Perceptions of Practice Educators in Social Work: Exploration of the Effects of Change

By

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Abstract

The dissertation explores lived experiences of practice educators, to capture their impressions of recent social work reforms affecting the assessment of social work students. A three-stage research study was conducted, aiming to gain the views of practice educators before, and then during the early stages of implementation, followed by a review of the data gathered involving social work professionals, to incorporate peer feedback, cross reference data and add research rigour. The rationale for the three-staged approach was to understand how participants perceived their changing role, explore personal and professional motivators for assessing students and identify ways of strengthening the available infrastructure of support.

The strength based methodology, Appreciative Inquiry, was selected to shape the three stages of the study, seeking to draw out peak experiences as a catalyst for managing change. Data collection started with four small group interviews, progressing six months later to the completion of twelve individual interviews, culminating in sharing research findings with social work professionals six months hence, to validate emerging data about how practice educators could be better supported. By reframing the challenges expressed by participants, such as limited support, role marginalisation and low extrinsic reward, research findings have captured aspirations for increased support to sustain the climate of change and uncertainty for practice education.

Solutions emerging from findings include strengthening local and national drivers to raise the profile of practice education, building research capacity, streamlining regional channels of support for individual, peer and group support and championing the practice educator role by raising awareness through inter-agency training and building more robust local partnerships.

Key words: practice, relationship, assessment, strengths, change, reflexivity, research capacity, power, collaboration.

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Authors Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself, and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

1 Introduction

Assessing social work students in practice is a vital aspect of undergraduate and postgraduate social work degree programmes (Shardlow and Doel, 1996). Practice learning enables social work students to make links between the academic learning gained at university and the reality of direct intervention with service users and practitioners on placement (Finch and Poletti, 2013). This thesis considers the experiences of social work practice educators assessing students on placement using the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) in order to gain a deeper understanding of the value they attach to their role and the support considered necessary during a time of rapid change for practice education and the social work profession in general. The term 'practice educator' will be used throughout the thesis to refer to the role of a social worker qualifying in England who has gained post-qualified training, in order to take on the assessment role for social work students during the two mandatory placements for undergraduate and postgraduate social work degree programmes delivered as traditional degree routes by universities across England. The relationship between the practice educator and the student is explored, to consider the placement assessment, which requires a judgement of the student's performance to be made, and the subsequent power differentials, which can be a feature between the learner and the educator (Parker, 2008).

A prevailing aspect of social work in the twenty-first century in England has been increasing government intervention to raise the quality and rigour of social work education, and practice learning in particular, to ensure that qualifying students are fit for practice (Higgins and Goodyer, 2015). The fast changing context of policy and practice in relation to social work education will be discussed further in the literature review and is briefly referred to here by way of an introduction. The General Social

Care Council (GSCC) was established in England following The *Care Standards Act 2000*, to regulate the social work profession and raise the status of the social work role. This was reinforced in 2003 by the replacement of the former Diploma in Social Work qualification with the longer and more rigorous social work degree programme. Of particular note was the focus on strengthening the emphasis on practice learning within all social work degree courses, by increasing the assessed placement days from 130 to 200.

The Social Work Task Force (SWTF) was commissioned by the Labour Government in 2009 and recommended comprehensive social work reform to raise the quality and status of the profession in England, to be monitored and overseen by the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB). The Coalition Government was established in 2010 and initiated the new College of Social Work for England (TCSW), which provided a new direction for social work practice. TCSW introduced the Professional Capability Framework (PCF) as the new placement assessment process for England, which was a departure from the former competency model of placement assessment known at The National Occupational Standards. At the same time the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) took over the regulatory duties of the GSCC in 2012. This created a difference between England and the rest of the UK, which retained regulatory affiliation set up under *The Care Act* (2000).

In 2010, the SWRB endorsed the new Practice Educator Professional standards (PEPS) which were fully implemented by the College of Social Work in 2013, requiring practice educators to complete a two-staged post-graduate qualification. The implementation of the PCF and the PEPS across universities and social work agencies in England during 2013 is therefore the latest in a series of changes underpinning social work practice education, and forms the central focus for this research study.

According to Durkin and Shergill (2000), measuring practice competence requires practice educators to assess what the students are '**doing'** in addition to what they '**know'**. This observation reinforces the central core of social work practice, where students on placement are directly assessed by practice educators whilst intervening with service users, carers and other professionals during the process of carrying out all aspects of the social work role, as part of work- based learning. The PCF is constructed of nine domains or capabilities, which place an emphasis on assessing the student's performance in a holistic way, to capture deeper levels of learning and sustain capability progressively as part of ongoing professional development. This assessment model requires more of a judgement and increased ownership and responsibility to directly observe and assess the student during the placement, and to ensure that reflective supervision is regular and effective and places an emphasis on personal and professional development (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Fenge *et al.* 2014). The developmental, holistic ethos of PCF highlights the importance of reflective supervision, which has always been of central importance for social work education, and has an even higher focus within the PCF assessment process. The research study will consider whether practice educators assessing students during their placements using PCF found the process helpful in encouraging deeper levels of thinking and reflection, particularly as they were introduced during a time of rapid change for the profession.

Thesis Objectives

The objectives set for the research were influenced by my substantive university post as practice learning lead, and the opportunity this afforded to gather first-hand information from practice educators on the cusp of the new PCF assessment framework being rolled out across England. I was therefore well positioned to gain a deeper understanding of some of the tensions that may arise during transition to the new assessment process, and to advocate for the practice education profession by raising awareness within the university and affiliated social work organisations of the potential need for increased support. Due to my particular interest in practice learning and belief in the central place this holds within social work education, I was motivated to select a research topic to address the importance of the learning gained by students during their placements and the vital role of practice educators in facilitating this. The research objectives are as follows:

1. To explore the views of practice educators concerning the newly introduced Professional Capabilities assessment process for social work students on placement.

2. To use an appreciative inquiry approach when interviewing practice educators, to encourage the sharing of their positive experiences of assessing students during a time of change for the social work profession.

3. To explore the relationships the practice educators forged with social work students during the assessment process, and highlight any tensions reported by them due to the power invested in their role.

4. To identify gaps in the support infrastructure and explore where this can be strengthened for the benefit of both practice educators and students.

The objectives stem from recognition that practice educators play a vital, yet often undervalued part in social work education (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Bellinger and Ford, 2016). The new regulatory frameworks require practice educators to make a fast transition from the former to the new assessment process, whilst still managing to enable, support and teach social work students during their placements. As practice learning lead, I was aware of the heightened apprehension expressed by practice educators working with the university on the brink of changing to the new assessment framework. The first objective aims to explore research participants' direct experiences of making this transition, to discover more about their first impressions of the new assessment process. The role of the practice educator is multi-faceted and complex and, as noted by Thompson *et al.* (1994), practice educators also need to absorb frequent changes in local and national law, re-organisation of social work structures and government reforms, often including new teaching and assessment regimes.

The second objective addresses the appreciative approach used to interview practice educators, to encourage the expression of positive examples of managing complexity and change. Appreciative inquiry was selected as the research methodology to meet the aims of the study, as the intention was to frame the questions in a positive way, whilst being aware that practice educators are likely to encounter both positive and negative experiences during a time of rapid change. The selected methodological approach will be discussed in the methodology chapter of the thesis.

The third objective set for the study seeks to explore tensions within the practice educator role, such as the implicit power differentials between them as assessors and the students being assessed, and the importance of the relationship between the student and the practice educator as an intrinsic part of the assessment process (Lefevre, 2005). My own experiences of supporting both students and practice

educators when placements become 'stuck' for some reason, particularly when there is a risk of the student failing, have highlighted the barriers that can arise and place pressure on the quality of the relationship. This can mean that the potential for the student to fully progress during the placement is placed at risk and the relationship with the practice educator can be placed under pressure.

The fourth objective seeks to gain information about what support has been helpful to practice educators and to discover any gaps in the infrastructure of support available to them during a period of rapid change. In my role as practice lead I was aware of the need to provide training and support for practice educators prior to the PCF being put into practice, but also that delivering this in an effective and wide-scale way was problematic due to time constraints and the limited availability of busy practitioners. This has particular resonance during a time when increased responsibilities to manage within a climate of change may be coupled with a sense of isolation, as a single practice educator will often support a student independently within a social work setting and may not have ready access to guidance and support (Finch and Taylor, 2013).

Social work research can be seen to be less well established in comparison to other professions, such as health and education. This is noted by McLaughlin (2007, p.184), who refers to research as being akin to social work itself, as it is: "highly contested, fraught with ideological, ethical and moral debates". Research studies point to the need for social work to become more research minded and also to extend the emphasis on evidence based practice (Macintyre and Paul, 2013: Moriarty *et al.*; MacRae *et al.* 2016). By selecting a research topic based on practice education, I hoped to draw attention to lived experiences of practice educators, thereby raising

awareness of the vital position that practice education holds within the research literature.

The objectives have been reviewed and evaluated as the flow of data collected has gradually moved forward over the eighteen-month time span of participant recruitment and sampling. The objectives were selected to provide a clear channel for the research topic and also to inform the search terms, as well as influencing the questions used for the interviews with research participants. Bryman (2012) mentions the value of open and transparent systematic review within qualitative research, to ensure that research is informed by clear goals with researchable objectives aiming to achieve tangible and attainable outcomes. It was vital to ensure therefore, that my own research objectives were transparent and designed to seamlessly connect all elements of the dissertation from the initial title to the final conclusion.

The objectives seek to discover more about the depth and complexity of the practice educator role. Practice educators are essential for students' learning and development during their placements, and in many ways provide the 'eyes and ears' for the university whilst the students are away from campus and allocated across different placement settings (Novell, 2013; Preston-Shoot *et al.,* 1997). The research study was planned and implemented in three stages over a period of eighteen months, commencing in May 2013 and completed in December 2014, in order to accumulate a body of knowledge about the experiences of practice educators assessing students during a time of significant reform. With the intention of capturing a sense of changes evolving over time, the study was carried out incrementally, initially through small group interviews, to firstly identify the anticipation of the changes about to be implemented in time for the 2013-2014 academic year, primarily due to the change of

the practice learning assessment framework (TCSW, 2012) and the Standards of Proficiency for Social Work (Health and Care Professionals Council, HCPC, 2012).

The second stage of the study was conducted using individual interviews to gather views about the actual impact of the changes six months later. This was then followed up after a further six months to share the findings and consult with social work professional forums about the impact of change and different initiatives being put in place within their respective organisations to support practice educators in their role.

A qualitative appreciative model of inquiry was used to capture findings from the data collection, which spotlighted the unique role that practice educators play within the spectrum of the broader social work career framework. The practice educators who participated in the research found the appreciative style of the interview questions helpful in recognising the innate sense of fulfilment and satisfaction they gained from their role, whilst still being able to acknowledge that they often felt alienated due to their autonomous position within placement settings, where support mechanisms were often difficult to control. The opportunity to communicate with practice educators in small groups and then individually provided scope for sources of information to be gathered about motivators and barriers experienced on a regular basis when assessing students, and the actual and desired infrastructure of support needed to sustain them in their role. Collaboration with social work forums provided scope to discover different ways that other universities and local employers were responding to the need to strengthen the structures of support for practice educators and raise the profile within their organisations.

A surprising feature of the group and individual interviews, which is reported on in chapter four and five of the thesis, was the intensity of the emphasis placed on the

practical and emotional investment of supporting and assessing a marginal or failing student. Several studies have explored the emotional impact of working with a failing student and the extent to which this may affect the assessment process (Finch and Poletti, 2013; Finch and Schaub, 2015; Finch and Taylor, 2013). Feelings of emotional turmoil emerged in my own research study, when practice educators were sharing peak experiences of assessing students, as the challenges seemed to arise from the complexity of their role. Practice educators shared experiences about the dynamics of working closely with students, and how challenges in the student's practice sometimes placed a strain on the professional and personal relationship. Tensions between the empowering role of the educator and the implicit responsibility for gatekeeping the profession were perceived to be antagonistic and references were frequently made to the 'public gaze' within a placement setting, where the dynamics of a student/ practice educator relationship are open to scrutiny by others (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2013).

The outcomes of the research study identified some interconnecting themes arising from practice educators' experiences, ranging from the cathartic pleasure derived from recalling and sharing positive experiences when things went really well, to the value of peer support, and also the genuine conviction expressed about contributing to raising the status of practice education. As illustrated in chapter five, participants also frequently mentioned the importance of reflexivity and critical reasoning in managing the complexity of the role and in perpetuating self-resilience and continual professional development. Barriers to strengthening the practice educator role were considered in equal measure to the motivating factors, as participants often felt that there were gaps in the support mechanisms in place for them. The research reinforced the need for effective strategies that are flexible and sustainable enough to support practice educators. Similar research conducted by Fifolt and Lander (2013), expressed the

need for individual, group and organisational changes to be put in place, which recognise both the practice educator's responsibility to effect change and a more collective sense of practice education as a profession sitting within the wider, shifting global body of the political and educational framework for contemporary social work (Ferguson *et al.,* 2005; Reisch and Jani, 2012). Findings from my own research study which are discussed in chapter four, echoed the need for practice educators to diversify and respond to the climate of uncertainty and change through continual personal and professional development, but also endorsed the need for stronger regional support for practice education. Recommendations discussed in the final chapter include raising awareness of the complexity of the practice educator role via better, stronger regional partnerships, raising research capacity and championing practice education through local, regional and national arenas, and maximising existing channels of support.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Rationale and Search Strategy

The premise for the research is to explore the perceptions of practice educators as they progress through a period of rapid change for the social work profession. The identification of three subsections for presenting the literature reviewed stemmed from my interest in exploring these areas in more depth, and to generate literature with relevance to the title and objectives set for the thesis. The three selected topics are:

- **The Professional Social Work Status of the Practice Educator**

- **The Power Relationship between the Practice Educator and the Student**

- **The Infrastructure of Support for Practice Educators**

The first topic has synergy with the first and second objectives, and explores the role of the practice educator as a professional and experienced social worker who is supporting and assessing social work students during a specific period of change, within the backdrop of constant transition and uncertainty for the profession. The appreciative approach used to capture peak experiences of practice educators, referred to in the second objective, has been discussed in the methodology section of the thesis rather than in the literature review, to ensure that all material relating to the selected methodology is located in one place.

The second topic is affiliated with the third objective, and aims to discover more about the importance of the relationship between the practice educator and the student, and how power differentials may impact upon the assessment process. Finally, the third topic addresses the support provided for practice educators by reviewing a range of literature and research already written on this subject, to provide a clearer picture of what initiatives have been helpful and where any barriers have been identified. This is

in tune with the fourth objective for the research, as primary research is accessed to consider how the support available can be strengthened for the benefit of both practice educators and students. Emphasis is given to the coping mechanisms favoured by practice educators to extend their resilience, whilst also recognising deficits in the support mechanisms in place for them.

Key search words were identified as subject terms in order to carry out a library search and filter down to find relevant journals and texts. The key words '**professional', 'practice educator,' 'social work,' 'power,' 'assessments,' 'support' 'reflexivity', 'collaboration',** were extracted from the research title and the abstract, in order to keep control of the search process used. The academic search engine 'Social Care Online' is an open access database primarily for social care/social work journal articles, websites and government publications, and enabled me to carry out an initial search using different combinations of words, and to have direct access to some relevant journal articles and texts. I was able to consult with the university librarian with subject responsibility for social work education, regarding the best data bases to use, and also how to combine search terms and carry out more advanced searching. Boolean operatives enabled more advanced searching to be conducted, and combined search words to be developed into broader terms to make meaningful connections and enable a systematic search to be conducted across subject specific social work journal articles. Published practice education social work research journals and social work texts were the main sources of literature included in the research.

Manually generated searching was also carried out by sourcing social work journals such as the 'British Journal of Social Work', 'Practice: Social Work in Action', 'Oxford University Press Journals' and the 'Journal of Social Work Practice'. This also created

the identification of new references through citations provided within relevant articles. The social work data base 'Community Care Inform' was also regularly accessed, and provided a good source of grey literature based on relevant experiences of social work practitioners. A range of seminal social work practice education texts were also included, thereby developing a broader scope for the literature reviewed. This process was aided by using Google Scholar, as this enabled me to move forward in time and identify more recent articles published by the same author, or other authors writing on the same topic.

A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied to the literature search. The primary literature sourced for the thesis is based on social work practice education in the UK, although discussion is enriched by drawing on authors from other disciplines, such as nursing and occupational therapy (Duffy, 2004; Ilott and Murphy, 1997; Luhanga *et al*. 2014). These other disciplines have been included due to the commonality of requirement for students across practice- based professional courses to complete lengthy placements, and due to the increasing inter-professionalism of social work. Dunk-West (2013) refers to the importance of the placement as an opportunity for students to practice working with other professionals and to recognise the differences and similarities between social work and other affiliated professions. Some research originating from America and Canada has been included in the literature search where there is particular relevance to the research topic, and when this is used the nationality of the author is referred to. For example, research carried out in Canada by Luhanga *et al.* (2014) provides a multidisciplinary perspective of shared concerns across nursing, education and social work about students who fail their practice placements, and the pattern of emerging issues that cut across individual disciplines.

 The timeline for the research included in the literature search covers the last fifteen years, although there is also some reference to seminal work from authors to provide some historical significance and a context for the more contemporary studies referred to. Earlier texts and journals have been included to illustrate how changes to social work have been gradual and have progressed from earlier changes in the 1990's, when concerns about the rigour of placement assessments became a particular focus for research (Shardlow and Doel, 1996; Sharp and Danbury, 1999).

The literature search strategy has endeavoured to include a range of research studies which explore the increasingly demanding, complex and uncertain climate of social work, requiring a robust and diverse range of skills, knowledge and experience to be taught to students, as they learn through informal and formal discussion and reflection during their placements (Parker, 2006; Williams and Rutter, 2013). The professional remit of the practice educator role has been explored within the literature selected, to discover more about the skills, knowledge and expertise required to carry out the role effectively. Furthermore, the power differential within the practice educator and student relationship has been a key area to include in the search, to discover more about the inherent tensions that can be experienced in practice. The need to support practice educators and extend their role across post-qualifying training is identified by Doel *et.al.* (2007), and this is acknowledged within the literature reviewed, which explores support mechanisms in place for practice educators and the perceived weaknesses in the support available. The value of the practice educator role and the potential for this to be extended for the benefit of newly qualified and experienced social workers in addition to students is also included in the literature search.

Implicit within the three core topics selected is the practice educator's responsibility for teaching students the skills of analytical, critical and reflective thinking in practice.

Fook (2012) considers the emphasis on a holistic as opposed to a fragmented approach to the shape of contemporary social work, as the world of theory, research and practice has become more deeply integrated, thereby creating connections between theorising and practice. The literature searched has emphasised the importance of the supervisory element of the practice educator's role in facilitating students' learning and development on placement, to help them become familiar with theories and models to inform their practice and understand and respond to the complex issues encountered in social work. Research by Bellinger and Elliott (2011) suggests that high quality practice learning supervision is an essential grounding for social work, and provides the focal point for students to learn skills in reflective practice and deeper levels of practice learning. The professional status of the practice educator, and their position within social work agencies as they assess, teach and support students during their placements offers students a vital role model to demonstrate their own professional commitment and to gradually take on responsibility for their conduct and learning during the placement.

2.2 The Professional Social Work Status of the Practice Educator

Introduction

The first section of the literature review explores the pivotal role and status of the practice educator as a fully qualified and experienced social worker with post-qualifying practice educator training, who holds the primary responsibility of assessing a social work student on placement. Consideration is given to the positioning of practice educators to maintain the threshold requirements for the social work profession within the context of the recent transition to the new Professional

Capabilities Framework (PCF) produced by The College of Social Work (TCSW, 2012). Plenty and Gower (2013) highlight the success of the PCF pilot conducted in one university in England, despite the upheaval this created and the extra resources that needed to be made available. This response reflects the overall positivity of how the new assessment process has been received by the social work profession in general. Some of the key drivers for the recent changes to the practice educator role are explored, and consideration is given to the different components and multiple dimensions of the role and the complexity of incorporating and juggling quite disparate qualities (Thompson *et.al.* 1994). Both intellectual and interpersonal attributes are essential aspects of the practice educator role within contemporary social work practice education, referred to by Bellinger and Ford (2016) as the essential twin components of assessment and education, requiring practice educators to be skilful in communicating, consulting, co-ordinating, assessing, teaching, supporting and advocating with students and other placement stakeholders. Appleton (2010) refers to this blend of skills as being essential for a rich and holistic assessment, and perceives integrity as the central ingredient to bind together skills, knowledge and values with the assessment itself. The speed of change faced by social work professionals is difficult to predict, making the practice educator role more challenging than in the past, due to the need to absorb new policies and regulations whilst carrying out a demanding and multi-layered role.

2.2.1 Changes to the Practice Educator Role

Practice educators need to provide accurate and valid assessment and evaluation of a social work student's placement performance (Luhanga *et al.,* 2014). Earl (2004) describes social work student assessments as being 'for learning' and 'of learning',

which incorporates the formative and summative assessment role of practice educators throughout the student's first and final placements. Furthermore, the practice educator role in enabling students to develop skills in reflective practice and critical analysis during their social work placements is considered to be of vital importance to their learning (Williams and Rutter, 2013).Inevitably, practice educators contribute vastly to the education of future social workers through practice teaching, as they are required to educate and assess students on placement whilst the profession continues to progress through fast changing policy and practice. This requirement reinforces the necessity for practice educators themselves to be self-directed and up to date with developments in teaching and learning (Preston-Shoot, 2012).

Change has been a constant feature for social work practice and education, although Higgins and Goodyer (2015) refer to current increased political and professional transformation of social work due to the recent influx of social work reforms, and the subsequent impact on the practice educator's role. This can be perceived as being a positive indicator of how the profession needs to remain abreast of wider societal and political changes and identify weaknesses that need to be tackled. A considerable impetus for the reforms was spearheaded by The Social Work Task Force (SWTF) in 2009, which carried out an in-depth assessment of front-line social work practice in England, making recommendations for improvement and reform due to the identified need for increased robustness and quality of recruitment, teaching and assessment of social work students (Keen *et al.,* 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013). Membership of the SWTF was diverse, and represented a cross-section of social workers from front-line practice to senior leaders and educators, in order to maximise the scope for

identification with relevant and meaningful standards to be widely agreed across the profession. The remit of the group was:

> "to undertake a comprehensive review of frontline social work practice and to make recommendations for improvement and reform of the whole profession, across adults and children's services." (SWTF, 2009, p.13).

The SWTF was set up by the Labour Government in 2009, following high-profile inquiries which challenged the rigour and effectiveness of social work intervention with vulnerable children and families. A particular feature of the SWTF recommendations was the importance placed upon high quality placements to ensure that students develop the requisite skills and values to work safely and effectively with service users. Practice educators were recognised as pivotal to this increased emphasis on practice learning, and were recognised as holding specific and senior roles requiring a nationally recognised career structure and qualification as both experienced social workers and practice teacher/educators. Another turning point recommended by the task force was the importance of universities and employers uniting forces to improve the education and training of the next generation of social workers, and responding to the negative image of social work portrayed by the media by promoting more positive stories through a new and coordinated way of working together.

 A significant recommendation for a seamless programme of reform for social work was taken forward one year later in 2010, by the government commissioned Social Work Reform Board (SWRB), which signposted the direction for how social work practice assessment would be carried out in England. In 2010 the new Conservative-Liberal coalition Government took the work of the SWRB forward, and implemented the reforms by establishing an overarching framework of standards for social work

education and practice. Coinciding with the finalising of the SWRB report, Professor Eileen Munro was tasked by the government to review child protection practice and produced a series of reports (Munro, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). Munro advocated for a move away from the bureaucratic care management model of social work in England, towards a more reflective and critically analytical approach, which combines social work tasks with deeper reflection and learning. The Munro Review of Child Protection (2010) has directly affected social work education, and the impact continues to be significant for the profession. Munro perceived the procedural approach of care management as serving the system by evidencing progress through the setting of performance targets, rather than fostering a more reflective way of learning and building up evidence based practice, for the benefit of service users and their families.

The fast pace of change and the direct impact for practice education has not eased, and on-going planning continues to shape the way that social work qualifying training is delivered (Davies and Jones, 2015; Forest, 2016). One aspect of the current social work landscape which poses challenges is the differing ideas about what the future direction of social work education should be. In 2014 two reviews of social work education were commissioned, one published by the Department of Education in January 2014, written by Sir Martin Narey ' *Re-visioning social work education: an independent review'*, and one commissioned by the Department of Health, written by Professor David Croisdale-Appleby and published in February 2014, '*Making the education of social workers consistently effective'.* Narey's review favours the specialist route for children and family social work and increased partnerships between universities and employers, whereas Croisdale-Appleby promotes the single generic social work degree model. The differences between the two reviews have not been fully reconciled, which has resulted in an unclear vision for the future of social work

education. It can be argued however, that there is some commonality within the two reviews due to the shared emphasis on work-based learning pathways to social work qualification, and increased competition between traditional degree routes via universities and fast track programmes designed collaboratively between universities and employers (Bogg and Challis, 2016).

Social work reforms and the resulting rigour of social work education has positioned practice educators amidst the change process, to ensure that social work students are assessed stringently and screened as fit for practice within professional social work settings (Bogo *et al.,* 2004; Parker, 2008). Practice educators have the prime role in assisting social work students to acquire a familiarity with theories, models and approaches that will help them better understand a range of practice situations whilst they are immersed in direct work with service users and carers. Coulshed and Orme (2006, p.15) refer to this task as:

"offering some clarity by showing that knowledge gained from theory exists to inform social workers' understanding, not to dominate it".

Bellinger and Ford (2016) discuss social pedagogy and the synergy this has with the practice educator's remit, as the role straddles the need to be an experienced social work practitioner and also an effective educator, able to instil social work values and use theory and methods reflexively to inform practice. This point is also noted by Hamalainen (2003), who refers to social pedagogy as an educational orientation to better understand the interaction between the social worker and the service user. The practice educator role requires a multitude of skills and expertise, in addition to demonstrating a robust ability to challenge, manage and evaluate the learner's progress objectively. This role is often balanced as part of the wider remit of being a

social worker in a busy social work team which according to Thompson *et al.* (1994) may mean that practice educators will experience excessive work pressures and the need to constantly juggle multiple responsibilities. All this requires qualities of creativity, enthusiasm, commitment and self-efficacy as well as recognition of the importance of a nationally recognised set of professional standards for social work (Dunk-West, 2013; Plenty and Gower, 2013).

Social work reforms have been implemented at a rapid rate which Banks (2015) equates to the continual shifting and uncertainty of the social work profession and endorses the increasing need for social work ethics and values as a steadying enduring force to counteract continual change. However, Ferguson *et al.* (2006) argue that social work needs to be continually reconstructed, to shift the focus from local and national to global politics, and to develop new forms of social inclusion to reflect wider diversity and changing demographic needs. Banks (2015) advocates for the embeddedness of 'principle-based' ethics in social work to counteract change and ensure a value- based focus for anti-oppressive practice and valuing diversity and difference. This can be seen to be increasingly important as social workers work with other professionals in a more seamless and connected way than ever before and need to be familiar with and respectful of the differences and similarities between different professional codes of practice. Beckett and Maynard (2013) concur with the need for social workers to be aware of competing and possibly contradictory ethics and beliefs held by different professionals, to ensure that inter-professional working is effective. Well-embedded ethical codes can therefore be seen to promote shared standards and value-based principles which guide the behaviour and practice of social workers and other professionals. Furthermore, Bellinger and Ford (2016) highlight the need to work with complexity creatively in order to expose new knowledge and to remain open to

different, possibly conflicting ideas arising from the value systems of others. The value base of the social work profession is explored further in the next section, with a particular focus on the relevance for the practice educator role. Furness and Gilligan (2004) refer to the importance of an integrity driven programme of learning for social work to ensure that deeper learning is captured and sustained. Evidence from research will be considered, which suggests that practice education has a central responsibility and role in imparting knowledge to social work students about the value-base of the profession.

2.2.2 A Value- Based Profession

The Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) became the regulatory body for the social work profession in 2012, replacing The General Social Care Council (GSCC).The GSCC, established in 2001, introduced the social work code of conduct now embedded within the HCPC, and introduced the mandatory professional registration of social workers across England. Ethics and values have maintained a central position within the social work profession over decades of change, and provide a constancy and framework for suitability in terms of both for social work students and qualified social workers' actions and their behaviours. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2012) acknowledges the requirement of the social worker to:

> "use the authority of their role in a responsible, accountable and respectful manner" (BASW, 2012, p.13).

The ethical foundation for social work is in no way disputed, although, as argued by Currer and Atherton (2008), there can be difficulty in the interpretation of what is deemed to be 'suitable' and 'unsuitable' ethical conduct due to the nature of practice assessment, which has a subjective structure, extends over a long period of time and

is removed from the rigours of university based academic assessment. By necessity, there is an ethical responsibility for social work students to develop a clear awareness of one's self and a sense of personal morals, values and beliefs as a precursor to being able to acknowledge this in others. Howe (2013) links ethics and moral codes to empathy:

> "Moral codes develop as we balance our own rights and responsibilities against the rights and responsibilities of others. And it is the presence of empathy that ensures that the moral scales are not unfairly tilted" (Howe, 2013, p.148).

Professional decision-making is an important aspect of the practice educator's gatekeeping role, which needs to be influenced and guided by professional social work ethics and values. Furthermore, Scholar *et al.* (2014) describe the emotional wellbeing and practical assistance afforded to social work students by practice educators during their placements, and the driving goal of enabling students to complete their social work programme successfully. As social work has such a strong value orientation, there is likely to be an undercurrent of difficulty balancing the enabling element of the role with objective decision making about when a student's practice is 'good enough'. Barlow and Coleman (2003) refer to the need to account for 'persistency' when assessing concerns about a student's practice, to ascertain whether this is a pattern of unethical student behaviour, or a part of the students learning journey, where there is scope for improvement through mentoring and guided learning. Certainly, there are differing views about the notion of what constitutes 'good enough' social work, and standards may well vary across different placement agencies (Lafrance *et al.,* 2004; Sharp and Danbury, 1999). Moreover, Heron *et al.* (2015) recognise the importance of the practice educator role in providing formative and summative feedback to

students as part of the assessment process, and that this requires a consistent and grounded commitment to the students' learning.

According to Parker (2008), there is a subtle but important distinction between knowing what actions need to be taken to complete an assessment and in having the belief or confidence in one's own ability to complete this fully and effectively. These views are echoed by Finch (2017), who identifies the distinction between hypothetical analysis of an assessment and recognising personal attributes of managing a robust and transparent assessment. Waterhouse *et al.* (2011) link the questioning of self-efficacy with the phenomenon of 'conscious incompetence', which can be real or imagined, and may be linked with the values of social work and the practice educator role being perceived as a conduit for maximising potential and extending opportunities to social work students. Creative and imaginative evidence based practice can be seen to be instrumental in increasing the confidence and self-efficacy of social work students:

> "when a social worker has greater confidence regarding his or her own research abilities he/she will feel more empowered as a social worker"(Holden *et al.,*2007, p.465).

Ethical tensions can be seen to be present within the practice assessment process, due to what Schumann and Barraclough (2000) refer to as the twin functions of 'mentor' and 'examiner' and the perceived disparity between both aspects of the practice educator role. Finch (2010) offers a similar reflection on the role conflict experienced by some practice educators, and tension which can arise between the nurturing aspects of facilitating learning and also having to make difficult judgements. The layered dimensions of the practice educator role can be seen to require well-grounded ethical ways of thinking and applying this in practice with students. This

accords with research by Hugman (2009), who explored the importance of genuine ethical communication, rather than the superficial imposition of prescribed values within managerial approaches to social work practice, to ensure that relationships between social workers and service users are authentic and person centred. Research by Morley and Dunstan (2013), warns against a neoliberalist approach to practice learning, and the risk of leaning towards a procedural emphasis in finding generic solutions, rather than being based on personalised and critically reflective learning. As an antidote to the managerial predisposition of contemporary social work, Freire (2014) advocates for a critical pedagogy, which is aspirational in approach, and critically analyses individual differences and campaigns for social justice and emancipation. In the same vein, Beresford (2000) advocates for service users and carers and the necessity of avoiding 'tokenistic' or 'tick box' gestures by encouraging a more egalitarian working partnership between social workers and the people who access the services provided for them.

Practice educators are often the conduit between the social work student on placement and the user of the service, and can facilitate open and honest feedback about the student's performance when assisting them. Research by Cole (1994), Moss *et al.* (2007), Skilton (2011) and Stacey *et al.* (2012) explores the relevance and value of service user involvement and feedback on practice based students' development on placement, and the help this provides in gaining insight in to the strengths of their practice and areas for development.

The assessment process used to consider the capability of students on placement is also worthy of consideration when exploring the value base of practice learning. Thompson (2006) referred to the lack of synergy between value based social work practice and the former assessment framework, The National Occupational Standards

(NOS), which was replaced by The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) in 2012 (TCSW,2012). This view was shared by Finch and Taylor (2013), who identified concerns about the robustness of the assessment framework that was in place at the time of conducting their research, and a lack of clear guidance from universities about the distinction between an assessment used to guide and facilitate ongoing learning and development and using the process to pass or fail a student. The potential paradox between relationship based social work and procedural aspects of social work assessment is considered by Broadhurst and Mason (2014), who stress the vital importance of face-to-face rapport, and refer to co-presence as central to relationship based social work and building a trusting and meaningful connection with service users. According to Parker (2008), there is a direct synergy between the quality of the practice educator and student relationship and attaining an open and trusting rapport between the student and the service user. This helps to facilitate a constructive and successful placement experience, which can be valued by the student and reap benefits for the service user (Bogo *et al.,* 2002; Lefevre, 2005; Ruch *et al.,* 2010).

Furthermore, the relationship between the practice educator and the university tutor is also considered to be paramount for a seamless and effective placement experience for the student. Finch (2015) stresses that a sound rapport between the student and tutor is particularly important where the student's performance is marginal and there is risk of failing. Power differences within the roles of student, tutor and practice educator have been considered by Hackett and Marsland (1997), who explored the tutor-student-practice educator triad in child protection placement settings, and identified some power differences and potential friction, which could impact on the morale and self-efficacy of the student if the roles and levels of authority of the tutor and practice educator were disputed or were unclear. Kadushin and Kadushin (1997,

p.100) refer to the concept of relationship as a "*communication bridge between people*" and stress the need for clarity in context, roles and goals to ensure that communication is managed effectively.

Effective communication is key to the forging of a working alliance between the practice educator and the student and, as advocated by Trevithick (2012), is essential for establishing a sound relationship base for ethical exploration and the dissemination of social work theory, models and methods to enhance knowledge and understanding in practice. To conclude, an ethical connection between the practice educator and the student, with agreed implicit moral codes, helps to measure the student's progress on placement, and is integral to the professional capabilities assessment framework (PFC). The domain 'ethics and values' requires social work students to conduct themselves ethically and to be capable of ethical decision-making, to have knowledge of the profession's value base and how this applies to social work policy and legislation.

2.2.3 Applying Theory to Practice in Reflective Supervision

Practice educators are well-positioned to help social work students on placement to reflect more deeply about why people behave in certain ways and what factors need to be considered to ensure that social work intervention is effective and meaningful. As pointed out by Payne and Askeland (2008, p. 28): "reflexivity is crucial, placing ourselves and our interpretation in the action". Confidence in applying different theories and models, being accountable for practice through reflection and critical analysis, and learning through experience on placement, can be imparted to the student by the practice educator during informal and formal supervision. According to

Kerridge (2008), the practice educator role includes the integration of theory and clinical practice and the ability to model a critical approach to practice. Musson (2017, p.147) explores the necessity of practitioners having a systematic framework for the theories, methods and models, which will relate to the particular task in hand:

> "this enables them to come to an understanding of *what's going on*
>
> and offers an organised approach to doing something about it".

An eclectic approach in social work practice education is often used and, according to Thompson (2009), several theories, models and approaches can be effectively blended in order to gain a holistic understanding of a particular set of circumstances and facilitate a personalised response to complexity. Theories can be seen to be vital for building social work students' conceptual understanding, through the gradual acquisition of skills and knowledge (Knott and Scragg, 2013). Theoretical models and research evidence therefore, underpin the process of reflecting on placement performance, to enable students to predict what may happen in a given situation and, at both an emotional and cognitive level, to facilitate an understanding of behaviours as highlighted by Howe:

> "Theories provide 'workable definitions' of the world about us. They make it intelligible. In a very real way, theory-building is reality building…. Our theories define what we see" (Howe, 1987, p. 10).

However, the application of theory to inform practice can be challenging for practice educators, in addition to students, and there are arguments against an eclectic framework for making sense of how theoretical knowledge underpins practice. This view is held by Coulshed and Orme (2006), who note that unpicking different theories

and combining them to form a new perspective can lead to a fractured and unclear way of working. Practice educators are required to encourage students to be accountable and to be able to substantiate their actions by being able to draw on theory in an informed way and have an evidence base to their practice. Inevitably the search for meaning can shift and change as debates about what actually constitutes knowledge in social work fluctuate (Trevithick, 2012). As social work education has moved apace over recent years, the social work profession has occupied different positions about the validity of the theories practiced, the underpinning ethics and values espoused and the professional knowledge shared (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997). Supervision provides a stabilising vehicle for students to consider placement experiences, and reflect on these to generate new ways of thinking and acting, and avoid impulsive reactions to complex issues (Doel, 2010). Research by Izod and Lawson (2015) considers reflective supervision as playing a vital role in managing the uncertainty and complexity of social work practice, and endorses the importance of creative and flexible outlets to enable practitioners to explore anxieties within a safe and energising supervisory relationship. Furthermore, Golia and McGovern (2015) advocate for the power of peer supervision in enabling social workers to engage with each-others' experiences, and also to normalise anxiety and overcome barriers thrown up by rapid change and complexity.

Applying theory to practice in reflective supervision sessions will be influenced by the practice educator sharing their 'preferences' for particular theories to students, which will be informed by their particular knowledge, experiences and accumulated 'practice wisdom'. Although this introduces scope for students to gain different theoretical knowledge depending on the practice educator they are allocated, there are some well-embedded theoretical models which all students are likely to become familiar with,

such as Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which help students to move from concrete experience, reflection on intervention and analysis of the outcomes. This is echoed by Schon's (1983) views on how knowledge can be shaped and restructured through critical thinking about direct practice, and the necessity of working with 'here and now' experiences to extend our understanding of the underlying meaning within the day to day tasks carried out. Furthermore, Fook (2012) refers to the essence of good supervision as a partnership to share and explore different meanings of practice, which include grappling with the ethical dilemmas central to social work practice.

Numerous writers have commented on the importance of the supervisory relationship in practice education and the different functions within supervision, such as management, administration, education and support (Adams *et al.,* 2002; Shardlow and Doel, 1996; Shulman, 1999; Thompson, 2009). Doel (2010) refers to the dialogue that develops in student supervision, and that it is through this dialogue that professional knowledge evolves and the essential skills of sensitivity, empathy and self-awareness are shaped. The progression from surface learning to deeper understanding, by questioning and building on ideas through active engagement with an experienced practice educator can be facilitated through regular supervisory dialogue (Gardner, 2014). Supervision can therefore be seen as a conduit for students to become aware of the importance of personal integrity, interpersonal skills and knowledge that encompass the development of professional identity and a more deeply embedded understanding of the importance of professionalism. Lishman (2009, p.65) endorses the importance of the supervision alliance being built on mutual respect and a safe reflective space:

> "supervision is built on a professional-to-professional relationship rather than a superior-to-subordinate one".

Similarly, Adams *et al.* (2009c) describe professional identity as comprising of attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs and skills that relate to the relevant professional role. The importance of a well- grounded professional sense of self is enshrined within the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), as 'professionalism' is the first of the nine domains included within the current assessment structure. According to Showell Nicholas and Kerr (2015), the practice educator can offer a positive or negative role model for students within the supportive supervisory role to emulate what professionalism actually means in practical terms, and refer to Maslow's framework of motivation to draw on the multi-layered depths of professional identity. Maslow (1970) stresses the need for physiological, security and belonging needs and self-actualisation. This is interpreted by Showell Nicholas and Kerr (2015), as the attention the practice educator needs to pay in ensuring that the basic physiological requirements of the student, such as access to basic practical resources are in place, in addition to ensuring there is scope for the student to integrate and feel a sense of belonging within the placement team. Self-actualisation needs can be attained through supporting students to reach their aspired learning and development goals set for the placement.

The relationship which evolves between the student and the practice educator can therefore be seen to be of central importance for effective supervision, and to be reliant upon a trusting and open relationship between two adults. Izod and Lawson (2015) and Trevithick (2012) refer to role awareness, and how the supervisory relationship provides the time and space to consider the role differences between the supervisor and supervisee, and create a network of support to 'reflect on action'. The professional identification of practice educators aspiring to be positive role models for students (Terum and Heggen, 2016) and instilling a sense of value based social work practice

can also be linked with the views of Kadushin and Harkness (2002), who identify the connection between a student having a good role model as part of the practice learning experience and then going on to achieve a strong identification with the social work profession after qualifying.

However, there can be inherent tensions within the supervisory relationship due to power differences within the roles of the educator and student. Howe (2009) refers to the concepts of 'transference' and 'counter transference,' where the student relays a problem and the supervisor provides a solution which can establish a 'parent – child' relationship, whereby the practice educator is seen as the skilled practitioner with all the answers, rather than attaining a more equalising relationship which recognises the experiences and learning that the student brings to the placement. Trevithick (2012) suggests that transference is a psychoanalytic theory which has been adopted in social work to better understand the relationship between one person and another. Although transference can be seen to be helpful in extending our understanding of human beings, as advocated by Howe (2009), it can depict a formulaic style of supervision, which accentuates an unequal relationship, rather than a more emancipatory, power sharing model (Yontef, 1997). Reflective supervision conveys the necessity for imaginative and creative ways to think about social work practice which prevent standardised, routine responses to students' intervention with service users on placement:

> "it is the qualities of creativity and imagination which enable solutions to be sought for unfamiliar, complex and subtle problems." (Clark, 1995, p. 578).

Izod and Lawson (2015) highlight the importance of capturing the 'vitality' of creative learning in supervision by keeping a 'thinking space' open and retaining a focus on

imagination and natural curiosity, which is akin to being able to apply the principles of critical ways of thinking and analysis when evaluating practice experience. In a similar vein, Bolton (2010) refers to the value of mindfulness, which facilitates the ability to focus on present action and tune in to our own skills and knowledge to gain insight in to the perceptions of others. According to Bolton (2010), there is a direct parity between mindfulness and 'reflection-before-action', which Wilson (2008) describes as being essential for enabling awareness of intended actions and seeking the best way forward. The importance of critical thinking and a creative sense of curiosity to inform practice is not a new concept. As far back as 1960, Dewey (1960) referred to the essential component of ' open-mindedness' as part of reflection, and described this as the ability to give heed to other views and possibilities and recognise the potential for error, even when this goes against strongly held values and beliefs. Furthermore, Ruch (2007) refers to the 'containing' feature of reflective supervision, in the sense that difficult thoughts and feelings can be brought to the practice educator in supervision and contained within a safe and therapeutic supervisory relationship:

"Practitioners need to work within safe containing contexts, characterised by; clear organisational and professional boundaries; multifaceted reflective forums; collaborative and communicative working practices; and open and 'contextually connected' managers." (Ruch, 2007, p. 659).

Personal and professional boundaries define the parameters of the practice educator/student relationship and, as such, can generate power differences which have the potential to conflict with the principles of empowerment and anti-oppressive practice that underpin social work values and ethical practice (Burton, 2016). The imbalance of power within practice educator and student roles and their subsequent working relationship will certainly have an impact on the importance of effective

channels of communication and an open and honest exchange about issues of power (Shardlow and Doel, 1996). This will be explored in the second theme of the literature review.

2.3 The Power Relationship between the Practice Educator and the Student

Introduction

This section explores the power differentials between the practice educator and the student, to consider the ambiguity and multi-faceted nature of power and the inter-play of different types of power that feature within practice learning relationships. This is set within the wider context of the social work profession, including the mediatory role of the social work tutor, and the powerful impact that social work interventions can have on other people's lives (Kendall and Hugman, 2016).The binary connection between holding power and yet also feeling disempowered is also considered, to highlight how practice educators may feel 'under the spotlight' in busy front line services where their assessment of a student is visible and open to scrutiny and critique. The literature discussed also explores coping strategies and ways of promoting equitable and enabling relationships between practice educators and students within the context of a profession undergoing constant change.

2.3.1 The Impact of Power Differentials on the Professional Relationship

According to Edmondson (2014), power inequalities are embedded within the fabric of the social work profession due to the dominant value base of social work intervention and professional ethics in relation to social work practice, where tensions exist as part

of the duties of a practitioner. Power inequalities can also be seen to impact on students' learning on placement, and the importance of recognising power differences between them and users of the services who may be marginalised due to structural inequality and injustice will need to be explored (Thompson and Thompson, 2008). Students will build an understanding of their professional responsibilities from their learning on placement, and will recognise the power and authority invested within the social work role of being a gatekeeper of resources.

The power differences between the practice educator and the student being assessed cannot be denied, as the practice educator carries the gate-keeping role of failing those students that are assessed as not robust enough in their direct practice with service users (Williams and Rutter, 2013). The ambivalent presence of power differences is also explored by Sowbel (2012), who considers the power inherent in the imparting of knowledge, skills and values from practice educators to students, and questions the disparate functions of mentoring, teaching and supervising, whilst also needing to screen out students who are not able to progress to social work practice. Moreover, Hackett and Marsland (1997, p. 49) refer to the roles of the practice educator, tutor and student and the dynamics between them as "a power charged learning relationship". From the perspective of the student, it is likely that the practice educator will be considered to be the person with the overall power and authority to decide if their placement performance has been good enough to pass, although the tutor and the university assessment regulations will also be influential in the final decision making process. Finch (2017, p. 96) considers the triadic connection between the practice educator, student and tutor and the role differences, which can shift and collide to create tensions and the scope for oppression:

"One practical way forward in developing constructive working relationships is to be cognisant of the different sources of power and authority and consider how these may shift throughout the placement."

It can be inferred from the views of authors included that different stakeholders within practice learning each hold their own areas of responsibility, and that different types of power ascribed within the roles can either conflict or be complimentary to each other. Students can be seen to have their own power base, as they are undertaking a professional degree of learning and will also often be viewed by service users and carers as having responsibility and access to resources and services. Moreover, students are required to assert a leadership role by taking responsibility for the professional learning and development of both themselves and others as part of the placement assessment.

Lefevre (2005) carried out research exploring the influence of the practice learning relationship from the perspective of social work students' unique experiences of their practice educators. Lefevre (2005) used a Likert Scale question analysis based on the number of times certain descriptors were used by the students to describe their relationship with their practice educator. The words 'support', ' helpful and good' and 'friendly' were featured regularly and terms were used to describe oppressive relationships; 'unconstructive', 'confronting', ' domineering', 'bullying', and 'controlled'. Moreover, 90% of the respondents believed that a strong relationship with the practice educator correlated with a positive impact on their learning and development. Kreisberg (1992) refers to empowerment as part of a collaborative process which balances self-control and self-knowledge with the need to respect others and their right to achieve and to be empowered. Interestingly Robinson (1994) refers to empowerment skills as a shared sense of critical consciousness achieved through

purposeful dialogue with others. The subtle interplay between the ascribed role power invested in the practice educator and expectations that the relationship with students will be empowering suggests that shifting power differentials can be difficult to deal with. Bernstein (1996) warns of the tendency for power to dislocate categories such as gender, class, race, age, experience thereby creating the potential for boundaries and division. It could be argued that the professional relationship between the practice educator and the student is power-charged and can create a climate of emotional tension and the risk of defensive responses emerging due to the disparate levels and types of power implicit within their roles.

Power differentials within the practice educator/student relationship have been identified to have a significant impact on the practice educators' sense of their personal, emotional and professional wellbeing. Basnett and Sheffield (2010) carried out a qualitative study considering the professional identity and wellbeing of practice educators who had direct experience of failing a student. Their research results indicated emotional and practical strategies used by practice educators to cope with the stress associated with student failure. This was reinforced by later research from Black, Curzio and Terry (2014) who described the 'personal price' practice educators paid and a sense of professional responsibility and accountability, referring to the moral obligation needed to have the courage to fail a student.

According to Ilott and Murphy (1997), 'soul searching' and 'mental exhaustion' can be experienced by practice educators and affective responses of failure, guilt and blame attached to the process of failing a student. Research carried out by Finch and Taylor (2013) also discovered evidence of significant emotional impact linked with failing a student, and ethical dilemmas and tensions that can affect the relationship with the

student. Finch and Taylor's (2013) research identified different themes emerging from participant's relationships with failing students:

- The Guilt Story: guilt and remorse attached to failing a student and the impact a failed placement will have on their professional career.

- The Angry Story: anger at the student's unprofessional behaviour and feeling intimidated by this and also angry at the University for taking on poor quality students.

- The Idealised Learner Story: conflict between the idealised vision of the student held by the practice educator and the reality of what the student was like.

In their research Finch and Taylor (2013) argue that emotional transference between a practice educator and a student who projects their anxiety and fears of failing the placement can reduce the reflective quality of the learning relationship, and this can have an emotional impact on the practice educator. Research studies that have attempted to rationalise and understand the complexity of the practice educator and student role (Finch and Poletti 2013; Finch *et al.* 2014) consider the emotional and professional entanglement of the practice educators' responsibility for deciding on the assessment outcome for a student. Finch *et* al. (2014) refer to the distressing emotional reactions experienced by practice educators, such as anxiety, anger and guilt, and how this can create barriers to an objective and effective assessment being carried out. Similarly, Finch and Poletti (2013) highlight the internalisation of the student's failing as the failing of the practice educator, and speak of the heightened emotional climate of the placement learning environment when a student is failing. One of the reasons for this may be due to reduced capacity to reflect effectively when a practice educator is struggling to overcome feelings of negativity transferred to them

from the student, and is overwhelmed by the task of carrying out a safe assessment to ensure that the gatekeeping role is not compromised. The effective professional 'use of self' and ability to critically reflect on the assessment role are however closely entwined, and arguably, practice educators should be able to 'work through' the experience of failing a student through a process of active reflection. This view is supported by Gardner (2014), who advocates for a relationship-based reflection model to offer a safe space for reflecting on emotional issues as a catalyst for positive action and change. Moreover, safe procedures for ensuring that social work students are able to perform in a robust and confident way can be seen to be vital, despite the discomfort that practice educators may experience when difficulties in the assessment process emerge. A similar point is considered by Brookfield (2009, p.297) who refers to the social worker as an agent of the state and gatekeeper of resources, and recognises the presence of power and control within the profession:

> "critical reflection turns the spotlight onto issues of power and control. It assumes that the minutiae of practice have embedded within them the struggles between unequal interests and groups that exist in the wider world".

Practical, remedial action can assist in reducing the barriers that may emerge during placements and create tensions between the student and practice educator relationship. The range of formative and summative feedback that practice educators need to deliver on an ongoing basis is considered as vital by Heron *et al.* (2015), and also the importance of empowering students to actively contribute to the assessment process. According to Sharp and Danbury (1999), some incidents of student's failing placements could be avoided if problems are flagged up and managed early on by using clear strategies for unblocking placement barriers. A transparent approach to power differences within the practice educator and student relationship can counteract

the negative connotations of power imbalance and focus on the professional relationship. This can be facilitated by a partnership approach with the student and, as suggested by Sharp and Danbury (1999) working with the student as soon as a problem is identified by running through a series of questions to explore when the placement difficulties started and how they can be resolved. Furthermore, a proactive approach and a well- planned induction, as advocated by Mullins (2005), can assist the new student learner to become familiar with the culture and learning environment and ensure that it is tailored to meet individual needs and learning styles. Boak *et al.* (2012) advocate for fair and transparent measures to protect the integrity of the social work profession, from the selection of students to the rigour of the assessment towards the qualification process carried out. As suggested by the studies included in the literature reviewed, a proactive approach to managing marginal learners can help to address the power imbalance and difficult feelings that can emerge within a teaching and learning relationship. This can be seen to be increasingly necessary, as highlighted by Parker (2008), because the practice learning component of the social work degree holds central importance within a programme of learning that is increasingly costly and demanding.

It is perhaps thought-provoking, that there is a wealth of literature to consider the importance of comprehensive and stringent measures to keep social work students on an 'even keel' in the early stages of the placement, yet there is very little emphasis placed on the induction and preparation of practice educators prior to teaching, assessing and supporting a student on placement. This issue is addressed by Doel *et al.* (2002), Postle *et al.* (2002) and Cherry (2005), who raise concerns about the increased expectations placed upon practice educators, without the requisite support network in place to sustain the speed of change. Limited access to support in times of

need and inadequate emphasis on the professional social work- practice educator identity and status has meant that there is increasing pressure placed upon practice educators to keep up to date with their own professional development. The same view is noted by Showell *et al.* (2014) and Williams and Rutter (2013), who stress the need for practice educators to establish a circle of peer support and be proactive in gaining training. Yet they also highlight that there is very little written guidance about how to plan and prepare effectively prior to taking on the active role of supporting a student. In contrast, social workers who are embarking on their practice educator training can find this to be a valuable and rich source of support and knowledge. This view is recognised by Keen *et al.*'s (2011, p. 73) study, in which fifteen employers and HEI partners were invited to deliver pilot Practice Educator programmes, just before the Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) were fully introduced in 2013. The study identified several ways that participants were able to gain valuable support and learning as they assessed students on placement:

> "The programme has caused me to assess and listen, to think and reflect. I found it has caused me to think of how I assessed the student. I have looked at my own self- assessment and I have become so much more organised: it meant I have been much more attentive to my students' blocks and learning difficulties".

An article written in Community Care by Lloyd and Grasham (2016) expresses concerns amongst practice educators about the lack of a distinct champion for practice education, and the absence of a consistent quality assured approach to training practice educators across the UK. There is a consequential impact on achieving high quality placements for social work students and practice educators having the confidence to make robust assessment decisions, thereby safeguarding professional standards. It can be argued that the assessment aspect of the practice educator role

has tended to overshadow other elements of the role, such as the educative responsibility. This is considered by Finch and Poletti (2013) as being linked with the outcome-based nature of the English assessment framework. A similar perspective is raised in research carried out by Jasper (2014) with practice educators to explore their views about the educating task within their role. Feedback from participants suggested that the teaching role was considered to be 'slightly hidden' within the supervisory relationship and part of everyday communication, rather than the formal assessment aspect of their role and that their skills as educators were underplayed by the social work profession. These research findings show that practice educator training and support can play an important role in the continued development of social work practitioners, although there is inconsistency in the quality and standard of courses across the country, and also some ambivalence from practice educators themselves about how they perceive their roles and their status within the wider social work profession.

Due to the complexity and the ambiguous nature of the practice educator role, clarity about requisite functions and responsibilities is essential in order to ensure that there is an honest and transparent approach taken to the power differentials within the practice educator/student relationship. According to Currer and Atherton (2008), the importance of professional expertise, measured judgment and the qualities of honesty, disclosure and accountability are central for practice education, and also being prepared to accept responsibility if placement difficulties arise. Moreover, Zuchowski (2016) refers to the need for sound critical engagement with the student, to ensure that the learning journey is openly shared. This perhaps is a 'tall order' for less experienced practice educators, and highlights the need for a rigorous infrastructure of support being readily available. Taking the step between self- reflection about a

student who may be struggling to progress on placement, and making an open declaration of risk of failure to other stakeholders within the placement can be a significant move forward. This is referred to by Showell Nicholas and Kerr (2015, p. 56) as the need for a 'constructive fail', which places equal balance on both the student's strengths and learning needs, and being able to communicate the reasons for the failed placement to the student and 'key others' in a balanced and professional way, to acknowledge and validate the power differentials within the relationship:

> "A constructive fail has a specific purpose; students who have not passed the course may gain more work experience and try again at a later date, and your report will be the starting point for their assessment".

In this context 'key others' refers to important stake holders who are also involved in supporting the student during the placement. This may include a work-based supervisor, and possibly the allocation of an experienced member of the staff team to support the student as a mentor or placement 'buddy'. The practice educator can, therefore, be seen to be positioned within practice learning settings, working closely with both 'key others' and other professionals within the social work service and therefore may be subject to the wider scrutiny of other professionals within the specific clinical field.

2.3.2 Power Differences and Public Scrutiny

When considering perceived tensions between the practice educator having 'role power' (Hawkins and Shohet, 2010) yet also feeling disempowered and often on the edge of communities of learning, the need for robust support and connection with other social work professionals can be seen to be of paramount importance. Practice educators assess students within the public domain, as they are located in busy social

work teams, often co-located with team managers and other supervisors. Universities allocate independent practice educators to specific social work teams to provide the assessment and support role, which does not usually include a pre-selection process, where the practice educator has an opportunity to meet the student in advance of taking on the assessment role. This can have a direct impact on how quickly and effectively the relationship between the practice educator and the student is able to evolve. Finch (2017, p. 96) notes the importance of a sound liaison between the placement and the university to cement an effective way of working:

"One practical way forward in developing constructive working relationships between the field and the academy is to be cognisant of the different sources of power and authority, and consider how these may shift throughout the placement".

The inequity in the power invested in the practice educator and student relationship and the positioning of practice educators on the periphery of professional communities of support has been the topic of several research studies. Schaub and Dalrymple (2011) identify the impact that a marginal or failing student can have on a practice educator, and how they can experience feelings of alienation and exposure when accounting for their concerns about a student's performance on placement. In their later research Schaub and Dalrymple (2013) consider Foucault (1984) and his notion of 'intersecting gazes' as relevant to the process of failing a student, as some of the practice educators interviewed as part of their research expressed feelings of being unsure of themselves and aware of being scrutinised and, at times, feeling under threat. Feelings of loneliness and isolation were described and the need for significant amounts of evidence to substantiate the fail. The perception of the 'public gaze' has also been explored by Finch and Taylor (2013), who noted that practice educators

sometimes felt exposed and visible to the critique of other professionals when a decision was made to fail a student on placement.

A multidisciplinary approach was taken by Luhanga *et al.* (2014), who conducted research in Canada, interviewing professionals across Nursing, Education and Social Work programmes. Their research highlighted a pattern of similarity across the participating professional programmes, regarding the complex issue of 'failing to fail' a student. Interestingly, their research highlights shared features of personal, professional and structural barriers which may exist for practice educators across different disciplines, who 'fail to fail' a student. The research stresses the need for both academic and emotional support and open, transparent channels of communication between universities, placements and practice educators to support a practice educator to fail a student safely:

> "It is recommended that strategies be implemented to strengthen the agency field educator/preceptor university liaison team, beginning with gaining an understanding of students and their personal issues, choosing appropriate field experiences, tracking students and identifying problems early in the placement" (Luhanga *et al.* 2014, p.19).

It can be suggested that there is a connection between the multiple accountabilities expected of social workers and the professional capability and accountability of the practice educator, who needs to be seen to exercise skills, practice wisdom and criticality when assessing social work students. This point is touched on by Gibson (2016), who explores the implicit anxiety that social work professionals can hold as part of their role, due to the complexity of making life changing decisions and the fear of missing crucial information as part of the risk assessment process. Moreover,

Trevithick (2011), refers to the importance of social workers learning to work with the defensive behaviour of service users and be able to work in a purposeful and effective way with anxiety and defensiveness. As qualified social workers, it may be that practice educators transfer these anxieties about the complexities of relating to others on to their assessment role with students, due to their first hand understanding of the importance of newly qualified social workers having the resilience and the strength to cope with the increasing demands of direct practice.

According to Finch and Poletti (2013), practice educators interviewed in their research study remarked on the 'us' and 'them' relationship with the University and a leaning towards favouring the student's version of events if a failure was on the horizon. The perceived exclusion that practice educators may experience within the context of a wider community of learning is also identified in research by Domakin (2015), who explored the experiences of practice educators who felt isolated from other parts of the social work education system. This research concurs with the general perception that practice learning is an important component of social work training, yet still falls behind the value attached to the academic modules of study. The wide scale lack of value placed on practice learning by universities and social work agencies indicates an urgent need to maximise the learning that can be derived from placements in order to raise the profile of practice education. Moreover, a failing student can also have a negative impact for the university, due to the apprehension of reputational damage and the complexities of student appeal and subsequent litigation linked with placement failure (Laroque and Luhanga, 2013). Moriarty *et al.* (2015) refer to the frustration expressed by practice educators who were allocated students with basic weaknesses such as poor communication skills and weak report writing skills, and therefore not prepared well for direct practice. This point was echoed by Schaub and Dalrymple

(2011, p. 9), who describe some of the difficulties students can experience on placement when their interpersonal and communication skills are found to be limited:

> "Insight is an innate quality that perhaps some individuals may not be able to develop".

Duffy's (2004) seminal work considered the factors influencing the decisions made regarding the assessment of student's competence in practice. Issues were raised, such as giving the students the 'benefit of the doubt' in the first placement, resulting in leaving the decision to fail to the final placement, when the repercussions for the student are even more devastating. Duffy (2003, p.38) describes the frustration of practice educators who have to take on the assessment of a weak student when other mentors and assessors have passed them: "it's very easy to pass a student but very, very difficult to fail a student"

The decision to fail or pass a student can be coloured by the perceptions of other professionals involved in the student's learning during the placement. Shapton (2006) expressed concerns in his research about practice educators feeling that their professional integrity may be undermined if they were not able to uphold a decision to fail a student when other stakeholders within the placement were dissatisfied with the student's performance. The practice educators interviewed in his study referred to the differences in student assessment within an organic, ever changing and frenetic social work setting as compared with the more structured and ordered environment of a university setting. It can be argued that the subjective nature of practice assessment and the diversity of organisational procedures and practice across placement settings may result in practice educators being isolated and under pressure to justify their decision where a failed outcome was likely. Along similar lines, Basnett and Sheffield

(2010) explored the feelings of estrangement and disempowerment that practice educators can experience when their assessment of a failing student is not endorsed by others stakeholders within the placement. Their small-scale qualitative research was carried out with practice educators who had all failed a student. Data arriving from the interviews identified the key themes of 'professional identity' and 'wellbeing' as offering a useful framework to analyse and understand the failures. Using a range of emotional and practical strategies Basnett and Sheffield (2010) proposed three categories within the framework to help practice educators to work through the challenges of working with a failing student by firstly locating the problem, then moving on to coping or managing the problem and then finally reaching closure.

Student assessments take place within various dynamic and fast-paced service settings, which, according to Thompson (2006), should provide creative, interactive learning environments. When considering different techniques and strategies to overcome barriers on placement, which is explored in the following section, there are likely to be infinite approaches that can be considered, which reflect the individuality of students' learning styles, needs and their personal and professional life experiences.

2.3.3 Coping Strategies and Unblocking Placement Barriers

Similarly to Basnett and Sheffield (2010), Bellinger (2010b) identified the debilitating impact that a limited infrastructure of support for practice educators can have, and how mechanisms to support practice learning have not been sufficiently rigorous over the last two decades. Bellinger (2010b) refers to the geographic dispersal of practice educators across practice settings, where constant re-structuring of services, roles and responsibilities often meant that practice educators felt side lined and lacking a clear line of support. Burton (2016) suggests that there are four prime barriers

experienced by students within practice learning settings: managing change in the work place, power differentials between students and practice educators, personal pressures that impinge of the placement learning and the ability to manage complexity.

A research study exploring strategies to understand and respond to placement barriers was carried out by Waterhouse *et al.* (2011), who completed a research project as part of a 'Skills for Care' review, to explore what supports and hinders social work practitioners who are training to become practice educators. The research findings identified a strong link between experience and confidence, showing that practice educators who had several years' experience of assessing students had been able to build up mechanisms to cope with the complexity of their role. The professional journey taken by practice educators and underpinned by experiential adult learning models, such as those developed by Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988), suggests that learning is achieved through practice and participating in tasks. Thus, learning is internalised and disseminated through the continual acquisition of knowledge, skills and values before being shared with others through the process of teaching and mentoring (Steinaker and Bell, 2007). The research conducted by Waterhouse *et al.* (2011) adds to the body of knowledge recognising that people with confidence in their own abilities are much more likely to be competent and able to support and educate others (Payne *et al.,* 2002; Parker, 2008; Sargeant, 2000; Carpenter, 2005). Interestingly the most significant barriers identified by practice educators in the research by Waterhouse *et al.*, (2011) were limited time and workload pressures.

As mentioned in the previous section, research studies have often identified power differentials as a significant factor in creating placement tensions (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Schumann and Barraclough, 2000; Shardlow and Doel, 1996). Tew (2006) refers to the importance of reframing the power held by practice educators as being

a positive development, in the sense of being able to share practice wisdom and expertise with students, and that this could be empowering and collaborative. Similarly, White (2007a) proposed the need to constantly reflect on the power dynamics in relationships, and the importance of asking the right questions to reconnect with the students' own values and beliefs, as part of the learning process when practicing a new set of skills. An imbalanced power relationship can run the risk of being discriminative and exploitative, if power is used 'over' another person rather than to enable and empower them, and this view is explored by O'Leary *et al.* (2013) within the context of the professional boundaries and power imbalances that exist between social workers and service users. Practice educators are often tasked with the role of reinforcing the need for personal and professional boundaries to be well established for students when intervening with service users, although arguably, this can create a separation, which can hinder a positive relationship being developed. O'Leary *et al.* (2013) developed a model of professional boundaries which has a more fluid approach by both 'surrounding' and 'connecting' the social worker with the individual, thereby promoting a sense of co-production, participation and recognition of the dignity and wellbeing of the service user.

Effective communication strategies are considered to be essential for practice learning and, as highlighted by Dixon (2013), effective engagement with others is the core requisite of social work practice. In a similar vein, Koprowska (2003), promotes the effectiveness of role modelling interviewing skills as part of practice learning to develop self-reflection and interpersonal skills, and the need to build in reflective time as part of supervision to strengthen insights acquired through interactive group work as a vital opportunity to stand back and consider the skills and knowledge gained. Edmondson (2014) proposed a strategy to encourage effective communication skills, referred to as

the 'TALK' model, which aims to encourage social work students to communicate with practice educators on placement to prevent blocks in learning occurring. The model has four specific indicators: **T**ell your practice educator how you are feeling, **A**ccept that we are all different, **L**isten and consider the views and perspectives of others and **K**now and recognise when there is a problem.

Placement settings as dynamic and ever-changing learning environments can be perceived to be vitally important when maximising the learning opportunities for students and for enabling practice educators to give of their best. Sterling (2007) refers to the organic and transformative scope within educational learning environments when reflective and critical thinking are encouraged, and there is a sense of shared ownership of the students learning. According to Senge (1990) and Gould (2000), learning organisations need to provide an environment, which encourages a flexible and interactive response to new challenges. Moreover, Williams and Rutter (2013) refer to as the triangulation of practice-based evidence to ensure that assessments are not only based on the judgement of a single individual or single event, but encompass evidence across different sources and from different people. Triangulated feedback from colleagues, feedback from service users and carers and direct observations from other professionals will extend the rigour and depth of the student assessment. Moreover, the notion of co-productive inter-dependency between the practice educator and the student reinforces the importance of the student's role in responding in a proactive and pragmatic way to unblocking identified placement barriers. This point is explored by Kadushin and Harkness (2002), who stress the importance of having shared responsibility for recording notes and setting the supervision agenda, to ensure that the agenda is open and responsive to students, and is able to prioritise issues for discussion.

Resilience, emotional intelligence and emotional connection with others through empathic interventions are widely considered to be core social work skills (Kinman and Grant, 2010; Koprowska, 2008; Thompson and Thompson, 2008), and to be closely aligned with the reflexive ability to creatively consider alternative approaches when difficulties arise. The importance of emotional intelligence is echoed by Clarke *et al.* (2016) as essential for the reflective teaching and learning of students and also for promoting personal resilience and reflexive self-knowledge for practice educators. This chimes with Bandura's (1977) work on creating a self-system of personal attitudes, abilities and cognitive skills, known as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Akin to emotional intelligence and self-efficacy, Tugade and Frederickson (2004) refer to the merits of positive emotions and the scope for heightened resilience to help practitioners to 'bounce back' from negative emotional experiences. The notion of a solution based approach to practice education, referred to by Thatchenkary and Matzker (2006) as 'appreciative intelligence' recognises the inherent capacity to see positive potential in individuals, groups and processes. A similar view offered by Isen (2000) suggests that people who are experiencing positive feelings are more likely to be creative, versatile and open to new ways of thinking, and accepting new information, which may challenge pre-conceived ideas and lead to a recognition of new lessons learned. Furthermore, research by Adamson *et al.* (2014) considers the power of robust personal moral and ethical codes and attributes of resilience as being effective in counteracting the demands and challenges of front line social work practice.

When considering the public domain of practice education, the interdependency of the practice educator and student role and the need for a proactive response to overcoming placement difficulties it is also pertinent to be aware of the overarching

support that needs to be in place. Lomax *et al.* (2010) refer to the wider body of support available for students and practice educators, incorporating university and placement resources and specialist support services in addition to social work forums such as The British Association of Social Work (BASW). Research, however, has often concluded that there are significant gaps in the infrastructure of support available, leaving practice educators feeling isolated and overwhelmed (Llott and Murphy, 1997; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013).

2.4 The Infrastructure of Support for Practice Educators

Introduction

The previous two themes covered in the literature review have considered the professional accountability of the practice educator within the context of a continual process of change taking place for social work, and the impact of power differentials implicit within the relationship established with social work students during their placements. The requirement for robust and personalised support for practice educators is of central importance to ensure effective teaching and learning is provided to social work students. This final theme explores the challenges of managing change and complexity within practice learning, and the need to acknowledge the existing gaps in the support provided to practice educators. Ways of strengthening practice education by consulting with practice educators and key partners in the social work profession are explored through selected research studies, to encourage a climate of accountability and ownership of the change process.

2.4.1 Practice Education: Different Models of Support

Practice educators are centrally positioned within pressures associated with the placement component of the social work degree programme. There are ongoing concerns about both the quantity and the quality of placements (Finch *et al.*, 2014) and also the support in place for practice educators, particularly when the student is marginal or failing (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010). Additionally, political influences and government intervention have aimed to make the social work degree more robust and strengthen the placement component to extend the 'readiness for practice' teaching provided by the university prior to students commencing their first placements. This in turn has implications for increasing the rigour and standard of practice education. Much of the groundwork for these changes was initiated by the Social Work Task Force (SWTF) in 2009, when an in-depth review of frontline social work was carried out (Finch and Taylor, 2013). The report highlighted the need to raise the bar for social work education and the readiness to practice process:

> "Specific concerns have been raised about the ….robustness and quality of assessment, with some students passing the social work degree who are not competent or suitable to practice on the frontline". (SWTF, 2009, p. 24).

The swift acceleration of continual and major change in the field of social work has been initiated as a move to professionalise and arguably institutionalise the work force, in line with political dictates for economic austerity and neoliberal policies (Banks, 2015). As a response to increased government intervention, there has been opposition to this direction, and a call for more personalised and radical approaches to social work, and a move away from managerial regimes (Duffy, 2003). Similarly, Houston (2016) advocates for a relational connection between individuality and social identity

in social work, to avoid reductionist ideas of personalisation, promote a wider inclusive notion of social justice and introduce more supportive models of learning. The interdependence of individual and social identity considered by Houston (2016) appears to be very applicable to practice educators, who are operating as part of wider organisational and regional spheres, yet also self-manage their roles as autonomous social work professionals.

Research studies have explored differing views about the direction of travel for practice education, to identify both the strengths in the provision of student centred practice learning, and the need for increased support for practice educators. Collis, Tolloch and Zaniewicka (2014) conducted small-scale qualitative research with practice educators working with a university in South East England to find out their day to-day experiences of assessing students, following the reduction in the daily placement payment initiated by the Department of Health in 2013. Findings concluded, in essence, that participants felt disheartened by the extrinsic de-valuing of their role due to a decrease in payment, in addition to an intrinsic lack of recognition of the status of the practice educator role. Research participants expressed ways that their role could be recognised through receiving enhanced and regular supervision, a significant increase in the payment threshold, more role clarity, support and status and an improved and more regular training regime from universities. These outcomes were similar to those reached by Waterhouse *et al.* (2011), where the most valued types of support perceived by practice educators were ranked in order, with the highest ratings given to briefing sessions and updates on developments in practice education, student feedback, training, handbooks, peer support, management support and work load relief.

Leigh (2014) suggests that practice based education roles need to be reconstructed through regional partnerships, with each stakeholder taking responsibility for the agreed aims of the partnership. The development of regional partnerships would arguably extend the importance of practice educators taking ownership of their own continual professional development and be able to demonstrate skills of effective leadership, emotional intelligence and integrity. The Department of Health and The Department for Education have collaborated following Croisdale-Appleby's (2014) independent review of social work education and Narey's review of children and family social work (2014), both commissioned in the wake of Munro's review of children's social work in 2011. A positive way forward has been piloted across four local authorities and a partnering university to create teaching partnerships aiming to increase the quality of student placements and the status of practice education. Based on the premise of the merits of 'communities of practice' Wenger(1998) and those of self –directed leadership McKitterick (2015), the aims of the teaching partnerships are to devise consistent processes for allocating and matching students with practice educators and placements, to increase the number of social workers undertaking the new practice educator professional standards two stage training (PEPS 1+2) and to increase the quality assurance of placements across the partnership domain (South East London Teaching Partnership, 2015).

The complexity of providing high quality practice placement provision for social work students whilst empowering practice educators within the context of continual change which can be difficult to predict and control, creates a potentially precarious environment for the assessment of social work students. The research conducted by Leigh (2014) pinpoints both an increase in the expectations placed on social workers and practice educators and subsequent weaknesses in the infrastructure of support

required to sustain the speed of change (Doel, *et al.*, 2002; Postle, *et al.*, 2002; Cherry, 2005). An interesting feature of practice education over the years has been the pattern of cyclical change, where features of past solutions to assessing social work students on placement have been revived as a response to diminishing resources and increased expectations. Cornish and White (2014) explore the re-creation of the student unit model of student placement established in 2006 by the University of Bedfordshire, in partnership with Luton Local Authority. In this placement model, an established and experienced number of practice educators are employed to support and assess several students throughout the academic year. Cornish and White (2014, p.190) refer to the balance achieved between creative and organic learning opportunities and building a sound reputation as a credible practice learning forum with good relationships between students, practice educators, partnering agencies and service user:

> "Potential for creativity emerges from the evidence as a strength of the Centre…..to develop new possibilities for practice….as increased regulation reduces opportunities for creative responses".

There is an increased expectation that social work professionals will be evidence-informed in their approach to practice and keep abreast of knowledge, skills and to further develop areas of specialist knowledge (Williams and Rutter, 2013). The increasing pressure for practice educators to take control of their own learning in order to keep on track with the climate of change will be explored in the following section.

2.4.2 Owning the Process of Change

Social work education agencies can be argued to assume an expectation that practice educators will take a forward position in confronting and addressing placement

challenges (Sowbel, 2012). However, the limited and variable quality of the structure of support in place for practice educators requires a resilient and proactive stance to be taken, where practice educators need to take ownership of change and be able to cope with the unexpected (Glassman and Robbins, 2007). Bogo *et al.* (2006, p.583) identified a set of skills and competencies based on personal qualities or meta-competencies that practice educators need: "maturity, initiative, energy, independence, responsiveness to others and commitment". Additional qualities rated as important for student assessment were: integrity, feeling comfortable with emotions, flexibility, humility, self-awareness and empathy (Lafrance and Gray, 2014). This array of requisite qualities and competencies reinforces the necessity of practice educators remaining true to the central core of social work values, whilst using professional judgement and objectivity in their assessment outcomes. According to Collins (2016), owning the process of change within the social work profession requires resilience, retention and identification with the social work role, as well as a deep commitment to the underpinning code of ethics and values. The importance of adherence to social justice and integrity is echoed by Mayer and Herscovitch (2001, p. 301), who define commitment as: "a force that binds an individual to a course of action". There can be seen to be is a connection between the practice educator's ability to keep abreast of change and their effectiveness in supporting the student to identify with the values, attitudes and norms within the social work profession. This view is echoed by Terum and Heggen (2016), who refer to the integral role of the teacher or educator within the placement setting in shaping and influencing the learning journey, by developing a strong and supportive relationship with their student.

To an extent the threats identified by practice educators, such as financial cuts and political intervention, can be counter balanced by recent positive feedback on the new

assessment framework for social work students, the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (Williams and Rutter, 2013). The College of Social Work (2012) endorsed the requirement for the nine assessment capabilities integral to the framework to be assessed in depth and progressively over the full period of the placement, and that the assessment completed by the practice educator must be trustworthy, reliable and transparent. Interestingly, the increased emphasis on a holistic and measured assessment increases the responsibility placed on the practice educator to become more reflexive and analytical in developing the professional capability of students (Taylor and White, 2006). There are differing views about the suitability of the PCF assessment framework, and concerns have emerged about the compatibility with front line social work practice. Research by Higgins and Goodyer (2015) considers the relentless professional transformation of social work education, partly due to the holistic value based PCF, and the aspirational emphasis of the assessment framework, which may be at odds with the reality of the complex and ambiguous reality of social work practice.

Despite differing opinions about PCF, the presence of a set of national standards for practice education can be seen to be an essential foundation for raising standards across the social work discipline and, according to Plenty and Gower (2013), should provide a quality assured measure for local and regional arrangements for practice education. Although there are acknowledged differences between the roles and experience of practice educators, it can be argued that practice educators, whether on-site or off-site, need to fully own the process of change and be proactive in their commitment to continual professional development:

> "We stand by our principle of developing proactive, flexible and open-minded practitioners able to grapple with complexity, to work autonomously and to co-create new knowledge". (Bellinger *et al.*, 2014, p. 64).

Increasing government intervention to raise the rigour of social work education and ensure that those entering the profession are fully ready for practice has placed a strong emphasis on post graduate and accelerated training routes, and a preference for statutory placements as opposed to sourcing placements within the private, voluntary and independent service sector. This is particularly apparent when a teaching partnership has been established between local authorities and universities, where students are expected to have both their placements within a statutory service setting. This direction challenges the view that a more broad based approach needs to be taken when sourcing practice learning placements for students, and, as advocated by Bellinger (2010b), the importance of a heightened generative stance to tap in to more diverse, non-traditional placement settings and counter-balance the pressure being applied to accessing enough good quality statutory placements. Scholar *et al.* (2014) also advocates for this approach, seeing social work education reforms and the move to a more holistic assessment framework as providing increased opportunity for the promotion of social work beyond the remit of statutory sector employers. There is clearly merit in developing a wider range of direct services for practice placements, where students and educators have more face-to-face contact with service users and carers within the services that offer them support on a regular basis. Certainly, an increase in non-traditional placement settings would extend the scope for off-site practice education, and would be in tune with the PCF and the nine interdependent domains of knowledge, skills and capacities which are relevant to all

social workers, whatever setting they work in. Wayne *et al.,* (2010, p.11) perceive the versatility of placements as a route to encouraging qualifying social work students to:

> "contribute to the education of future social workers through practice education – the signature pedagogy of social work education"

By virtue of the role of practice education, where educators will have a direct footing within the fast pace frontline social work services themselves, the professional boundaries of their remit are likely to need to remain versatile and dynamic in nature. As expressed by Schon (1983), the essence of social work practice can be argued as being about the messy and multi-layered world of practice; 'swampy lowland' in contrast to the 'high ground' of academic social work theory, which takes place in the more controlled and structured environment of the social work university. The negative and the positive experiences of practice educators need to be openly expressed and critically reflected upon, as part of the process of gathering strength and motivation for improvement, to create an honest framework for dealing with the complexities and the constant challenges of social work practice education. A transparent dialogue about concerns can avoid setting up false hopes that the difficulties will resolve themselves and establish a documented plan for how issues can be addressed. This view is conveyed by Finch (2017), who argues that honesty needs to be declared by practice educators through having 'courageous conversations' with students, where there are consistent concerns about their practice.

According to Asquith *et al.* (2005), a sense of ownership and identity from practice educators is also vital as part of the process of resolving confusion about the shifting and sliding shape of the social work profession in order to manage the conflicting, and at times, detrimental notions about social work conveyed by the media and social and

political discourse. This cautionary note seems to be appropriate in the current social work landscape of ever-increasing change and uncertainty and is noted by Scholar *et al.* (2014), who refer to government intervention to introduce 'fast track' social work programmes, which are employer- led, rather than retained fully in the domain of higher education. There are concerns that the intrinsic values and the central core of social work may become compromised due to the potential for diluting the professional identity of social work as the direction of travel moves towards shorter social work programmes with a sharp focus on the legal and statutory social work remit. As noted by Rogowski (2012), critical social work and the emphasis on the relationship between the social worker and service user may be threatened by the managerial culture creeping into the profession. This tension may be ameliorated by practice educators continually examining, exploring, reinforcing and reflecting on their students' practice (Sharp and Danbury, 1999).

The value of practitioner research also needs to be highlighted as a vital way to raise the profile and the support for practice education. Research by MacRae *et* al. (2016) endorses the value of practitioner research for the learning culture of social work, and proposes that when perceived barriers, which may exclude practitioners from contributing to academic research, are lifted, significant skills and knowledge can be gained and shared to inform others. Moriarty *et al.* (2015) identify some of the stumbling blocks that can hinder the capacity for social work research, and suggest that practical help in tendering for and submitting bids and building up research minded support groups can bolster the potential for increased evidence based social work research. Evidence based research is also strongly advocated by Croisdale-Appleby (2014, p.15) who refers to the need for research minded social work practitioners as:

"able to understand and apply to their social work practice the relevant principles, methods and knowledge of social work: seeking to further the understanding of social work through evidence gathering and through research".

Owning the process of change can be seen to be a vital and ongoing priority for practice educators, in order to uphold professional standards and stringently assess capability. Qualities such as integrity, incorporating skills, knowledge and values, have been highlighted by Appleton (2010) as being essential in ensuring that good practice is measured in a congruent and holistic way. However, practice educators also need a reliable network of support to sustain their professional integrity and practice. Research conducted by Plenty *et al.* (2015) endorses the need for all social work training programmes to develop support networks to promote and share best practice and ensure that supervisors and practice educators have full access to information, documentation and research to inform them and enable them to carry out their roles. This connectivity with other practice educators and professionals within social work student practice placements can be seen to be vital for practice educators, balancing the assessment of fitness to practice for social work students, whilst concurrently mentoring and encouraging students to demonstrate ethically grounded value based skills and qualities.

2.3.3 Chapter Summary

The three main topics selected for the literature review have attempted to highlight the onus placed on practice educators to manage the complexity of change in social work education and development, and the increased emphasis on robust professional standards and expectations, both for their own practice and to measure the capability of social work students (Bogg and Challis, 2016). The power based relationship

between the practice educator and student, coupled with a shift in learning and assessment introduced by the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), has been explored to identify some differing perspectives about the new assessment framework and the impact for the practice educator role. The heightened focus on continuing professional development and the need for increased creativity and skills to evidence the PCF holistic assessment to capture students' capability has been touched on to consider some coping strategies for practice educators. The research articles examined have identified gaps in the infrastructure of support available to practice educators as social work travels through a continued state of flux. Moreover, the literature searched has illustrated some imaginative ways that the professional status of social work practice education can be raised and good practice initiatives emulated and extended. Scholar *et al.*, (2014) state the importance of the retention of robust boundaries around the professional identity of social work:

> "If we as a profession fail to articulate, promote and lobby for our own conception of social work's role and identity we should not be surprised that others are willing to do this for us, prescribing and limiting the role of social work to what is required by statute and within statutory settings". (Scholar *et al.,* 2014, p.113).

3 Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

A qualitative research design using different participant selection approaches was chosen for conducting the data collection process, with the aim of sequentially exploring the data gathered to both confirm and cross-validate findings arising from each stage of the data analysis (Boeije, 2010). Both small group and individual interviews were carried out to inductively identify patterns and associations from the experiences of practice educators, thereby aiming to gather socially constructed 'truths' or shared phenomena which held genuine meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Feedback was later gathered from written reflective commentaries completed by participants of two social work forums. The additional feedback gained from other professionals enabled broader information to be gathered about the support available for practice educators across different agencies during a specific time of change for social work practice education.

The decision to use different methods to collect the data across the three stages of the research study was also influenced by the intention to gain intelligence from participants over a period of 18 months (Brannen, 1992b; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The planned timespan for preparing and conducting the study was informed by the intention of capturing research participants' changing experiences as they became familiar with the new student assessment framework for social work students. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress the importance of 'trustworthiness' when carrying out research, to ensure that the data collated and analysed remains as true as possible to the research participants' direct experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four concepts to ensure that trustworthiness is assured; one of these is the concept of

credibility. According to Padgett (2008), using two or more sources within a research study can strengthen credibility of the research by adding a more rigorous and comprehensive framework. Furthermore, Sandelowski (1986) referred to 'fittingness' in research as a way of checking whether a research study can be fitted into a wider body of knowledge on the topic. The three-staged research study carried out aimed to provide verification that the views of a small group of research participants had wider relevance to social work practice education forums, and also had the potential to link in with wider research studies.

The strengths-based social-constructionist methodological approach of appreciative inquiry (AI) was used for the design, implementation and evaluation of the research study. The data collected in the first and second stages of the study were subsequently shared by other social work professionals with direct experience of practice education to explore the relevance of the findings and reflect on the integrity of the approach followed (Denzin, 1994). AI was selected as a fitting approach to be able to delve deeply into the direct experiences of research participants over a period of time, to draw out their 'peak experiences' when assessing students, to portray the richness of individual and small group experiences, and to amplify the way in which certain key words expressed, such as 'strength', 'practice wisdom', 'confusion' and 'uncertainty' could be drawn together to identify themes which hold shared meaning. The decision to validate direct experiences across a wider audience of social work professionals from two social work forums in the final stage of the study stemmed from the intention to harness the data already collected, and reach some clear recommendations for the future of practice education. The objective was and to establish rigour in the way the research was conducted, by cross-referencing data gathered in the earlier stages of the study (Silverman, 2010; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

3.2 Appreciative Inquiry: Rationale for the Selected Research Design

Appreciative inquiry was chosen for the research design due to the positive change core of the approach, and the emphasis on the process of discovery, rather than a generative technique to analyse pre-conceived information. The rationale for the choice of approach was also motivated by parallels between appreciative inquiry as a strength based journey rather than a clear cut destination, and the trajectory of fast paced change in practice education, which is difficult to predict or control (Saleeby, 2006; Patton, 2003). Social work has experienced detrimental and, at times, conflicting reviews from the media which tend to highlight negative images of the profession. It therefore seemed important to counteract this by using an appreciative approach and encourage research participants to share their positive practice learning experiences, rather than dwell on negative aspects of practice education.

The notion of 'provocative propositions' which forms the central core of appreciative inquiry, has synergy with the importance of nurturing personal skills and qualities, which are perceived to be energising and self-motivating. Reed (2007) refers to the concept of provocative propositions as giving shape to the hopes, dreams and aspirations of people through idealised statements, which can provide a starting point for thinking about new ways of doing things. In addition to sharing positive experiences of assessing students, the choice of methodology was therefore also identified to capture new and provocative ideas to take forward during a time of transformational change. Bushe (2007) referred to the need to focus on reality, but to phrase this differently to encourage fresh ways of looking at things.

As an exploration of the power differences between practice educators and students was a key component of the research study, it was felt that an appreciative design to

the research questions would create a positive framework for the questions posed, and facilitate an open and honest dialogue about power. Hammond (1998) and Reed *et al.* (2002) endorsed the application of appreciative methodology within research to create a new reality through asking shared, aspirational questions and thereby encouraging energy and ideas for dealing with difficulties identified. Bellinger and Elliott (2011) were very aware of the power differentials between practice educators and social work students, and carried out their research using appreciative inquiry as a tool to recognise positive power through a focus on capacity and resourcefulness in the way they posed the interview questions. Bellinger and Elliott (2011) interviewed students, service users, carers and practice educators to gain their perspectives about which particular occasions social work students were best supported on placement, and what made this successful. Feedback suggested that the supervisory role needed to incorporate reflective practice and critical reasoning, to enable a reflective culture in practice learning to evolve.

Hamel (2000) refers to the strengths-based features of AI as being affiliated with the notion of 'continuous improvement' and as possessing revitalising qualities to generate new ideas as people share experiences and 'co-construct' positive changes. This also has synergy with the emphasis placed on continual professional development within social work education, and the use of strengths-based styles of mentoring and support, rather than opting for a more problem centred approach. Cojocaru (2010) developed an egalitarian style of supervision based on appreciative inquiry to affirm what is going well and share a vision with a clear plan to then put the shared vision into action. The appreciative structure of the three-staged research study aimed to capture unfolding knowledge from research participants as they progressed forward from initial ideas of the new assessment framework to being able to actualise and share their experiences.

According to Van der Haar and Hosking (2004), the process of inquiry should not be seen as separate from the evaluation, and for this reason, AI has been applied as a consistent critical perspective for the preparation, implementation and evaluation stages of the research study (Smith, 2009). In the first two stages of the research study peak experiences were gathered to shape the data collected as a way of re-framing rather than ignoring negative experiences, and as a way of celebrating the experiences that give life and meaning to practice education. Dreyfus (1990) designed a qualitative life story exercise to consider peak experiences when his research participants spoke about being uplifted and breaking through their difficulties. Interestingly Dreyfus (1990) also identified the opposite emotion to 'peak' as being 'nadir', where more negative experiences can evolve directly from positive turning points. When selecting appreciative inquiry as the methodological approach, the risk of skewing the research towards positive, transformational change rather than achieving a measured and critical approach was seen as a potential drawback (Carter, 2006). As the researcher it was important to ensure that difficulties were not discounted but were openly discussed as a way of working through the barriers and seeking solutions to challenges. Appreciative inquiry provided a loose structure for the interview questions, which encouraged a reframing of participants' individual experiences of students, and a fresh perspective when reflecting on overcoming placement barriers. Lilja and Richardson (2012) used an appreciative form of research methodology to empower their university student participants, and reported that AI provided a positive channel for focussing on successful experiences to motivate and revitalise students as they progressed through change.

Practice educators can be seen as 'agents of change' due to their important position within practice education and the wider organisational changes occurring for the social

work profession. Appreciative inquiry was selected to encourage research participants to focus on what already works well as a platform to envision new insight, as opposed to highlighting problems stemming from uncertainty and change. The choice of methodology was directly influenced by Cooperrider's (1986) seminal work on AI organisational change, and the emphasis on both personal and shared employees' direct and lived experiences and recognition of collective strengths within the organisation, which can be used as a catalyst for change. AI as an action based social constructionist theory provides a vehicle for affirming past and present strengths and successes (Reed, 2007). This seems to hold relevance for practice education, where constant change due to social work reforms and the ensuing impact for practice, can lead to 'exhaustion' and 'burn out' (McFadden *et al.*, 2015). Despite the seemingly paradoxical differences between the positive affirmation of the AI approach and the deficit based social, political and cultural image of social work, there can be seen to be a binary synergy which has provided an inspirational vehicle for reframing the challenges within the social work profession, to seek fresh ideas and energy to deal with the complexities (Bellinger and Elliott, 2011; Hughes, 2012). Furthermore, Robinson *et al.* (2012) referred to a connection between AI and therapeutic interventions and the notion of the 'miracle question,' which can be used in practice to motivate clients with negative thought processes. The notion of the 'miracle question' equates with 'peak experiences' and the value of encouraging practice educators to share their positive experiences of assessing students.

Finally, the underpinning value base of appreciative inquiry and social work and the shared emphasis on valuing individual differences and contrasting perspectives served to justify the choice of AI as a fitting methodology. The intention of the research was to empower research participants to share their success stories as a catalyst for

creating a focus on new possibilities in the face of change. Cooperrider *et al.* (2003, p. 32) reinforces the importance of the language used when communicating with others to reflect on the positive change core of an organisation by asking initially:

"What factors give life to this organisation when it is and has been most alive, successful and effective?"

This question seeks to capture what is going well in the present. When asking participants to then dream about and design a better future Cooperrider *et al.* (2003, p.3) asked:

"What possibilities, expressed or latent, provide opportunities for more vital, successful and effective (vision-and-values congruent) forms of organization?"

The value based language used to design the interview questions for my research study were influenced by Cooperrider's body of work on appreciative inquiry, and were based on the ' 4 D Cycle' framework which is described in detail in the following section.

3.3 The '4 D' Cycle Process

Appreciative inquiry, in a similar way to many social work value based theories, moves forward in a cyclical and developmental way which is self-perpetuating and stems from a 'positive change core'. Cooperrider *et al.* (2003, p.30) refers to this intrinsic quality as: "the greatest yet least recognised resource in the change management field".

AI is powered forward by a cyclical model of action known as the '4D' Cycle; '**Discovery**', '**Dream'**. '**Design**' and '**Delivery**' also sometimes referred to as 'Destiny' by Coghlan *et al.*, 2003. This process provides a seamless and visual progression through a study of research beginning with the **discovery** of '*the best of what is'* followed by the **dream** stage to envision '*what might be'* moving on to the **designing** stage; '*determining what will be'* to craft plans for the future to the final stage of **delivery** and ' *planning what will be'*. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) refer to the 'affirmative agenda' of AI as a theory of communicative action. According to Grant and Humphries (2006, p. 411), the design and delivery stages seek to close the circle of enquiry to answer the question: "what can we begin to put in place to achieve these dreams?"

Research using the appreciative model of inquiry carried out by Fifolt and Lander (2013) applied the '4D' model to examine the quality of the student experience within a higher education institution to build on and improve the performance of the organisation. In this study the '4D' model was used to scaffold the SOAR model for organisational planning:

Strengths (Discovery) – the best of what is

Opportunities (Dream) – what could be

Aspirations (Design) – what should be

Results (Destiny) – what will be

The process of inquiry provides the impetus for change to occur by focussing on what is already working well, rather than dwelling on the weaknesses (Cooperrider *et al.*, 1995). The shifting from a top-down model of power to a more emancipatory, value-

based approach seeks to increase individual investment in an organisation, rather than expecting changes to come only from the individuals themselves (Sheldon, 2005).

The notion of posing positive questions to instigate a productive approach to discovering new information and unleashing new potentials is underpinned by the '4D' cyclical model of growth and development. This is complemented by particular principles and assumptions that reshape AI as more than a set of techniques for change and more of a philosophical orientation (Coghlan *et al.*, 2003). The five principles of AI were expounded by Cooperrider (1986) and Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), but have been re-generated by more recent studies as a guiding set of concepts and values that guide action.

3.4 The Five Central Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

The five central principles, which derive from Cooperrider's original conception of appreciative inquiry, have been featured within many research studies over the last twenty years (Gergen, 1999; Ricketts, 2002; Coghlan *et al.*, 2003; Bushe and Khamisa, 2004; Lilja and Richardsson, 2012; Johnson, 2013). The first principle, known as 'The Constructivist Principle' refers to the social constructionist theory introduced by Gergen (1999) and the notion of ideas being shaped and given added meaning as individual stories and experiences are shared and re-affirmed by others. Bellinger and Elliott (2011) carried out research to consider a less managerial organisational structure for supporting social work students as they completed their practice learning placements. An appreciative inquiry approach was used to move away from deficits and problems to focus on capacity and resourcefulness. Bellinger and Elliott's (2011) research found that the co-construction of knowledge gained from research participants created a new reality about what worked well, which research

stakeholders could then invest in to create an envisioned future (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). In this way AI, as the social constructionist methodology, draws attention to the processes of construction as each participant shares their own stories about the past, present and future and can harness this to highlight the power these stories have to shape and reflect the way people think and subsequently put their thoughts into practice (Reed, 2007).

The second principle, 'The Principle of Simultaneity' stresses the holistic impact of an appreciatively driven inquiry, where the design, delivery and evaluation of the research are fused together as sequential stages of the same process. Schiller and Worthing (2011, p.20) refer to values that define the core of who we are as individuals, and highlight the benefits of AI as a research tool:

> "having an open and positive attitude, where dreaming and execution come together to produce demonstrable results".

The inquiry, or intervention, is therefore an impetus for reflection and analysis upon different ways of thinking and doing and the connection between intellectual ideas and interpersonal criticality. Sheppard and Charles (2015) express this connectivity as the interpersonal (heart) and the intellectual (head), which they consider to be the twin pillars of social work. Gillen *et al.* (2013) argue that the balance of demonstrating both cognitive and affective capabilities will alter according to the task, and that although it is acknowledged that both are essential for social work, in reality they may not be coterminous, as practitioners who are interpersonally strong may be weaker in the traditional sense of cognitive intelligence. AI is an approach which seeks to bridge the gap between the distinct processes of reflection, implementation and delivery through the positive core of discovery and enhancement (Cooperrider *et al.,* 2003).

'The Poetic Principle' of AI refers to the self-monitoring aspects of human storytelling where individuals will create and construct their own sense of reality drawn from lived experience. This approach is also valued and adopted by other narrative methodological approaches, where research participants are perceived as unique storytellers:

> "humans are story telling organisms who, individually and collectively lead storied lives" (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p.8).

In this way individual authors' perspectives lead to a co-authored approach, and the potential for inspired new stories to be related and created (Carter, 2006). AI recognises that individuals are authors of their own experiences and will therefore select the parts of their stories that have the most resonance for them. AI can therefore provide a fluid vehicle for supporting people through the individual and collective story telling process, engaging their attention in an accessible and authentic way, which incorporates their own lived experiences. Cowling and Repede (2010) refer to the potential for individual stories to become enriched through sharing knowledge with others, to create deeper and more holistic levels of knowing. As mentioned, AI as a form of research has parallels with narrative methodology, where the notion of 'storying' is inexorably linked with the analysis of the stories to convey some message or salient point (Reissman, 2008).

Perhaps the most ground breaking quality of AI is 'The Anticipatory Principle' because this sets the context of current ideas and practice firmly in the future to 'see what might be' as the guiding light to reforming and refashioning a collective set of possibilities. The connection between the ideas and experiences of individuals involved in the research and how this is extended and redefined is an essential part of

AI and, as advocated by Bushe and Kassam (2005), creates a new lens for seeing old issues. Barrett (1998) conducted adaptive learning research using an appreciative approach and highlighted the importance of affirmative competency and the capacity to appreciate possibilities. Barrett recognised the importance of both cognitive and emotional energy and creativity when seeking to create a positive image of a desired future.

Finally, 'The Positive Principle' stems from a belief that if we shape our research in a positive frame of questioning, the change process will be more successful and sustainable, as it is based on individual commitment and conviction. However, many research studies have recognised the need to incorporate the full spectrum of lived experiences and to see how AI can facilitate an objective and empowering way of re-living difficulties and exploring mechanisms to work through the barriers: "Appreciation is not just about looking at the good stuff". (Rogers and Fraser, 2003, p.75).

Micheal (2005) found that having a focus on asking positive questions engaged participants more deeply, despite the often negative nature of the experiences being expressed, and that the level of cooperation in the study was more intense because there was a natural tendency to share ideas and images that conveyed nourishment and energy. Micheal (2005) noted that AI incorporated the positive principle as a guide to designing the research questions in addition to how the study itself was constructed. The scope for a holistic and versatile interpretation of appreciative research methodology, which is guided by the principles of AI, can facilitate an open and measured approach to collecting and evaluating data, to ensure that the information gained is not skewed towards a perspective that filters out the challenges and complexities of social work experience.

3.5 Consideration of Alternative Methodology

Alternative methodologies could have been applied, and may well have generated very different outcomes. Case study methodology could have been used, to explore different groups of practice educators across a range of social work programmes, to compare and contrast their experiences and discover what specific support structures are required. This would have been a relevant approach to consider, due to the increased emphasis being placed upon practice educators needing to extend their repertoire of skills and knowledge to adjust to the diverse climate of social work education. Yin (2009) states that case study research requires an empirical approach to study a case, or a number of cases, in a detailed way over time, which can be approached qualitatively or quantitatively.

It would be possible to analyse and compare the experiences of practice educators assessing students across different levels of social work education, to show where requisite skills sets and experience may vary, and to draw out meaningful outcomes through thematic analysis. Qualitative case study methodology could perhaps be a viable approach to build on the research study currently being carried out, rather than selected for a first research project, due to time constraints and the need to extend my knowledge and skills as a researcher.

Action research was the initial choice of methodological approach, although this was then decided against due to a preferred emphasis on spotlighting what is already valued within practice education, rather than seeking solutions to perceived problems. Action research is a methodology with an approach akin to AI, as it is concerned with following the process of change through facilitating research students to become actively engaged in making constructive differences through collective inquiry. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) action research is

participatory in nature, and is concerned with the identification of a problem, and then working out solutions through circular strategies, which are very similar to the '4D' approach. Whilst the collaborative design of action research is very similar to AI, the main difference is the problem-solving focus, rather than starting from the premise of what is already working well. I was particularly keen to engage with a non-problem orientation for the research, to aim to mirror the underpinning value base of social work as part of transformational change, to promote participants' reflections on success and achievement, rather than starting with the perceived failings within the social work profession (Jones, 2014).

3.6 Justification of Appreciative Inquiry as the Selected Methodology

Appreciative inquiry has been applied across diverse disciplines to explore 'the best of' what already exists. Educational, organisational, spiritual and political domains have tapped into the strengths base of AI to understand the complexity of human interactions and the potential to achieve transformational change (Clarke *et al.,* 2006; Michael, 2005; Saha, 2012; Ricketts, 2002; Schiller and Worthing, 2011; Sheldon and King, 2001).

Yet AI is not beyond critical debate due to the positive orientation of the process, which may be seen to distort the 'bigger picture' as we reflect on the non-problem attributes of the methodology. Grant and Humphries (2006) refer to the direct contrast of AI seeking to distance itself from deficit discourses as compared to traditional problem-orientated theories, and argue that the appreciative approach to research has not been widely evaluated and analysed. Similarly Dick (2004) raises concerns that AI may be a 'management fad' rather than a rigorous alternative to the broad genre of action based research which is geared to problem solution techniques. Fitzgerald *et al.*

(2010) referred to the risk of the longer-term transformational application of AI diminishing, and that one person's notion of positive may be perceived as a negative by another. Research by Bushe and Khamisa (2004) explored the effectiveness of AI measured against the central definition of social change. The authors examined 20 studies based on the appreciative approach and their findings demonstrated that 'transformational change' had not been fully achieved in all cases. Trajkovski *et al.* (2012) used the '4D' appreciative cycle in a healthcare setting and found AI to be a powerful research tool for facilitating change, but highlighted the lack of a consistent methodological approach in undertaking AI and absence of a reliable means of measuring change. Moreover, Bellinger and Elliott (2011) highlight the potential tension between a focus on positives and potential underlying power differences across research participants, as failure to recognise power imbalance may have a detrimental impact on research outcomes.

Perhaps the most cogent critique of appreciative inquiry came from Golembiewski (2000) who questioned the social constructionist methodology of AI and the validity of a human construction of ideas, which does not seek the ultimate 'truth' but instead generates a community of discourse which holds value to the research participants, rather than intending to convey an anti-research approach.

The notion of the ultimate truth is hotly contested by ethnographic researchers such as Denzin (1997), who refers to multiple versions of truth and reality co-existing within the real world. Denzin (1997) argues that the perception of the truth is always personal, subjective and open to constant re-interpretation: "a coproduction and an interactional experience lodged in the moment that connects the reader-as-audience-member and co-producer to a performance text" (Denzin, 1997, p.268). Transformative redefinition and emancipatory intent are well imbedded within the social constructionist

appreciative inquiry model, and encourage the challenging of accepted norms and traditional thought by focussing on human flourishing and uniqueness (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). According to Andrus (2010), the use of strength-based language facilitates interaction and the strength of both individuals and the collective organisation. Andrus (2010) also suggests that the transformative change achieved through positive collaboration can be sustained through time.

The endeavour to reach positive outcomes in social work can be understood through the positive arc of systemic strengths expounded by Cooperrider and McQuaid (2012), who explore how a productive space for negativity can help to see things in a new light and seek solutions. Social constructionists argue that polarities such as looking with an appreciative eye at negative experiences can result in positive and generative outcomes. Johnson (2013) argues that the generative potential of AI is actually more likely to stem from embracing the polarities of human experiences, and that the subsequent tensions have the potential to give life and vitality to new ways of working. Bushe (2007) refers to the 'spread effect' of positive stories and the scope to build bridges between conflicting groups. Furthermore, Carter (2006) refers to the orientation of AI as in stark contrast to traditional methods:

"Almost directly opposed to the problem-solving orientation of traditional research, AI actively celebrates success, achievement and what is already working". (Carter, 2006, p. 50).

Although not a panacea for fully understanding the complex arena of social work and practice education, appreciative inquiry offers a new vision and a way forward based on a four-staged transformative process, which can reframe and draw out the skills, enthusiasms and creativity of individuals for the wider benefit of the organisation

(Liebling *et al.,* 1999). Research by Michael (2005) demonstrates that AI has the scope to strengthen 'micro-communities' and mobilise 'macro-communities' in a progressive and inclusive research approach, with the objective of tapping into resourcefulness and increasing the quality of the support provided for the research participants. Michael (2005) interviewed directors of large health organisations across three African countries and identified AI as a methodology able to address individual, cultural and organisational contexts in order to gain a deeper understanding of change constructs. AI was used as the research tool and to structure the interviews by posing questions to capture positive images of the future and the actions needed to attain this outcome fuelled by the affirmative energies of participant's past and present experiences.

AI has strong roots with Organisational Development theories and, as argued by Cooperrider and Whitney (1999, p.57), has its strengths in:

"the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them".

However, AI can be seen to have extended its initial position within the organisational development school of research and become linked to a number of cross-cutting inter-disciplinarian initiatives, which are interested in defining how people feel and think about what they do, and how this may impact on new ways of understanding based on evolving and participative enquiry, rather than on predetermined ideas (Burr, 1995). The social construction of understanding the world through the interactions we have with each other is closely affiliated with the principles of AI and as such, can be perceived to be fluid and eclectic and have a cyclical rather than linear approach, where outcomes may continue to be explored rather than having a very clear-cut

ending. Reason and Torbert (2001) refer to this as 'transformational social science'. Carter's (2006, p.61) recommendation of retaining awareness of the need for a measured perspective may however be worth keeping in mind:

> "Fall in love with AI as a way of reframing your research….but keep your eyes open and maintain a critical stance".

3.7 Putting Appreciative Inquiry into Practice

An important procedural and ethical consideration prior to starting the data collection process was to present clear information to research participants about the underlying philosophy of an appreciative form of inquiry, and to justify why this approach had been decided upon. Butler (2002) recommends that the ethical foundation for social work research needs to be compatible with the broad ethical base of the social work profession generally. As synergy between an appreciative approach and value-based social work principles had already been determined, it was vital to communicate this information clearly and in advance of invited participants completing the consent forms. An information sheet was circulated to prospective participants prior to both the group and individual interviews and the wider collaboration with forums to provide an over-view of AI and the rationale for the research.

Appendix 4 contains a copy of the first information sheet for stages one and two of the research study. This provides guidance to prospective participants about the selected methodological approach and the reasons it was chosen as being suitable for the research study. The premise for the study was clearly explained, to ensure that there was clarity about the intention to discover practice educators views about the transition

from one assessment framework to another over a twelve-month period. Both stages of the study were explained, with the hope that participants would be able to progress from the first small group interview stage to the second stage of the data collection process, where individual interviews would be conducted. The right to withdraw from the study at any time was made clear and the confidential process for managing the interviews and the storage of data was provided. Appendix 5 contains a copy of the second information sheet, which was sent to a cross section of senior social workers across different social work teams and organisations. Prior to sending the information sheets to prospective participants I had previously attended two professional social work forums to present my research findings gathered to date and explain the aim of the next stage of data collection, and had asked forum members if they would be interested in participating in the final stage of the study. The information sheet summarised the research carried out during the previous twelve months and the outcomes achieved. The theory base for the research was explained and the next stage of the research study was then introduced, requesting their participation. This entailed participants completing a simple 4 question feedback form, requesting them to share their ideas about how support for practice educators could be strengthened as they assessed social work students during a time of significant change.

Personal motivators for the research approach chosen stemmed from a desire to move away from predominantly problem solving approaches, often affiliated with social work theory and practice, which tend to illustrate the deficit of resources and the generally poor image portrayed of social work by the media and social/political constructs. (Preston-Shoot, 2012). Bushe (2007) argues that a problem based focus can become self-perpetuating and unearth further problems, due to the powerful impact that 'bad' experiences can have which outweigh the 'good' ones. AI therefore was selected for

the research design, not to deny the presence of negative experiences, but rather to re-frame them to consider what 'gives life' to practice education and to harness difficulties to achieve some constructive and transformational change.

The '4D' cycle devised by Cooperrider and Whitney 1999) has a holistic core, with a progressive sequence moving research participants through each of the four stages of the research process, from discovery, dreaming and designing through to delivery. Although my own research study applied the '4D' approach, this was not conducted with one defined group of participants to systematically proceed from the first to the final stage of the research. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) refer to 'forms of engagement' used by AI practitioners to acknowledge differences in the interventions and variance in approach which can be taken, whilst still remaining true to the spirit of AI. The three staged research study carried out certainly followed the four core stages of the '4D' model, but not with one consistent research group working through every stage of the model. The following table illustrates the structure of the data collection, to show the participants involved in each stage and the time line for conducting the research study. The first three stages of the '4D' model have been incorporated into the table shown below, to show the how this was able to inform the flow of the data collection process.

Research Structure

Stage 1, July – October 2013. 12 Practice Educators involved in 4 Small Group Interviews.

Discovery – 'What gives life to determine the best of what is'. Four small group interviews were conducted to share 'peak experiences' of assessing social work students on placement, and to anticipate the forthcoming changes to social work assessment to be implemented over the next six months.

4 Participants were involved in the first stage only (Angela, Tahira, Marilyn, Sarah

8 Participants were involved in both stage one and two (Davina, Joan, Mary, Wendy, Diana, Rosie, Daisy, Lucy.

Stage 2, April – August 2014. 12 Individual Interviews with Practice Educators

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Dreaming – 'What might be: envisioning action'. Twelve individual interviews were conducted six months after the group interviews, to share early experiences of the newly introduced student assessment framework and the impact on their roles, to begin to consider ways of managing the change.

8 Participants returned to complete the second stage (Davina, Joan, Mary, Wendy, Diana, Rosie, Daisy, Lucy).

4 Participants joined the research to participate in the second stage (Amy, Shona, Rachel, Sally).

Stage 3, November – December 2014. 6 Feedback Forms from other Professional Social Workers

Designing- 'What should be the ideal'? The collaboration with members of social work forums was undertaken to share research findings and gain wider views for future planning.

6 senior social work professionals completed the feedback forms (Linda, Rachel, Julia, Kamina, Wanda, Erica).

The final stage of the '4D' cycle '**Delivery'** places an emphasis on putting ideas into practice, and this was referred to in the dissemination of the data and drawing out the key themes from the narrative. Although the '4D' framework was used as a vehicle for collaboration throughout the sampling there were inevitable overlaps between one element of the model and the next. For example in the initial group sampling, there was reference made to the aspirations participants had for the future of practice education, which projected the **discover** aspects of the discussion through to **dreaming** about how things might be. As the research coordinator I noticed that there was a fluidity between new ideas emerging from the data as the study proceeded. Berg (2000) and Maxwell (1996) refer to the importance of retaining a clear focus on

the research objectives and ensuring that the chosen methodology for the research continues to inform the data collection process and that this is sensitively managed as new ideas emerge.

3.8 Research Participation Selection Process

The data collection process entailed a participant selection approach incorporating the views, experiences and ideas of practice educators and also other social work professionals. The process of planning and carrying out the interviews spanned an eighteen-month time-frame, during which time a three-staged research study was carried out. The following section of the thesis provides insight into how the research participants were selected. The participants were informed in advance about the appreciative methodology chosen to shape the structure of the interviews and the subsequent dissemination of the data captured. The non-directive explorative design of the three-staged study presents an unfolding account of how data has been gradually collated and validated, with a view to widen the dialogue and thereby be 'in tune' with local and national initiatives around practice education.

3.8.1 Participant Selection

A non-probability purposive sampling approach was applied throughout the first two stages of the research. A small sample of practice educators were invited to take part in order to recruit individuals who were relevant to the research topic and had shared experiences, but also differed slightly to each other according to features such as age, experience and ethnicity (Bryman, 2012; Padgett, 2008; Patton, 2002; Robson, 2002). Furthermore, sampling needed to encompass different experiences of practice educators, and a mixture of both 'off-site' independent practitioners and those who

work as 'on-site' practice educators across different local authorities were therefore recruited. As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (1994), a purposive rather than a random approach can be favoured in qualitative research, because it is possible to ensure that participants have direct experience of the phenomenon of interest. Moreover, Mason (1996) makes a distinction between the statistical focus of quantitative research and the more theoretical emphasis of a qualitative approach, where groups are chosen on the basis of their direct relevance to the research rationale and the scope provided to test the methodological theory. Purposive sampling is a deliberate process of selecting respondents based on their ability to provide the necessary information to ensure that insight is provided into particular issues, as supported by Alston and Bowles (2013). The decision was therefore taken to invite individual participants, rather than having an open invitation for practice educators to take part.

The participants were therefore chosen purposively due to their role as practice educators assessing social work students from the host university, rather than primarily due to attributes such as gender, age or ethnicity, although some diversity within individual characteristics was seen to be desirable to represent the wider population of practice educators. An element of judgement selection was therefore also incorporated (Burgess, 1984; Honigmann, 1982) to capture some diversity within the individuals sampled, and to encourage differentiation in perspectives and diversity across the issues discussed. All the participants were qualified social workers and all were either already qualified practice educators or were in the process of gaining the new two stage practice education training, Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS 1+2). The PEPS course requires social work candidates to be assessing and supervising a student using the PCF assessment framework whilst they are completing the course (The College of Social Work, 2015).

There was variation in the amount of experience participants had already gained in student assessment, ranging from two years to over twenty years. The research participants were all of female gender, ranging between 25 and 60 years of age. Male practice educators were also invited to participate but unfortunately declined. Age and experience are the main features identified within the sample of the practice educator population selected, although it is recognised that a wider definition of diversity needs to be explored. Reflections on the importance of diversity and limitations within the sampling are discussed in chapter 5 and 6 of the thesis.

The template below, Table 1-16, provides a brief vignette for each of the participants, to capture their age, specific experience as an off-site or on-site practice educator, background experience, the number of years in the role and country or origin. The template indicates where individuals were able to participate in both the individual and group interviews or only one stage of the interviews, and complements the earlier table on p. 85, which provides detailed information about participants' involvement in each of the three stages of the research. All participants invited to join the group interviews were also invited to participate in the individual interviews, although a small number were unable to commit to further interviews. An additional four individuals were therefore invited to participate in the individual interviews, to ensure that twelve practice educators were available for the second stage of the interview process. The decision to recruit twelve participants for the individual interviews was taken to ensure that there was sufficient diversity to cover the subject matter and gain rich data, in order to optimise opportunities to unpack meaning and generate new ideas based on each participant's lived experiences (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

3.8.2 Biographies for Individual and Group Research Participants

(All names have been anonymised)

Table 1 Participant 1   Participated in Group and Individual Interview

Name	*Davina*
Age	*40-50 years*
Practice Educator Role	*Off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Mental Health*
Experience as Practice Educator	*Over 10 years*
Country of origin	*U.S.A.*

Table 2 Participant 2   Participated in Group + Individual Interview

Name	*Joan*
Age	*50-60*
Practice Educator Role	*Off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Children and Adults*
Experience as Practice Educator	*Over 20 years*
Country of origin	*U.K.*

Table 3 Participant 3 Participated in Group + Individual Interview

Name	*Mary*
Age	*40-50*
Practice Educator Role	*Off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Children and Families*
Experience as Practice Educator	*Over 15 years*
Country of origin	*U.K.*

Table 4 Participant 4 Participated in Group + Individual Interview

Name	*Wendy*
Age	*50-60*
Practice Educator Role	*Off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Mental Health*
Experience as a Practice Educator	*Over 20 years*
Country of origin	*U.K.*

Table 5 Participant 5 Participated in Group + Individual Interview

Name	*Diana*
Age	*50-60*
Practice Educator Role	*Off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Adults and Children*
Experience as a Practice Educator	*Over 20 years*
Country of origin	*U.K.*

Table 6 Participant 6 Participated in Group + Individual Interview

Name	*Rosie*
Age	*30-40*
Practice Educator Role	*Off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Adults and Children*
Experience as a Practice Educator	*Over 10 years*
Country of origin	*Australia*

Table 7 Participant 7 Participated in Group + Individual Interviews

Name	*Daisy*
Age	*50-60*
Practice Educator Role	*Off-Site and On-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Adults and Children*
Experience as a Practice Educator	*Over 25 years*
Country of origin	U.K.

Table 8 Participant 8 Participated in Group Interview

Name	*Tahira*
Age	*40-50*
Practice Educator Role	*Off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Adults and Children*
Experience as a Practice Educator	*Over 15 years*
Country of origin	*India*

Table 9 Participant 9 Participated in Group Interview

Name	*Marilyn*
Age	*30-40*
Practice Educator Role	*On-Site and off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Out –of –Hours Social Work*
Experience as a Practice Educator	*10-15 years*
Country of origin	*South Africa*

Table 10 Participant 10 Participated in Group Interview

Name	Sarah
Age	30-40
Practice Educator Role	On-Site Practice Educator
Background Experience	Family Fostering
Experience as a Practice Educator	2 years
Country of origin	South Africa

Table 11 Participant 11   Participated in Group Interview

Name	Angela
Age	50-60
Practice Educator Role	Off-Site Practice Educator
Background Experience	Children and Adults
Experience as a Practice Educator	20-30 years
Country of origin	U.K.

Table 12 Participant 12   Participated in Individual Interview

Name	Lucy
Age	30-40
Practice Educator Role	On-Site and Off-Site Practice Educator
Background Experience	Mental Health
Experience as a Practice Educator	5 years
Country of origin	U.K.

Table 13 Participant 13 Participated in Individual Interview

Name	Amy
Age	20-30
Practice Educator Role	On-Site Practice Educator
Background Experience	Adults, Disability and Older
Experience as a Practice Educator	2 years
Country of origin	U.K.

Table 14 Participant 14   Participated in Individual Interview

Name	*Shona*
Age	*20-30*
Practice Educator Role	*On-Site and Off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Adults, Disability and Older*
Experience as a Practice Educator	*5 years*
Country of origin	*U.K.*

Table 15 Participant 15 Participated in Individual Interview

Name	*Rachel*
Age	*30-40*
Practice Educator Role	*On-Site and Off- Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Adults, Older*
Experience as a Practice Educator	*5 years*
Country of origin	*India*

Table 16 Participant 16   Participated in Individual Interview

Name	*Sally*
Age	*40-50*
Practice Educator Role	*On-Site and Off-Site Practice Educator*
Background Experience	*Young Adults*
Experience as a Practice Educator	*20 years*
Country of origin	*Jamaica*

The practice educators selected to participate in the research study received their invitations several weeks before the interviews were scheduled to begin. This included both independent practice educators and practice educators working across voluntary and statutory organisations, with the premise that they had all assessed a social work student within the last 12 months. The rationale for selecting participants, rather than opting for an open invitation for participation, was arrived at in order to select a balanced community of practice educators to share their ideas and experiences generated through their current practice. Invitations included the details of the ethical

process carried out for the research proposed, which will be discussed in section 3.9, an information sheet to provide objectives for the research and an over-view of appreciative inquiry. Consent forms were also circulated and those interested in participating returned signed copies to confirm their involvement (Appendix 2). The consent form used was the standard university template, which covers all the criteria considered necessary for the study. This includes the emphasis on voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, assurance of the protection of confidentiality and also that dissemination of the study would ensure that no individual participant's identify would be revealed.

3.9 Research Ethics

The research topic could be considered to be ethically sensitive, as participants will be discussing students when they are in contact with vulnerable individuals during their placements. It was likely therefore, that live scenarios from participants' direct practice would be mentioned, as it was anticipated that participants would want to talk about specific students. As confidentiality issues could be raised, ethical protocol was adhered to, as set down in the university practice learning regulations referring to data protection and confidentiality, and it was agreed that no student names or other confidential information about placements would be disclosed during the interviews. This was reinforced at the beginning of each group and individual interview. Furthermore, the process of researching with one's peers can be ethically sensitive, due to the duality of the role of researcher and practice lead for the host university (Smith, 2009). Oliver (2010) maintains that there is an ethical responsibility placed upon the researcher to add to the body of knowledge selected for analysis, and to

share this knowledge with research participants. As the researcher, I had a natural affiliation with the qualitative and appreciative approach chosen for the research, and was keen to impart this to my colleagues and ensure that participants enjoyed their involvement in the interviews. To this end, the participants were fully informed prior to the study commencing by receiving detailed information sheets, and through reiterating the purpose and function of the study at the beginning of each group and individual interview.

The ethical intention of discovering more about the quality of support provided for practice educators, as they made the transition from one assessment process to another was kept firmly in focus as the interviews were conducted. Moreover, I was aware of the sensitive balance to be struck between gathering valuable data about practice educator's experiences when assessing social work students and avoiding intrusion where difficult stories were shared. Interestingly it became clear that an ethical bond between members of the small group interviews encouraged a shared feeling of appreciation in exchanging their personal experiences, which often accorded with each other's accounts.

According to Oliver (2010), although confidentiality is intrinsic to the informed consent process there is also a wider commitment from the researcher in terms of keeping data confidential and making this clear to participants. This was an important consideration, as questionnaire data from the first stage of the study would be referred to in the second stage, due to the intention of combining data as part of the data analysis and dissemination process. Moreover, the message was conveyed to participants that the data gathered may be shared with professional social work forums, as part of cross referencing and validating the material as a precursor to potential publication of the research as a journal article or paper. Ryen (2004) and McLaughlin (2007) stress the

importance of building in space as part of the data collection process to ensure that research participants have the time available to raise any sensitive or emotive issues arising from discussion. Another point to be considered is the nature of participant's consent, which is not open-ended and can be withheld at any point (Reed, 2007).

In terms of ethical consent for the study, the research was approved by the host university's ethics committee and the required standards of ethical practice, as just described, have been adhered to throughout the sampling, interviewing and dissemination of the research. Ethical standards therefore need to be central to the planning, implementation and evaluation of the data collection, rather than seen as an 'add on'. Participants were informed that data collected throughout the interviews would be disseminated, both as part of the doctorate thesis, but also potentially as a journal article, or shared with social work professionals as a conference presentation, but that this information would be fully anonymised. Although individual participant's identity would be fully anonymised at every stage there is an ethical obligation to share research findings with the wider social work profession, particularly as the topic has been under-researched and may contribute to the body of knowledge available. This point was discussed with research participants, who expressed commitment to the topic and the agreed process of gathering and evaluating findings. There is a subtle interplay between confidentiality, consent and ownership of the research, in terms of what is owned by the individual's contribution and a sense of wider ownership for the research study.

Smith (2009) suggests that it may be necessary to be pragmatic and creative about the most practical way of gathering data and combining methods for obtaining findings, whilst still ensuring that an ethically grounded approach is taken. The final stage of data gathering involved a more ad hoc arrangement of requesting feedback following

a presentation, rather than pre-selecting participants to gain rich and detailed data, which was possible in the first two stages of the study. Although the semi-structured feedback form designed for the final stage of the data collection retained a focus on the core research topic to ensure ethical rigour and continuity the researcher role became more distanced, as individuals who elected to complete and return the information were able respond in a free and unprompted way. Due to the prolonged nature of the three-staged data collection process, all data pertaining to the study will be destroyed following final dissemination of the research.

3.10 Data Collection

As mentioned in the recruitment sampling process, data were collected using three different methods, starting with small group interviews followed by individual interviews and finishing with gathering feedback from social work forums. The group and individual interviews were recorded using a small battery operated digital recorder, combined with note taking. Audio recording provided an accurate and discrete way to collect the data, which avoided distortion or omission of any material. All recorded interviews were filed in a password protected laptop computer and interview transcriptions were stored in a separate file within the same protected computer. According to Boeije (2010), recorded data enables material to be easily transcribed and filed into different archives. This was particularly important due to the intention of including literal quotes from the interviews in the data analysis and findings sections of the thesis. Kirk and Miller (1986) refer to the importance of transparency and quality of research, which is closely associated with validity and reliability, and the importance of how social phenomenon is examined to reveal legitimate and accurate insights, and

report these as valid findings. Data were collected from participants of the social work forums by circulating peer feedback forms for completion, and analysing the information gathered, in order to cross-reference and enrich the narrative from practice educator participants.

3.10.1 Small Group Interviews

The first interviews to be conducted were four small group interviews. The groups were much smaller than anticipated, as the initial plan had been to have only two larger focus group interviews with a minimum of six people in each group. Due to the complexity of agreeing a date and time that was suitable for all participants, it was necessary to re-arrange smaller groups, which were spread over a longer period of time, in order to accommodate everyone. This was exacerbated by the need to hold all the interviews at the host university, as this was a venue that all participants were able to travel to.

The small group size proved fortuitous, as participants were very keen to present their views and to listen to other experiences, without feeling the need to wait too long for a lull in the conversation. Kreuger and Casey (2000) refer to the merits of group interviews, as they replicate the cut and thrust of influencing and being influenced by others, which is naturally occurring in day-to-day communication. I was keen to capture the energy that can be generated by group dynamics and bring the insight of multiple experiences into the interview process. To remain true to the spirit of AI and small scale qualitative research, the interview was designed in a semi-structured, non-directive style, to encourage participants to explore and share ideas within a free-

flowing climate (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The interviews lasted between 55 minutes and 90 minutes, and were all delivered using the following structure:

- Introductions and a brief explanation of the rationale for the study and the underpinning methodology of Appreciative Inquiry

- Warm up exercise, completion of a personal reflection exercise and then sharing the thoughts with the group.

- Exchanging 'best practice' positive stories of participants' experiences of assessing social work students.

- Looking ahead to the new assessment framework being introduced and changes to the role of practice education to pose the question; "If you had three wishes for practice education what would they be?"

- Winding up the session to reflect jointly on the key themes that have emerged.

The flow of the interview questions aimed to capture an unfolding structure, which encouraged the enquiry process to move from ideas to action, incorporating an ethical and an appreciative emphasis. D'Cruz and Jones (2004) reflect on the need to maintain a careful balance between creating a shape to the questions, yet avoiding a degree of precision that may stifle the expression of original and unexpected perspectives from participants. Furthermore, an appreciative approach to the design of the interview questions provides a positive spin to the tone of the dialogue, which can encourage an affirmative focus. Lietz *et al.* (2006) consider how the role of the researcher will affect the answers given by participants, simply due to their presence and the experience, knowledge base and perspectives held by them. As a researcher, I anticipated that the appreciative, strength-based emphasis of the questions posed

and my informed delivery as an experienced practice educator would encourage the exchange of open and collaborative narratives.

The personal reflections exercise comprised of five statements or prompts, aimed at helping research participants to get themselves in to the mind-set of considering their practice and what holds personal and professional value for them:

1. *I know I have done well when…..*

2. *I would like students to think that I am……*

3. *I would like my peers to think that I am….*

4. *My energy is sapped by…….*

5. *What coping strategies enable you to manage your role…..*

The affirmative tenure of the statements was inspired by Cooperrider *et* al. (2003, p.88), who provided some examples of AI questions, which were open ended and positively framed:

"Describe a 'peak experience or 'high point'"

"What are the things you value most about – yourself – the nature of your work?"

I was very keen to encourage participants to reflect on the actualities of what they did as part of their role as the first step towards considering possibilities for change as the interview progressed forward. Each small group interview was recorded and notes were also taken as pertinent points were raised and echoed by other participants. The researcher role within the four interviews conducted straddled between positive collaboration with the participants, active listening to absorb the flow of conversation and the mediating role of prompting, encouraging and enabling less vocal members to share their ideas. Morgan (1997) refers to the value of group interaction for

generating insights and contrasting perspectives. This can allow the researcher more space to tune into the dynamics and take a less directive role than would be required for individual interviewing, as there is more scope for informal discussion amongst participants when exploring a topic (Wilkinson, 2004). Horsburgh (2003) refers to the interchanging role of the researcher moving from a less directive, observation role to become more participatory as the group interactions alter.

Due to the small sizes of the groups, the researcher role was quite active, particularly for one of the groups, where there were some differences of opinion expressed between two of the participants, necessitating the stimulation of fresh perspectives to encourage self-resolution. An example of conflicting views arose in the first group interview, when differences and barriers emerged between participants. One practice educator felt quite strongly that cultural barriers can be created between a social worker and a service user if the social worker is not able to talk or write clearly in English, and that this is a particular problem when working with children. A discussion about social work values then followed, where there was an exchange of views about how much can be taught to students as part of the practice educating role if there are underlying tensions between the student's personal beliefs and social work ethics and values. Although there was broad agreement about the importance of clear channels of communication, there were differences in the extent to which two participants felt that they would be able to overcome cultural and language barriers and the impact this may have on a student being able to practice in a value-based way. Another example of a differing opinion expressed by one practice educator later in the same group interview referred to a male, black African student and particular difficulties he experienced understanding the core tasks required within a Probation service placement. The practice educator implied in her discussion that it was necessary to

carry out additional work to break the tasks down and avoid the risk of failing the placement. Although there was no overt discrimination in the dialogue, there was a sense that the student's ethnicity had been mentioned as a contributory factor to the placement challenges. There was a silence following this dialogue and I recall steering the conversation towards other strategies that participants may want to share where students had been 'stuck' in their learning.

Maintaining the role of researcher and avoiding both direct affiliation with the practice educators' lived experiences, and also giving advice or making favourable or unfavourable comments on participants' views, were vital considerations to minimise the risk of bias occurring within the data collection process (McLaughlin, 2007). According to Bloor *et al.* (2001), commonality and a shared sense of purpose is even more important to stimulate discussion in small groups. A commitment to social work practice education provided shared commonality between the researcher and the participants, and the impetus for homogeneity for the four small group interviews.

Fielding (1995) refers to the importance of winding down the group discussion towards the end, and to move away from personal concerns that may have been instigated towards a positive note that can be shared by all participants. The final question focussed on future planning and shared ideas to take forward to the next stage of the study, providing the opportunity to remind participants of the individual interviews due to commence a few months later.

3.10.2 Individual Interviews

Prior to the individual interviews being carried out, a further letter was sent to the participants from the first stage of group interviews. Eight of the original participants agreed to return to be interviewed again, which necessitated fresh invitations to be

sent out to other practice educators in order to aim for twelve individual interviews to be carried out. My intention was to recruit twelve individuals, to enable a comparative study to be carried out with the same number of practice educators who were involved in the group interviews, to widen the potential for capturing the experiences of individuals as they progressed towards assessing students using the new assessment framework. A contingency plan was put in place for this eventuality, as it was anticipated that there may be natural opt out due to conflicting priorities, in addition to the expressed commitment of some individuals to participating in the first stage of the research only.

As with the group interviews, attention was taken to ensure that there was a mix of participants, in terms of their age and experience, whilst retaining the commonality of the practice educator role. In addition to differences in age and experience there was also some diversity in terms of the nationality of participants and also the social work and practice educator training they had undertaken. The sample of participants involved in the interviews reflected the cross-section of people employed as practice educators by the university and partnering local authorities, with a tendency for white, female, middle aged individuals to be the primary demographic. The parity between myself as the researcher and the demographics of the research participants is a pertinent point to be reflected on in the final chapter of the thesis. Creswell (2013) refers to the relevance of the personal interpretation of the researcher, based on the social, gender, class and personal experiences they bring to the study. The positioning of the researcher and how this has shaped the emerging data will be reflected on later, to look more deeply at the biases and values that can be brought into qualitative research.

Particular care was taken to be as flexible as possible in encouraging participants to take part in the interviews. By arranging the individual sessions in convenient venues, which interspersed between using the university and individual homes, it was possible to achieve the desired twelve interviews. Ruben and Ruben (1995) advocate for in-depth interviews to comprise of a number of stages to facilitate the flow of dialogue and gain a fluid and contextualised dialogue to emerge. O'Leary (2010) stresses the importance of having a 'real-world' research question checklist, which is open, transparent and very clear in context and meaning. To avoid ambiguity, the questions were formulated to be meaningful, well-articulated, tangible and relevant for the type of study being carried out. It was also important to achieve a sense of momentum from the first to the second stage of the data collection process. Formative evaluation was carried out to ensure that there was synergy in the interview questions linking the first to the second stage, to keep a constant track on what needed to be achieved (Fouche and Lunt, 2011). This was achieved by linking up the '3 Wishes' aspect of the group discussion with the individual interviews, and keeping the objectives set for the dissertation in mind, thereby orchestrating a smooth continuity between the two data collection components.

As with the group discussion, the individual interviews were structured in an appreciative style and followed the 4D core of AI. The length of the interviews varied from 40 minutes to 65 minutes and comprised of twelve semi-structured points for further discussion:

- Brief introduction to the research topic and the first stage completed with small groups. An over-view of AI as the theory base for the research

- Sharing the '3Wishes' statements collated from the group interviews, summarising their hopes and aspirations for the future of practice education (Appendix 7).

- Gaining information and views about direct experience thus far of assessing students using the new PCF assessment

- Gaining information and views about any information sessions or training that had been made available to inform their understanding of the changes

- Discussion about the synergy between the holistic style of PCF assessment and reflective learning models used with students, to gain views about whether this is a better fit as compared to the former assessment framework

- Asking for a particular learning experience that has had a direct impact on the participant's personal and professional development as a practice educator

- Discussion to discover what groups, forums, resources best support the participant in their role on an ongoing basis

- Discussion about any gaps in the support provided for practice educators and how these could be filled

- Asking the participant if a new practice educator is beginning their role now and wanted to learn from your own experience, what was the best piece of advice they could offer?

- Asking what the practice educator role might look like in five years' time and how practice educators can influence future changes

- Any last points or reflections?

The interview format was designed to capture the positive core of an appreciative inquiry without avoiding the scope for challenges to be addressed, and to develop depth and breadth as the interview structure started to open up and evolve. There was

deliberation about the construction of the questions, due to the need to maintain a developmental flow from one question to the next, and the notion of content mapping was helpful to keep a momentum going from the start to reaching the end of the interviews. Kvale (1996) refers to the distinction between content mapping and content mining, and the importance of interviewing skills in prompting and probing to acquire both an open dialogue and the capacity to drill down and explore responses in more depth. Moving through the '4D' AI model, individual interviews encapsulated elements of **discovery** about the changes to their role, **dreaming** and envisioning what might happen in the future, and also starting to co-construct or **design** how this could be achieved. Each interview was recorded and formative evaluation took place soon after the transcription of the recordings, to pin point some initial themes naturally arising from the data.

The third set of data were compiled six months later by gathering peer feedback from social work professionals, to enrich the material already gained, evaluate any synergy from material across the three stages following completion of the final stage, but also to layer and thicken the descriptions from participants, which may generate contradictions and fresh questions and create further scope for reflection (Boeije, 2010).

3.10.3 Feedback from Forums

Stemming from the two different methods of data collected and the early findings about practice educators' perceived need for increased support and guidance, a decision was made to share the narrative gathered with professional social work forums. The extended scope for the study needed to be considered, to ensure that this met the

ethical remit of the research (Silverman, 2010). Participants of the first and second stage of the study had completed and signed a consent form before taking part, which included agreement to the sharing and wider dissemination of the interview data, and it was possible to also subsequently contact the participants to inform them of the next stage of the study. Prior to commencing the third stage of the research, a concept map was created to visually appreciate patterns across aspects of the data collection process to highlight themes and ideas (Kara, 2015). The evolving themes highlighted by the two staged interview process identified a clear need for increased support and recognition due to the complexity of the practice educator role, particularly within the sea change occurring across the social work profession.

 The decision was taken to request a space on the agenda items for two professional social work forums attended by the researcher on a regular basis; the regional Social Work Education Grant (SWEG) forum and the Pan London Skills for Care Social Work Education Network (SWEN). These two forums took place within six months following the completion of the interview data collection. During each of the two meetings a slot on the agenda was allocated to share the research by presenting a brief power point presentation and handout to summarise the data collected and some early findings. Permission was then requested to send out a brief reflective feedback form for individuals to complete and email back within the next six weeks. An information sheet about the research study was also circulated with the feedback form (Appendices 5 and 6).

The reflective nature of the feedback form designed highlighted key themes emerging from the data collected to explore practice educator's views on their changing role due to recent social work reforms, and their identified need for increased support and

guidance. The open structure of the form comprised of four questions designed to garner the following feedback:

- Views about the increasing complexity of the practice educator's role in assessing social work students, due to recent social work reforms and the need for an improved infrastructure of support.

- Information about any existing initiatives around work force development, social work career structure and continual professional development that would feed in to the views expressed by research participants.

- Request for ideas about how the support for practice educators could be strengthened; three different ways that the infrastructure of support for practice educators could be improved.

- Finally, looking locally and more nationally, how can the research study being carried out promote the status of practice education and the necessity for a more rigorous structure of support to sustain progress made?

The dissemination of the knowledge gained through data collection, by presenting the information and stimulating knowledge exchange on a wider scale, proved to be instrumental in extending the credibility of the data and providing an opportunity to cross-reference the results and add rigour. The audiences at each forum comprised of stakeholders from a community of professional social work, such as practice educator coordinators, service managers and consultants. Kelleher and Wagener (2011) refer to the benefits of conveying a message to an audience and being able to step back from immersion in the data collection process to gain different perspectives. Similarly to the group and individual interviews, it was important to present the information in an ethical and creative way to both reveal the data but to be careful to

conceal any personal material (Ellingson, 2009). Another balance to be struck was having enough time to deliver the essence of the research, whilst still capturing the attention of the audience (Evergreen, 2014).

The reflective commentary feedback form (Appendix 6) was designed to gain the ideas and views of individuals, to both add to and give dimension to the sampling already conducted. The '4D' focus for the research was followed through in the questions posed, with an emphasis on **design** to extend the ideas and experiences of practice educators, and to find out about pressures across different agencies and how these were being resolved to co-construct an action plan to take these views forward. The thrust of the questions was formulated to gain wider views about research participants' perceptions of their role in supporting practice education, and to find out what infrastructures of support were in place within their respective organisations. The questions also sought to discover how support could be further strengthened, and to glean any additional ideas to promote the status and value of the practice educator role. Jasper *et al*. (2014) describes the educational task of the practice educator as the 'invisible art and heart' of placements, and the surprising lack of recognition and nurturing provided to practice educators themselves. Discussion following the presentations sparked some interesting debate about the central place that practice educators have within social work education, yet how this is poorly recognised. In addition to the spectrum of activities they carry out, including the supervision, support and assessment of social work students, there was a lively discussion about the teaching aspect of the role that is often underplayed. Examples of mentoring and coaching schemes involving practice educators with newly qualified social workers, and employing practice educators to teach practice education sessions at university

settings were examples shared as part of the discussion in the forums, and further information was subsequently received from the completed feedback forms.

Although only six feedback forms were completed and returned, the combined experience of the presentations, the informal exchange of views immediately after the presentations in addition to subsequent communication through email and telephone exchanges from other participants of the forums, all culminated to give credence to the multiple methods approach aiming to add rigour to the research study.

The six feedback forms received following the two forum presentations have been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms:

Feedback Form 1	Linda (Local Authority Training Coordinator)
Feedback Form 2	Rachel (PEPS Assessor)
Feedback Form 3	Julia (Social Work Manager Vol. Agency)
Feedback Form 4	Kamina (Local Authority Placement Manager)
Feedback Form 5	Wanda (Senior Social Worker of a Multi-disciplinary Mental Health Team)
Feedback Form 6	Erica (Local Authority Training Coordinator)

Reflexivity can be considered to be the golden thread connecting up the three stages of the research study, to acknowledge the need for self-disclosure and the ability to tune in to the 'professional use of self' as the researcher and research co-ordinator. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), reflexivity is vital for research stemming from a critical paradigm, as how the researcher is positioned within the text and shapes the

material will be a factor requiring deep levels of critical analysis. Certainly the potential for bias and the values and experiences of the researcher need to be openly explored, as the research progresses to the analysis of the data process, and also how the findings, discussion and conclusions of the research are shaped and drawn together following this (Creswell, 2013).

3.11 Data Analysis

3.11.1 Introduction

As the research study was carried out in three distinct stages, which informed and complemented each other, the decision was taken to generate findings from the data formatively and incrementally between each stage, in addition to a holistic approach to analysing the data at the end to draw out the overriding themes. Kvale (1996) considers the researcher's role in seeking to identify what participants themselves mean and understand by the narrative generated through interview, and a seamless analysis of emerging data can facilitate this process. Meaning is then extrapolated through identifying shared ideas emerging from individual experiences, which are then integrated within a wider theoretical perspective. Appreciative inquiry was the constant methodology applied to facilitate the flow of data from individual to shared ideas and emerging concepts. Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to the concept of scaffolding as creating a hierarchy of analysis, which recognises that the different stages of analysis are not distinct, but will emerge and are re-visited as the bigger picture of the data emerges. In this process, emerging codes are consolidated to create empirically valid evidence from rich and diverse qualitative data.

Boyatzis's (1998) thematic analysis and coding framework theory was applied to capture initial open codes emerging from identified segments, or fragments of the data,

which would then be distilled to consolidate and finalise the selected key themes. Following the transcription of the data collected from the group interviews, initial concepts were highlighted through colour coding to identify words or themes regularly used by participants in blue, and sentences or phrases which held particular resonance were highlighted in red. Boyatzis (1998) refers to both manifest and latent content analysis as being relevant for thematic analysis. Manifest analysis is used to highlight the frequency of words or phrases, and latent analysis being more tuned into the underlying significance of the data and different meanings that participants may ascribe to the way the word was used. For example, the word 'power' appeared several times throughout the study, but was used in many different contexts. This same process was used following completion of the individual interviews, to sort and understand the data and to keep in mind the iterative nature of the material across the three stages of data collection, where constant movement to revisit material and build upon it was required. According to Wolcott (2009), analysing data incrementally as part of the writing up process is a vital discipline for qualitative research, to ensure that data unfolds in a natural and genuine way. Appendix 12 provides an example of how a segment of dialogue from one of the individual interviews has certain sentences highlighted in red or blue to draw out the latent and manifest meaning. The highlighted data are then assigned open codes which are merged together to create combined codes which hold significant meaning.

Qualitative software (NVivo10) was used to gain more transparency and facilitate the search for the raw data, in order to code and analyse the data sets to validate the codes and create a visual projection of code clusters (Appendix 8). Themes and sub-themes and emerging patterns were organised in more depth to identify the frequency of occurrence and pertinent conversation topics. Themes were then finalised for the

analysis discussion, with direct quotes interjected to illustrate the direct experiences of participants, and to create a story of the connected categories. The data analysis process for qualitative research can be seen to be all-encompassing, as it envelops each stage of the research, from gathering the raw data to the synthesis of a wider theoretical, legislative and social application, to maximise a full and reflective analysis (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). A continual and iterative process of data analysis has been carried out to ensure constant comparison of the material, to enhance familiarisation and assist in really 'seeing' the ideas taking shape. According to Boeije (2010), coding creates order from rich and disparate segments of data and enables the researcher to reassemble the data and achieve overarching core themes. The following table illustrates how phrases from participants' emerging from one single question asked as part of the 'personal reflections exercise' for the group interviews have been coded to establish significance and connection to the culminating key themes.

Group Interview Personal Reflections Exercise Question 2: *I would like students to think that I am?"*

Phrases from Participants	Open Codes	Combined Codes	Final Themes
Enabling and supporting, that I can create a safe environment for them to learn	• Quality of the Relationships • Experiences of Success • Mentoring	• **Quality of the Relationship** • **Success Stories**	**Relationship Between Student and PE**
That students have trust in me to educate, inform and instil values	• Working Together • Role Confirmation • Mentoring	• **Quality of the Relationship** • **Success Stories**	**Relationship Between Student and PE**

Lowering the barriers of power dynamics	• Power Dynamics • Communication	• **Power Dynamics**	**Relationship Between Student and PE**
Friendly professional but not a friend	• Assessing Adults • Professional Boundaries • Power Dynamics	• **Power Dynamics** • **Professional Boundaries** • **Quality of the Relationship**	**Relationship Between Student and PE** **The PE Role**
I am not a counsellor, I need to clarify the role	• Students' Perception of PE • Power Dynamics • Role Confusion • Reflection on Role*	• **Quality of the Relationship** • **Power Dynamics** • **Professional Boundaries**	**The PE Role** **Relationship Between Student and PE**
I would like students to think I am fair and professional but not the font of all knowledge	• Professional Judgement • How PE's are Perceived by Others • Quality of the Relationship	• **Quality of the Relationship** • **Power Dynamics** • **Professional Boundaries**	**Relationship Between Student and PE**
I would like them to think that I am there for them and that I listen, reflect and evaluate knowledge	• Reflective Practice • Positive Experiences • Deeper Learning	• **Reflective** • **Quality of the Relationship**	**Relationship Between Student and PE**

	• Quality of the Student and PE Relationship • Guidance		
I am firm, fair, dispassionate	• Professional Boundaries • Power Dynamics • Feedback • Professional Judgement • Reflection on Role	• **Power Dynamics** • **Professional Boundaries**	**The PE Role**
I am positive, creative, open-minded, willing to learn, firm, fair and clear	• Mutual Learning • Student Perception of the PE • Quality of the Relationship • Professional Boundaries • Feedback	• **Quality of the Relationship** • **Informal Support** • **Reflective**	**The PE Role** **Relationship Between Student and PE**
It's important to let students know that I don't have all the answers	• Reflection on Role • Professional Judgement • Trust • Uncertainty • Support for Students	• **Assessment Ambiguity** • **Quality of Relationships**	**Relationship Between Student and PE** **The PE Role**
I am abreast of changes in social work	• Confidence in PCF	• **Role Definition** • **Success Stories**	**The PE Role**

	• Support for Students • Role Confidence • Experiences of Success • Communication	• **Holistic Assessment**	**Experiences of Using PCF**
I have a wide knowledge of social work theory and can give them the wider picture	• Different Learning Theories and Techniques • Enriched Learning Opportunities • Mutual Learning • Creativity	• **Holistic Assessment** • **Success Stories** • **Quality of the Relationship**	**The PE Role**
I want to appear professional and fair	• Professional Judgement • Positive Experiences • Standardisation • Adult Learning • Guidance	• **Professional Boundaries** • **Quality of the Relationship**	**The PE Role** **Relationship Between the Student and PE**
I was in their shoes once	• Informal Support • Adult Learning • Advocacy • Reflection on Role	• **Reflective** • **Informal Support** • **Quality of the Relationship**	**Relationship Between the Student and PE**
I would like them to think that I am good at it!	• Reflection on Role • Positive Experiences	• **Quality of the Relationship** • **Success Stories**	**The PE Role**

	• Students' Perceptions of PE • Advocacy		
Creative in approach, able to engage in a different way, able to identify specific themes, for example assertive communication	• Enriched Learning Opportunities • Quality of the Relationship • Success Stories • Positive Experiences • Creativity	• **Success Stories** • **Placement Supervision** • **Quality of the Relationship**	**The PE Role** **Relationship Between the Student and PE**
Students should know that they can model practice and know that, even though it looks scary now, that with the right commitment and support, they have the potential to be good, effective social workers.	• Adult Learning • Reflection on Role • Support • Gatekeepers • Mentoring Role • Experiences of Success • Advocate	• **Success Stories** • **Quality of the Relationship** • **Reflective**	**Relationship Between Student and PE** **The PE Role**
I would hope that students would approach me, question me and observe practice that they wish to model	• Support for Students • Supervision • Communication • Advocate	• **Quality of the Relationship** • **Reflective** • **Success Stories**	**Relationship Between Student and PE** **The PE Role**

3.11.2 The Process of Analysing the Data

Both hand generated and software methods were used in the data analysis process to assist in drawing out the patterns and relationships across the data collated from the three stages of the research study. Jorgensen (1989) advocates for the importance of garnering meaning from the participants' own direct experiences when collecting qualitative data, and that this needs to be carried out in a personalised and meaningful way. In order to make an interpretive analysis of the key themes present in the data the following process was used:

- Read and re-read line by line the group, and individual interviews and also the feedback forms

- Highlight fragments of the data in each separate interview and feedback form to identify both the manifest and latent frequency and significance of key words, phrases and sentences. Blue colour coding was used to denote frequency and red colour for significance.

- Open codes were then assigned to the data, when words or phrases were used several times and were meaningful to the overall thrust of the dialogue. Some highlighted lines were eliminated where there was no marked significance and others were merged in to other codes where the meanings were seen to be similar.

- The open codes identified by hand were then uploaded on to a 'NVivo 10' data base to create a coding scheme of key and minor 'nodes' which were sorted alphabetically and cross referenced to each individual interview and line reference. Thus, 92 open codes were identified at this stage.

- The open codes were checked back to the interview and feedback form transcriptions to check for significance and transparency of data; further codes

were identified totalling 133. Once cross referencing between the coding and phrases had been completed combined codes were then highlighted to merge together key messages deriving from the open codes. Charmaz (2006) refers to these more dominant themes as axial or focussed codes, which combine to create a 'spiral of analysis' (Boyatzis, 1998).

- The 26 combined codes emerging from the 133 open codes then required further sorting, refining, sifting and organising by returning to the hard copy transcriptions to explore and identify the key concepts emerging from the material. A mapped visual display on several large pieces of paper was created for each distinct stage of the study. The mapping captured the interview questions and corresponding fragments of data next to each question. The open and combined codes were highlighted against the relevant data fragments and further colour coding was applied to cross reference where codes arose across more than one stage of the study.

- Consequently, six underpinning key themes were finally identified across the data collected to represent a hierarchy of smaller codes within them, or 'themes within themes', which had synergy with the overriding objectives and premise for the research study (Strauss and Corbin, 2007). They are as follows:

1. The Practice Educator Role

2. Practice Educators Experiences of Assessing Social Work Students using the Professional Capability Framework (PCF)

3. The Relationship Between the Practice Educator and the Student

4. Support for Practice Educators

5. The Impact of Change for Practice Educators and Students

6. Wishes and Hopes for Practice Education in the Future.

These selected key themes can be seen to be very wide ranging, due to their over-arching significance to the research and to the wider trajectory of the body of knowledge on the topics. Boyatzis (1998) refers to the 'cognitive complexity' of data analysis, as the patterning of the inter-relationship between multiple variables is unearthed.

The next chapter will assimilate the textural material arising from the coding and will contextualise this within the six thematic topics to draw out the key findings arising from the research. Selected exemplars of the rich material collected from participants have been included as a way of processing the data to generate the overall findings discussed. Gergen (1999) states that it is essential to communicate with participants in a sequential and ordered way, in order to include the 'thick descriptions' of their thoughts and feelings, as expressed during the data collection process. Direct observations and quotes have therefore been included, in order to build up a story as the interviews have unfolded, to show the way the codes emerged from socially constructed fragments of data, and also to build in accuracy and sufficient detail. The deeper meanings behind the data will therefore be considered, to explore the relationships between the phenomena across the six main themes. The table below illustrates the inter-relationship between the initial open codes, the collective axial codes and the final six themes, and provides a visual presentation of the richness of the narrative behind each of the key themes to be explored in the following chapter.

Key Themes	Combined Codes	Open Codes
THE PRACTICE EDUCATOR ROLE	**REFLECTIVE, DIFFERENT SUPPORT FOR ON-SITE/OFF-SITE PE'S. PLACEMENT, FAILING STUDENTS, SUCCESS STORIES, PEPS TRAINING, FUNDING, POWER DYNAMICS, NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES.**	Positive experiences, Reflection on Role, Adult learning, Resilience, Assessing Adults, Challenging Placements, CPD, How Practice Educators are Perceived by Others, Success Stories, Failing Students, Professional Judgement, Borderline students, PEPS Training, Students-Midway Placement, University Tutors, Written Guidance, Gate-Keepers, Mutual learning, Advocacy, Trust, Dyslexic Students, Support, Lack of time,
EXPERIENCES OF USING PCF	**HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT, REFLECTIVE, ASSESSMENT AMBIGUITY, DIFFERENT LEARNING THEORIES, SUPERVISION, ISOLATION, PLACEMENTS, SUCCESS STORIES.**	Lack of Exemplars, Ambiguity, NOS – deeper levels of Learning, Practical application of PCF, PCF as learning tool, Objective Assessment, Enriched learning opportunities, Professional Judgement, Creativity, Reflection, Different Learning Theories and Techniques, Structure of the Domains, Repetition, Time, Supervision, Standardisation, Uncertainty, Confidence in PCF, Success Stories
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENT AND PRACTICE EDUCATOR	**QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS, POWER DYNAMICS, PLACEMENT SUPERVISION, PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES, FAILING STUDENTS, NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES, INFORMAL SUPPORT, REFLECTIVE, SUCCESS STORIES.**	Power Dynamics, Adult Learning, Guidance, Gate-keepers, Borderline Students, Proactive Students, Professional Boundaries, Students Perceptions of PE, Transference, Early Support, Counselling, Support for Students, Quality of the Relationship, Failing Students, Success Stories, Mentoring, Role Confusion, Challenging Placements, Experiences of Success, Communication, Unwilling Students, Student's Additional Needs, Student's Learning Styles, Lack of Time, Advocate
SUPPORT FOR PRACTICE EDUCATORS	**INFORMAL SUPPORT, ISOLATION, INCREASED SUPPORT, ROLE DEFINITION AND UNCERTAINTY, PLANNED WORKSHOPS, PEPS, SUPERVISION, DIFFERENT SUPPORT FOR ON-SITE/OFF-SITE PRACTICE EDUCATORS**	Supervision, Working Together, Student's Additional Needs, Structure of the Degree, Early Support, Research, Information about PCF +PEPS, Planned Forums, Workshops, Action Learning Sets, Peer Support, On-line Information, Increased Workload, College of Social Work, BASW, CPD, Different Support for On-Site and Off-Site PE's, Financial Changes, Role-Widening, Role Confidence.
IMPACT OF CHANGE FOR PRACTICE EDUCATORS	**ROLE DEFINITION/UNCERTAINTY, JOINED UP MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PRACTICE, INCREASED SUPPORT FOR PE'S, FUNDING, PLACEMENTS, PEER SUPPORT, REFLECTIVE, CAREER STRUCTURE**	Competing Social Work Programmes, Ambiguity, Comparison, Different Levels of Training, Student's Additional Needs, Increased Workload, Role Reflection, Financial Changes, Working Together, Job Uncertainty, Competing Programmes, Joined up Practice, Enthusiasm for Student Placements, More Placements, Changes in the Voluntary Sector, Increased Support, Regional and National PE Structures, Funding
ASPIRATION OF FUTURE FOR PRACTICE EDUCATION	**CAREER STRUCTURE, CPD INDIVIDUAL LEARNING, SUCCESS STORIES, PEPS, JOB ROLE DEFINITION, UNCERTAINTY, JOINED UP MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PRACTICE, PLACEMENTS, FUNDING.**	Joined Up Practice, More Research, Share Research with Senior Managers, Master Classes and Pedagogy, Increased IT, Skype, More IPP, Empower Social Work in Medical Models, Increased CPD, Higher Status for Social Work, Increased Status for Practice Education, Regional and National PE Structures, Multi-Disciplinary Working, PE Career Structure, Enthusiasm for Student Placements, Improved Placement Learning Environments, More Holistic Practice, Value Attached to PE.

4 Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

This three-stage research study has explored the complex layering of the practice educator role, both in terms of the skills, expertise and emotional resilience required to carry out the role effectively. The fragile and precarious support systems in place to enable them to carry out the role during a time of continual change and uncertainty for the social work profession have also been considered (Higgins and Goodyer, 2015). The findings from my research study have been presented in six sub-sections, organised to address each of the six key themes emerging from the research data, which are identified in the matrix table on p.121. Quotes from the participants' narrative across the three stages of the data collection process have been selected to provide supportive evidence to illustrate the findings. The inclusion of fragments of data interspersed through the chapter aims to enrich and validate the emergent findings. Bryman (1988) considers the inclusion of anecdotal narrative from research participants in qualitative research as having the capacity to sharpen the clarity of individual life stories and the rich description of the experiences of the respondents, but suggests that this may also dilute scope for a generic sense of validity of the data. The quotes have been included as they were verbally expressed, to ensure that the credibility of the lived experiences of participants were presented as they naturally occurred, and were not diluted of amended.

 A discussion of the findings will then be presented in the following chapter, to contextualise the themes that arose and explore areas of discovery about the research topic as well as where limitations were identified. Although some of the findings emerging from the research participants were anticipated, there were some more

unexpected outcomes, particularly the intensity of the emotional experiences shared when assessing failing students on placement, and also the prevailing commitment to the social work profession, despite local difficulties and barriers experienced as part of their role.

4.2 Key Findings

Theme 1: The Practice Educator Role

The first theme considers the perceptions that research participants shared about their role as practice educators, and how recent changes had impacted on the way they assessed and supported social work students. The decision to invite both independent off-site and on-site practice educators employed by social work agencies to participate in the study, was taken in order to explore a representative sector of the wider practice education community. Similarly, several very experienced practice educators were included in the research, in addition to a small number of practice educators embarking on the role whilst undertaking their practice education training. Findings have suggested that, although the primary tasks of supporting, teaching and assessing social work students are very similar for both off-site and on-site practice educators, there are likely to be differences in the context in which their role is delivered and the support structures available to them. This view was identified by Linda, one of the social workers involved in the third stage of the study:

> "What your research has not fully highlighted is the difference between those practice educators employed by local authorities and those that are independent. The needs of each are likely to be different and therefore any infrastructure developed needs to take account of this". (Feedback Form 1, Linda).

Off-site practice educators spoke about the insular nature of their role and the necessity of keeping up to date with changes in legislation and policy, and to be self-reliant, whilst seeking different ways to gain support and keep abreast with their continual professional development. This is illustrated below by Joan's and Shona's views:

> "Yes, it's good to have someone to talk things over with. And I think that if you're in a work environment where there isn't anyone else doing it, you know, you haven't got any other practice educators, it is a really lonely place". (Individual Interview 2, Joan).

> "I have really sort of had to pick it up and go with it. I really haven't had the opportunity to sit down and just go over it in depth, other than my own individual learning". (Individual Interview 7, Shona).

Bellinger and Ford (2016) refer to this point in their research, and the need for independent practice educators to be resilient and self-reliant. All participants in my research valued being attached to a community of practice learning, although there were differences in where participants accessed this support. The off-site practice educators spoke about the universities as their main source of support, and several participants carrying out the off-site role expressed feelings of estrangement from the social work agencies in which their allocated student was placed, particularly if there was a risk of a failed assessment. On the other hand, on-site practice educators referred to some of the constraints experienced as social workers employed within high pressured environments, where practice education was often perceived by managers as an extra task to be 'bolted on' to their substantive social work practitioner role. This point was well illustrated by Lucy:

"Practice education is not valued by teams and by managers; you are made to feel that you are doing it for your own benefit rather than for the profession". (Individual Interview 6, Lucy).

Another significant finding was the disparity in the scope for career development and advancement for off-site practice educators, who frequently felt side-lined and unable to access all the opportunities available to their on-site practice educator colleagues. This view was endorsed by the senior social work professionals interviewed in the final stage of the research, who recognised that both independent and employed practice educators needed opportunities to share their experiences and update their skills. This was acknowledged this in the statement below:

"I agree that practice educators need extra support; what that looks like will depend on where they work, whether or not they are employees of an organisation or independent. I think they all need opportunities to share experiences and update knowledge and skills". (Feedback Form1, Linda).

Research participants in the first and second stage of the research shared their positive or peak experiences of assessing students, and often expressed how cathartic it felt to be able to talk about high points in their role, as expressed by Davina and Mary in the following statements:

"That light bulb moment when the student's learning progresses and you feel you're really sort of struggling away and, you know, you're giving them lots of opportunities but then suddenly it comes together". (Group Interview 1, Davina).

"The shot of endorphins when mutual learning in achieved". (Group Interview 1. Mary).

However, findings also suggest that practice educators often referred to the difficult experiences of supporting a failing student and that these were considered to be peak points in their own learning and development:

"Being able to support a new supervisor and the strong rapport that was built up following the process of failing a student was a peak experience in my learning, as mutual trust and rapport was achieved". (Individual Interview 5, Wendy).

"And then, when suddenly they've had difficulties and you've gone through it a few times and you've done the practice and role modelling, and then they take off and you see that they have understood. I think that's a real joy for a borderline student who's had difficulties, and suddenly they are launched aren't they?" (Group Interview 4, Joan).

Finch and Taylor (2013) mention the emotional impact of working with failing students and the distress that can be experienced by the practice educator. A pertinent point linked to this is the role tension that participants frequently referred to, which was highlighted by Mary in the statement below, due to the gatekeeping role of the assessor, balanced with seeking to resolve placement difficulties and making a fair judgement about the student's capability:

"Success from a very negative experience of failing a student and carrying out the gate-keeping role; reflection on this afterwards was one of the most positive experiences of my life". (Individual Interview 9, Mary).

Practical challenges within the practice educator's role were alluded to, which included limited or delayed information about the student prior to the placement commencing from the university. Examples included limited communication about a student's

learning support needs or health issues. Participants also mentioned tensions with other stake holders, such as tutors and on-site placement supervisors, when information was not fully shared, roles were unclear and communication channels became tenuous. These concerns have been highlighted by participants in the statements below:

"There seems to be some role confusion and students are unclear about what the tutor's role is". (Individual Interview 5, Wendy).

"It is not the practice educator role that drains me, it is the gatekeeping role of managing limited information and resources". (Group Interview 4, Joan).

"No control over other people, such as supervisors who are not organised". (Group interview 3, Marilyn).

Experiences of supporting students that were shared by practice educators frequently mentioned the value attached to flexible and reliable channels of support that could be readily tapped into when they were experiencing particular challenges and needed to reaffirm their professional practice. The inner resources and resilience required to be an effective practice educator was a recurring topic throughout the research study. Findings, such as those voiced by Joan in the following statement, identified that practice educators valued and relied upon their own repertoire of teaching and learning strategies as a sound platform for encouraging students to develop critical thinking skills:

"I used the winner's triangle in supervision which served to be a turning point and helped the student to open her perceptions and move forward in her learning". (Group Interview 4, Joan).

Time to do justice to the practice educator role was often reflected on as a tension, and participants frequently mentioned the heavy personal and professional investment in supporting and assessing students, whilst also questioning and appraising their own capability to carry this out effectively:

> "You need to be confident in effectively assessing a student's competence, to support them to develop and also to support them when they are not developing". (Individual Interview 1, Davina).

> "I remember passing my first student on the premise that I was fearful of not passing her". (Individual Interview 12, Sally).

The experiences of practice educators involved in the research identified wide ranging views about their role, although many participants expressed shared concerns about the fast transition from the former to the new assessment framework and the subsequent pressures of becoming familiar with this quickly and adapting to the changes. Another issue which many participants referred to, was the sense of isolation from sources of support when difficulties were experienced with students, and the competing pressures of limited time and the importance of effective channels of communication with other key placement stakeholders.

Theme 2: Experiences of using PCF

All the research participants shared the common requirement of needing to adjust quickly to the PCF assessment process, although first experiences tended to be of a positive nature, as expressed by Rosie:

"It's new and I had to learn it but I love it; every domain offers scope for reflective practice and supervision; supervision is central to the process". (Individual Interview 3, Rosie).

The general flavour of feedback about their early adoption of PCF was optimistic, although this was often tinged with frustration about the ambiguous style of the nine overarching professional capabilities, and findings referred to a fluidity within the structure that could at times be difficult to pin down. Participants Sarah and Wendy highlighted the necessity for practice educators to separate out the different components for each of the domains, to ensure that students fully understood the nuances of the assessment criteria:

"The criteria for student assessment needs to be more honed and less vague, for example, what evidence do students need to gather, what is enough, how do you demonstrate their learning and the learning process they need to go through to become more proficient?" (Group Interview 2, Sarah).

"The domains are over-arching but still need to be broken down, for example professionalism is formed of many components such as confidentiality, professional boundaries, fact versus judgement". (Individual Interview 5, Wendy).

Furthermore, there was wide recognition that the PCF assessment process took longer to complete as compared to the previous assessment design, because the holistic framework required assessors to drill down and cross-reference where students had met specific capabilities during the placement. This was pointed out by Rosie in her comment:

> "The holistic assessment for the final report is a challenge and very time consuming. I use quotes from my direct observations in the assessment". (Individual Interview 3, Rosie.)

Participants mentioned that assessing against the capabilities became more challenging when a student was 'stuck' in their learning and a judgement needed to be made about whether their practice was 'good enough' or where a failed assessment needed to be recommended. Sally illustrated this point when referring to students who struggled with critical thinking and reflection and needed support to think in more depth about the learning required to demonstrate the domains:

> "You've got to be able to demonstrate critical thinking and write in a way that is reflective. If the student doesn't get this over a period of time, then actually is this the right career for them?" (Individual Interview, Sally).

Participants frequently expressed their ambivalence about the enforced wide scale introduction of PCF without a rigorous training programme being available for all practice educators. Findings suggest that practice educators often used their own initiative to discover what training was available, rather than a coordinated approach being in place to ensure that the necessary information was available to all. This was the situation experienced by Davina:

> "It's very difficult, and so, you know, I think I've spent far more time than is really healthy being solely responsible for myself and for all that kind of self-reflection and self-supervision, which is just not a good thing. So I'm trying to expand my network of support". (Group Interview 1, Davina).

The lack of a streamlined approach to the delivery of PCF training for all practice educators resulted in different experiences of becoming familiar with the new assessment framework, partly due to different arrangements being in place for on-site and off-site practice educators. A particular concern raised was the lack of exemplars of the revised practice learning templates to illustrate how the assessments should be completed. This point was clearly raised by Davina:

"And the thing is that with this, there aren't any exemplars to look at". (Individual Interview 1, Davina).

Some practice educators, such as Mary, also mentioned that university tutors were not always familiar with the professional capabilities, although it was assumed that they would have received this knowledge from the universities:

"Are tutors up to speed with PCF? The tutor I have been working with seems to have different ideas about what needs to happen". (Individual Interview 9, Mary).

Research carried out by Hackett and Marsland (1997) refers to the specific role tutors have in imparting knowledge to practice educators about the student's development needs, and providing clarity about the mode of assessment to be linked to the placement learning opportunities. My research suggested that tutors often needed to assimilate the new assessment information without having sufficient time to fully familiarise themselves prior to the transition from one assessment framework to another taking place.

Ambivalence was expressed by some participants in my research study, who were sceptical about the potential for PCF to be sustainable amidst the flux of change in social work education, whilst others perceived PCF as ameliorating the climate of

uncertainty and offering a new and reassuring way forward. Participants also discussed the synergy between PCF and the value-based, developmental nature of social work practice education. Views expressed appeared to recognise PCF as a vehicle for increased self-reflection on their own accumulated skills, values and knowledge base, and perceived the move away from the previous task orientated assessment model to be a positive one for themselves and for students. This point was raised by Davina as a positive change:

> "More critical reflection on practice and direct links to social work theory; less micromanagement within social work teams; perhaps the PCF structure will help with this?" (Group Interview 1, Davina).

There was also recognition of their responsibility to ensure that they were up to speed with the new assessment process and their professional development, and therefore able to emulate a positive and well-informed role model for the students. This was a surprising and refreshing finding, as practice educators demonstrated a sense of ownership and responsibility in seeking information to make up any shortfalls due to inadequate sources of training being made available for them:

> "I've always taken it on as my responsibility to actually learn. And I read something every day about social work, probably either on the internet or something I'm basically doing every day". (Group Interview 4, Wendy).

> "Practice educators need to recognise their responsibility to keep on learning as part of their personal and professional development". (Group Interview 4, Joan).

Findings revealed a contrast between experienced practice educators and those participants who were currently taking their practice educators' training (PEPS), in

terms of the pathways of support available to them to gather the necessary information about PCF. Those undertaking the PEPS training often expressed very positive views about their induction to the new assessment model and having access to helpful learning tools and resources. This view was endorsed by one of the social work professionals involved in the final stage of the research:

> "My experience is that staff who have recently, or are currently completing PEPS, find it a good model, although there has been some feedback about the need for additional support at the start of the process". (Feedback Form 6, Erica).

Practice educators also spoke about their experiences of assessing students on different social work degree programmes, including undergraduate, postgraduate and the accelerated post graduate diploma in social work education (Step Up to Social Work). Some of the more experienced participants, such as Sally, spoke about having assessed newly qualified social workers in addition to students, and were aware of both the differences and similarities of using PCF for varied levels of training:

> "You need to assess both students and NQSW's and wear different hats because students need something different; you need to support both". (Individual Interview 12, Sally).

The findings suggest that participants identified some positive benefits when assessing students using the PCF assessment process and perceived the increased emphasis on critical learning and reflection within the framework to be advantageous for students and for their own professional development. Participants also discussed their experiences of assessing students when they needed more time to understand and evidence the capabilities, and the impact this had when building a relationship with them.

Theme 3: Relationships between the Practice Educator and Student.

The third key theme captures the views of research participants about the relationship they developed with students during the placement. Findings suggest that there is an interdependency between assessing students well and developing a sound working relationship, yet participants often expressed tensions due to the multiple requirements to support, empower, teach and assess students. This potential for role friction was raised by Shona:

> "You can still assess a student if the relationship is poor but this could hinder the process; you can get in to a downward spiral and just see the negatives". (Individual Interview 7, Shona).

The issue of power differences between practice educators and students were frequently raised by participants, particularly due to the responsibility to pass or fail a student. Duffy (2003) highlights the traumatic impact that failing a student can have on the assessor, and advocates for access to support to be made readily available. Experiences shared during group and individual interviews within my research referred to the personal investment of time, energy and self-reflection incurred in order to establish constructive rapport with students, and the additional pressures when a student was struggling or failing the placement:

> "Tailor your approach to the needs of the student; on reflection I did not always do this and I could have related differently, less confrontationally, but still being clear on how things need to happen to meet the requirements". (Individual Interview 12, Sally).

"And they don't seem to move on. I mean, I've only ever failed a student once, when I've said to the student, 'Your relationship with me is not working because of these problems you've got. Now, it could be me that's creating this and I need to step down, or it could be something that we need to work on'. But I find this very, very draining that you keep reassuring and reassuring and they don't get any further forward". (Group Interview 1, Mary).

Supervision was seen to be a vital platform for developing an effective relationship, and a platform for ongoing assessment with students throughout the placement:

"Supervision is about the practice educator understanding what the student is thinking, why they are thinking that, what they are seeing on a day to day basis". (Individual Interview 3, Rosie).

"The student's portfolio provides a snippet of information about the whole placement; the assessment process is more about what I see in supervision, what I see in practice". (Individual Interview 12, Sally).

Participants recognised the different functions of supervision, and the importance of blending the professional requirements of the student assessment against the PCF with the organisational context of the placement setting and the personal wellbeing of the student. Findings also identified the importance attached to gaining feedback from students and peers about their own performance as practice educators, and the importance attached to demonstrating credibility with the student as a good role model, to ensure that the supervisory and assessment process was helpful and developmental:

"I want to establish a good reputation. I have a naturally engaging and supportive style and I want to be seen as thoughtful, thorough and that I do a good job". (Group Interview 1, Davina).

"I would like peers to think that I am effective in a team, good to work with and willing to share my experiences and offer support". (Group Interview 3, Marilyn).

Although supervision was perceived to be vital by all participants it was recognised that supporting and assessing a student within a placement setting can be unpredictable and challenging due to the interplay of organisational dynamics and the students' specific blend of skills, knowledge, learning style, needs and personal resilience.

Findings also highlighted some placement barriers which impacted on the relationship with students. Barriers which were frequently referred to by participants were limited time, competing workload pressures and the need for professional boundaries to be established. Although personal and professional boundaries were perceived to be necessary, there were some views expressed, which are illustrated by Mary, about the sense of separation from the student that could subsequently emerge, and the difficulties this created in forging an equalising relationship with students:

"It's about professionalism, but it's also about being able to be warm, creating a safe environment but stepping over boundaries takes away a lot of that safety if you're not very careful". (Group Interview 1, Mary).

Feedback from participants suggested that they often devoted considerable time and energy when working with students, particularly when the student had specific learning

support needs or had personal issues which impinged on their placement performance:

> "And I've just got one very difficult student at the moment, who just expects far more of me than I could possibly give or want to give. And I just think, how far can you go before you say 'This person isn't, wouldn't be able to be assessed as right for this". (Group Interview 3, Diana).

> "It is lovely to see a student blossom because, sometimes you try all these different methods, and you know, there's often a time when you think, 'well is the student going to actually manage to do it?' and then suddenly, you know, it all comes together and you see the fruits of your labour". (Group Interview 2, Sarah).

Participants frequently mentioned the blurring of their work and private time due to the tendency for concerns about the student's progress to spill over into their leisure time. Furthermore, ambivalent feelings were expressed about the presence of power differentials in their relationships with students, whilst also disclosing their feelings of powerlessness when supporting a struggling student, particularly if support was not readily available when required. On a positive note, research participants referred to the merits of tuning into individual learning needs and styles of each student and adjusting their teaching and assessment techniques to discover creative ways of unblocking placement barriers, as highlighted by Angela in her statement below:

> "Yes I think you need to tailor your approach to the needs of the student….One of mine was more reluctant to read and make links, you know…. Yes you could see the difference and want to encourage them both". (Group Interview 2, Angela).

Some specific models and frameworks were mentioned, such as the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), learning styles (Honey and Mumford, 1986) and the theory circle (Collingwood *et al.*, 2008). However, findings suggest that participants often depended quite heavily on their own resources and resilience, rather than gaining enough ongoing support and access to refresher training to embed the new assessment process and manage the complexities of practice learning and education and their varied roles including teacher, supporter, negotiator, supervisor, facilitator, manager, enabler, planner and mediator.

Theme 4: Support for Practice Educators

The research study aims to discover what support systems had been provided for practice educators, to help them adjust to a new assessment framework as part of wider social work reforms, and also to find out participants' aspirations for ongoing support within the context of envisioning what practice education might look like in the future. The fourth theme focused on participants' direct experiences of the kind of support they had already been able to access during the change process and separates this from the aspirations for the future of practice education discussed in the final theme.

The findings have identified broad agreement from participants that practice educators needed extra support, but that this support would vary, depending on whether they were employees of an organisation or independently employed and linked to a university. Furthermore, findings identified a disparity in the amount of experience and support that participants had already gained at the time of the research being conducted in becoming familiar with the PCF assessment process, with some practice

educators on the brink of acquiring knowledge, such as Rosie, whilst others had started to assess students using the new framework:

"I think that once you start assessing on it, then you're going to have to learn it pretty quickly aren't you, because you've got to know what you're assessing against"?(Individual Interview 3, Rosie).

Participants also referred to the need for increased communication and connectivity between key stakeholders for student placements and the autonomous and sometimes isolating nature of their role. Daisy expressed her views about the variable quality of the informal and formal support experienced, and the personal responsibility invested in keeping abreast of the changes:

"There isn't actually a sort of fixed structure to the practice educator role as a profession, in terms of offering supervision or appraisals, it's, you know, you're all seen as quite autonomous". (Individual Interview 10, Daisy).

Feedback from other social work professionals in the third stage of the research study also reinforced the need to provide a cohesive structure of support and career development for practice educators regardless of their role as on-site or off-site assessors:

"I think they all need opportunities to share experiences and update knowledge and skills". (Feedback Form 1, Linda).

"The need for an improved infrastructure of support for practice educators is essential given the many challenges facing social work via professional schemes such as 'Frontline' and 'Step Up to Social Work'. (Feedback Form 3, Julia).

Feedback from the practice educators interviewed indicates that mentoring, peer support or supervision were considered valuable and desirable, although many participants did not have access to these means of support, often due to limited time:

> "To be honest it's difficult to find the time. So what I've tried to do is meet another practice educator, because we support newly qualified staff for the same local authority". (Individual Interview 6, Lucy).

> "I think there's quite a lot on offer, but it's getting the time to go, if you're independent, because of the sheer finances of having to, you know, be at work. Peer support is very good I think". (Individual Interview 5, Wendy).

Amy, who was one of the practice educators interviewed, referred to feeling de-skilled and worried about the need to understand the new assessment framework before having to assess a student, and the importance of keeping on track with everything:

> "I tend to question myself and feel that I'm not doing as well as I should be. Sometimes I think, 'Oh yes I'm a good practice educator, everything is fine'. And other times, 'Oh no, I really shouldn't be doing this". (Individual Interview 4, Amy).

Both academic and emotional means of support were considered important, and the opportunity to share early experiences of the new assessment process as part of a supportive community of practice was appreciated by the practice educators who were interviewed within the four small groups. Ruch (2007) refers to the need for a 'safe space' for social work practitioners to think through the complexities of their experiences with students, and that if this is not available, there is a risk of feeling isolated and unsupported. Daisy referred to the constraints of time and work pressures that often prevented peer support becoming a reality:

> "Over the years I've been involved in several attempts to get practice educators'
> peer support going and every single time it's failed. It doesn't matter what
> university it has been with". (Individual Interview 10, Daisy).

Participants spoke about the importance of gaining feedback from students,
placements and other practice learning stakeholders about their own performance, as
a means of self-monitoring and self-improvement. Findings suggested that limited
feedback was provided by universities, and that more constructive information about
their performance when assessing and supporting students would be welcomed.
However, participants spoke favourably about the practice educator training (PEPS)
as a valued means of support and learning, due to the collaborative teaching sessions
provided and the ability to build up a range of teaching and learning strategies to
strengthen their skills:

> "PEPS 1+2 have been very helpful for my personal learning, developing my
> confidence and working through solutions to placement difficulties". (Individual
> Interview 6, Lucy).

> "I started PEPS 2 a couple of months ago….. and in terms of my development
> and being able to see how things go through the process and very much reflecting
> back on my previous work and how that could have been improved and can
> impact on the work I'm doing now". (Group Interview 2, Angela).

Interestingly a disparity was identified between the developmental learning provided
for new practice educators engaged in the PEPS training, in comparison with more
experienced practitioners, who were assumed to already have the requisite skills and
knowledge. This difference in the availability of support for new and more experienced
practice educators highlights the need for more emphasis to be placed on ongoing

refresher training and support. On-site practice educators mentioned the difficulties in ensuring protected time for their assessment role after completing PEPS, due to competing demands within over-stretched social work teams. Findings also suggest that training managers within social work teams recognise the value of social workers completing the PEPS training but were aware of the competing pressures within social work teams. This pressure was raised by Erica in her following statement:

"Ideally it could be better developed but the general trend has been that, as placements are not a 'must do' for local authorities, it relies to a large extent on individual development, although I have been proactive in encouraging staff to see PEPS as a good development opportunity, and we have had success in getting staff to complete the training". (Feedback Form 6, Erica).

The pertinent point of measuring the currency of practice educator training was also highlighted in the third stage of the research study by team managers, who recognised the importance of ensuring that the time gap between doing the PEPS training and having another student did not lapse over the recommended two year period.

A final point raised by participants as a source of support was through participating in the research study, sharing their experiences of day-to-day practice and the importance of research based practice as a way to articulate their own ideas and heighten the profile of practice education. Daisy raised the importance of research in helping to change perceptions about practice education:

"I mean hopefully we can influence change in a small way by research like this and looking at the way forward by sharing this across different forums" (Individual Interview 2, Daisy).

The views gained from participants highlighted the sources of support that were valued, but findings have identified that there were gaps in the support and training that was available to them, particularly during times when they really needed it. Experiences of on-site and off-site practice educators tended to vary in terms of the communities of support they were affiliated to. There were some marked differences in the experiences of participants engaged in their PEPS training, who appreciated the support this provided, and those who had been in the role longer and needed to seek relevant information updates and self-monitor their professional development.

Theme 5: The Impact of Change for Practice Educators

Research participants expressed mixed views about the accelerating pace of change due to reforms for social work education and practice, and the direct impact on their role as practice educators. Independent practice educators were particularly concerned about the sustainability of their role, due to the increase in teaching partnerships between local authorities and universities, where students are likely to be placed within statutory social work teams which already have qualified social workers able to take on the on-site assessment role. Diana, one of the independent practice educators involved in the research, also raised her concerns about the risk of placement funding being phased out as part of ongoing social work reform:

> "Cuts may affect independent practice educators like me; in-house practice educators may need to step up if the placement funding is cut". (Individual Interview 8, Diana).

This point was also made by Rosie, who expressed dissatisfaction with the low financial payment for assessing a student, and concerns that the daily placement fee may not continue to be a protected funding stream:

"Daily placement fees are less now, what is the incentive of assessing a student?" (Individual Interview 3, Rosie).

On-site practice educators voiced their concerns about the increased pressure within social work teams and the added responsibility of assessing a social work student without adequate 'work-load' relief and time being set aside to attend practice educator support and information sessions. This appeared to be Daisy's experience, expressed in her statement below:

"And you're kind of thinking of the demands of your work and the demands of the student and your own life and then learning a new process on top of that". (Group Interview 2, Daisy).

Research by Garrett (2014) refers to the uncertainty of the future direction of social work due to economic constraints, and opposing governmental driven views about what social work should look like in practice. Job uncertainty and poor extrinsic reward for carrying out their role as practice educators were key research findings, and were associated with the importance of raising the status of practice education, as participants felt that their role was not sufficiently recognised by the wider social work profession. Findings suggested however, that there was a sense of commitment to owning the process of change, and Joan, one of the participants, was keenly aware of the need to seize opportunities becoming available due to the diversification of social work education:

> "Practice educators can keep up to date with changes in social work, to extend their knowledge and increase self-confidence in managing the fluidity of their role". (Individual Interview 2, Joan).

Some of the more experienced practice educators referred to becoming involved in new areas of work, such as assessing and mentoring social workers on the PEPS courses and being involved in the Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE) for newly qualified staff. A positive development arising from the PEPS practice educator training becoming well established since it was' set up in 2013 has been the opening up of new roles to mentor and assess social workers studying on the PEPS course and also to assess newly qualified social workers as part of their first year in employment. Joan, who at the time of being interviewed, had recently taken on the mentor and assessor role for PEPS, reflected on this in the following statement:

> "I really love the practice assessor role with PEPS because people look at things differently and you can pick up some very good stuff; let's face it, people are being observed, so they are going to do their very best". (Individual Interview 2, Joan).

Participants employed by local authorities also referred to the accelerated post graduate social work diploma, 'Step Up to Social Work', where practice educators are directly recruited by the employer, as being a new avenue of opportunity. Research findings identified the commitment of participants to fellow practice educators and a sense of supporting each other and strengthening the collective position of practice educators as part of the social work professions. Golia and McGovern (2015) promote the merits of peer supervision, and the mutual support this provides in normalising anxiety and uncertainty. This research chimed with participants' recognition of the

need to both seek and offer support as a way of navigating through difficult experiences, although lack of time was seen as a major barrier to this happening:

"Well, I think that meeting together as social workers is an imperative part of what we need to be doing to support one another – we don't meet in small groups within our local environment and we should". (Individual Interview 7, Shona).

"There's no reason why we can't actually have everybody's email addresses or telephone numbers and do a 'self-help' once a month support group". (Individual Interview 8, Diana).

The views of participants highlighted mixed responses to the impact of change, with practice educators perceiving themselves to be agents of change who could play an instrumental role in the way forward, whilst a more pragmatic stance was also shared about the uncertainty of changes that they had limited control over. Findings identified an energising flow of dialogue about the changes in social work, which recognised that there needed to be a move away from the managerial model of social work practice linked to economic austerity, although the actual direction of travel appeared to be unclear. This view was expressed by Sally, who tuned in to the uncertain climate of change for social work:

"I think that there's a lot of eyes on social work anyway. And whatever we say and do, it's not going to change the path of what I think and the direction in which the government wants us to go". (Individual Interview 12, Sally).

The discussions about the impact of change for practice education were closely aligned with participants' aspirations for the future of social work education and practice learning. The research study provided an opportunity for the practice

educators involved to consider some creative possibilities about how the social work profession can thrive and work through the complicated landscape of social work education and the ongoing contested dialogue about how things may or may not develop over the next few years.

Theme 6: Aspirations for Practice Education.

The final theme emerging from the data addresses the research participants' aspirations for the future of practice education. Findings identified some key hopes for improvement, which can be summarised as receiving better support, more role clarity, increased status, more uniformity across different universities' processes for practice learning and improved quality of student assessment and are illustrated in the following statements:

"More support from placements in supporting students to recognise that they are undergoing a learning process". (Group Interview 3, Marilyn).

"More clarity on the expectations of the practice educator from the university and from the student". (Group Interview 4, Wendy).

"More respect for the social work profession from the media and society in general". (Group Interview 4, Joan).

"A widening role for practice educators within the university". (Group Interview 1, Tahira).

"More uniformity across different universities, the add-on bits are always different, even if the main practice learning documents are the same". (Group Interview 1, Mary).

"Regular practice learning forums when experiences can be shared". (Group Interview 2, Sarah).

"More peer support to create a community of learning through on-line forums and local support groups". (Group Interview 4, Wendy).

"More training and support and sharing of new ways of working". (Group Interview 2, Angela).

These findings were gained by asking practice educators interviewed within small groups as part of the first stage of the study to share 'three wishes' for the future of practice education. A heartening observation was the synergy between the views of the practice educator professionals and social work professionals involved in the final stage of the research about the need for improved channels of support. Kamina, who was involved in the final stage of the research identified potential avenues to raise awareness across different forums:

"A number of the suggestions raised by the research could feed into regional and national initiatives, such as more research, greater recognition of the social work role in multidisciplinary teams, practice learning forums etc." (Feedback Form 4, Kamina).

Strengthening regional support for practice educators by delivering regular information updates and specialist knowledge such as master classes in adult learning and

pedagogy, were ideas suggested by Rachel and Julia, who were also involved in the final stage of the research study:

"I suggest bi-annual or annual forums for practice educators to meet; a mix of Action Learning Sets for CPD, for both individual tracking and also for standardisation". (Feedback Form 2, Rachel).

"Providing training and a focus on key areas not necessarily covered by PEPS 1+2 as well as master classes in adult learning and pedagogy". (Feedback Form 3, Julia).

Evidence based research was perceived to be an important route to raise the profile of social work practice education and it was acknowledged by Erica that senior managers needed to be on board to ensure that ideas were sustainable and wholeheartedly committed to:

"There could be value in sharing the research with senior managers to secure their active engagement in supporting and encouraging placements – linked to the recruitment of social workers". (Feedback Form 6, Erica).

In addition to raising suggestions for heightening the profile of practice education, research participants also highlighted the need to campaign for improved the working conditions for practice educators, particularly the low financial payment:

"It would also be beneficial if the research acknowledged the pressures that exist for practice educators in terms of the financial rewards for their work, now that the ESG has been reduced to a flat fee of £20 a day. Furthermore, the research may also need to specifically look at the experiences of practice educators who are supporting programmes such as 'Step Up' and 'Frontline'. Possibly a comparative

case study approach could be used in order to identify the similarities and the differences between the experiences of practice educators involved in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes". (Feedback Form 6, Erica).

The diversity of opportunities for practice education due to the increased emphasis on post-qualifying professional development was seen as providing potential for practice educators' to develop a widening role within universities and local authorities. Findings suggested that there was scope for a range of different ways of working, such as supporting and assessing newly qualified social workers and taking on the mentoring and assessment role for more experienced social workers engaged in the practice educator training. This view was expressed by Linda, one of the social work managers involved in stage three of the study:

"There needs to be better recognition of the key role that practice educators can play in supporting social workers, not just students!" (Feedback Form 1, Linda).

There were differences between the future aspirations for on-site as compared to off-site practice educators, which echoed recognition that the difference in the two roles were likely to increase rather than diminish, and this point was highlighted by Angela:

"Practice educators need to be acknowledged as part of a career development path; this is happening with local authorities, but what about independent practice educators?" (Group Interview 2, Angela).

Findings suggested that participants anticipated further role differentiation due to the lack of clarity from the government about the future direction of social work education. Participants also wished for a more seamless and transparent way of working between university and social work employers, to make connections between academic and

placement based learning for social work students. The feedback from participants inferred that there was a commitment to the social work profession, but concerns were shared about how the status of social work is perceived by other professional groups. An expressed wish was for practice education to be viewed as elemental to the foundation of social work education, rather than being a separate process that takes place away from the university. The aspirations shared by research participants provided a vehicle for thinking through tangible ways of developing creative and provocative ideas to raise the profile of practice education based on their lived experiences of the role.

5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider the six core themes emerging from the research data and will discuss the findings within the context of the wider body of literature on this topic. The dominant themes are both singular and interconnected, as the data across the three stages of the research study have frequently referred to topics which have been deconstructed and analysed to locate them within a designated place, whilst still recognising the patterning and synergy within and between the six distinct themes. Silverman (2010) refers to the need to consider all data sources as adding to the wider body of knowledge being gathered, which can be strengthened by constantly comparing data to test out the emerging hypothesis. The structure of the chapter has a similar pattern to the previous findings chapter, and is divided into six sub-sections with one section for each of the six key themes, to highlight and contextualise the key points arising from the research findings. Where applicable there is reference to specific direct quotes included in the findings chapter to contextualise the discussion.

5.2 The Practice Educator Role

The first theme considers the experiences that research participants shared about their role as practice educators, and how recent changes have has an impact on the way they assess and support social work students. The differences within the role of off-site and on-site practice educators, the cathartic sharing of peak experiences and reflections on how the role is perceived by themselves and others within the practice learning community will be discussed. The tensions between the mentoring and assessment aspects of the role are examined, and the emotional investment in the role will be explored, to consider some of the barriers practice educators experience in practice and strategies to sustain the vigour of the role within contemporary social work practice.

5.2.1 Differences between the On-Site and Off-Site Practice Educator Role

All practice educators who participated in the research conveyed a shared sense of importance in having a strong professional identity and the need for good access to support and training to be able to carry out their role effectively. There were however, quite stark differences between the hopes and aspirations of on-site and off-site practice educators expressed during the interviews, which inferred that the differences in the two roles were likely to increase rather than decrease. The perceptions of participants about the fragmentation of the practice education profession, with an increasing focus on the differences between on-site and off-site practice educator roles, appears to be supported by the government agenda of creating employer-driven social work programmes which are likely to benefit social work employees taking on the practice educator role. The notion of academic supremacy is raised by Bellinger

and Ford (2016), who express caution about the privileged status given to statutory placements by the government, due to the creation of accelerated learning through new social work courses, such as Frontline (2014), where only statutory placements are allocated to students. Moreover, the government-funded introduction of Social Work Apprenticeships, is also likely to favour on-site practitioners who can take on the assessment lead within the apprentice's work place (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2017).

Participants expressed their views about the comparative merits of the off-site and on-site role and shared contrasting views about the benefits and drawbacks for both. Off-site practice educators really relied on the university they were employed by to provide good channels of support and information updates, although experiences of participants was variable, with many feeling a sense of disconnection to contemporary practice learning developments. A frequently voiced concern from on-site practice educators was the heavy 'work-load' attached to their social work role and a sense of feeling overwhelmed by the additional pressure of supporting and assessing a student on placement (*p. 135, group interview 1, Mary and p. 150, group interview Angela)*

Discussions about the two models of placement assessment in use also generated mixed opinions about whether students benefitted more from having a two-tier model involving an off-site practice educator and an on-site supervisor, or the integrated role of the on-site practice educator employed directly by the agency. Zuchowski (2011) suggested that there is an increase in general satisfaction expressed by students and other placement stakeholders when a strong on-site practice educator provides the assessment. In contrast, research by Bellinger (2010b) identifies the advantages of having an independent practice educator to provide a fresh perspective and open up new channels of learning. Literature exploring the heavy demands of the practice

educator role tend to cut across the differences between the off-site and on-site remit, and focus on the individual qualities and attributes that help individual practitioners to be more confident and resilient in their work (Payne *et al.*; Parker, 2008; Sargeant, 2000; Carpenter 2005). Waterhouse *et al.* (2011) identified a link between experience and confidence, noting that as a practice educator built up a body of knowledge and practical experience they increased their self-confidence. Their research study also found that limited time and competing work pressures could be significant obstacles. Findings from my research mentioned the barriers of restricted time and heavy work commitments for practice educators, but did not identify a strong correlation between participants' experience and how confident they felt in their role, as their experiences tended to be influenced by a number of variable factors, such as the support made available and the emotional resilience individuals were able to demonstrate.

Off-site practice educators sometimes expressed feelings of estrangement from the social work agencies in which their allocated student was placed, and referred to the importance being associated with a community of learning, as espoused by Wenger's (1998) community of practice model (*p. 124, individual interview 2, Joan*). This view is shared by Showell *et* al. (2014) and Williams and Rutter (2013), who advocate for practice educators creating a circle of peer support to counteract the pressures of the role. The insular role of the independent practice educator is considered by Bellinger and Ford (2016), who refer to the importance of staying up-to-date with changes in legislation and policy, and the vital requirement to be self-reliant, whilst seeking different ways to gain support and keep abreast with continual professional development.

The last stage of the research involved sharing the results of the first two stages of the data collection process with other social work professionals, and provided some

interesting perspectives about the role differences for on-site and off-site practice educators. Dissemination of the key themes arising from the research data was conducted by providing a short presentation at two professional social work forums. This provided the opportunity to gain peer debriefing and reflective feedback about the data already collected from practice educators. The scope to present to the forums increased the audit trail for the research and heightened reflexivity, due to the energy and appreciation expressed and the validation given to the emerging themes (Shenton, 2004). This was heartening, as the feedback gained often reinforced the views of practice educators and offered insight into how practice educators were being supported in different service settings (*p. 139, feedback form 3, Julia*). However, Padgett (2008) suggests a note of caution, as peer debriefing can interfere with the deeper meaning conveyed by research participants, by creating more generalised or skewed interpretations of the data. This has resonance with my own research, as the process of validating views shared across different groups of participants facilitated the emergence of key findings but may have under-valued other less prominent views.

The feedback forms completed and returned to me following the presentations were mainly from local authority team managers and placement co-ordinators with a broad understanding of both roles, but more working knowledge and familiarity with practice educators directly employed within their teams. This may have introduced a skewed perspective due to the stronger emphasis on the on-site practice educator role at the final stage of the research, although the generic nature of the questions posed on the feedback form enabled me to capture broader, holistic material with organisational, regional and national perspectives on how the status of practice education in general terms can be heightened. Moreover, the message came across very clearly from the senior social workers involved in the research that there were concerns about the

growing inequity between the employment and career opportunities for off-site practice educators as opposed to on-site practice educator employees (*p. 123, feedback form 1, Linda*). There were many references to the new direction of social work education within local authorities and how employees with a practice educator qualification would appear to be better positioned to take advantage of new openings emerging. Furthermore, Bogg and Chalice (2016) recognise the controversy caused by the recently introduced employer-driven social work programmes and concerns about how successful these schemes will be in the longer term.

5.2.2 Sharing Success

As part of the small group interviews carried out in the first stage of the research study participants were asked if they would share their success stories in order to identify what was particularly valued and what gave life and energy to their complex and challenging role. This question was posed using terminology frequently used in appreciative inquiry methodology, 'peak experience,' also referred to in some literature as 'the miracle question' (Carter, 2006) to place an emphasis on a high point or success story about an aspect of their role that works well and from which job satisfaction is derived. Peak experiences are referred to in appreciative inquiry research studies as a means to capture organic ideas about what is working well now, both individually and collectively, as a basis for making transformational change (Cooperrider, 2003; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001; Bushe, 2011). Research participants frequently exchanged stories about the 'best of' their experiences when working with students, which created a sense of sharing common ground and a shared appreciation of their role. Appendix 13 provides several examples of peak experiences, which reflect a tone of celebrating energising experiences, although often

positive stories merged with more challenging examples of practice, where skills creativity and resilience were needed to work through difficulties. Participants often reflected on specific moments in time when a difficult turning point during the assessment of students on placement had occurred, and this tended to move the dialogue away from the positive to a more negative exchange of stories, based on the challenges they had experienced when a student was struggling and at risk of failing the placement (*p. 125, group interview 1, Davina*).

The emphasis on positivity generated by using an appreciative approach for the research study did appear to resonate well with the participants, and provided a strengths-based approach to frame the interviews, although there were underlying issues that needed to be explored which were repeatedly referred to throughout the three stages of the study. Bellinger and Ford (2016) refer to the unprecedented pace of change within social work in the last decade, and the challenges of preparing social work students for the uncertainly and complexity of social work practice. There is an expectation that practice educators will be able to mentor, teach and assess students to be ready for practice, although findings emerging from the research have identified concerns about limited support to enable them to attain this. Significant findings captured the emotional journey experienced by participants as they reflected on peak learning experiences, often incorporating the 'nadir' (Dreyfus, 1990) or negative aspects of their narratives, and the strong emphasis on the personal and professional commitment to supporting struggling students as part of their learning.

5.2.3 Supporting Struggling Students

The emotional and practical challenges of the practice educator role were repeatedly expressed throughout the research study in terms of limited support, poor channels of communication, assessment methods that were unfamiliar and unclear, lack of time, change occurring at a fast pace and 'switched off students' who were unwilling to participate. An examination of literature revealed concerns about the limited support provided for the practice educator performing the gatekeeper role of screening unsuitable students from progression to the profession (Sowbel, 2012; Finch and Poletti, 2013; Finch, 2014). Findings from my research study also identified feelings of participants having limited control over the quality of other key practice learning stakeholders, such as university tutors and work based supervisors, who are instrumental to the overall student experiences during the placement. Comments were made about students' not always disclosing information if they have specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, and mentioned that the necessary support and information was not always forthcoming from the university to enable reasonable adjustments to be made.

The individual and collective stories about supporting a struggling or failing student were often shared by participants when they were expressing their peak experiences of assessing and supporting students, and they often mentioned that deep levels of retrospective learning had been gained throughout the process. However, this connection between deep but difficult learning whilst supporting a failing student may also be due to the interlayering of the practice educator role and the competing functions of undertaking a rigorous assessment and enabling learning opportunities (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2013; Shapton, 2006). Sowbel (2012, p.39) also takes up this

position and considers the ethical challenge of balancing the ambiguous nature of practice learning assessment:

> However, we must maintain a commitment to persevere through our uncertainty and discomfort with the innate duelling values that inform being a social worker while gatekeeping for the profession.

Practice educators often alluded to the vast responsibility of making the right assessment decision and the repercussions if a student qualified and subsequently intervened with vulnerable service users in a negative and unprofessional way. The subjective and unpredictable nature of practice learning assessment is considered by Finch (2017), as individual practice educators may have different expectations of a student's performance on placement, and service settings may have higher or lower standards when measuring the student's capability. Moreover, Lafrance *et al.*, (2004) refer to the challenge of deciding what constitutes a 'good enough' assessment and, as noted by Finch and Taylor, (2012), practice educators needing to form a judgment about whether the student is capable enough to pass the placement and also considering if they are ready to progress to be a newly qualified social worker, which is more difficult to judge with certainty.

Conversely, individual participants often mentioned that the challenge of managing complexity had been energising and had unleashed reserves of resilience and skills they were not aware they had. Participants reflected on the interplay between feeling energised by the role, gaining peer affirmation and using a 'tool kit' of strategies to support students when there were challenges identified (*p. 126, individual interview 5, Wendy and group interview 4, Joan*). The inner resilience of practice educators and the strategies applied to overcome challenges will be discussed as part of theme 4.

The stories articulated by research participants frequently mentioned the value attached to support from a community of learning that could be readily tapped into when they were experiencing particular challenges and also to reaffirm their professional practice.

5.2.4 A Community of Learning

The interplay between successes and challenges within the practice educator role were frequently associated with both the self-perceptions of practice educators and the views of significant others about the role. Participants mentioned the importance of a wider community of practice education, and the respect they were able to gain from their peers. Reed (2007) refers to a community of peers as those people who share a similar discipline and interests, but may not have regular contact. It was clear that my own research participants linked with different learning communities according to whether they had an off-site or on-site role and if they were currently undertaking the practice educator training, or were more experienced practitioners. Research participants endeavoured to position themselves within a broader spectrum of other practice educators and social work professionals, and findings suggested that the sharing of ideas helped shape and develop thinking and stimulate new ideas. Furthermore, there was a sense that participants valued the views of significant others about their own role performance as a means of justifying their worth by having this acknowledged and endorsed by others.

Wenger's (1998) idea of a community of learning is consistent with the credence participants placed on peer identification and support and the desire to be connected to a practice learning community. Participants spoke about the importance of a 'whole

team approach' as very positive and desirable when assessing a student on placement and the benefit of triangulated assessment and feedback shared across team members, service users and carers and other professionals to enrich and validate the student's learning. Findings suggested that participants valued a rich and well supported learning environment, where the whole team within the placement setting shared some responsibility for the student, as this helped to ease the pressure of the practice educators' central position in carrying out a robust, fair and transparent assessment. Feedback during the interviews often referred to the intensity of the practice educator/ student relationship, and expectations from students that they were the 'font of all knowledge'. The need to avoid a singular assessment stemming from one source only is noted by Heron *et al.* (2015), who advocate for a well- balanced range of assessment feedback for social work students, with collaboration from other placement stakeholders, which is empowering and encourages students to participate in the feedback process.

Practice educators often raised the potential to feel isolated when assessing students within a social work team, particularly when the practice educator was carrying out the off-site role. The sense of belonging to a community of learning often seemed to be tenuous, with participants having a sense of belonging yet somehow set apart, due to the insular positioning of the the role within individual service settings. Participants spoke about their uneasiness when raising serious doubts about the progress of a student, and the tendency to internalise their feelings about the student's potential failure as being somehow due to their own inadequacies as a practice educator. According to Gibson (2016), a social worker's personal experiences of practice can be coloured by feelings of anxiety about missing important information that could lead to an escalation of risk. The tendency for practice educators within the study to admit to

personal and professional over-commitment to their role, and to carrying a heavy emotional investment in getting things right for students, may be part of the bigger picture of pressures on social work practitioners to perform their role well within a time of turmoil and uncertainty for the profession. The perceived ambivalence within the practice educator role, due to the duality of being attuned to a wider body of support, yet needing to work autonomously, also highlighted the discrete role of student assessment which falls outside the main social work role yet is integral to the practice educator role.

5.2.5 The Assessment Role

The power inequalities between the role of the practice educator and social work student were often referred to during the research study. This was particularly noticeable when the assessment component of the role was discussed, and participants exchanged their experiences of how they had endeavoured to apply sound professional judgement when assessing students and had adhered to the adult learning principles of shared learning and equalising power differentials, as espoused by Tew (2006), although experiences about managing difficult situations where students struggled to progress were also shared. The cumulative nature of practice learning assessment was seen to be a necessary but demanding aspect of the new holistic PCF assessment structure and, as endorsed by Heron *et al.* (2015), assessment needed to incorporate both formative and summative forms of feedback carried out throughout the duration of the placement.

The interviews with participants often mentioned the importance of gaining feedback from students about the ways they were being assessed and supported during the

placement. Findings suggested that practice educators found it useful to encourage students to critically reflect on their own learning, and also to open up discussions where the students' views were compared with their own, in order to create a critical debate. This process was seen to be effective as a way of encouraging the student to reflect on the practice educator's own performance in the light of the student's views and opinions of their practice. This approach to reinforce the importance of reflexive learning is echoed by Showell Nicholas and Kerr (2015), who favour the questioning technique within assessment, as this encourages power sharing and being able to pinpoint the student's strengths and those areas requiring further development.

There were some imaginative ideas shared about assessing students and ways to empower them to actively contribute to the assessment process. Initiatives shared included encouraging students to record some of the supervision records, carry out presentations to the placement team, design resources for the team, such as an induction pack for subsequent students, conduct community based projects and completing research on a particular aspect of the team's area of work. Shardloe and Doel (1996) refer to the terminology of assessment as being synonymous with authority and the passing of judgement, yet arguably assessment cannot be divorced from the relationship built up between the practice educator and the student, as this is often the forum in which formative feedback is given as part of the overall assessment process. The way that feedback was given to students as part of the assessment process was also raised as important, to ensure that this was balanced and constructive rather than overly negative or positive, defined by Davys and Beddoe (2010) as needing to be timely, proactive and best received as part of the supervisory relationship. Participants also mentioned the importance of students reflecting on their own performance and professional capability as part of the assessment process, and

referred to the importance of understanding each student's preferred learning style and particular learning needs. Fenge *et al* (2014) refer to the practice educator's role in enabling the student to develop a sense of self as a learner and how to engage with the learning opportunities available. However, participants were candid about the tensions experienced when assessing a student where there were difficulties with the relationship developed with them. Examples of feelings of disconnection with a student were shared by practice educators during the interviews, and often appeared to refer to a clash of personalities or opposing learning styles. Discussions often referred to the importance of practice educators' modelling sound professional behaviour and judgement, particularly where the working relationship was difficult, and the need to be aware of the power invested in the assessment role (*p. 128, individual interview 12, Sally*).

Interestingly, when participants were asked if they could pass on their advice to a practitioner just starting their role as a practice educator, assessment was often perceived to be the most important component of their role to get right. Advice tended to focus on the importance of having a robust assessment with a transparent measure of the student's attainment cross-referenced to pieces of work carried out during the placement. A recurring point raised throughout the research study was the central importance of a robust and trustworthy assessment framework to guide and inform them, referred to be Earl (2004) as 'criterion-referenced assessment, to avoid reaching generalised notions of what level the student should attain by a particular stage in the placement. Participants shared the anxieties they experienced when a student became 'stuck' in their learning, the progression towards risk of failing and the emotional and professional strain they felt when assessing and supporting a failing student. One practice educator disclosed the experience they had in the early days of

their career when the pressures of failing a student became overwhelming, and disclosed feelings of lack of confidence and self-blame when the student failed to achieve (*p. 144, individual interview 2, Daisy*). The amount of time and emotional and physical investment in assessing a student during the placement was frequently raised, and anxiety was expressed about the complexity of the role and the need to make significant, possibly 'life-changing' decisions about a student's ability to pass or fail. These feelings are also reflected in research carried out by Schaub and Dalrymple (2011), who discovered that practice educators can experience feelings of exposure and alienation from peers when assessing a failing student and that support needed to be available to help cope with the demands of the role.

The first core theme has explored the key findings identified by practice educators in terms of their constantly changing role, to highlight both the complexity and ambiguity of their remit when assessing and supporting students on placement, and also the impact of change and the uncertainty this evokes. The differences between the on-site and the off-site practice educator roles have been highlighted, with participants expressing the view that the differences are likely to become more pronounced as further changes are implemented.

5.3 Practice Educators' Experiences of Assessing Students using The Professional Capabilities Framework

At the time of collecting the research data, the Professional Capability Framework (PCF) (The College of Social Work, 2012) had recently been introduced as the new assessment and career model for social work, and participants involved in the first stage of the research were becoming familiar with the structure and anticipating the

forthcoming changes, but had not started to use the assessment with students. When individual interviews were conducted six months later, participants were more cognisant of the assessment criteria and able to share their experiences of the new format and the impact on their role. Findings arising in the second theme will be discussed, to illustrate the participants' perceptions of the new assessment framework and the process of orientation they experienced as they adjusted to the change. The second key theme will consider participants' early experiences of using PCF and the impact this had on their learning as practice educators. The holistic nature of the assessment process will be discussed, and the different levels of learning that participants had experienced are explored to reflect how PCF has been applied for assessing students, and also for assessing both newly qualified and more experienced social workers across undergraduate, postgraduate and accelerated social work courses.

5.3.1 Sharing Early Experiences

There were mixed experiences of using the new PCF assessment framework with student social workers on placement, as participants involved in the first stage of the research were just on the cusp of testing it out, and others involved in the individual interviews six months later were beginning to feel more confident and familiar with the process. The differing experiences of participants resulted in varied feedback, ranging from optimism due to the value-based tenor of the professional capabilities to feelings of apprehension due to the speed of transition from one assessment model to another. Favourable reviews from early PCF pilots, as reported by Plenty and Gower (2013), found that the chaos and upheaval of introducing a new framework was counter-balanced with a sense of enthusiasm and energy for the integrated and creative design

for the assessment model, with a stronger emphasis on deeper critical analysis of learning (Izod and Lawson, 2015). This blend of views was also shared by participants in my own research study, who spoke about being on the brink of a new approach to student assessment, which was compared favourably with the former assessment model.

There was firm agreement that the PCF assessment model had been rolled out very quickly without a well-planned and consistent training plan in place, and participants referred to a lack of teaching materials and exemplars to illustrate how the capabilities should be demonstrated (*p. 131, individual interview 1, Davina*). Mullins (2005) refers to the vital need for a good induction for any new programme of learning to ensure competent practice, and this was seen to be lacking for many practice educators, particularly where a proactive learning community was not in place for them. Participants vocalised feelings of being overwhelmed and pressurised by the fast pace of change, and often expressed concerns about just being one step ahead of students as they learnt the new assessment process. The climate of change in social work is referred to by Forest (2016) and Bogg and Challis (2016), who note that the influx of accelerated social work programmes and the increased need for collaboration between the government and social work employers means that social work practitioners need to be able to keep abreast of change in order to maintain their professional status and employability.

Salient observations from the findings revealed the necessity for all placement stakeholders to be 'well-versed' with the tasks and functions of their roles and to be able to work constructively to implement the new assessment model with students. Participants expressed their views about the need for work based supervisors, placement settings and university tutors to be consistent in their approach when

delivering professional standards and values. Research carried out by Hackett and Marsland (1997) refers to the specific role tutors have in imparting knowledge to practice educators about students' personal and professional development needs, and providing clarity about the modes of assessment to be linked to the placement learning opportunities. A significant point to emerge from the research was the crucial importance of the relationship between the practice educator and the tutor, and the need for a more seamless approach to upskilling tutors when changes to practice learning occur. There was a great deal of discussion about the practical difficulties experienced by practice educators when the university tutor was unclear about the new assessment structure, and this sometimes caused friction due to students receiving mixed messages about how the capabilities should be evidenced and assessed. Finch (2014) warns of the risk of 'splitting' that can occur where the practice educator and tutor have not communicated effectively and have opposing views about how the student is progressing. The role of the tutor was considered to be important in providing educational support for both students and practice educators, and my research participants mentioned the arbitrating remit tutors hold where difficult working relationships arose between students and practice educators. Findings referred to the risk of student assessment becoming complex and muddled due to differences of opinion arising and the need for the university to become more actively involved. Research undertaken by Schaub and Dalrymple (2011) also highlighted tensions between practice educators and tutors, referring to concerns expressed by practice educators about a lack of consistency about the process to follow when a student was at risk of failing and the reluctance of the tutor to confront student failure.

Participants also expressed concerns when a student was struggling on placement and found the capabilities difficult to demonstrate due to the need to 'delve into' their

practice in more depth in order to be able to reflect on the learning gained. On these occasions practice educators mentioned the need to work closely with the student to break-down the holistic, broad based domains, and that this was time consuming and demanding. Findings however, identified a shared sense of positivity about PCF as providing a sound foundation to build knowledge and skills and introduce theories and models to inform students' practice on placement, and mentioned reciprocal learning as they became familiar with the assessment model.

5.3.2 Impact on Learning

Participants spoke about their own learning and how the PCF had provided a vehicle for increased self-reflection of their own skills and value based practice. Appreciation was expressed about the transition away from the National Occupational Standards (NOS), measuring individual competencies to assess the learner's placement performance and the replacement of this with the capability based PCF assessment model, with an emphasis on more cohesive and applied learning and developing the skills, knowledge and qualities needed to work in complex situations. Williams and Rutter (2010) accord with the need to help students become more critical about their practice and develop problem solving ability by thinking more deeply and therefore being better prepared to manage the uncertainty of social work. The replacement of the rigid, 'tick box' competence based NOS approach with a more creative and responsive way of measuring capability and building up transferable skills was embraced by research participants as offering a positive move forward.

Interestingly, research participants expressed feelings of being energised by the generative assessment framework of PCF, promoting anti-oppressive practice and

diversity, and recognised that they had an implicit requirement to learn how to apply the new assessment model to ensure they were up to speed and able to emulate a positive and well informed role model for social work students. This commitment to their own learning echoed the view of Asquith *et al.* (2005) that practitioners must have a sense of ownership and professional identity, particularly during times of rapid change. The nine capabilities within PCF are assessed interdependently rather that separately, to enable students to see how a piece of direct work carried out with a service user can cover a range of skills and knowledge, such as professionalism, value based practice and critical reflection on practice. The value of transferable learning is noted by Sterling (2007), who suggests that learning should be transformative and sustainable, and refers to the environmental organisation as needing to be organic and dynamic. Research participants generally welcomed the new assessment framework and shared their views about PCF providing a better fit with rapidly changing, contemporary social work practice, and also with the social work theories, methods and models they already used with students to encourage critical learning and analysis.

However, participants who had experience of assessing a student using PCF also acknowledged that some students were more at ease with the reflective, deeper approach to assessing learning, whilst others with a learning style preference for describing the concrete task or activity and seeking more generic solutions struggled with the emphasis on deeper thinking and writing reflectively. Participants also raised the pertinent point that the unlearning and relearning process they were experiencing was not shared by their students, who were typically being assessed for the first time using PCF, and therefore had no preconceived ideas about former assessment regimes. There was also a shared recognition that the more open- ended design of

the new assessment structure required more input from practice educators, due to the need to drill in to the domains and collate a measured and holistic report. One participant expressed the subtle difference between a holistic approach and the risk of this becoming repetitive, and expressed some issues about the need to present the capabilities in smaller learning components before students can fully understand the scope within each specific domain (*p. 129, group interview 2, Sarah*). Furness and Gilligan (2004) describe the equation of ability + knowledge + understanding as components integral to holistic capability, which is synonymous with Appleton's (2010) notion of integrity, as binding together the qualities that are needed for social work practice to create a coherent whole, and has synergy with the capability based assessment framework. Participants expressed their recognition of the need to be equipped with the requisite blend of practice knowledge and expertise to be able to assess students at different stages of their education and within direct practice as newly qualified social workers if they assessed and supported NQSW in addition to their student assessment.

5.3.3 Different Levels of Learning

Dialogue with participants captured variance in the opportunities for learning and advancement available to them as they made the transition to PCF. The PCF was designed to provide a layered pathway for practitioners, from entry on to a social work programme through assessed readiness to practice, followed by the two placements and an assessed and supported first year in practice (Finch, 2017). The higher levels of the PCF framework also sets out a clear career progression route into senior social work posts. On-site practice educators working within local authority settings were more familiar with the career structure embedded within PCF compared to those with

an off-site remit, and could identify with the importance of keeping abreast of their own career aspirations and the professional development needed to achieve progression. This point was also reinforced by senior social work professionals in the third stage of the research study, who acknowledged that there was an uneven playing field for independent practice educators unable to access the post-qualifying levels of training available to on-site practice educators, who were able to progress forward after completing the Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) training (TCSW, 2012). However, the view was also expressed that practical obstacles often prevented on-site practice educators maximising their practice educator qualifications to continue assessing students and newly qualified social workers, due to limited resources for ongoing post qualifying training and the pressures of the social work role within busy teams.

Practice educators also spoke about their experiences of assessing students on different social work degree programmes, including undergraduate, postgraduate and the accelerated post graduate diploma in social work education, 'Step Up to Social Work' (Department for Education, 2014). Some of the more experienced participants also had experience of assessing newly qualified social workers and were aware of the differences and similarities of using PCF to assess different individuals on different levels of training. Findings suggested that participants were aware of the increasing demand of assessing under the new framework, referred to by Novell (2013) as requiring practice educators to extend their judgement about a student's practice due to the overarching nature of the professional capabilities. This was seen to be a positive aspect of PCF, as it enabled participants to evaluate the learner's performance more fully and encouraged a fuller remit to teach, assess and focus on reflective practice learning. However, although the PCF could be seen to empower

practice educators, as noted by Plenty and Gower (2013), the opportunities to extend the assessment and mentoring role require on-going training and support. Participants expressed their views about the need for universities in particular to extend the support available to independent practice educators, to ensure that a supportive learning and teaching environment is available to them and the risks of working in isolation are avoided. Showell Nicholas and Kerr (2015) concur that this is vital if we are to avoid the fragmentation of practice learning assessment and an increasing divide between on-site and off-site assessment arrangements for social work learners.

Participants were at different stages of their own personal and professional journeys, with some looking to consolidate their learning and move in different directions, whilst others were on the brink of a new career in practice education. There was a sense of unity from participants however, with a shared recognition that sources of support and training needed to be available, and that there was a responsibility to keep abreast of the reform agenda through their own continual professional development.

Findings emerging from the second main theme for the study have focussed on the participants' journey in becoming familiar with the new assessment framework and the associated challenges of a period of steep learning and rapid adjustment required. Research participants frequently shared their early experiences of assessing students with the capabilities framework as synonymous with the relationship established with social work students during the placement. Practice educators wrestled with the polarity of forging a strong relationship built on trust and sharing the student's learning journey, yet also needing to retain a sense of impartiality and separateness due to the objective judgement needed to assess the student's ultimate fitness to progress to social work practice.

5.4 The Relationship between the Practice Educator and the Student

Research findings indicated that participants recognised the strong connection between assessing students and forging a sound working relationship with them, noted by Scholar *et al.* (2014), as the necessity of providing emotional and practical support to students whilst also making an assessment about students' suitability to pass the placement. Participants often expressed the difficulties inherent in achieving this, partly due to the complex nuances of the role, and also due to the limited time that the student is on placement. This tension can be seen to have increased following the full implementation of one of the social work reforms by the Social Work Reform Board in 2013 (Social Work Reform Board, 2012), resulting in a reduction to the number of placement days from 200 to 170 days and an increased emphasis on preparing students for their first placements within the university setting. The mandatory 30 'skills' days were introduced to replace 30 placement days, placing a strong emphasis on students' developing the skills and knowledge needed to be fully prepared for the first placement.

Research participants expressed mixed feelings about this reform, particularly due to the reduced amount of time this allocated to students' first 70 day placements, and the impact on establishing a sound relationship in which to assess the students against the PCF assessment process. At the time of carrying out the research, changes to the placement structure had just been introduced, and had triggered consternation about the added pressure to participants' role of the assessment-heavy PCF structure, and the limited time to work through this with students. Participants spoke about their first-hand experiences of establishing working relationships with students, the pressure points that were identified, and different ways that barriers were removed or lowered.

5.4.1 Power Differentials

Research participants frequently discussed and reflected on the power differences between practice educators and students, and appreciated the layered complexities of their role and the multiple requirements to support, empower, teach and assess students. Moreover, the notion of power invested in the social work profession itself was a frequent topic within the interview dialogue, expressed by Brookfield (2009) and Edmondson (2014) as the need for social workers to become agents of the state and control finite resources. Participants recognised their responsibility to share with students how professional knowledge and judgement can be perceived as disempowering by service users, due to the authority of the social worker to make decisions on their behalf to give or remove services according to assessed eligibility linked with diminishing resources. This can be seen to be slightly at odds with the theory-based person-centred approach of valuing the uniqueness and diversity of every individual, as espoused by Kendall and Hugman (2016), and these tensions were frequently discussed in relation to the assessment role when judgements needed to be made about a student's placement performance. Measuring 'good enough' placement performance was perceived to be quite challenging by practice educators involved in the research, who also spoke about the blurring of work and personal time and energy when a difficult decision needed to be made about a student failing the placement. LaFrance *et al.* (2004) and Sharp and Danbury (1999) both accord with the difficulty of managing the role tensions and the power invested in the practice educator role, referred to by Sowbel (2012) as the skilled inter-play required between mentoring and screening out those students who are not ready for social work practice.

The quality of the relationship, and the extent to which this influenced the assessment outcome, was frequently referred to during the research study. Lefevre (2005) explored the definitive connection between social work students' experiences when being assessed on placement, and a direct correlation between positive assessment outcomes and experiencing good quality teaching and learning from the assessor during the placement. Participants of my own research study were acutely aware of the process of active and positive engagement with the student as something to aspire to, although it was recognised that striking up a sound rapport with a student could be challenging, either due to poor student performance, or on occasion due to personality tensions or different learning styles. Findings suggest that tailored support to manage placement difficulties when they arose were not always readily available. Inner resilience and self-reflection were often flagged up by participants as important qualities to draw upon when students' performance on placement was marginal and risk of failure became a possibility. A clear revelation from the research highlighted the importance participants attached to students perceiving them to be fair and professional and presenting a good role model for them as experienced social workers. Participants also shared different ways that they were able to facilitate students' learning and use their position in a positive way to assist them as they progressed through the placement. An example of this was assisting students to gain feedback from service users and carers about their performance. Moss *et al*. (2007); Stacey *et al.* (2012) and Skilton (2012) refer to the vital role of the practice educator to gather feedback from service users and other professionals on the student's behalf as helping to lower power barriers and encourage honest and objective evidence to be gathered about the student's intervention skills during the placement.

Discourse across the group and individual interviews connected power differentials with the essence of the student/assessor relationship. Experiences shared referred to the personal investment of time, energy and commitment incurred to establish a constructive rapport with students, and the subsequent angst experienced if a student had placement difficulties. Research by Basnett and Sheffield (2010) and Black, Curzio and Terry (2014) acknowledges the emotional entanglement that can occur between the student and the practice educator, and the personal price that can be paid when coping with the anxiety of a student relationship where there is risk of failing the assessment. Furthermore, Finch *et al*. (2014) identified the emotional transference that can occur when a practice educator's own sense of failure is implicated in the failed assessment outcome. This view was echoed in the dialogue with participants, who questioned their own ability to carry out a sound and impartial assessment when managing a struggling student on placement, and the value of impartial advice and support to help with difficult decisions. Placement difficulties shared by participants were tempered with some positive stories about when a student's performance improved due to the introduction of specific teaching tools and models which were instrumental in helping the student to progress.

Finch and Poletti (2013) identified the crucial role of practice educators in bridging the gap between university based academic learning for students and the transition to real life social work practice during the placement. My research participants referred to the importance of reflective supervision, noted by Zuchowski (2016) as the vehicle for critical engagement with the student to establish rapport, build bridges and share the learning journey with them. Findings from my research suggested that participants were able to use regular supervision sessions to forge their relationships with students and provide a direct influence on their personal and professional development, and

also as an effective platform for unblocking placement barriers and seeking solutions to overcome placement difficulties. Bellinger and Ford (2016) associate the supervisory relationship with the need to blend together recognition of the student's personal wellbeing with their professional understanding of the role required of them within the placement setting. One particular participant in my research recognised that the strength of the relationship formed with the student during supervision had been instrumental in turning a negative placement experience in to a positive outcome through setting clear goals and monitoring progress on a regular basis (*p. 135, individual interview 3, Rosie).*

5.4.2 The Supervisory Relationship

Participants expressed their views about the central function of supervision for practice learning, and the importance of regular sessions to build up incremental knowledge of the students' strengths and learning development needs (Adams *et al.,* 2002; Shardlow and Doel, 1996). There was also a sense conveyed of the need to demonstrate credibility with the student as an effective supervisor, able to encourage reflective analysis and the integration of social work theory and models within their direct practice. The views of Kerridge (2008) and Musson (2017) accord with the value of a scaffolding approach to supervisory learning, by building up deeper levels of understanding by applying social work theory, models and methods to inform practice. Findings suggest that participants were keen to model good practice and provide a safe climate, described by Ruch (2007) as the 'containing features' within reflective supervision, to encourage students to develop their confidence and learn new skills within a supported learning environment. One participant mentioned a feedback form devised to gain views from students about their own performance as a supervisor, and

several participants mentioned the importance of shared responsibility for the supervision sessions by encouraging students to take turns in recording the notes and having a shared agenda. Fook (2012) and Doel (2010) refer to the professional knowledge that develops through the supervisory dialogue, and the scope for supervision to have a steadying influence to counteract the often chaotic and fast pace of the placement setting. Research participants frequently mentioned this aspect of supervision as offering a safety net for students to learn and develop.

Findings suggest that some participants had assessed students who were not familiar with the concept of supervision, and were unsure about what was expected of them. In the same vein Terum and Heggen (2016) reflect on the significance of the practice educator's supervisory role for supporting individual student learning needs and styles and being aware of power differentials. Furthermore, students on their initial seventy-day placements were likely to encounter social work services and settings for the first time, and needed a strong role model to help them develop confidence. Participants recognised the importance of both formative and summative placement feedback, and referred to informal supervision and support as being of equal value to the regular formal supervision sessions (Heron *et al.*, 2015). Experiences were vocalised about the necessity of adjusting their own learning style according to each individual student, and the need to tap in to individual capability in creative ways and tailor the support provided accordingly. Stories were exchanged about students who perceived the practice educator as having the practice wisdom and knowledge to be able to solve all their problems, and mentioned the negative impact of transference and counter transference within the supervisory relationship. Howe (2009) refers to this feature in supervision and the need to equalise the power balance by encouraging the student to reflect on complex issues and seek their own solutions.

Practice educators involved in the research were able to cite their experiences of passing on their skills and knowledge to students and enabling them to develop critical reflection to help them manage the uncertainty and complexity of social work practice. The importance of effective supervision is discussed by Kadushin and Harkness (2002), who identify a parallel between students who had a good supervisory role model and then subsequently expressed a higher degree of identification with the social work profession due to the positive experiences during the learning process. Social work literature frequently refers to reflective, relationship-based supervision as essential for practice learning (Gardner, 2014: Bellinger and Elliott, 2011; Izod and Lawson, 2015). Participants expressed their conviction about the essential role of reflective supervision as being central to their relationship with students and, as noted by Hughes and Pengelly (1997), supervision can offset the dynamic and frenetic nature of social work practice by offering the key attributes of reliance and consistency. Participants expressed their views about supervision as providing a calming and thoughtful time to develop a learning dialogue with students and incrementally build on their skills and knowledge in a safe climate of learning. Whereas supervision was perceived to be vital by all participants, it was acknowledged that supporting and assessing a student within a placement setting can be unpredictable and challenging, due to the interplay of organisational dynamics and the students' specific blend of skills, knowledge and personal resilience. Participants shared some of the different barriers they had experienced as part of their personal and professional investment in working with students.

5.4.3 Boundaries and Barriers

Due to the diverse experiences that research participants had accumulated within their practice educator roles, there was some disparity in terms of the coping mechanisms used to manage the complexity of student assessment, with some participants tending to struggle more than others to overturn placement obstacles effectively. Research conducted by Waterhouse *et al.* (20110) discovered a strong link between experience and confidence equating to more experienced practice educators being more exposed to coping strategies which helped to strengthen inner resilience and the ability to overcome placement barriers. Findings from my own research suggested a link between confidence and the experience that individual practice educators had gained in effectively managing struggling or failing students. However, this did not necessarily appear to be due to the length of time in the role and seemed to be linked with the personal and professional resilience of the educator and external factors, such as competing work commitments and the degree of support they received.

Practice educators involved in the research shared quite different experiences of managing placement difficulties, with individuals demonstrating varying evidence of professional use of self and self-assurance in applying the practice learning regulations and seeking advice to make their decisions on the assessment outcome. Peer support was also raised as a much-valued resource, although participants tended to need to be proactive in seeking this. This view was echoed by research conducted by Golia and McGovern (2015), who advocate for peer support for practice educators, although, in a similar vein to my own research, concluded that this was not always available when needed. Moreover, Barlow and Coleman (2003) stress the need for a persistent approach in measuring students' progress on placement, which requires an informed and autonomous approach to assessment, and this was echoed in my own

research findings, which suggested that a proactive and measured approach to student assessment was considered important. Furthermore, there were differences in the extent to which participants expressed the need to adjust their preferred learning style and adapt to individual students' practice learning needs. Gibson (2016) suggests that notions of 'self' and 'other' can offer a framework for self-evaluation and, as identified in my research findings, some of the research participants referred to the merits of tuning in to the individual differences of each student and adjusting their learning style accordingly as providing a helpful way of unblocking placement barriers.

Barriers frequently referred to by participants were limited time and competing workload pressures, and it was evident that some on-site practice educators really wrestled with retaining their student assessment role, whilst balancing a very busy front line social work remit. A tension that arose in discussion with research participants also referred to personality clashes and frustration expressed when students were not on the same 'wave-length' as them in fully recognising the need to demonstrate social work values and an anti-oppressive approach to their learning.

Although not overtly raised by research participants as a negative point, the sample of practice educators interviewed reflected the wider population of practice educators, in terms of falling within a similar narrow age and gender band. According to Holmstrom (2012), many practice educators in social work are women, who fall into the middle age and older age categories, whereas students tend to be younger and from diverse cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds. These differences could be perceived as barriers by students, who may struggle to identify with the role model presented by their practice educator and their way of promoting value-based social work. Furthermore, Holmstrom's (2012) study suggests that younger students experienced age-related discrimination during social work practice learning, and were less likely to

progress due to negative responses experienced from placement professionals due to their age. This point was discussed by participants in my own research, who referred to the powerful position of the practice educator in terms of their age, experience and status, particularly when the student was at risk of failing the placement.

Research by Tedam (2017) suggests that students belonging to minority groups are more likely to experience oppression and discrimination during their placements, and that practice educators need to be particularly aware of any difficulties that may arise for students due to their differences and to deal with this professionally and escalate any concerns that may arise. Research into discrimination and oppression linked to the progression of students on social work courses in England carried out by Hussein *et al.* (2008) also revealed that students with disabilities, male students and students from black and ethnic minority backgrounds had poorer rates of progression when compared to other students. This study also highlighted an increase in the disparity in progression rates when minority groups were away from university and on their practice placements. Although there is no direct indication in the research conducted by Hussein *et al.* (2008) that discrimination is related to how students are practice assessed, practice educators do have an instrumental role to play in being proactive if discriminatory practice does occur during the placement. These significant factors will be further explored in the concluding chapter, to reflect on issues of diversity that arose whilst conducting the research, and the importance of anti-oppressive practice within practice education.

Research participants discussed the need for professional boundaries to be established between them and the student, although there was often a sense of unease about drawing these boundaries, as this was seen to create a separation and risk of disempowering students. O'Leary *et al.* (2013) advocates for a more fluid style

of defining professional boundaries, based on co-production and student centred support, to connect and equalise relationships where there are power imbalances. My research findings pinpointed the considerable time and energy invested by practice educators when working with individual students with specific learning needs, or where circumstances became difficult due to personal challenges that impinged on the placement.

Findings from my own research suggest that research participants tended to refer to local tensions and pressure points within practice education, rather than conveying negativity about the social work profession itself. Listening to the practical suggestions made by practice educators about what would support them to continue to learn, develop and sustain a relationship-based style of social work, there was a great deal of evidence to suggest that the necessary support was not always forthcoming. In the same vein, Collins (2016) makes a distinction between social workers having a high commitment to the social work profession, but not necessarily to their particular organisation, due to the high demands of front line practice.

The importance of the relationship with students and other placement stakeholders has been strongly reinforced by research participants throughout the study and discussed in depth as the third core theme to arise from the data. Participants have shared their coping strategies when supporting students who are struggling on placement and have exchanged positive and energising experiences despite the challenges encountered.

5.5 Support for Practice Educators

My research findings have identified a multi-layered range of support systems that participants have been able to access, and variability in the kind of support that has been most highly valued by them. A prominent observation raised by participants during the interviews was the gap between the support they needed and what was actually made available to them. Participants interviewed were often at different stages of their career development, and some appeared to have better access to sources of support and information as compared to others. The binary tension of time limitations and increased assessment rigour due to the PCF framework have been frequently referred to, and some participants voiced feelings of estrangement from other social work professionals when the student's performance on placement was marginal and informal peer support, in addition to more formal support, would have been particularly welcome.

5.5.1 Informal and Formal Sources of Support

The heightened vigilance required when assessing students using the professional capabilities framework (PCF) and the limited time available to digest the new information was a topic that research participants raised frequently with reference to the importance of effective informal and formal support being available for them. Feedback from other social work professionals in the third stage of the research study also reinforced the need to provide a united and wide spread support structure for practice educators, regardless of their role as on-site or off-site educators or the length of time they had been in post. Findings particularly highlighted that participants wanted more immediate access to sources of support when they were experiencing difficulties

assessing students on placement. These findings accord with research by Finch (2015), Basnett and Sheffield (2010) and Schaub and Dalrymple (2011), who address the vital need for robust mentoring and support for practice educators, particularly when a student experiences difficulties and is at risk of failing. Finch *et al.* (2014) stress the importance of practice educators being able to reflexively consider their emotional responses to student difficulties proactively. Their research also highlights the importance of the assessment framework being used correctly when making the final assessment, and for any placement concerns to be dealt with in a timely way.

Participants in my own research expressed fears about their personal adequacy to keep on track with the imposed changes, and this triggered worries about their own perceived weaknesses, and concerns that they would not be up to speed in time to assess students using the new assessment format. At the time of carrying out the small group interviews in the first stage of the study, the participants were on the brink of transition from the former to the new PCF assessment format, and findings conveyed some reticence about how they would gain the necessary guidance in time. The PCF places a strong emphasis on students' capacity to learn and develop through continued professional development, measured by the attainment of value-based capabilities, which comprise of different threshold requirements to attain as they progress from the first to the final placement (Lozano *et al.,* 2012; Higgins and Goodyer, 2015). The expressed feelings of being deskilled by the fast pace of change, and not fully prepared for the wide-scale rolling out of PCF can be viewed within the context of research participants' also being very aware of the need to refresh their own professional development within a limited time frame. Participants expressed several different routes for gaining support including personal, peer, organisational and local support forums, informal mentoring, accessing professional supervision and attending

targeted training. The range of support available included informal channels, where practice educators could talk together and share experiences, in addition to more structured information and training provided by the university were mentioned.

Findings indicated however, that the support provided tended to be variable in quality, and was often self-initiated rather than being employer driven. Limitations to the connectivity with other key placement stakeholders, such as tutors and on-site placement supervisors, were also raised as a tension. This observation was also mentioned in research conducted by Luhanga *et al.* (2014), who refer to the need for both academic and emotional support when assessing students on placement, and that better communication between universities, placements and practice educators is necessary, to ensure that supportive training for supervisory and assessment roles is available for practice educators. According to Bellinger and Ford (2016), a complete circle of factors needs to be in place to ensure that placements are effective, which incorporates shared, constructive communication, core values and a supportive placement environment, in addition to recognition of the expertise and experience of each person within the placement partnership. Research participants from my own study disclosed both supportive and challenging factors experienced whilst becoming familiar with PCF, and referred to transient and erratic links to teams where identification with a community of learning could be problematic. The reasons expressed by participants for limited connectivity with other placement professionals seemed to stem from time pressures and differing interpretations of roles and responsibilities.

A prominent finding when exploring pathways of support for participants was the value they attached to receiving feedback on their own performance from students, the university and from other professionals. Shapton (2006) refers to the importance of

practice educators engaging together as a supportive community of practice and providing mutual support and encouragement. This perspective is echoed in research by Durkin and Shergill (2000), who stress the importance of a team approach when resolving placement difficulties, to ensure that the assessment process is clear and transparent and that the right levels of support are all in place. The contrast between academic and practice assessment regimes was also a point raised by participants, who mentioned the variable indicators to be accounted for when assessing a student on placement, as compared to the more formal and transparent process of assessing academic assignments and examinations. According to Ruch (2007), a 'safe space' is essential for practitioners to think through the complexity of their experiences with students and, that if this is not available, there is the risk of isolation and feelings of estrangement from the community of support. Participants verbalised about the importance of the inner resources and resilience required to combat the complexity of practice learning, and that this was essential in order to be an effective practice educator.

5.5.2 Personal Responsibility for Gaining Support

Participants recognised the professional 'step up' in skills and knowledge required when assessing students in a more holistic way across the professional capabilities, and the necessity of a heightened emphasis on critical analysis. Asquith *et al.* (2005) and Leigh (2014) advocate for practice educators owning the change process and taking responsibility for their continuing personal and professional development. However, many of the suggestions raised by participants for taking a more proactive stance in their learning were aspirational and hampered by practical constraints, such as limited resources, which impaired the actual effectiveness of their intentions.

Participants mentioned the lack of exemplars to illustrate how students should demonstrate the professional capabilities, and made reference to the placement evaluation form in place to gain feedback from students about their placement experience and how they had been supported. The formal placement evaluation forms; 'Quality Assurance for Practice Learning' (QAPL) were not seen to be particularly helpful, as they provided a generic appraisal of the placement experience, rather than more meaningful sources of feedback from students about how instrumental they had been in supporting them during the placement. Participants expressed interest in receiving much more direct feedback from the universities about their performance when assessing and supporting students. This view was also expressed by research participants in the study carried out by Luhanga *et al.* (2014), and pinpoints a weakness in the evaluation process in place for monitoring the continued professional development and capability of practice educators.

Findings from this study highlighted the importance participants attached to more informal ways of gaining feedback about their role in assessing and supporting students on placement. Heron *et al.* (2015) also advocate for more informal feedback mechanisms within the practice learning experience, and stress that this needs to be a two-way process, to ensure that students are confident enough to share their own experiences with their practice educator about what has been particularly helpful in their journey of learning. This view is also expressed by Bellinger and Elliott (2011), who carried out research to evaluate the placement support provided for social work students, and identified a need to strengthen both the assessment process and a relationship based approach to practice education, through establishing supportive learning environments where reflective practice, critical appraisal and two way feedback is encouraged. Self-efficacy can be seen to be a vital requisite for practice

educators to self-assess their ability and measure their own professional capability (Holden *et al.*, 2007), and this view was expressed by research participants, who frequently reflected on their own skills and qualities and how to foster these for the benefit of students. A feature of inner resilience which participants discussed in relation to their personal responsibility for gaining support was that of emotional intelligence, and being able to tune into each student's learning style, needs and strengths, and support them to reflect openly on their own thoughts and feelings. This point is raised by Clarke *et al.* (2016), who state that emotional intelligence should be perceived as distinct from cognitive intelligence, and incorporated within the PCF assessment for the capabilities of 'professionalism', 'values and ethics' and 'critical reflection and analysis'.

Wlliams and Rutter (2013) make the salient point that the introduction of the PCF has placed a holistic emphasis on the continual professional development of practice educators, and the need for self-directed learning to demonstrate growth of expertise in order to enable and facilitate learning. My own research participants were aware of the need to retain currency by having a student every two years and keeping themselves updated on a regular basis, although there were often practical constraints that prevented this from actually happening. The commitment to ensuring their own personal and professional efficacy when assessing students carried an implication that there is an increasing pressure on practice educators to demonstrate capability when preparing students for future employment as social work practitioners. Findings suggest that participants did not take their responsibility as the sole person to pass or fail a student lightly, and recognised the vital need for a robust infrastructure of support being in place for them.

5.5.3 Value of Other Support Routes

Participants involved in the research who were embarking on their career as practice educators and engaged in the practice educator training (PEPS), spoke in favourable terms about this as a helpful means of support. Participants perceived themselves to be instrumental in shaping the practice learning experiences of students, and recognised PEPS as offering the opportunity to develop more collaborative learning experiences with students, and in building up a range of teaching and learning strategies to extend critical reflection on their own learning experiences. However, findings also identified that more experienced participants who had completed their practice educator training some years ago did not always experience refresher training and ongoing pathways of support. This observation was also highlighted in research by Keen *et al.* (2010), who conducted a wide scale study across practice learning sites where key university and organisation partnerships were established, and identified limited guidance and training updates provided to practice educators on reflective models or theory based styles of assessment and report writing. Findings from my own research have identified a disparity between the developmental learning provided for practice educators engaged in PEPS training and those with more experience, who are assumed to already have this skill set in place (*p. 133, feedback form 6, Erica).*

Those participants who were still in front line social work practice, and were either currently taking the PEPS course whilst assessing a student or had recently completed this, appeared to be more aware of the tensions between PCF and the reality of social work practice. One recently qualified participant recalled her own first year in social work employment as a 'baptism of fire,' due to the sudden shift from reflective practice learning to the reality of fast pace social work intervention. Participants mentioned that some students, and some placement settings tended to concentrate more on the

technical skills and competencies of assessment, rather than the professional skills and knowledge of the professional capability model. Furthermore, research by Luhanga *et al.* (2014) refers to the ambivalence of universities who have a moral and professional duty to 'gate-keep' the social work profession, and ensure that only those students with robust capabilities progress to practice, yet also have the fiscal and organisational pressure to retain student enrolment ratios. Morley and Dunstan (2013) refer to the risk of an increasing neo-liberalist context for work place learning, where a procedural emphasis can prioritise training to attain efficient employees, rather than more rounded critically aware practitioners.

Social work professionals who provided peer feedback as part of the third stage of the study also endorsed the benefits of the PEPS training. One social work professional expressed a note of caution about the limited ongoing support available for social workers who had completed the PEPS training, but were no longer able to assess students as part of their designated role. This may be due to career advancement or the sheer demand of the heavy workload they carried. A dilemma was raised about recognising the need to support and encourage staff to return to their practice educator role, balanced with the challenges of protecting time for refresher training and practice educator information sessions. Time constraints were raised as creating tensions within busy social work teams, with competing demands and pressures on the time available for practice education. There were several discussions about the 'stand-alone' nature of the practice educator role for on-site educators, and various attempts to map the practice educator role within the social work career structure.

Social work research was also referred to by participants as a source of professional support and acquisition of knowledge. Participants expressed genuine enthusiasm for the research study and their contribution to sharing lived experiences of their day-to-

day practice, and recognised that social work research is vital but not easy to access. Research by Moriarty *et al.* (2015) refers to practical constraints in contributing to social work research, and the importance of research-minded practitioners. Similarly, participants of my own research study articulated their own aspirations to contribute to the evidence base of social work as a means to heighten the profile of social work and practice education in particular.

Research participants voiced their concerns about the accelerated pace of change and the potential for PCF to be replaced in the near future, due to increasing governmental intervention and early indicators that children's social work may need to be separated from mainstream social work, with a stronger focus on child protection. At the time of carrying out the research the new fast-track qualifying programme (Frontline) had just been introduced by the government, with a narrowing focus on children and family social work. According to Higgins *et al.* (2016) the future of social work is set to change again, taking a different direction to that projected by the Social Work Reform Board, with the debate about the nature and purpose of social work education still unresolved.

The infrastructure of support available for practice educators has been addressed as the fourth key theme emerging from the research study, and concern has been raised by participants about the variable and inconsistent nature of the support available during a period of transition and change. Recognition of their personal responsibility for professional development and acknowledgement of some valuable sources of formal and informal support have been shared by participants, although the gaps in support have outstripped the positive experiences referred to.

5.6 The Impact of Change for Practice Educators and Students

Research participants conveyed a mix of hopes, fears, opportunities and threats, influenced by the impact of accelerating social work reform and the uncertainty of the future for practice education. Findings suggest that independent practice educators participating in the research had particular concerns about the sustainability of their role, due to the increased emphasis on teaching partnerships between local authorities and universities and the subsequent allocation of on-site practice education employees to carry out the assessment role. This was coupled with the trend for local authorities to allocate their own practice educators to assess students within private and voluntary placement services. On-site practice educators voiced their concerns about the increasing pressure within social work teams, and the added responsibility of assessing a social work student without adequate work-load relief, and time being set aside to attend practice educator support and information sessions.

All participants were united in expressing dissatisfaction with the poor financial payment for assessing a student, and there were concerns that even the current low daily placement fee may disappear in the future, due to government interventions and the proposed focus on employer driven initiatives for practice learning. Research by Garrett (2014) refers to the uncertainty of the future direction of social work due to economic constraints, and opposing views about what social work should look like in practice. Practice educators also referred to students who were challenged by the complexities and uncertainties of placement learning, and who subsequently transferred the blame onto the assessment process. In a nutshell, constant change, uncertainty and continual and often conflicting updates, lack of time and feeling rushed were seen as contributory factors to the feelings of apprehension conveyed by research participants.

Research participants also shared some contrasting views about fresh opportunities being opened up due to the changes in practice education, and there was clear evidence of practice educators feeling energised by the scope for new areas of work to be explored, and imaginative ways of overcoming the challenges encountered on a day to day basis.

5.6.1 Indicators of Change

Job uncertainty and a decline in the status of the social work profession, as perceived by other professions, were constant themes emerging within the research study. This view was endorsed by Higgins and Goodyer (2015), who referred to the tendency for social work professionals to be subsumed into larger, multi-professional organisations dominated by health professionals, and a resultant risk of dilution of the social work code of ethics and values within direct practice. Participants were also aware of the increasing government remit in measuring the rigour and effectiveness for newly qualified social workers, and recognised the importance of improving the profile of the social work profession. Conversely, participants were also cognisant of the need to seize opportunities available within the climate of change, and extend their role from student assessment on placement to include different mentoring and coaching roles which were being developed by universities and organisational employers, to optimise the expertise and experience of practice educators. Discussions often highlighted the tensions between social work career progression routes and the practical obstacles in the way of achieving them. This was particularly relevant for on-site practice educators, who mentioned the PCF career structure depicted within the illustrative framework, and difficulties in being able to continue with their practice educator role if promoted to a senior social work post within the organisation.

Versatility was considered essential, as participants recognised the challenges faced by universities in being able to secure high quality placements across both the statutory and voluntary service sectors. Participants also referred to the growing disparity between traditional statutory placements within social work local authority teams and less traditional placements within community based settings run by private and voluntary services, where legal social work tasks are also carried out. Research by Scholar *et al.* (2014) conveys concerns about the narrowing interpretation of what defines 'real' social work and the emphasis placed on formal assessments and safeguarding to the detriment of more rounded relationship based characteristics of social work. This view is also explored by McLaughlin *et* al. (2015), who refer to the increasing perception shared by universities and social work employers that 'non-traditional' placements within private, independent and voluntary service sectors are often seen as second best. Moreover, Bellinger (2010b), argues that the national drive to prioritise statutory placements is shadowing the potential for students to gain first-hand creative learning opportunities with direct access to service users, and to appreciate that social work operates across a rich range of community–based services in addition to the traditional location of field social work teams. Findings suggest that participants were aware of the increasing emphasis on sourcing statutory placements for students, particularly when universities were located within teaching partnerships. This also poses a particular threat to the longer-term security of independent practice educators, who tend to be matched with students placed in non-statutory settings where social workers are not likely to be employed.

Another indicator of change identified by participants referred to the wide scale economic, political and demographic influences for the social work profession, and the need to inform and educate students about the changing landscape for social work

practice due to austerity and political intervention. The impact of change is also referred to by Reisch and Jani (2012), who reflect on the political environment within which social work operates, necessitating a constant change process to reflect the wider influences of economic globalisation, demographic shifts and the impact of medical, environmental and technological factors. Findings suggest that participants were able to see the local influences for practice education, and to appreciate the bigger picture of political, ideological and cultural changes. Participants frequently discussed their responsibility and a sense of commitment to managing the process of change and the potential possibilities for practice education. This aspect of the research evidenced a positive response to embracing the disabling features of constant change, despite the implicit fears and threats also referred to.

5.6.2 Practice Educators as Role Models in Managing Change

Participants demonstrated their professional integrity and personal values as they conveyed their commitment to the practice educator role, and reflected on ways that they could pass on their knowledge and experience to social workers taking on the practice educator role for the first time. The findings from this research suggest that participants enjoyed assessing learners, and were often prepared to accept the poor pay due to the intrinsic gains they gained in supporting students on their learning journey through placements. The inadequate financial compensation for time and travelling was considered a significant challenge for some participants, who, despite the pleasure derived in the role, were unsure how long they could continue to be employed as practice educators.

When practice educators involved in the individual interviews were asked what piece of advice they would give to a new practice educator, suggestions reflected on the importance of good time management skills, being proactive in accessing support when needed and ensuring a transparent record of evidence for the final assessment report and outcome. Advice from participants often appeared to be tinged with some regret that their own past experiences assessing social work students had not always been 'plain sailing', and there were acknowledgments that hindsight and reflection after the event are essential components for building resilience and improving performance. Findings identified that participants often felt drained by their role and needed more support, in addition to keeping their own professional development up to date. An example of the deficit in support available was raised by one participant, who mentioned the lack of appraisal and evaluation for practice educators, and the need for the employing organisation to take responsibility for their professional development, in addition to the personal responsibility of each practice educator to keep themselves up to date (*p. 139, individual interview 10.Daisy*). Collins (2016) refers to the attachment and bond that social workers demonstrate towards the social work profession, and the scope for extending commitment to a community of learning with colleagues sharing the same professional identity.

My own research findings identified the commitment of participants to fellow practice educators, and a common recognition of the need to support each other, particularly through fast-paced change, as a way of strengthening their own position as part of the social work profession. Participants frequently identified the importance of initiating and gaining sources of support to navigate their way through difficult experiences, a point advocated for by Golia and McGovern (2015), who highlight the power of peer

supervision and mutual support in normalising and ameliorating anxiety and uncertainty.

In addition to finding strength in association with fellow practice educators, research participants also felt energised by the connection with social work as an affirmative and creative force, with the potential to make positive differences to people disadvantaged by life experiences. The findings from this study show that participants were aware of the pervasive threat of austerity for the profession, recognised by Garrett (2014, p.503) as the need for social work to move away from the threat of a capitalist ideology linked to economic austerity, and to: "re-enchant the profession and discursively infuse it with a new spirit". This accords with the views of research participants, who expressed the need to establish sound working relationships with students to provide a strong role model for social work intervention, and often perceived this as a steadying force against the impact of constant change and the tensions of feeling under pressure. The notion of recapturing the focus on relationship based social work is advocated for by authors Trevithick (2012) and Broadhurst and Mason (2014), who stress the importance of 'face-to-face' social work practice, and the need to reinvigorate a humanistic model of practice, requiring emotional connection between the social worker and the service user.

The fifth key theme has highlighted research participants' commitment to influencing and owning the process of change rather than fighting against it, and has evidenced suggestions about how they could extend their roles and demonstrate versatility and flexibility when seizing new opportunities. Despite the strength of loyalty to the profession, findings also suggest that participants appeared to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the changes and the likelihood of further changes to follow. As role

models within the change process, participants were well placed to express their opinions on what the future may hold for practice education.

5.7 Future Aspirations for Practice Education

The final key theme addresses findings generated from research data about participants' aspirations for the future of practice education, and captures their expressed enthusiasm and hopes for the future, combined with a more pragmatic response to the uncertainties for the social work profession in general and for practice education in particular. Participants were vociferous in envisioning their aspirations for practice education, which were clustered around several key topics, including better support, improved role clarity and status, uniformity across universities, and improved quality of student assessment. Social work professionals who provided peer feedback in the final stage of the research identified different ways of strengthening the existing local and regional support structures for practice education, and proposed some new ideas to raise the profile of practice education. Hopes for more practice education-based research was mentioned across each stage of the study, and there was recognition that the social work profession requires a stronger research platform in order to extend evidence-based practice (MacIntyre and Paul, 2013). Suggestions were made about how the research being carried out could perhaps be extended, and interest was expressed in providing openings for research possibilities within different social work organisations.

5.7.1 Expressed Wishes of Practice Educators

Research participants were asked to share their three wishes for the future of practice education as part of the small group interview process, to encourage aspirational ideas

for practice education. This approach was taken in the spirit of the appreciative method of enquiry applied across the research (Reed, 2007), which draws on change management and creative ways of moving forward in a time of rapid social work transformation. The three wishes were inspired by the notion of 'provocative propositions,' which is central to the appreciative focus on generating new ideas for change, through the expression of courageous statements of intention for the future. Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2003, p.148) describe a provocative proposition as:

> "A statement which bridges the best of "what is" and "what might be". It is provocative to the extent that it stretches the realm of the status quo, challenges common assumptions and routines, and helps suggest desired possibilities for the organization and the people. At the same time, it is grounded in what has worked in the past."

A summary of the three wishes statements gained from the four small group interviews has been included in appendix 7. This exercise generated some interesting views from participants, which encompassed improvements they would like to see for students on placement and for the social work profession, in addition to focussing on better conditions for themselves as practice educators. In hindsight, the three wishes exercise could have been analysed in more depth to draw out the clustering of statements gained from participants, in order to map these with the six key themes arising from the data. This will be reflected on in the concluding chapter, to further consider the themes emerging from the three wishes statements. The 'three wishes' exercise has, however, provided a degree of thematic interconnection across the data collection and analysis, by introducing the exercise as part of the first stage of the research study, opening the second stage of the study with a summary of the wishes

statements, and then by providing some critical analysis as part of the findings, discussion and concluding chapters of the thesis.

Findings suggest that participants wanted to see improvements in the way that practice educators worked together with other key placement stakeholders, referred to by one participant as a 'whole team approach' to student support. Participants frequently referred to the demanding and insular role of teaching and assessing students, and were positive about the merits of an interactive learning environment, noted by Williams and Rutter (2013) as triangulated practice assessment, where other professionals contribute to the student's learning. Participants also expressed a wish for their precarious position within the changing landscape of practice education to be recognised, and for the wider social work profession to listen to their suggestions about how support could be strengthened.

A strong message conveyed by participant was the need for improved collaboration between universities and employers, to highlight the links between academic and practice learning and their instrumental role as practice educators in making these connections. Caution is conveyed by Davies and Jones (2015) and Forest (2016) who refer to the fast pace of change to the way that social work is delivered and the new fast track qualification routes being introduced. Furthermore, Bogg and Challis (2016), warn that this change has generated competition and pressure on traditional, university-lead social work programmes, and increased the risk that independent practice educators could be disadvantaged by the emphasis placed on employer-lead teaching partnerships. Although participants relished the scope for diversity and new possibilities created by the changes, despite uncertainty about the future, there was also recognition that work pressures may increase and the need to juggle multiple

roles and responsibilities may place additional strain on them if the necessary support structure was not in place (Finch, 2015).

In addition to the three wishes exercise providing a platform for aspirational thinking about practice education, practice educators involved in the individual interviews were asked to consider what practice education might look like in five years hence. Some of the responses to the question posed have been included in appendix 13, to illustrate provocative propositions expressed by participants. One particular hope for the future was for increased value to be attached to providing social work student placements within social work settings. The participant shared the hope that, at some point in the future, social work agencies would initiate increased interest in having a student on placement, rather than having to be persuaded by the university to offer a place. Other hopes expressed the need for an increased emphasis on post-graduate social work and raising the entry bar for social work education to a Masters- Degree level.

The transformation through history of the social work profession was raised in terms of uncertainty for the future, and concerns were shared by participants about how they were perceived by other professional groups. Participants expressed interest in working more cohesively with other professionals, and one person spoke about the need to raise more awareness of the social work role as part of professional training for nurses. According to Dunk-West (2013), social work gains its professional identify through shared values and a theory base, but the societal and cultural context will continue to shift and transform over time due to national and international reforms, perceived by Ferguson *et al.* (2006) as a vital reconstruction to reflect wider global influences. Participants expressed the view that practice education needed to be perceived as part of the foundation and building blocks of social work education, rather

than being perceived as an 'add-on,' and recognised the need for an interplay between personal, local, national and international developments in social work.

Findings from participants also factored in the increasing emphasis placed on post-qualifying continual professional development, and the enhanced training and support provided to newly qualified social workers (Carpenter *et al.,* 2015). Participants viewed the strengthened transition from student to qualified competent practitioner as providing leeway for practice education to gain a wider remit and new ways of working. Expressions of interest were shared regarding increased potential for a widening role within universities, for example, to contribute to students' preparation for placements teaching sessions, practice assessment panels and mentoring PEPS candidates. The positivity expressed by participants has synergy with the views of Isen (2000), who advocates for the importance of new ways of thinking and remaining open to new ideas during a period of change. New opportunities within social work agencies were explored by participants, such as supporting and assessing newly qualified social workers and mentoring newly qualified practice educators. The optimism for new possibilities thrown up due to the climate of change for the social work profession was also shared by social work professionals, although this was tempered with the reality of the challenges faced by practice educators to keep up with the demands and complexity of the new landscape for social work.

The research has explored the differences and similarities experienced by on-site and off-site practice educators in terms of their role, changes to the assessment framework, the way they relate to students, and the impact of wider changes to the social work profession. When considering the aspirations expressed by participants about the future of practice education, findings suggest that there are some shared hopes across both groups of participants, but also some marked contrasts. Off-site

practice educators appeared to be more apprehensive about their future prospects, and voiced concerns about where they would fit in to the teaching partnership model of social work education, which tends to use on-site practice educators located within statutory services. Other social work professionals involved in the final stage of the study acknowledged concerns about the sustainability of the independent educator role, and mentioned their volatile positioning within the climate of austerity and the lack of a career development framework. On-site practice educators also expressed fears about the accelerating pressures on them within busy social work teams, and the difficulties experienced in managing their practice educating responsibilities effectively. Findings however, have identified some similarities in the hopes expressed by both on-site and off-site practice educators, in terms of embracing opportunities to diversify their role, more respect and recognition from the social work profession, improved working relationships between universities and employers and better support being made available to them.

5.7.2 Local and Regional Support Structures

Professionals who completed the feedback forms during the final stage of the study referred to the government-led drivers for social work education, such as the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) (Department of Health, 2015), and the likelihood that practice educators will need to navigate through an increased number of different criteria in relation to undergraduate, postgraduate degrees, postgraduate diplomas and newly qualified social work programmes. Views expressed about the need to diversify the span of the practice educator role signified the potential to promote the status of the role through collaborative action, in order to provide a catalyst for this to happen. One participant suggested that practice educators could

collaborate with employers to jointly commission increased opportunities for experienced practice educators to develop post qualifying training streams for social workers (*p. 148, feedback form 4, Kamina).*

Senior social work professionals involved in the final stage of the study spoke about the need to maximise regional networks of support for practice educators and to extend their role across social work organisations. The need for a collaborative, cohesive stance to ensure that the support links were' joined up' came across as an important area to strengthen, although there was recognition that managerial barriers across different organisations, such as differences in the value attached to practice learning, could impede a more holistic overview of practice education. These views for a more open and inclusive approach are echoed by Freire (2014) and Bellinger and Ford (2016), who advocate for a critical pedagogy of hope for social work, which avoids a bureaucratic approach to the acquisition of knowledge, in favour of a more holistic and transparent way of working together and sharing knowledge and information.

Social work professionals in the final stage of the study accorded with the wishes expressed by practice educator participants for universities to work openly and collaboratively with social work employers. There was a sense of shared commitment to viewing both academic learning and placement learning for students as being part of the overall learning model, with the potential to co-construct theory and practice knowledge for a better understanding of the continual changes in direct social work practice. Bellinger and Ford (2016) advocate for the co-construction of social work education rather than focusing on the relative merits of experiential, work based learning as opposed to university-based education. Practice educators were seen to provide a vital link between the university and practice, and several ideas were shared across the feedback forms to heighten the profile of practice education and improve

the quality of the support in place. Findings suggest that an increase in regional approaches to training would strengthen the infrastructure of support for all social workers, and could include regular standardisation and refresher training in addition to master classes and conferences.

A significant finding from the three staged research study was the synergy between the views of the practice educator professionals and other social work professionals about the perceived gaps in support for practice educators. Literature reviewed by Showell *et al.* (2014) and Williams and Rutter (2013) strongly advocate for increased circles of support for practice educators, and that practice educators themselves need to take a proactive stance in accessing this. Participants cited research as a useful way to highlight the importance of consistent and effective channels of support for practice educators. One participant in the final stage of the study suggested that the research already conducted could be shared with social work teams and their managers, and that the research needed to be developed further to ensure that the findings were not lost. Research was also seen to be a vital way to energise and spotlight the value of practice education, and was perceived to be essential for 'raising the bar' for the social work profession, where there is less research evidence than for many other professions. Research conducted by MacIntyre and Paul (2013) refers to resistance on the part of social work practitioners, academics and students to engaging with social work research, partly due to time constraints, but also due to other more subtle influences based on preferences for teaching and practice based social work disciplines. This view is echoed by Jasper (2014), who identified a tendency in her research study for practice educators to underplay the teaching element of their role and focus more on the assessment and mentoring aspects of their intervention with students. The research participants in the final stage of my own

research study advocate for an increase in research-minded practice to ensure that the social work profession does not become increasingly marginalised.

5.7.3 Research to Raise the Profile of Practice Education

Professionals providing peer feedback expressed commitment to social work research as an effective way of heightening the profile of practice education and stimulating debate, and conveyed appreciation for the importance of putting research ideas in to direct practice. In addition to suggesting ways for practice education to receive a heightened profile within organisations, professionals also highlighted the need to campaign towards improving working conditions for practice educators and to share learning through strengthening links across the social work profession. Peer feedback from social work professionals proved to be fruitful in offering both affirmation of the views expressed by practice educators and in promoting the value of evidence-based practitioner research to raise the profile for practice education (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014).

Practice educators conveyed a genuine interest in participating in the research as a way of having their experiences listened to and validated. A significant finding from my research study was the creative and resilient approach taken by both practice educators and social work professionals, demonstrated by the ability to seek proactive solutions to complexity and change, and to perceiving research as a possible way to raise the profile of practice education. Adamson *et al.* (2014, p.529) define the qualities of resilience found in research carried out with social work practitioners as; '*flexibility, robustness and bounce'*. These descriptors fit my own research participants well, and the capacity demonstrated in sharing their own experiences of feeling deflated by

constant change, yet also being able to inflate and 'bounce back' in the face of adversity and yet more unexpected changes on the horizon. Clarke *et al.* (2016) highlight the value of reflexive self-knowledge and emotional connection and resilience, also considered to be important assets by the research participants, who appreciated the chance to draw strength from each other's experiences and to reflect on how they could collectively improve working conditions and achieve better means of support. Social work professionals' contributions to the study reflected a sense of responsibility for creating a heightened platform for practice education, and a pragmatic approach to seeking solutions. Evidence based research was perceived to be a good way to build on the ideas shared through participation in the research study, and the role of research was seen to be imperative in strengthening the infrastructure of social work as a practice based profession and a research discipline.

The future aspirations of research participants across the three stages of the study have been considered as the sixth and final core theme, and have conveyed a sense of commitment to the value base of social work, and recognition that the profession will need to weather ongoing political, societal and cultural shifts as part of transformative change. In this vein, continued professional development was considered to be essential to sustain the profession through ongoing transition and change.

The discussion of the findings clustered across six interconnecting themes have explored key strands arising from the research study, to provide insight in to the experiences of a sample of practice educators as they became accustomed to a new assessment framework for social work education and practice. The concluding chapter

will reflect on the emergent findings and explore possible solutions to the challenges expressed by practice educators as they progress through uncertain times for the profession, set against a backdrop of recent announcements for further social work reform.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

The concluding chapter will seek to draw together key learning points gained from conducting the research study, and will reflect on whether the objectives for the study were fully achieved as part of the identified findings. The experience of taking on the researcher role has been insightful, and has enabled me to gain a fresh perspective on the role of practice educators as they move through a particular period of change for the social work profession.

The proposed plan for the chapter will initially include a brief summary of the main findings and will then critically analyse the objectives selected for the research study, to explore whether these were fully or only partially met. The learning gained from the process of working through the study will be explored, to reflect on the personal and professional learning achieved from being involved in doctoral level research, to consider the reasons why some objectives were more challenging to address as compared to others, and where alternative approaches could have been taken. The researcher role will be reflected on, to examine the tensions that emerged when taking on the insider researcher role due to having a number of years of experience within the field of practice education. This was a new and interesting role, and opened up a

new dimension of learning due to the need to gain unfamiliar skills rapidly and respond to the research participants in an approachable and informed way, yet still remain impartial. The methodological approach used for the research study will be considered, to weigh up the benefits of using an appreciative approach, and to acknowledge some of the weaknesses encountered. The remaining section of the chapter will reflect on recommendations for the field of practice education, in addition to considering the scope for future research to add to the body of work already available on this topic.

6.2 Summary of Findings

The six final themes to emerge from the data were indicative of significant findings from the three- stage research study. The key themes have incorporated a number of the smaller sub-themes emerging from the raw data, referred to in the data analysis section and illustrated in the table on p. 121 as open and combined codes. The chosen spiral of analysis has emphasised certain aspects of the study and in doing this has underplayed others, in an attempt to advocate for the dominant views of research participants, and capture emergent narrative using a scaffolding approach to generate shared meaning and relevance (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Silverman (2010) refers to the researcher as the gatekeeper of knowledge, due to the ethical necessity of prioritising fragments of data and omitting other material, and the subsequent funnelling down of the data collected. As the researcher, I was aware of the power invested in the gatekeeping role and the responsibility of representing the views of participants, whilst also shaping emerging data to reveal distinct themes. As the research study took place over an eighteen-month time scale, it was important to analyse data on an ongoing basis in an endeavour to manage the data in a reliable

and trustworthy way, and ensure that earlier ideas and experiences of participants were not lost or subsumed into information gathered more latterly. Engaging with research participants over a substantial period of time and using different approaches to gather data has sought to ensure that the data has been authentic and of value, as initial views and experiences have been shared and cross-referenced with the ideas and opinions of participants who joined the study in the latter stage of the study. The notions of ensuring that credibility and confirmability are demonstrated in qualitative research is referred to by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I was very aware that it is not possible to attain objectivity when carrying out interpretive research, and that is was essential to measure and validate the views of participants when gathering and analysing data.

Although there were significant differences in the experiences of off-site and on-site practice educators, these were mainly focussed on the need to strengthen the relevant infrastructure of support and the impact of future change on their requisite roles. When capturing the views of all the research participants about their lived experiences of teaching, supporting and assessing students during a time of intensive social work reform, there were surprising similarities and consistencies in the feedback provided. The rich descriptions of data from participants, referred to as 'thick' data by Gergen (1999; 2003), have demonstrated that practice educators were able to withstand change well, although there was a sense of not always feeling in control, or being fully prepared for the changes taking place. Participants suggested that fluctuations in their role had occurred quite rapidly but incrementally, as the ongoing transformation of social work education necessitated a flexible and creative approach to managing change, although support was often fragmented and unhelpful. The PCF assessment was generally welcomed by participants as providing a relevant and comprehensive

model to guide and assess students during the placement. Some practice educators commented on the simplicity of the structure, and the emphasis on assessing students' capability in-depth and over a long period of time as they progressed during the placement. A frequent point raised was the rather ambiguous nature of the nine capabilities themselves, which required more drilling down by practice educators to ensure that students were fully aware of the composite skills and qualities they needed to demonstrate within each separate capability. A related point referred to the extra time needed to do full justice to the assessment process. Feedback from participants about the assessment framework suggested that there was an appreciation of the emphasis placed on the students being able to demonstrate practical social work skills aligned with professional ethics and values, to acknowledge the uncertainty and complexity of social work practice. Time constraints were highlighted due to a reduction in the number of days that students are now on placement, and concerns about the increased time needed to assess students in an integrated and meaningful way. There was some ambivalence expressed about the transient nature of social work reform and the risk that PCF may be replaced by a more government-driven assessment framework, which places a stronger emphasis on front line social work skills and operational process.

Relationships with social work students were often perceived to be power-based and inextricably linked with the assessment role. Peak experiences of participants tended to focus on challenges when students experienced difficulties on placement, although the appreciative methodology, as endorsed by Johnson (2013), encouraged an emphasis on considering new ways of working, and reflection on positive stories that injected life and vitality to their role. This approach deliberately moves away from the problem-orientated approaches often associated with social work and, on reflection,

has been partially successful in holding the interest of the research participants and allowing them to share experiences of assessing students that held value to them.

Personal resilience and commitment to continual professional development were frequently mentioned as being essential attributes to withstand the constant pace of change, although participants often referred to the continual 'catch up' just to cope with the demands they experienced. The importance of personal resilience as expressed by participants is consistent with the views of Adamson *et al.* (2014), who make a distinction between personal resilience and broader work-based organisational challenges, and the need for robust strategies to overcome them. Participants from my study frequently expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the demands of the role, particularly when they were becoming familiar with a new assessment structure and did not feel well supported though the change process. A recurring topic raised by participants referred to the unclear boundaries between personal and professional commitment to the student, and the tendency to struggle to 'switch off' from the demands of the role during their leisure time. This view is explored by LeCroy (2002), who perceives social work as a vocation, suggesting that there is an inevitable blurring of personal and professional life which requires commitment akin to a 'calling,' due to the need to adhere to the social work code of conduct in all spheres of life. Several participants mentioned the importance of inner resilience and good networks of support to manage the rigorous expectations of their role, although findings suggested that some individuals struggled more than others to manage this effectively.

The debilitating impact of having to fail a student on placement was raised repeatedly by my research participants. Research by Finch *et al.* (2014) also discovered that practice educators often experienced feelings of self-doubt and disempowerment, and

of being marginalised and unsupported by other professionals when the assessment outcome was a fail. Support streams available were often found to be inadequate, and participants sometimes expressed feeling on the edge of communities of learning when assessing students on placement. Personal support, mentoring and peer support were identified as particularly valuable methods of debriefing and working through problematic placement experiences, although these avenues of support were not always easy to access. There was wide acknowledgement that increased channels of support to analyse where things went wrong and to assess the lessons learnt would be beneficial.

Participants raised the equivocal impact of change, as this offered scope for fresh opportunities but also fear of the unknown. Research by Cowling and Repede (2010) notes the importance of developing a culture for managing change, which encourages an emphasis on those affected becoming agents rather than victims of the change process. The commitment to proactive ownership of change by research participants was balanced with the recognition that wider political, economic and demographic factors will continue to shape the way that social work is delivered and that the continual reconstruction of the profession was inevitable (Ferguson *et al.,* 2005).

Social work professionals who provided peer feedback in the third stage of the study frequently reaffirmed the views of practice educators involved in the first two stages of the research, and were creative and pragmatic in suggesting different ways for practice education to be promoted and transformed to stay apace with the changing landscape of social work. The importance of raising the profile of social work practice education to enable aspirations to be shared by individuals across practice learning communities is also advocated by Houston (2016), who recognised the need to improve channels of communication. Suggestions were framed within the wider

context of diminishing resources and constraints across the services they operated in, which introduced a cautionary tone to what may be feasible.

Research was perceived to be a possible vehicle to heighten the profile of practice education, and, as discussed by Adamson *et al.* (2014), to offer a way to seek proactive and informed solutions to constant change. Participants welcomed the appreciative methodology used to deliver the research study in general terms, although they had very little or no prior knowledge of the approach before their involvement in the study. They were forthcoming in proposing diverse ways to retain good practice and creative ways of working, and to avoid the risk of their expertise being lost as part of the transformation process. Perhaps one of the overriding findings from the research study was the enthusiasm that participants demonstrated for having their voices heard. The platform provided by the research enabled participants to express their views and to have these recorded and shared. Research by Collins (2016) identified that participants had a strong allegiance to the social work profession, but were cynical about changes in front-line social work practice due to austerity cuts and unclear directions. My own research participants also demonstrated a strong commitment to the profession, despite their expressed concerns about limited support from affiliated organisations.

6.3 Reflection on the Objectives and Findings

There is evidence in the research findings and discussion to suggest that the four objectives selected to shape the three-staged study have provided a useful framework and have stimulated discussion about the practice educator role and the impact of change as the qualitative study has unfolded. This section of the concluding chapter

will explore whether the individual objectives have been fully met, and will consider what learning has been achieved from the process of planning, implementing and reviewing them.

The first objective refers to the intention to seek the views of research participants about the newly introduced professional capabilities assessment framework for social work students on placement. The objective has been met to my satisfaction, as it has formed the focal topic for the research, and some useful learning has been acquired. As the researcher, I became aware of the stark contrast between the support and training available for qualifying practice educators undergoing the PEPS courses to inform them of the professional capabilities, as compared to support for more experienced practice educators, who tended to be more self-reliant on accessing refresher courses and updates that become available to them. Moreover, the opportunity to listen to the experiences of practice educators has reinforced the need to recognise different ways that individuals cope with change and with difficulties that are encountered when assessing students. Waterhouse *et al.* (2011) refer to the 'conscious incompetence' that practice educators may experience when challenges are encountered, and this resonated with the feelings communicated by some of my research participants of being overwhelmed by constant change and complexity, whereas others appeared to be more resilient. This has highlighted the need to be more aware of the pressure points that may affect individual practice educators, such as feeling isolated from other social work professionals, struggling to cope with the impact of constant change, and the importance of targeted support when challenges are encountered.

Pressures experienced by research participants who needed to quickly familiarise themselves with a new assessment process, without adequate support and training

being in place, has made me very aware of the need to be more proactive in preparing for change, and also, as noted by Plenty and Gower (2013), to ensure that the necessary training is provided before changes in practice educator are implemented. Another learning point, which has also been prominently revealed across literature studies, refers to the tensions that practice educators raised around the final assessment role as compared to the teaching and mentoring aspects of their role and the need for different skill sets (Thompson *et al.*, 1994; Bogo *et al.*, 2004; Parker, 2008; Finch, 2010). This has highlighted the need to consider ways of strengthening the guidance given to practice educators about the assessment role, and for more emphasis to be placed on both the differences and the inter-connections between formative, developmental aspects of student assessment and the final summative judgement that needs to be made in order to pass or fail the student. Earl (2004) and Heron *et al* (2015) make the point that formative assessment for students during their placement tends to draw out the mentoring and enabling qualities of the practice educator, whereas the final assessment is based on the need to be measured and objective when making the assessment judgement.

The second objective refers to the decision to use an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach when interviewing practice educators, to encourage them to share positive experiences of assessing students during a time of change for the social work profession (Higgins and Goodyer, 2015; Davies and Jones, 2015; Forest, 2016). When reflecting on this objective set against the findings generated from the research, the choice of methodology was partially successful, as it was helpful in the planning of the interviews and providing a positive steer for the sessions. The inclusion of exercises based on an appreciation of the practice educator role and what is working well for them helped to shape the interview sessions and provided a consistent theme as the

study progressed. Research participants tuned into the approach and were positive about the emphasis on self-reflection and the opportunity to share their aspirations for the future for practice education.

When considering the learning gained from using this approach, I was also aware of the synergy of AI with the participants' commitment to the social work profession, and the desire to see practice education flourish as new opportunities became available through social work reform. The value of AI is expounded by Lilja and Richardson (2012), who refer to the attributes of empowerment when people experience change, as this can provide motivational support and encouragement. When considering the more contentious aspects of AI, the aspirational and rather idealistic tone of appreciative terminology, such as 'peak experiences' and 'provocative propositions' required some careful analysis to ensure that research participants were aware of the meanings implied. Although the language used does have direct synergy with the social work ethos of continual improvement, capacity building and focussing on assets and strengths, there were occasions when the '4D' core of AI, as designed by Cooperrider *et* al. (2003), appeared to be unrealistic and unachievable. On reflection, this became particularly challenging when progressing through the four stages of the cycle, to put in motion the final 'delivery' stage, following the 'dream', 'discovery' and 'design' stages of the research study, to then draw recommendations together and put plans into action. As noted by Van der Haar and Hosking (2004), the process of inquiry should not be separate from the evaluation. This posed a tension in terms of celebrating the positive aspects of the practice educators' experiences as the integral process used for the research study, and then being able to take this forward as part of a wider approach to also highlight the problems and tensions that were acknowledged by the research participants, and be able to effect change.

The experience of using AI as a theory-based approach has made me realise that it is vital to retain what is working well for practice education, but that a much wider debate needs to be had to overcome the financial, political and cultural pressures that exist for practice education in order to create robust and sustainable improvement. Grant and Humphries (2006) make the point that AI has not been widely used as a research methodology and that it is important to be mindful of the bigger picture when evaluating and analysing research outcomes. As a concluding comment, the objective to use AI as the chosen methodology has been partially achieved, and the merits of using this approach are explored further in the following sub-section of the thesis. The main challenge will be in moving the research forward to make a positive difference for practice education in the transformational world of social work education and practice.

The intention of the third objective set for the research was to explore the relationships practice educators forged with students during the assessment process, and to highlight any tensions reported by them due to the power invested in their role. This objective became a prominent and central aspect of the research findings, and is therefore considered to have been met. Rich data emerged from the interviews pertaining to the ambiguity and tensions perceived by participants around forging relationships with students whilst assessing them. The role strain and power imbalance between practice educators and students being assessed is noted by LaFrance *et al.* (2004) and Sharp and Danbury (1999), although Lefevre (2005) recognises that the power differences can be effectively channelled to provide expert wisdom for the advantage of the student. A point of observation was the element of control practice educators held in passing or failing the students, and the associated emotions shared by some participants about conversely feeling out of control and overwhelmed by this responsibility when difficulties arose during the placement. The

emotional commitment and the time invested in the practice educator role is also a frequent reference point across practice learning literature (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Black, Curzio and Terry, 2014; Finch *et al.*, 2014).

The value of the supervisory relationship was constantly referred to by practice educators as the central forum for developing sound working relationships with students. An emerging learning point was the realisation that very few of the practice educators involved in the research were able to access reflective supervision themselves. Although the on-site practice educators received clinical supervision pertaining to their social work role, many acknowledged that this did not often include support or guidance for their practice educator responsibilities. Off-site practice educators referred to the need to purchase professional supervision, although it appeared that the majority of participants did not have access to regular supervision. The importance attached to gaining meaningful feedback from students about their performance as practice educators was an unexpected finding raised during the research study. This triggered consideration about how to improve the feedback mechanisms in place to build in more personalised and easily accessed processes for practice educators. The emotional entanglement and investment of time in the relationships practice educators developed with students was also a salient learning point, and reinforced the importance of targeting mentoring support for practice educators when this is needed. The practice learning regulations in place at the host university provide mentors and consultants for students when there are placement difficulties, and it occurred to me that there is nothing similar in place for practice educators. This presents an interesting dilemma, as increasing emphasis is placed upon practice educators teaching students about the importance of emotional awareness and intelligence, as advocated by Morrison (2007), and the need to model

emotional competence and talk openly about feelings, managing self and relationships, although the emotional needs of practice educators themselves may not be adequately addressed.

A final reflection linked to the third objective relates to the power held by practice educators due to their assessment role and their vital responsibility in promoting an inclusive and anti-oppressive learning environment within the placement setting. The experience of carrying out the research study has reinforced the disparity between the age, gender and cultural status of the practice educators sampled and the much wider diversity across the demographics of the social work student population. Research by Holmstrom (2012) and Tedam (2017) suggests that discrimination is more likely to occur when students from minority groups are on their placements. It is evident that the practice educator has a central role in promoting inclusive learning during the placement, although this could be problematic if the practice educator is not perceived to be a role model that can be easily identified with by the student due to differences such as age, gender and ethnicity.

The fourth and final objective considers the gaps within the infrastructure of support in place for practice educators, to explore how support and guidance could be strengthened, for the benefit of both practice educators and students. Research participants have been vocal in identifying the pressures they have experienced when they needed support and this has not always been forthcoming. The weaknesses revealed by the research study in terms of the infrastructure of support available, have already been documented in the findings and discussion chapters of the thesis, with a view to proposing improvements. When considering how effectively this objective has been achieved, there is evidence to suggest that the deficits in support have been well documented and discussed throughout the research study, but there have been

limitations in the identification of ways to remedy them. Literature suggests that local, regional and national support for social work practice educators needs considerable improvement (Doel *et al.*, 2002: Plenty and Gower, 2013; Bellinger and Ford, 2016). Participants in the final stage of my study reinforced the need to look at local and wide-scale solutions to boost the levels of support for practice education, but acknowledged that due to constant change and austerity cuts, this would not be an easy task. In my substantive role as practice lead for the host university, I am aware of the importance of well-embedded quality assurance for practice education and the need for robust standards to be in place. My recent involvement as a member of BASW professional development working groups has addressed the importance of streamlining and refreshing the PCF assessment framework, and looking broadly at practice education and training to strengthen the quality assurance standards in place across different localities, with the aim of creating a more standardised approach. This work has some connections with the research findings for objective four, and the need to continue to improve the way we support, mentor and update practice educators, despite the continuing climate of economic and political uncertainty for the social work profession.

The research findings have captured some helpful information about the type of support practice educators have appreciated and valued most highly. Feedback from participants has included the benefits gained from receiving constructive feedback from students and peers about their practice. The importance of feedback is highlighted by Waterhouse *et al.* (2011) and Williams and Rutter (2013) as encouraging a healthy, two-way exchange between students and practice educators. The findings captured from research participants about the value attached to constructive and personalised feedback on their performance has influenced the implementation of some new procedures. Students' placement evaluation forms are

now shared with the relevant practice educator and their employer in order to promote a transparent process of gathering feedback. Furthermore, individual feedback is now given to practice educators following the submission to the university of the student's placement portfolio, to acknowledge where assessment and guidance has been particularly helpful.

Another significant learning point has been the need to continue to provide the ongoing refresher and information updates but also to be more proactive in supporting individual practice educators who experience challenges when assessing students during the placement. The marked prevalence of research participants' emphasis on managing struggling or failing students during a time of shrinking resources and increasing pressures on placement services has made me reflect on the need for champions for practice education. Lloyd and Grasham (2016) refer to the distinct need for the rights and status of practice educators to be championed and advocated. As noted by Jasper (2014), practice educators tend to under-play their range of skills and expertise, particularly in terms of their central role in teaching and imparting knowledge to students. A particularly striking observation arising from the experiences of practice educators involved in the research was how often individuals mentioned feeling 'on the margins' of communities of support and open to scrutiny due to their positioning within placement teams (Finch and Taylor, 2013; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2013). The increased emphasis on teaching partnerships and renewed interest in teaching and learning hubs encouraging a team approach to practice education would move away from the prevalent singleton model of practice education and increase access to learning networks and peer support.

6.4 Reflection on the Methodological Approach

The motivation for deciding to use an appreciative approach as the selected methodology was primarily because AI was considered appropriate to meeting the aims of the study but also stemmed from my first two years of undertaking the professional doctorate, and the opportunity to extend my knowledge of qualitative research methods prior to starting the research study. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the '4D' Cycle at the core of appreciative inquiry (AI) provided an iterative and affirmative structure for the research study, seeking to discover what gives life and meaning to individuals for the shared benefit of others (Coghlan *et al.*, 2003). AI research favours an open style of interview question design, emphasising reflection on what is working well, and capturing responses from participants with shared resonance for others, which are shaped into principles to effect change. As articulated by Cooperrider and Whitney (1999, p.57), AI is about asking questions to evoke: "the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them". I was interested in the open-ended interview design, and decided to include the interview question: 'describe a peak experience or high point'. This is a well-accepted example of how an interview is structured to promote an appreciative response, and to focus not just on aspirations but also on tangible examples of what actually works well and to celebrate success (Reed, 2007). The '4 D' Cycle was consistently applied across the three stages of my study to '**discover**' positive experiences of practice education in anticipation of forthcoming changes in the group interview, to then '**dream**' about how new changes were impacting on participants' role to envision the future for practice education during the individual interviews. The third stage '**design**' became established during the co-construction of ideas and actions through sharing the research with social work professionals, and the

final '**delivery**' stage of the cycle became relevant during the dissemination of the research to gather findings and recommendations for putting ideas into action.

When evaluating the effectiveness of AI methodology, it has become clear that the first and second stages of the research study engendered a purer sense of the spirit of an appreciative approach, as achievements and aspirations developed into potential ways forward. The third stage of the study had a more pragmatic context, and placed less emphasis on 'provocative propositions,' as the process of delivering action plans to focus on tangible outcomes needed to take resource limitations and structural challenges in to account. Although this may have diluted the effectiveness of the methodology, a sense of realism needed to prevail, as moving from a protected and discrete research study to apply research to influence the world of social work practice education will inevitably be an ongoing and challenging process.

AI can be perceived to present a partial or distorted picture, due to the emphasis on positivity (Carter, 2006). However, the research sought to redress the emphasis on problems in a rigorous way to contribute to the body of knowledge on practice education, and allow participants to think critically as part of appreciating the best of what they do. This seemed to evolve naturally from the appreciative tenor of the questions, as participants reflected on the challenges within their role, and considered how their own inner resources and resilience had enabled them to move forward and extend their expertise and understanding of the value of appreciative research. Gergen (2003) refers to the power of discourse when opportunities to co-create and empower people through the language expressed are available. The challenge now will be to promote the ideas engendered by the research, to ensure that they accord with the views of those people holding positions of resource and structural power, and to ensure that findings are able to be actioned. In the ascribed role of researcher, I

have been able to coordinate the unfolding of ideas culminating from the study to apply active listening skills and detailed recording of data. It is therefore clear that I have an integral role to play in the transition from appreciative research towards attaining practical realities.

The connectivity between AI and critical reflexivity referred to by Grant and Humphries (2006), and the asset-based affirmative core of an appreciative approach, has gained an increasing appeal across social work, and other disciplines using strength orientated models to extend good practice. Although my research has focussed on a small group of participants, there is scope for transferability to other social work and affiliated settings, and therefore wider ramifications for the findings generated due to the suitability of the methodological approach applied. Rather like the layers of an onion, with my own research study embedded in the centre, the methodological approach has enabled me to discover wider and more general relevance as the research has unfolded, to reveal the outer layers of the onion, thereby creating new ideas and broader associations. Garven *et al.* (2016) suggest that AI can be blended with other more familiar strengths-based models, in order to extend good practice and develop critical thinking, to avoid defensive assumptions or deficit-based solutions.

As reflected on in the previous chapter, AI alone can present an aspirational tone, which may detract from the reality of the challenges faces in social work practice education. The idea of an eclectic approach to bridge the gap between practice and theory accords well with the strong theory and value base of the social work profession, as appreciative inquiry provides a valuable contribution to complement other complimentary theories and approaches. The personal and professional relevance of AI has been effective in the research carried out, due to the flow of inquiry from the individual and the co-construction of ideas to achieve a wider narrative that

holds shared meaning (Ludema, 2002). This approach provides a move away from the managerial, target driven culture of contemporary social work practice and increasing government intervention, towards a more capacity and resourcefulness focussed perspective, that promotes human flourishing and recognises where practice is working well and celebrates success (Saleebey, 2006).

The experiences of my research participants indicated a need for increased channels of support to help to analyse difficulties when things went wrong and evaluate where lessons could be learnt. There is scope to use an appreciative approach to look more proactively at the challenges inherent within the constant change and complexity of social work practice education, to seek fresh ideas and possibilities through the power of positive discourse. Cooperrider and McQuaid (2012) refer to this as the 'positive arc of systemic strengths,' which can provide the catalyst for change. Moreover, the constancy of power differentials as a prominent theme throughout my research has broad relevance for social work, suggesting the need for an empowering appreciative approach and emphasis on equality, which can be created by the use of language and interactions that energise people and produce shared knowledge and ideas. Duncan and Ridley-Duff (2014) regard AI as an effective source for deconstructing the power differentials within communities where minority groups may have experienced marginalisation and exclusion. The selection of the methodological approach has encouraged the iterative emphasis I aspired to gain when collecting data, in order to generate the lived ideas and experiences of participants for the wider benefit of the academic discipline. This has made a small contribution to the body of practice learning research that is available and has raised increased awareness of the merits of an appreciative approach.

6.5 Reflections on the Researcher Role

When looking back to consider my reasons for selecting the research topic, I recall the personal and moral incentive to discover more about the direct experiences of practice educators who were coming to terms with a new assessment process whilst other changes were happening for social work practice education. I was very aware at the time of the simultaneous changes occurring due to social work reforms, such as the reduced placement days, a reduction in payment for practice educators and the introduction of new standards for practice educator training (SWRB, 2013). The researcher role aims to look for authentic and common patterns in the participants' experiences, in order to identify the underlying themes Gilbert (2002), although this process also necessitates the process of gathering data and shaping this in to distinct findings, which inevitably introduces an element of subjectivity. As noted by Gilbert (2002, p. 223) 'We Live in Stories, not Statistics', and therefore will not gain absolute truths or one definitive answer, but will add to the body of knowledge through a range of ideas and individual experiences. I was keen to use a participatory approach when interviewing the sample of practice educators, in order to learn from an inside position about their own perceptions and perspectives.

The duality of the researcher and practice lead roles required sensitive handling, and a balance was needed to retain a degree of professional distance and also to be approachable and indirectly contribute to the dialogue co-constructed by research participants throughout the interviews. This proved to be quite challenging, as it was not possible to remove myself completely from the unfolding dialogue, and I needed to remind myself not to allow my internal feelings and perceptions colour the accounts. This tension was particularly evident when participants raised their concerns about the limited support available for them when they most needed it when dealing with

challenges arising during the students' placements. As the practice lead, I am directly responsible for providing the guidance and support for practice learning, and therefore felt directly culpable in the declared deficits shared by participants. The process of enquiry has however, opened up a frank and transparent dialogue, providing fresh perspectives on how practice educators are supported, which verify what were already perceived to be potential gaps in the infrastructure of support available for them. The strengths of participative research are referred to by French and Swain (2006), who promote the benefits of gaining first-hand accounts from insider perspectives, in order to reflect on these experiences and gain new insight and understanding as a precursor for action.

The tendency to be 'drawn in' to debates when researching with peers is raised by Smith (2009), who urges caution as objectivity can be compromised. This occurred intermittently throughout the research study, as participants were familiar with me in my substantive role and needed reminding of the confidentiality policy regarding not referring to students or other professionals by name. Moreover, during one group interview there was a direct request for me to intervene to resolve a particular challenge a participant was experiencing with a student, where I needed to open the dialogue out to the group for discussion and maintain an objective perspective. Bobasi *et al.* (2005) refer to the 'use of self' when taking on the researcher role, as the researcher will have their own knowledge base, interests and priorities which will influence every stage of the research study from research design to dissemination of findings. This approach accords with the social constructionist approach to research Creswell (2013), which recognises that there is no one version of events, and each person's unique experiences will have shared meaning for others, whilst also validating individual knowledge and experience. As I have personal experience of the

on-site practice educator role in a previous managerial role for direct service delivery in addition to my current substantive role, I was able to take on an 'insider' researcher position, as research participants were aware of my insight into their role. Reed and Proctor (1994) distinguish between 'insider' and 'outsider' researcher roles, and warn that the 'insider' with established knowledge may have pre-conceived ideas and assumptions that will colour the research and make it more difficult to stand back from the research outcomes. I was however, very aware of the need to retain professional distance and manage the relationships with research participants effectively. As advised by D'Cruz and Jones (2004), the researcher needs to demonstrate skills in planning, engaging, observing and reflecting with participants about the interview process, and be responsive to unexpected findings that may emerge. As an insider researcher, I was able to frame the questions in an informed way to encourage participants to explore and reflect on their direct experiences to find out more about their knowledge gained in practice.

Although I have several years' experience as a social worker, service manager, practice educator and university academic, the role of researcher is a very new one, and the process of acquiring research mindedness has been slow and accumulative. Mezirow (1994b, p. 223) refers to transformative learning as being composed of stages of learning that build on each other to extend meaning and depth:

'The constellation of concept, belief, judgement and feeling, which shapes a particular interpretation'.

Mezirow (1994b) also explains that the learner will initially experience disorientation and gradually become more self-assured and competent as the new discipline of learning becomes more familiar. This model had resonance for me, as I needed to

experience the process of learning 'in action' as I gradually became more comfortable with the researcher role. A reflexive approach to research-mindedness has been essential for planning, implementing and evaluating the research and extending my skills of critical discourse. This is consistent with the professional value base of social work, and the need to seek creative resolutions by re-defining and deconstructing information, to seek new ways of understanding and responding to complexity (Fook, 2012; Koprowska, 2003). In retrospect, the process of analysing the rich data generated from the first stage of the study could have been strengthened, if I had inductively analysed the '3 Wishes Statements' shared by participants of the small group interviews (Appendix 7) in more detail. The expressed wishes could have been themed to illuminate key ideas, thoughts and emotions to plot the interrelationship between them and link these to the emerging six key themes arrived at to account for the research findings (Boyatzis, 1998). The statements expressing aspirations for the future of practice education tended to fall loosely into four main strands: the desire for improved support and recognition, improved consistency and quality, better career prospects and increased status for social work as a profession. These expressed wishes could have been clustered into themes, and connections made with the six main themes emerging from the data, to further inform the findings.

The opportunity to coproduce the research by collaborating with experts in the field of practice education served to ignite new ways of reframing ideas, rooted in the process of sharing stories to add depth and different ways of seeing things. Although the three-staged process undertaken was time consuming and challenging to coordinate, in hindsight the accumulative learning process has enhanced reflective rigour and added credibility and the scope to contribute to a wider body of knowledge on this subject area (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I gained the opportunity to extend the research by

consulting with social work professionals, due to university research funding, which enabled me to build another dimension to the initial planning for a two-staged, small-scale qualitative research study. The scope to cross-reference and add to the lived experiences shared by practice educators has been illuminating, and it has been interesting to see some of the interconnections between the practice educators and social work professionals' views and aspirations for the future of practice education.

On reflection, a particular dichotomy arising when coordinating the data collection process, was the central value participants placed upon high quality supervision for social work students as being integral to the assessment process, yet practice educators themselves did not have always have access to professional supervisory support. As a new researcher, I also recognised the essential value of professional supervision for my own studies, and could appreciate how difficult it was for practice educators who did not have access to this support. According to Izod and Lawson (2015) the shared thinking space to seek solutions and gain affirmation and support are crucial for personal and professional development, yet this fundamental opportunity to receive regular supervision was often not available for practice educators. The lack of individual, group or peer supervision appeared to be particularly apparent when participants articulated their experiences of supporting struggling students at risk of a failed assessment. An important aspect of the insider research role has been to recognise the challenges experienced by research participants and consider realistic ways to make improvements that are achievable and sustainable.

I was aware of the impact of the 'public gaze' on practice educators within placements when the learning environment was not fully effective, and where other placement stakeholders were reluctant to commit to supporting a failed outcome. Showell Nicholas and Kerr (2015) refer to the need to arrive at a 'constructive fail' when this is

the right decision to make, although it seemed apparent that participants often felt critiqued and unsupported when going through this process with a student. It was a particularly powerful learning point for me as the researcher, to acknowledge how marginalised and unsupported practice educators can feel when a judgement needs to be made about the students' performance not being good enough to pass, and the anguish they can experience when making this final assessment.

Perhaps the overriding learning gained from carrying out the research has been the implicit responsibility to lobby and advocate for the practice education profession, and to raise the awareness of senior managers in positions of authority that the gradual erosion and devaluing of the practice educator role cannot continue. As expressed by Scholar *et al.* (2014), if those of us in positions to promote the value and expertise of practice educators choose not to do so, who will carry the baton forward?

6.6 Recommendations for the Field of Practice Education and Further Research

The future for social work education is currently unclear, with governmental influence set to extend, due to plans proposed for the social work profession to be regulated and quality assured by a government appointed agency, rather than the current regulator HCPC (Community Care, 2016). At the time of writing, the climate of uncertainty prevails, and the future of the PCF assessment framework remains tenuous, due to expressed governmental preference for the development of an assessment criteria based on the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS), created by government commissioned reports in 2014 (Dept. of Education, 2015). There are opposing theories about whether the social work degree will remain generic and retain the aspirational ethos of a professional value-based assessment process (Croisdale-

Appleby, 2014), or if there will be a decision to specialise and focus further on statutory, employer-driven social work qualification routes such as 'Frontline' and 'Step Up' (Narey, 2014). Research by Higgins *et al.* (2016) carried out with participants across a social work degree programme, identified a sense of irony about the ceaseless changes, and the tendency for participants to fill the vacuum with ambivalent views of 'just the same old thing' and 'wait and see'. Although there was some cynicism voiced by my own research participants, there was also proactive debate to envision what the future may hold for practice education, reinforced by some pragmatic and supportive ideas articulated by social work professionals, many of whom hold senior positions. Peer feedback from social work professionals suggested pooling the resources available to feed in to regional and national initiatives, and to gain strength through economy of scale, thereby avoiding duplication of effort by planning events in a more streamlined way.

These suggestions from research participants accord with the governmental drive to raise the standards for social work, through establishing teaching partnerships between local councils and universities to unify and strengthen social work as a profession. Teaching partnerships are becoming a tangible and effective way for social work councils and universities to form alliances and work together to meet agreed objectives, which play to the strengths of each partner organisation. The Department for Education and the Department of Heath have completed a new round of bidding for further teaching partnerships, building on the initial four pilots established in 2015. Early evaluation of the teaching partnership pilots was conducted by the governments' social research team, and highlighted both positive and negative features (Berry-Lound *et al.*, 2016). Merits included increased consistency of standards, increased support for practice educators and a practice-focussed national

career path for social work, whilst drawbacks were highlighted due to independent, voluntary and private placement settings not being utilised and the planned increase in the sole use of statutory placements. Concerns were shared by research participants about the risk of the Education Support Grant funding for placement fees and student bursaries being terminated. This risk of funding deficit has resonance with the possibility that funding from teaching partnership allocation may become the main route to social work education, with universities without a formal partnership and access to this funding having to close or limit their social work degree programmes. This may preclude potential social work students from accessing a degree programme who are unable to afford the fees without bursary support, and could also impact upon independent practice educators, who may become positioned on the fringe of teaching collaborations.

The spirit of creative thinking and collaborative working has not been lost however, and there is scope for communities of practice to form productive and mutually beneficial alliances. Local initiatives, such as the recently established partnership between the host university and local council to establish an Academy of Learning, provides evidence of effective partnerships in action to promote and raise the status of social work. Master classes delivered by social work professionals and researchers are showcasing the profession and raising awareness of research minded practice and there are plans to extend the range of topics to include practice education.

Building research capacity can be perceived as a viable way to heighten the profile of practice education and to empower the profession. In this vein, Reisch and Jani (2012) stress the need for the social work profession to confront and actively engage with the political context of social work, which has the power to deconstruct and reinvent the social work role, according to broader social and economic influences. Furthermore,

Cameron and Este (2008) propose the advantages of placing research at the centre of social work, to develop holistic research minded ways of thinking, rather than research being viewed as one singular and discrete aspect of social work education and practice. Ideas stemming from my research study highlighted the urgency of tapping in to research as a conduit for recognising the pressures that exist for practice educators, and to share research findings with senior managers to raise awareness of the complex and vital role carried out by them. Social work professionals advocated the merits of building on the research study, to consider the different skills sets and knowledge that practice educators may need when supporting students across different social work programmes, and also when supporting and assessing newly qualified social workers. There is scope to build on the research already carried out, by exploring comparative case studies involving practice educators based across differing social work training programmes, to highlight similarities and contrasting support requirements. Comparative research of this nature could 'showcase' the practice educator role across a number of different social work routes, to pinpoint the levels of support and training required according to the specific social work programme they are engaged in.

Bellinger and Ford (2016) raise concerns about the role of the independent practice educator becoming marginalised, due to the increasing emphasis on accelerated social work programmes, and the tendency for employers to appoint their own on-site practice educators to assess their social work employees. The independent practice educators participating in my research recognised the need to revitalise placement opportunities across the private, independent and voluntary sectors, and be proactive in seeking fresh opportunities. My research has endorsed prevailing ideas that exist about the perceived lower status of practice learning as compared to academic

elements of the social work degree programme. This has been echoed by participating practice educators, who referred to the dichotomy of providing a robust assessment for students away from the university on placement, yet recognised that the actual assessment process may be less rigorous and more prone to subjective bias when compared to the formal assessments carried out at university for academic assignments and exams.

Practice based advancements within the field of practice education also need to be considered as a way to champion and advocate for social work education. According to Bellinger (2010b), the lack of parity between social work theory and practice is particularly noticeable within the realms of research, and evidence-based ways of working need to develop in order to build up a body of practice with consistent national standards and guidance. Moreover, Canning and Gallagher-Brett (2010) argue that deeper forms of learning can take place using evidence-based approaches and workable models to inform and enhance social work practice on placement, and that this needs to be developed and shared across the community of practice education. In 2017, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) re-instated England-wide Practice, Policy and Education Development forums (PPEG), to develop consistent quality standards for practice education and I have been actively involved in two of these groups. One of the forums has been set up to revisit the PEPS framework (TCSW, 2012), which was established to provide consistent and agreed standards for practice education, including the level descriptors required to provide practice education assessment at first and final placement stages, and the requirement for all practice educators to be registered and qualified social workers. A significant aspect of the work carried out by the forum has been to design and implement a survey circulated across the practice learning community to find out more about how PEPS

is delivered across different regions and also to seek views about the effectiveness of the standards in place. Survey feedback identified PEPS to be an important framework for sharing social work knowledge, theory and values, for quality assuring the standards required for practice education and identified that there was a shared sense that PEPS was a valued part of continuing professional development. Another salient finding was the strong feeling expressed by participants about the need for practice educators to be recognised and supported by their employers, and the expressed wish for wider acknowledgement of their role in educating and assessing the future work force of social workers.

The other BASW forum I have participated in has been the relaunch of PCF, in order to 'refresh' the capabilities, and ensure that they are fit for current social work education and practice. The survey conducted as part of this process stressed the need for PCF to be 'owned' by the social work profession, to be linked more strongly with other social work frameworks and standards, to emphasise the professional development of practice and career progression and to be affiliated with the BASW code of social work ethics and values. When reflecting on the work carried out by both BASW forums, I have been struck by the similarities in the recommendations arising from the survey feedback and the views shared by my research participants. Prominent views emerging from the BASW surveys and my own research participants have highlighted the need to develop a nationally recognised quality assurance process for training and accrediting practice educators. Other emerging ideas have promoted increased guidance and support across social work networks for all practice educators, including independent practice educators, and to find out more about the views of practice educators themselves about their requirements for support and ongoing training.

Practice educators themselves can also have a united voice in seeking solutions and strengthening the profession. Fook (2012) advocates for increased self-awareness during times of change, to search for the gaps to discover what isn't being done and identify what needs to happen. However, self-efficacy and personal resilience need to be backed up by reliable and robust support structures, to ensure that practice educators are engaged with communities of learning to keep abreast of changes and gain the relevant information, support and training. Research participants were particularly enthusiastic about peer interaction to share experiences and seek their own solutions:

> "So I suppose for me individually, I would love, a real wish list would be regular practice forums….just to facilitate…even if you turned up and there were two or three people there… just an opportunity for reflection and sort of group supervision really. That would be great, I would love that". (Group Interview 1: Mary)

Peer supervision is also advocated by Golia and McGovern (2015), who suggest that peer supervision can foster mutual aid and stimulate affinity and professionalism. Guidelines for peer supervision and support groups could be designed and shared across organisations in order to strengthen the infrastructure of support, and promote commitment to continual professional development. Work is currently underway to establish a network of peer support and mentoring at the host university, as a direct response to the prominent views emerging from research participants.

Research participants relished the opportunity to be engaged in the research study, which advocated for their own profession, and have consistently voiced their interest in the progress of the research. The candour and passion evoked by individual

participants' commitment to self-improvement and promotion of practice education as the central core of social work education has generated an optimistic appetite for taking the research forward. Participating practice educators expressed enthusiasm for a conference or a presentation hosted at the university, to share the results of the research, and to disseminate the findings and transfer research ideas in to practical action plans, thereby making a small contribution to the body of research already available in social work practice education. Further collaboration with social work forums to promote the importance of quality standards for practice education, contributing to practice learning conferences and arranging master classes and building stronger, more streamlined support systems are suggested recommendations to advocate for the often unsung attributes of practice educators and their precarious positioning within the social work profession.

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Appendix 1: Faculty of Society and Health Ethics Pro-forma

GUIDELINES AND PRO-FORMA FOR PROPOSED RESEARCH PROJECTS
for submission to the Society and Health Ethics Committee

The Pro-Forma is to assist members of the Research Ethics Committee. It is therefore essential that the following questions are individually answered by researchers before the research projects will be considered by the Committee. To aid clarity, it is suggested that the questions are retained in bold with the answers added in italics.   Please remember that the Ethics Committee is made up of diverse individuals and therefore give your answers in *lay language.*

Particular emphasis is placed on the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form, which must accompany all submissions.

Ethics Committee approval is for a period of **3 years only** (4 years if the researcher is on part time PhD study). At the end of this period, the researcher should request an extension if necessary. If the basis of the research has not altered and it is progressing satisfactorily, then there should be no difficulty about extending Ethics Committee approval.

In order to comply with the new National Research Ethics Service (NRES), (formerly COREC) application form and guidelines we have adopted certain procedures. As from July 2007, the Ethics Committee will continue to request a progress report at six monthly intervals from the month in which approval was given. The report will be sent out to you when it becomes due. The same form will be required on completion of your project, please request a copy from the Committee Secretary.

You are advised to refer to the new National Research Ethics Service (NRES) guidelines and appendices before you complete your application. A reference copy of this is available from the Faculty Research Centre and also on-line at <ins>http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/</ins>

SUMMARY NOTES FOR APPLICANTS

On all Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms there needs to be a **principal contact and telephone number identified.**

Participants in the study to be sent **two copies of documentation** which they are required to sign with instructions for them to **keep a copy for themselves and a second copy to be returned to the sender.**

THE PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

The Participant Information Sheet should contain statements on the following in *lay language.*

1. The purpose of the investigation, the nature of the procedures, the risks and the possible benefits to the individual or society.

2. A statement that the participant may decline to participate without giving reasons or incurring penalty.

3. A statement that the participant will be free to withdraw at any time without giving reasons or incurring penalty.

4. A statement about the availability of compensation for injury (if appropriate).

5. An invitation to ask for more information.

6. The name and telephone number of the person to be contacted if problems arise.

7. If this is non-therapeutic research, a statement that the participant would not benefit directly from the research.

Bucks New University Society & Health Ethics Committee **ETHICS APPLICATION**	
Official use only Local identifier: ……………… Date Received: ……………… Amendments Received: ……………… Date Approved: ………………	**IMPORTANT** Before completing this form, please read the accompanying Guidance Notes. Please submit your application via e-mail (or on disk); plus one hard copy with signatures

1.   Principal Investigator Details

Title	*Mrs*	Forename	*Jennifer*	Surname	*Burton*

Post held: *Senior lecturer*	
Department: *Social Work*	E-mail: *jburto01@bucks.ac.uk* Tel. No./Ext *01494 522141 ext. 3532* Fax No. *Not Available*
Organisation: *Buckinghamshire New University*	
Full postal address (including postcode): *Buckinghamshire New University, Alexandra Road, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP11 2JZ*	

2.   Co-Applicants

NAME	POST HELD	ORGANISATION

3.   Full Title of Project:

'To gain the initial views of practice educators about the pending national reform of social work education and to gather evidence about existing good practice. Subsequently, to explore the impact of the changes on the assessment of social work students on placements.'

4. Justification of the research

(Explain the rationale for carrying out this project. Please include any literature review to support the research.)

The rationale for carrying out this project stems from my role as practice lead for social work education at Bucks New University and has been triggered by new national changes to social work education and, practice learning. The changes include a new regulatory body for social work, a more robust process for selecting candidates for social work training, a new national training programme for practice educators and the introduction of a national social work student assessment framework for practice learning. It is the new national assessment framework for social work students on placement that will form the basis for my research. The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) will replace the current National Occupational Standards assessment process as from September 2013.

The research will enable me to collaborate with a sample of practice educators about the new social work assessment process and to gain their views about the changing landscape of social work and the impact for social work students on placement. This is particularly timely as social work placements are becoming more difficult to source due to economic and political influences resulting in the reduction in social work numbers within many statutory teams and the dispersal of social workers across a diverse range of services and settings.

Literature based on a range of social work studies has informed my ideas about the research project. The main methodology to shape the research will be Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry is a model with a strong focus on success and good practice stories which can be utilised and built upon as a catalyst for positive change. This approach has synergy with the need for social work as a profession to seek positive ways forward and promote best practice as a driver for future changes.

Another influence on the proposed research project has been research by Lefevre (2005) which highlights the importance of the quality of the relationship between the practice educator and the student and the link between a positive and supportive relationship and the assessment outcome. This study identifies the value of both cognitive and emotional intelligence within practice education which is implicit within the central values and skill base of the social work profession.

Foster (2009) carried out a research study to identify the enabling factors within three different social work teams which were able to influence the quality and effectiveness of each service. Five key drivers for productive working were identified;.; a positive learning environment, space for self-reflection, professional support, clear practice and procedures and access to training and development. This study has synergy with the proposed research project as the focus will be on appreciating the aspects of good practice to retain and develop within the new social work education framework.

Research by Scholar (2012) explores the pertinent topic for social work practice learning about what constitutes a good quality statutory social work placements and how this is evaluated. This study compares and contrasts traditional social work settings with 'non- traditional' placements where statutory tasks are carried out. The planned interviews with practice educators within the study will involve their direct experiences of assessing social work students across a range of different social work settings.

Research by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) explores the social constructionist approach to research known as Appreciative Inquiry. Cooperrider recognised that there are high levels of energy and investment attached to stories of success and good practice which can add value for an organisation and for individuals based on participant's experiences and aspirations. The proposed study will use AI as a vehicle to explore what works well in practice learning and harness this as a catalyst for positive change.

Literature to support the research will include the following studies;

a) *Bellinger, A +Elliott, T (2011) ' What Are You Looking At? The Potential of Appreciative Inquiry as a Research Approach for Social Work'. British Journal of Social Work (2011)* **41** *pp708-725*

b) *Carter, B (2006) 'One experience among many working appreciatively to make miracles instead of finding problems. Using appreciative inquiry as a way of reframing research'. Journal of Research in Nursing.* **11** *(1) pp48-63*

c) *Cooperrider, D, L + Srivastva, S (1987) 'Appreciative Inquiry in Organisational Life'. Research Organisation Change and Development* **1** *pp129-69.*

d) *Foster, J (2009) 'Thinking on the Front Line; why some social work teams struggle and others thrive'. Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust.*

e) *Lefevre, M (2005) 'Facilitating Practice Learning and Assessment: The Influence of Relationship'. Social Work Education, Volume 24,* **5** *pp 565-583.*

f) *Scholar, H, McCaughan, S, McLaughlin, H and Coleman, A (2012) 'Why is this not Social Work? The Contribution of 'Non-Traditional' Placements in Preparing Social Work Students for Practice'. Social Work Education: The International Journal. Volume 31,* **7** *pp932-950*

g) *Williams, S + Rutter, L (2010) 'The Practice Educator's Handbook'. Exeter, Learning Matters.*

5. **Total cost (if applicable)**

£ *The research is not anticipated to have costs attached. The interviews and focus group meeting will be based at the university and materials will be accessed by the university as required. There will be no payment to participants.*

6. **Proposed duration: (months)**

The research project will take place between June 2013 and February 2014 and therefore the actual implementation will take 9 months as this will be conducted in two stages; stage 1 in June/July 2013 and stage 2 in January/February 2014.

7. **'Plain language' Summary**

Please summarise your proposal in non-scientific language, using words and terms that can be easily understood by non-research communities. Do not use acronyms or abbreviations. Your summary must include a clear statement of the purpose of your research, how it will build on existing evidence where available, and its intended benefits to patients and the public. It must also describe

how the research will be conducted and how patients and the public will be involved, both as research participants and partners.

The purpose of the research proposal is to collaborate with social work assessors, known as practice educators, to discover their initial views about the approaching changes to the assessment of social work students when they are on placement and then, six months later, to explore with them how the changes have started to affect their role in assessing social work students. The research study will be carried out in two stages; the first stage will be to meet with 15 social work practice educators in focus groups to find out their views about approaching changes to social work education,(which includes a new student assessment framework and new training for practice educators.) The changes will be in place by September 2013. The initial focus group meetings will be in June/July 2013. The second stage of the study will take place six months later in January/February 2014.when practice educators will be interviewed individually to discover the impact of the changes on their role. The two staged approach has been designed in order to capture initial views of practice educators before the changes are implemented and then to meet with them a few months after the changes have been in place to find out their direct experiences of this. The rationale for data collection via both focus group and individual interview methods is to capture collective views from practice educators in an informal group forum and then to follow this up in more depth with individual participants to glean more details arising as they become more familiar with the changes to the assessment of students during their placements. It is anticipated that the focus groups will enable participants to share their experiences and also possible apprehension about forthcoming changes to how they will assess students.

As social work reforms are just about to be put in place there is no existing evidence to measure the impact of the changes for social work practice education. However, the research will build on a body of work which has explored social work as a fairly new and constantly evolving profession and the direct impact this has on providing practice learning placements for social work students. Each social work student will have to complete 170 days in placement settings over a two year period.as from September 2013. During this time each student will be assessed by a practice educator against the new assessment framework; (Professional Capabilities Framework) The placements sourced for students by the university have altered as a direct impact of the changes to the social work role in practice and the increase in social work posts across a much wider range of community settings and employed by both statutory and private, voluntary and independent settings. The study will seek to draw on the changing landscape of social work and the individual experiences of practice educators to identify stories of good practice and how to retain and develop these within the new practice education structure.

The direct benefits to practice educators and also to social work students will be gained by exploring the views of the participants using the principles of the research methodology 'Appreciative Inquiry'. This approach recognises that individual experiences of success and achievement can help to identify what is working well and build on this to enrich future practice

and capture the best of what we already do. Appreciative Inquiry is based on a '4 D' approach; discovery, dream, design and destiny. The first stage, 'Discovery' will apply to the focus groups, with an emphasis on discovering from participants their personal success stories when assessing social work students on placement. The second stage, 'Dream' will apply to the planning stage of the research, and individual interviews with participants to draw on the best practice ideas from the focus groups and reflect on the new assessment process in order to use the positive experiences as a catalyst for the approaching changes. The third stage, ' Design' refers to the linking and connecting of the data collected to shape the analysis of the data and the final stage, ' Destiny' will apply to the translation of the ideas in to intent and action through recommendations for best practice in social work assessment for a wider practice education audience.

Another benefit will be in disseminating the results of the study for the wider good of practice education in the form of a journal article.

The research will be conducted directly with a sample of 15 practice educators, initially as focus groups and then individually six months later with practice educators who may or may not have been involved in the focus group. The focus groups will be encouraged to share 'peak experiences' they have had when assessing individual students. This will be explored within the context of the approaching changes and therefore will also provide an opportunity for participants to express any issues they have about changes to their role in the future .By the end of the focus group meeting it is planned that there will be a set of statements agreed by the group which summarise their positive stories about assessing students. The individual interviews will progress the ideas from the focus group to consider individual views about the changes to social work assessment and identify best practice ideas. The analysis of the data will involve linking experiences through thematic analysis and the identification of recommendations to benefit practice education; both in terms of the participants and the wider forum of practice education.

Overview of the Areas of Questioning in the Focus Groups and Interviews;

To remain true to the spirit of Appreciative Inquiry both the focus groups and interviews will be carried out in a non-directive, unstructured way which encourages participants to explore and share ideas within a free-flowing climate.

Focus Groups;

- *Introductions and brief explanation of the rationale for the study and the underpinning methodology of Appreciative Inquiry*
- *Warm up exercise involving a visual, practical, shared task*

- *Exchange 'best practice' success stories of participant's experiences of assessing social work students. (This is based on peak experience exercises often used in coaching or team building)*
- *Look ahead to imminent changes to social work practice learning to pose the question; 'If you had three wishes for future social work practice learning, what would they be?'*
- *Invite the group to identify salient ideas and reflections from the session to agree some best practice experiences and aspirations for future social work practice education.*

Interviews;

- *Recap on the outcomes of the focus groups and the connection with the individual interviews based on Appreciative Inquiry and using change as a catalyst for building on identified good practice initiatives*
- *Consider the success stories and frame these with the new social work assessment process which places an emphasis on holistic assessment and continual professional development (participants will be familiar with this but a diagram of the framework will be provided)*
- *Reflect on how the peak experiences could apply to the assessment framework and the individual assessment domains to capture best practice ideas*
- *Identify what resources and support participants will need to move forward and assess students with the new framework; identify an audit of current knowledge, training and experience*
- *Explore ideas on how to disseminate the work achieved through collaboration. With the visual aid of a 'dissemination tree' identify different dissemination branches that could be achieved for different beneficiaries such as students, practice educator forums, practitioner research etc.*
- *Complete the interviews with plans to send participants information on the main themes from the analysis of the data and the recommendations for disseminating the work.*

8. Please indicate the methodological design(s) and other features of your study

☐ YES Literature review	☐ Clinical Trial
☐ Clinical Trial	☐ Randomised
☐ Scoping/mapping study	☐ Controlled
☐ Policy analysis/service evaluation	☐ Single blind
☐ Case-control study	☐ Double blind
☐ Survey	☐ Incidence/prevalence study
☐ Cohort study	☐ Systematic review/meta analysis
☐ Economic evaluation	☐ YES Qualitative (please elaborate using the "other" box below)

Other (please use this box if your proposal is qualitative research **or** if your quantitative method is not listed above)

> *The research is qualitative and will include a two staged research method which will commence with focus groups and then six months later will involve individual participants in interviews.*

9.   Sampling Procedure

Please include sample size and power calculation (if applicable). Sufficient detail should be given to enable any calculation to be repeated

There are over 40 independent practice educators who work with the host university to assess social work students on placement. A sample of 15 practice educators will be sought for the focus group and the individual interviews. This is approximately 40% of the total and will offer a sufficient sample to work with.

10.   Study Procedures

Please describe study methods, including all measurements, confounders and outcomes, process and follow-up.

As indicated, this is a qualitative piece of research which will use study methods of focus groups and individual interviews. The '4 D' Appreciative Inquiry approach will be used for both the research planning, data collection and data analysis stages

11.   Planned Analysis

How will you analyse your data?

Collected stories and ideas of best practice will be collated both during the research study and at the end of the process. This will be in three stages;

- *The organisation of data from the focus groups with the involvement of the participants to agree a number of summaries or statements which incorporate the stories and ideas of best practice*

- *After the individual interviews there will be the initial sorting, organising and indexing of the findings. Reference will be made to the assessment criteria for the social work assessment framework (Professional Capabilities Framework) to find out is there are links between the 'best practice' experiences of practice educators and the new assessment process which has a holistic and developmental approach to individual student's learning*

- *This will be followed by the analysis and explanations from the research study which will connect to the broader context of existing knowledge in social work education for wider dissemination of the findings.*

Have you taken statistical advice?		
Yes ☐	No *☐	N/A ☐
From whom?	Please justify *This is qualitative research and will not include any statistical data*	
Have you taken analytical advice?		
Yes *☐	No ☐	N/A ☐
From whom? *Study Supervisor and Course Lead*	Please justify	

12.   **References**

Cite up to 10 references

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2. Banks, S (2012) (4th ed.) *'Ethics and Values in Social Work'*. Basingstoke; Palgrave, Macmillan
3. Bellinger, A + Elliott, T (2011) '*What Are You Looking At? The Potential of Appreciative Inquiry as a Research Approach for Social Work'*. British Journal of Social Work **41** pp 708-725..
4. Cooperrider, D.L. + Srivastva, S (1987) '*Appreciative Inquiry in Organisational Life'* Research in Organisational Change and Development. **1** pp129-69
5. Foster, J (2009) '*Thinking on the Front Line; why some social work teams struggle and others thrive*' Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust.
6. Lefevre, M (2005) *'Facilitating Practice Learning and Assessment; The Influence of Relationship'.* Social Work Education, volume 24, **5,** pp 565-583
7. Ritchie, J + Lewis, J (2010) *'Qualitative Research Practice; A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers'.* London, Sage.
8. Rubin, H, J + Rubin, I.S. (1995) '*Qualitative Interviews: The Art of Hearing Data'*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
9. Scholar, H, McCaughan, S, McLaughlin, H + Coleman, A (2012) *' Why Is This Not Social Work*? *The contribution of 'Non-Traditional' Placements in Preparing Social Work Students for Practice'*. Social Work Education: The International Journal. **7,** pp 932-950.
10. Williams, S + Rutter, L (2010) *'The Practice Educator's Handbook'*. Exeter, Learning Matters.

13.   **Dissemination**

Please state your plans for disseminating your research findings.

Plans for disseminating the research will focus on existing practice education forums and partnerships in addition to the direct benefit for the host university, the social work department and the practice educators who work with us.

Different ways to disseminate finding will include;

- *A presentation to a regional partnership forum for practice learning to involve some of the research participants*

- *An article to be published within a social work journal (The British Journal of Social Work)*
- *A possible conference at the university centred on social work practice education and best practice ideas in the light of changes to social work student assessments.*

14.   **Project Plan and Milestones**

List of key tasks	Timing (in months)

e.g.   1) Organise focus groups
        2) Data collection
        3) Data entry
	Months 1–2
	Months 2-5
	Months 3-6

1) *Letter to be sent to research participants with information sheet and consent form*	*Month 1 (May 2013)*
2) *Organise the focus group sessions based on the first stage of the '4 D' Appreciative Inquiry model.*	*Month 2 (June 2013)*
3) *Arrange a periodic review and supervision*	*Month 3 (July 2013)*
4) *Analysis of data from the focus group session*	*Month 5 (September 2013)*
5) *Contact participants with summarised feedback and invite for individual interviews*	*Month 6 (October 2013)*
6) *Commence individual interviews with up to 15 participants based on the second stage of the '4 D' AI model.*	*Month 8-9 (January to February 2014)*
7) *Initial analysis of data from interviews*	*Month 9 (February 2014)*
8) *Exhibition of work and initial dissemination of findings to include presentation of research planning, implementation and initial analysis, a three-way supervision session, the justification assignment and feedback to research participants*	*Month 10 – 16 (March – September 2014*
9) *Full analysis of data to include the coding and thematic analysis using Appreciative Inquiry methodology to guide the process. With reference to the '4D' AI model this will link with the third and fourth stages; ' Design' and ' Destiny' and will progress the thematic analysis through to recommended intent and actions for a wider social work education audience.*	*Month 17 -20 (October – December 2014)*
10) *Complete the orientation assignment to synthesise and critically analyse the research*	*Month 20 (December 2014)*
11) *Start to write up the research dissertation*	*Month 21 – 27 (January –July 2015)*
12) *Viva Voce*	*Month 27 (July 2015)*

15. **Who will do the Study?**

Who will be responsible?

I will take responsibility for the study with the support of the course lead and my study supervisor

Who will actually do the research?

I will be carrying out the research

What other members of staff will be included?

The research participants are independently employed but work directly with the university. I will be informing and updating my colleagues within the social work team and the manager of the team at various stages of the research

Who will be undertaking the study and what will their role be?

I will be undertaking the study as the researcher but will also be well known to all participants in my role at the university as social work practice learning lead.

Are they competent to undertake this work?

I have in depth experience as a practice educator and responsibility for providing support, information and training to practice educators. Therefore I feel that I am competent to undertake this study with the support and guidance of the Professional Doctorate staff and my supervisor.

Has the person named received adequate training?

I have received training and tutoring as part of the doctorate programme of study.

For those yet to be assigned to the study, will they be receiving training prior to investigation?

I will be the sole person assigned to carry out the research study.

16. **What practical procedures will the Participants undergo?**

Details and frequency of interventions – to what extent are they part of normal activities?

The collection of data through collaboration with practice educators will take place in two stages, with a six month gap between the first and second stages. The first stage will be focus groups involving approximately 15 participants. It is anticipated that two separate focus groups will need to be carried out. The second stage of the data collection will take place six months later and will consist of 15 individual interviews. The participants taking part in the focus group may then take part in the interviews but this is not essential and participants will be given the option of progressing or just being involved in the focus group. Practice educators will not engage in research interventions as part of their normal activities at the university although the research topic will be based on their day to day remit of assessing social work students Practice educators are invited to attend a range of developmental sessions over the course of each academic year. These are an important part of continuous professional development and are of a voluntary nature. The participation in the research project will require practice educators to volunteer their own time although it is envisaged that there will be a direct benefit in terms of increased knowledge and the opportunity to collaborate with peers about social work assessment and practice learning.

What are the degrees of inconvenience/pain/discomfort for the participants?

This will not be a relevant factor for the planned research although if a participant does become distressed or unwell in any way during the data collection process there will be arrangements set in place for additional support to be available. The university counselling service can provide additional support if a participant becomes distressed and the researcher will also set extra time aside to de-brief and talk through any issues that may have caused distress.

What are the possible adverse effects/complications, and what are the chances of these occurring?

There are no anticipated adverse effects or complications which will arise from the participants being involved in the research study. However, sensitive issues may be touched on during the research and this will be dealt with carefully with support from university services and with the back-up of detailed information sheets and consent forms circulated to participants before commencing the research. Confidentiality will be respected and this will be stressed at the beginning of each group and individual session. If however unsafe practice is disclosed during the group or individual sessions then it may be necessary to take this further and over-rule confidentiality procedures. There will be clear reference to this in the participant's information sheet and consent form.

17. **How will Participants be Selected and Approached?**

- Always state if minors, elderly, pregnant or lactating women, or mentally incapacitated people will be included.
- Always consider subject exclusion in the light of possible drug side-effects, drug interactions or hazards from practical procedures.

Please include a list of:

a. Subject inclusion criteria

The participants included in the research will be invited to take part and therefore will be pre-selected. The participants will be part of the cohort of independent practice educators who work regularly with the university's practice learning team to assess social work students on placement. The independent practice educators invited to participate in the research will be those individuals who have experience in assessing social work students across a range of placement settings and who have currency in their practice (have recent experience of assessing students within the last 12 months) The reason for selecting participants is to ensure that there is a balanced community of colleagues which will allow the sharing of ideas and experiences generated from their current practice. It is anticipated that this approach will reduce bias as thought has been given to which practice educators to invite rather than inviting the entire cohort and selecting those who respond positively first.

b. Subject exclusion criteria

The decision was taken to exclude participants who are practice educators based within agency placements used by the university practice learning team. The rationale for this was based on gaining the views of independent practice educators who have worked across a broad range of placement settings and will have a more holistic over-view of practice education.

Have those responsible for the participants (e.g. course leader, HOD) given their approval?

Yes *☐ The social work   No ☐   N/A ☐

course manager has provided

approval for the participants to

be involved in the research. _As
the participants are self-
employed consent from an
employer is not required
although the social work
course manager has given his
approval for them to
participate in the research.*

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18.   How will the Research be Funded?

We need to know the amounts of payments to the researcher, the department concerned and the participant/volunteer

There will be no financial payments made to the researcher, the social work department or to individual participants.

We will want to know that costs to the institution have been discussed with the appropriate department head and whether there is any 'interest', financial or otherwise, to personnel or departments.

There are no significant costs anticipated to be generated from the research to be carried by the university. The benefits of the research will be for the wider dissemination of information which will provide insight in to the support needs of practice educators in the light of pending changes to social work practice education but will not generate any financial gain for individuals or for the organisation.

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19.   Consent

Please use the following as a checklist before providing a full statement

- Who will ask for consent?
- Consent must be obtained in writing
- It should normally be given to the participant at least 24 hours before consent is obtained
- A consent form must be signed by all participants.
- This consent form must state that the information sheet has been read and understood.
- It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the participant fully comprehends and interprets the content of the information sheet used for the project as it is intended.
- For participants with limited understanding of the English language, it is important that arrangements are made to contact an English speaking translator.
- Participants with reading difficulties may have problems in understanding the information sheet. The content must be fully explained to the participant, preferably in the presence of a third party, before signing the consent form.
- When the research is to be carried out on children under 18 or people of clouded judgement, we would like to know what methods will be used to obtain consent.
- If it is possible that the research will produce abnormal clinical or investigational findings, the Committee will want to know how this will be handled. For instance, will the participant or their general practitioner be informed? Would treatment be considered appropriate?

---

20. Readability Evaluations for Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet

- To assist in the participant's understanding, the information sheet should be clear and comprehensive. We suggest using Gunning's FOGG Test (*see attached, Appendix A & B*), aiming for a maximum score of 10.
- Typeface should be a minimum of 12 in Arial and illustrations used for procedures wherever possible. The use of phonetics to express difficult medical terms is recommended.

21. Arrangements for Indemnity Insurance

Please enclose any documents relating to indemnity with your submission.

Is any product covered by insurance or indemnity from the manufacturer or other third party?

☐ Yes, I understand that, if my research proposal is approved, I will be covered by Bucks New University's public liability and employee insurance indemnity which is provided by Zurich Municipal Insurance Company

If so, does the manufacturer accept strict liability for non- negligent injury?

☐ Yes

Please provide the following information:

1. Full name and address of sponsoring company

Zurich Municipal Insurance Company, Zurich House, 2, Gladiator Way, Farnborough, Hampshire, GU14 6GB

2. Name and telephone number of company representative

Sarah Napier, 0870 2418050

Do you understand that you must be indemnified against mishaps due to negligence?

☐ Yes

22. Data Protection Act

Does your study involve the use of computerized participants' records?

☐ No

If so, have you complied with the requirements of the Data Protection Act?

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### 23.	Authorisation

For Faculty academic staff:

Please ask your Head of School to sign that they have read the application form and that they accept responsibility for the applicant who is undertaking the work in their department.

Signed: ………Sinclair Coward………………………………….

			Head of School

Date   ………………………….

For undergraduates, masters and research students:

Please ask your supervisor to sign that they have read the application form and that they accept responsibility for the applicant who is undertaking the work.

Signed   ………*Elaine Arnull*……

			Supervisor

I, as the Supervisor, recognise the benefit of attending the ethics committee meeting with the student

Signed   ………………………………………………….

			Supervisor

Date   ………………………….

### 24.	Checklist for Applicant

☐ The Ethics Application Pro-forma

☐ The Participant Information Sheet

☐ The Consent Form (see notes in Section 19)

FOGG's TEST OF READABILITY

NOTE: For calculating the FOGG score without using your computer, please follow these instructions:

1. Take any sample of 100 words in complete sentences.

2. Count only whole sentences by counting full stops, if the last full sentence stops short of the 100th word count only full sentences for this stage.

3. Count the number of words with three or more syllables (example, mouth the words and note movements e.g. marmalade = three syllables. Omit capitalised words such as names.

4. Divide the number of sentences into 100; answer = x

5. Add the number of words with more than three syllables to your number, i.e. x + y; y being the number of words.

6. Multiply x + y by 0.3 to give an American grade equivalent.

7. Add 5.0 to your answer to give the equivalent to an English reading age.

Example: four complete sentences and nine words with three or more syllables:

* 4 (sentences divided into 100)

= 25

* 25 + 9 (words with three or more syllables)

= 34

* Multiply 34 by 0.3

= 10.2 (American grade equivalent)

* 10.2 + 5.0

= 15.2 (English reading age)

The material has a reading age level of approximately 15 years.

FOGG's TEST OF READABILITY

Instructions on how this can be calculated using Microsoft WORD on your computer

To display readability statistics:

1. On the Tools menu, click Options, and then click the Spelling & Grammar tab.
2. Select the Check grammar with spelling check box.
3. Select the Show readability statistics check box, and then click OK.
4. Click Spelling and Grammar on the Standard toolbar.

After completing the Spelling and Grammar check, the system will automatically provide the readability statistics including the Flesch Reading Ease. To obtain FOGG's score, add 5 to the Flesch Score.

Appendix 2: Consent Form for; Social Work Practice Education and Changes to Social Work Student Assessment

Please tick the appropriate boxes

I have read and understood the project information sheet…………………………………………………………………… ☐

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project……………………………………………………………… ☐

I agree to take part in the project. (Taking part in the project will include taking part in a focus group and an individual interview, or if preferred, just the focus group. Both the group and the individual interview will be audio-taped.)
…… ☐

I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time and I will not be asked questions about why I no longer want to take part……………………………………………………………………………………………… ☐

Select only one of the next two options:

I would like my name used where I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised…… ☐

I do not want my name used in this project………………………………………………………………………………… ☐

I understand my personal details such as phone number or address will not be revealed to people outside of this project………
☐

I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs but my name will not be used unless I requested it above……………………………………………………………………………………………………. ☐

I agree for the data I provided to be archived while the process of transcribing the data from the taped focus group and interviews is being carried out.

I understand that other researchers will have access to these data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of these data………. ☐

I understand that other researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs………
☐

I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to the named researcher Jenni Burton……
☐

On this basis I am happy to participate in the study; ' Social Work Practice Education and Changes to Social Work Student Assessment'.

Name of Participant …………………………   Signature…………………………   Date………….

Student ID: 20901505

Name of Researcher…………………………..   Signature…………………………   Date………….

If you have any queries or concerns, please contact: Jenni Burton. Senior Lecturer Social Work Department. Address; Buckinghamshire New University, Queen Alexander Road, High Wycombe, HP11 2JZ. Telephone Number; 01494 522141 ext. 3532. Email address; jburto01@bucks.ac.uk.

One copy to be kept by the participant, one to be kept by the researcher

bucks
new university

Appendix 3 Letter to Accompany the Participants' Information Sheet

Dear……………

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study I am planning which is based on gaining the views and ideas of practice educators about the new 'Professional Capabilities Framework' assessment process for social work students and to help in the process of seeking positive ways forward for social work practice education.

The participation would consist of one focus group meeting and one individual interview session. There will be a few months between the focus group and the interviews with a planned start this summer. There is also the option of just participating in the focus group. It is anticipated that the research will be disseminated and published for the wider benefit of the social work profession.

Your participation in this research study would be very much appreciated. Please read the attached information sheet which provides more information about the study. If you would like to be involved please contact me by email with details of your preferred contact address/ email or phone number. If you prefer you can complete the details below and send this to me at Bucks New University.

Many thanks and look forward to hearing from you,

Jenni Burton. Practice Development Tutor. Bucks New University.

Social Work Team, Bucks New University,

Queen Alexandra Road, High Wycombe HP11 2JZ

Telephone; 01494 522141 extension 3532

Email; jburto01@bucks.ac.uk.

Name of Practice Educator   ---

I would like to take part in the research --

My contact details are;--

Appendix 4 Information Sheet for Participants of 1st and 2nd Stage

Social Work Research Participant's Information Sheet

Introduction.

The title of the research study is; 'Perceptions of Practice Educators in Social Work: Explorations of the Effects of Change'.

The study is being undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate in Social Work which is taught at Buckinghamshire New University and accredited by Coventry University.

The Research Topic.

The researcher, Jenni Burton, is a professional social worker and educator with current responsibilities for practice and placements at Buckinghamshire New University. The area on which the research focuses is particularly relevant due to the forthcoming changes to social work practice learning and the new student assessment framework (The Professional Capabilities Framework) In undertaking the study the researcher wishes to:

- Collaborate with practice educators to gain their views about the new assessment process for social work students

- Provide an opportunity for educators to contribute to the changes

- Help to seek positive ways forward for social work practice education.

The study is therefore being undertaken on the basis of Appreciative Inquiry. This approach fits in well with the research aims as AI appreciates the value of individuals who can shape and develop social work reforms according to their unique experiences and ideas and acknowledge the aspects of practice education that work well and need to be retained and built upon. Further information about Appreciative Inquiry can be provided if required.

Proposed Research Plan.

The research study will be in two stages although you may decide whether you wish to be involved in just the initial stage or both stages;

- Stage 1 will take place in July 2013 in the form of a focus group. This will be informal but the focus for the discussion will be the change from the National Occupational Standards of student assessment to the Professional Capabilities Framework of student assessment. In line with the underlying aims and ethos of the research methods the emphasis will be placed on exchanging positive experiences of practice learning to identify what has

worked well for individual students. The intention in doing so is to be able to consider how, or if, these positive experiences are able to be used as a platform for assessing students on placement under the new PCF arrangements. The focus group will last no more than 1 hour and 30 minutes.

- Stage 2 of the study will take place six months later in the form of individual interviews. The interviews will ask interviewees to reflect on and describe any 'success' stories. These stories will be used in the analysis to develop a narrative about best practice. The dissemination of the findings will include you as a participant and a wider audience, for example through conference presentations and written presentations for social work practitioners. The interview will last no more than 1 hour.

The Right to Withdraw.

You have the right to withdraw from the study and do not need to tell me why. Should you wish to do that I would discuss with you what will happen to information you had already provided, for example if you had participated in the focus group but did not wish to be interviewed. Data provided up to the point of withdrawal from the study will be removed and destroyed in all cases where a participant wishes to withdraw themselves and their contribution. A deadline date of March 2014 will be set for the withdrawal of data, as after this date the process of incorporating data for wider analysis will begin.

If a participant wishes to withdraw their further involvement in the study but would like their data to remain, there will be no requirement to destroy the data.

The information shared within the sessions will be confidential and the sensitivity of the subject will be respected in the spirit of social work values and codes of practice (HCPC Standards of Proficiency and BASW Code of Ethics) Arrangements will be put in place if any information discussed during the study causes any distress to an individual. Data generated during the research, the storage of data and the dissemination of data will be treated with care and under the remit of confidentiality and the Data Protection Act (1998) Your anonymity will be protected when data is saved and recorded. I will do this by using a code for each individual participant and by not naming place of work, address or any information directly identifying an individual.

The research study seeks to provide benefits for the practice education profession, social work students and for Buckinghamshire New University as the host organisation. Individual participants will not directly benefit from the research although dissemination seeks to widen the benefits to a broader audience as outlined above.

The Next Step.

After you have received this information and the accompanying letter I will make contact with you within the next working week to discuss any aspects of the research with you and also discuss how you might become involved. If you do not wish to participate you can email me at this address;

Jburto01@bucks.ac.uk

Thank you very much for your time.

Jenni Burton….

Appendix 5 Information Sheet for Participants of 3rd Stage

Social Work Research Participant's Information Sheet

Background to the Research Study

The research already undertaken as part of my professional doctorate research was conducted with social work practice educators in two stages over a period of eleven months (July 2013-June2014) The title of this study is; ' *Perceptions of Practice Educators in Social Work; Explorations of the Effects of Change'.*

The study topic was selected due to the recent changes in social work practice education; the new Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) assessment framework for social work students and the requirements for practice educators to gain The Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) training to assess social work students on placement. In essence, the research already carried out met the following outcomes;

- Collaboration with practice educators, initially in small focus groups, to gain their views on the pending changes to the assessment of social work students as stage one of the research
- Further collaboration with practice educators through individual interviews conducted six months later to discover their early experiences of the changes and the impact for their role
- To provide opportunities for practice educators to contribute to the changes
- To help seek positive ways forward for social work practice education.

Theory Base for the Research

The methodology used for the research is Appreciative Inquiry (AI) The approach fits well with the research study as AI appreciates the value of individuals who can shape and develop changes in practice education according to their unique experiences and recognise the aspects of practice education that work well and can be retained and built on. Both stages of the research study have focussed on the positive experiences of practice educators and their role in assessing social work students through developing success stories as the narrative for best practice and as a catalyst for change.

The Next Stage of the Research

The third stage of the research study will triangulate the data already gathered by sharing the results of the study with professional social work forum participants to seek positive ways forward for practice education and the individual continuing professional development (CPD) of social work educators. The title of the third stage of the research is; '*Exploration of the Perspectives of Professional Social Work Forums on Recent Changes for Practice Educators'.*

The aims for this element of the study are;

- To share the findings of the research study to establish wider participation and strengthen the evidence base for practice education with the university

- To triangulate data and seek ways to develop a regional approach to the support and training needs of practice educators as part of the PCF social work career structure
- To disseminate material gained through collaboration and write a journal article based on changes to the role of practice education and recommendations for increasing the infrastructure of support for practice educators.

Planned Steps to be Taken

1. An initial presentation to social work forums to present the research findings and the aims for the next stage of the study
2. Sampling to be carried out through requesting further information via a feedback form to be sent to members of the forums.
3. A further meeting to feed- back on the data gathered and to share recommendations to strengthen the support provided to practice educators as they support and assess social work students during a time of change.
4. A journal article to be written as a culmination of the findings across the three stages of the research study

The Right to Withdraw

There is no obligation to participate in the study and you have a right to withdraw at any time. The information shared at the meetings and within the questionnaires will be confidential and the sensitivity of the material will be respected at all times and in the spirit of social work values and codes of practice (HCPC Standards of Proficiency and BASW Code of Ethics)

Anonymity will be protected when data is saved and recorded. This will be done by coding individual names and removing the place of work, address or any information directly identifying an individual.

The research study seeks to provide benefits for the practice education profession and the wider social work profession and for Buckinghamshire New University as the host organisation. Individual participants will not directly benefit from the research although dissemination seeks to widen the benefits to a broader audience as outlined above.

When you have received this information and heard about the research study at the social work forum's meeting I will circulate a summary of the research and a brief feedback form

Thank you very much for your time. Jenni Burton. Jburto01@bucks.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Feedback Form for Participants of the 3ʳᵈ Stage

Feedback Form; Continual Professional Development for Practice Educators

The very brief presentation at the SWEG forum on 1ˢᵗ October 2014 was based on a research study carried out in 2013/14 as part of my Professional Doctorate in Social Work. The topic for the research is to explore practice educator's views on their changing role due to social work reforms and their identified need for increased support and guidance. Please can you complete the short feedback form. Although I am very grateful for your comments participation is, of course, voluntary.

1. **Recent research on the changes to the practice educator role identified the need for an improved infrastructure of support which recognises the complexity of their work in assessing social work students. What are your thoughts?**

……….

2. **Are there any aspects of the views expressed by the research participants in the summary that could feed in to existing regional initiatives around work force development, social work career structure and continual professional development?**

……….

3. **In what ways could the regional support for practice education be strengthened? Please list three different ways that you think the infrastructure of support for practice educators could be improved**

……….

4. **Finally, do you have any additional ideas about how the research could be taken forward to promote the structure of support and the status of social work practice educators across the region?**

………..........

Please complete the form and email this to Jenni Burton on jburto01@bucks.ac.uk. Many thanks for your help.

Appendix 7: Summary of Three Wishes Statements

Summary Of The Three Wishes Statements Gained from the 4 Group Interviews.

Interview 1; 23/7/13

1. Good support coming from placement agencies for social work students which recognises their learning needs and the support required for students as distinct from employees.

2. Enthusiasm for having social work student placements across a much wider range of settings; particularly across statutory services.

3. Recognition built in to agencies to encourage social workers to take a student; reduced work load, access to training, built in to the ethics of the agencies that having students is built in to the working role requirements.

4. Developing the learning environment for the placement so that it is not just the responsibility of the practice educator, but of the wider team to open up different levels of understanding and knowledge.

5. The diversity of how different Universities deliver their social work education courses is interesting but more shared practice learning documentation would be appreciated.

6. Linked to the above wish, for uniformity to be embedded as part of PCF so that expectations for the finished social worker and anticipated skills and qualities are the same

7. Regular practice forums for practice educators; just an informal time for us to get together and talk about our successes and things we want to improve on.

Interview 2; 26/7/13

1. More training and support for practice educators so that new information can be disseminated

2. Peer support for practice educators with local geographical networks and on-line discussions.

3. More communication from the Universities; with more advance warning of information and teaching sessions to ensure that we are well prepared for the practice educator role and the forthcoming changes.

4. More honing of the guidance for assessing students; some of the assessment information can be vague and open to individual interpretation. The evidence that

the students need to collect to be assessed against can be unclear and there is often the need to be very creative in this. What is 'good enough' evidence?

5. Much more reflective practice to be evidenced in practice portfolios and less emphasis on work based products that do not really show the learning the student has gained.

6. A wider expectation of the practice educator across a range of University work rather than purely to assess students. Role expectation could include recruitment of new students for the social work courses, quality assurance for practice learning and presentations about our role when students are on placement.

7. More research like this or practice educators to participate in; this has been a really helpful forum for me.

Interview 3; 18/9/13;

1. To extend the model of practice education where there is a work based supervisor and also an off-site practice educator so that the student gains the advantage of both practitioners rather than just one person carrying out the dual role.

2. To professionalise the role of the practice educator and raise the profile through increased requirements for taking students regularly and updating training and recognise the value of the role as an important component of social work and not an 'add on'.

3. To build in a career structure for practice educators, so that it is not a job you do after retiring and set social work on a par with medicine, nursing, law, to have a proper professional career structure.

4. A national structure for practice education in addition to local support networks. This forum where we can develop particular topics and ideas and share our learning would be great.

5. More uniformity across different Universities providing social work education. This with particular reference to requirements for the student's placement portfolios.

6. That practice educators are competent and confident enough to produce newly qualified social workers that are fit to practice.

7. That students are given quality placements that provide a good learning experience and the opportunity to develop their skills and recognise the privileged position that social work gives them. Sometimes a lot of support needs to be given to students to recognise the power the position holds and placements need to support them to use this positively with those they are working with.

8. That good social workers are supported to access training and development as practice educators and to maintain this; and not just those employed in local authorities, It feels as though the PCF will provide a more consistent tool for measuring practice; not just for students, but for newly qualified social workers and those at all levels of practice. I hope that it maintains relevance throughout a social workers career as the NOS evidently did not do.

Interview 4; 24/9/13;

1. To see social work portrayed within multi-disciplinary teams as a positive and valued professions.

2. To raise awareness of the social work role as part of other professional training such as nursing.

3. To recognise the value of social work within multi-professional practice and ensure that practices such as 'The Hackney Model' encourage a broader professional base and recognition of what social workers actually do as part of their professional role.

4. To empower social workers working in a medical environment such as a hospital to promote the social model rather than the medical model of working with people.

5. An increased emphasis on theory to enhance social work practice

6. An increased emphasis on critical reflection and analysis to improve social work practice and less emphasis on managerial outcomes and size of case- loads.

7. To increase the knowledge base of social workers and the individual requirement of each social worker to commit to continual professional development.

8. To move away from the fragmentation of the social work role towards the holistic, co-ordinating role. This should include assessment, intervention and review and not focussed on assessment and safeguarding and the care management role.

9. To broaden the role of the practice educator in direct practice; not just for the assessment of social work students but also to use their expertise for other students and newly qualified social workers across a team. Linked to this, to recognise the role of the PE through reduced case load, financial incentives etc.

10. To recognise the complexity of the practice educator role; particularly when a student is failing a placement. The gatekeeper role is essential and demands high knowledge and skills.

11. To introduce a structure of support for practice educators, which includes an individual working agreement, supervision, training and information, appraisal and

ensure that there is scope for practice educators to be involved in a wide range of roles within the social work department of the University.

12. To standardise expectations for practice educators across regions to ensure that individuals are carrying out the required amount of assessing, training, quality assurance.

13. For practice educators to recognise the responsibility to keep on learning and not expect that The HEI, The College of Social Work, The Employer will train and teach us; this should be part of our professional responsibility and the need to demonstrate continual professional development.

Appendix 8: Nvivo Coding Data

Appendix 9: Code Mapping Matrix

Key Themes	Combined Codes	Open Codes
THE PRACTICE EDUCATOR ROLE	**REFLECTIVE, DIFFERENT SUPPORT FOR ON-SITE/OFF-SITE PE'S. PLACEMENT, FAILING STUDENTS, SUCCESS STORIES, PEPS TRAINING, FUNDING, POWER DYNAMICS, NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES.**	Positive experiences, Reflection on Role, Adult learning, Resilience, Assessing Adults, Challenging Placements, CPD, How Practice Educators are Perceived by Others, Success Stories, Failing Students, Professional Judgement, Borderline students, PEPS Training, Students-Midway Placement, University Tutors, Written Guidance, Gate-Keepers, Mutual learning, Advocacy, Trust, Dyslexic Students, Support, Lack of time,
EXPERIENCES OF USING PCF	**HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT, REFLECTIVE, ASSESSMENT AMBIGUITY, DIFFERENT LEARNING THEORIES, SUPERVISION, ISOLATION, PLACEMENTS, SUCCESS STORIES.**	Lack of Exemplars, Ambiguity, NOS – deeper levels of Learning, Practical application of PCF, PCF as learning tool, Objective Assessment, Enriched learning opportunities, Professional Judgement, Creativity, Reflection, Different Learning Theories and Techniques, Structure of the Domains, Repetition, Time, Supervision, Standardisation, Uncertainty, Confidence in PCF, Success Stories
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENT AND PRACTICE EDUCATOR	**QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS, POWER DYNAMICS, PLACEMENT SUPERVISION, PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES, FAILING STUDENTS, NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES, INFORMAL SUPPORT, REFLECTIVE, SUCCESS STORIES.**	Power Dynamics, Adult Learning, Guidance, Gate-keepers, Borderline Students, Proactive Students, Professional Boundaries, Students Perceptions of PE, Transference, Early Support, Counselling, Support for Students, Quality of the Relationship, Failing Students, Success Stories, Mentoring, Role Confusion, Challenging Placements, Experiences of Success, Communication, Unwilling Students, Student's Additional Needs, Student's Learning Styles, Lack of Time, Advocate
SUPPORT FOR PRACTICE EDUCATORS	**INFORMAL SUPPORT, ISOLATION, INCREASED SUPPORT, ROLE DEFINITION AND UNCERTAINTY, PLANNED WORKSHOPS, PEPS, SUPERVISION, DIFFERENT SUPPORT FOR ON-SITE/OFF-SITE PRACTICE EDUCATORS**	Supervision, Working Together, Student's Additional Needs, Structure of the Degree, Early Support, Research, Information about PCF +PEPS, Planned Forums, Workshops, Action Learning Sets, Peer Support, On-line Information, Increased Workload, College of Social Work, BASW, CPD, Different Support for On-Site and Off-Site PE's, Financial Changes, Role-Widening, Role Confidence.
IMPACT OF CHANGE FOR PRACTICE EDUCATORS	**ROLE DEFINITION/UNCERTAINTY, JOINED UP MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PRACTICE, INCREASED SUPPORT FOR PE'S, FUNDING, PLACEMENTS, PEER SUPPORT, REFLECTIVE, CAREER STRUCTURE**	Competing Social Work Programmes, Ambiguity, Comparison, Different Levels of Training, Student's Additional Needs, Increased Workload, Role Reflection, Financial Changes, Working Together, Job Uncertainty, Competing Programmes, Joined up Practice, Enthusiasm for Student Placements, More Placements, Changes in the Voluntary Sector, Increased Support, Regional and National PE Structures, Funding
ASPIRATION OF FUTURE FOR PRACTICE EDUCATION	**CAREER STRUCTURE, CPD INDIVIDUAL LEARNING, SUCCESS STORIES, PEPS, JOB ROLE DEFINITION, UNCERTAINTY, JOINED UP MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PRACTICE, PLACEMENTS, FUNDING.**	Joined Up Practice, More Research, Share Research with Senior Managers, Master Classes and Pedagogy, Increased IT, Skype, More IPP, Empower Social Work in Medical Models, Increased CPD, Higher Status for Social Work, Increased Status for Practice Education, Regional and National PE Structures, Multi-Disciplinary Working, PE Career Structure, Enthusiasm for Student Placements, Improved Placement Learning Environments, More Holistic Practice, Value Attached to PE.

Appendix 10: Endorsement for Practice Learning Text Published 201

macmillan
education

"This clearly written and well-informed text provides social work students with a good insight into key issues relating to the important areas of practice learning. It will be a valuable resource for students progressing from preparation for their first placement to becoming newly qualified practitioners." - Melanie Parris, *Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Buckinghamshire New University, UK, and author for An Introduction to Social Work Practice: A Practical Handbook.*

Learning through practice lies at the heart of social work education, providing the opportunity for students to develop and employ the skills, experience and knowledge they need to become effective social workers. This exciting new addition to Palgrave's Practical Social Work series provides an integrated and user-friendly approach to practice learning by putting placements within a broader learning framework. Rather than treating placements as an isolated aspect of the social work degree, *Practice Learning in Social Work* shows how they are relevant to all aspects of the social work experience.

Divided in to three parts, this book's pragmatic approach mirrors students' own journey as they progress from preparation for practice, through to actual experience, and then beyond this to support personal and professional development right up to qualification as a Newly Qualified Social Worker.

With a strong emphasis on service users and carers as central stake holders, *Practice Learning in Social Work* illustrates the practical nature of the profession with realistic case scenarios based on real life learning experiences, reflective learning exercises and practice led research references throughout. Progress checklists, linked to the Professional Capabilities Framework, also provide readers with the opportunity to assess their own strengths and learning needs.

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Appendix 11: Power Point Key Note Presentation of Research

Perceptions of Practice Education in Social Work: Reflections on the use of Appreciative Inquiry

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Practice Educator

❑ A Practice Educator is a qualified social worker who has completed post qualifying training (PT Award or PEPS 1+2) to assess social work students during their social work placements

❑ Each student needs to complete 170 days during the degree programme across two different social work settings with experience across two different service user groups and 30 social work skills days

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Practice Educator

❑ Each student is allocated a practice educator who will supervise, directly observe and assess the student, completing a final assessment report using the PCF assessment criteria with either a pass or a fail outcome

❑ At Bucks New University there are 35 independent practice educators who carry out the role of supervising and assessing social work students as off-site practice educators across the BSc and MSc social work degree programmes

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Social Work Education Reforms

❑ As from October 2013 the following reforms were agreed by The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and The College of Social Work (TCSW)

❑ All practice educators must hold either the Practice Teacher's Award or go through the new Practice Educator Professional Standards Training (PEPS)

❑ A change from the previous placement structure to 170 days over two placements with 30 additional skills days being delivered by HEI's to strengthen the 'readiness for practice' process.

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Social Work Education Reforms

❑ A change from the National Occupational Standards assessment process for practice learning to the new Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF)

❑ Practice learning documents all altered with a stronger emphasis on holistic assessment from the practice educator.

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Context of the Research Topic
❑ The research topic aims to explore the perceptions of practice educator's about the changes to practice learning

❑ A three staged approach to the study has been conducted. The first stage was completed over three months concluding in September 2013 and involved four small group interviews; this was a mix of independent and on-site practice educators

❑ The aim of the group interviews was to capture the views of participants as they were embarking on the PCF assessment process to discover their initial thoughts.

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Context of the Research Topic

- ❑ The second stage of the research took place from March to June 2014. The research method used was individual interviews with practice educators to explore their first experiences of the reforms and the direct impact for them as individual practitioners and to look at how practice education may look in the future

- ❑ The third stage was carried out from September to December 2014 to share research findings with social work forums and explore ways of increasing support to practice educators

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Why Use Appreciative Inquiry ?

- ❑ To appraise the effectiveness of what already exists in social work practice learning as a positive catalyst for change
- ❑ To gain qualitative data based on the strengths perspective rather than dwell on a deficit, problem focussed view of social work
- ❑ To use individual 'peak experiences' of participants to explore future possibilities

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Principles of Appreciative Inquiry;

- ❑ The inquiry begins with appreciation

- ❑ The inquiry is applicable

- ❑ The inquiry is provocative

- ❑ The inquiry is collaborative
  (Cooperrider + Srivastva, 1987)

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Achieving Transformational Change:

- ❑ Certain qualities need to be present to create individual or organisational transformative change;
- ❑ 1. A focus on changing how people think instead of what they do; *"a new lens for seeing old issues"*
- ❑ 2. A focus on supporting self-organising change processes that flow from new ideas; *" the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes"*
  (Bushe, 2005)

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Synergy between Appreciative Inquiry and Social Work

- ❑ The recognition of the importance of the human relationship between the student and the practice educator (Lefevre, 2005)
- ❑ The importance of power sharing and the recognition of power imbalance in practice assessment. (Tew, 2006)
- ❑ Recognition of the professional 'use of self' in social work. (Trevithick, 2012)
- ❑ The value of 'provocative propositions' taking individual ideas forward to shape change (Bellinger and Elliott, 2011)

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Synergy between Appreciative Inquiry and Social Work

- ❑ Parallels between AI and Reflexivity; exploration of both personal and professional investment in practice education and scope for deeper experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) (Johns, 1995)
- ❑ The importance of individual, group and organisational commitment to shared values to harness strengths. (Cooperrider, 1986)
- ❑ Shared base of pragmatic, action based practice learning based on lived experiences (Reed, 2007)

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Other Research using A.I.

❑ Clarke et al (2006) used the Appreciative Inquiry model to understand the lived experiences of school children; 'to discover the best of what is in order to explore what might be'

❑ Kemp (2000) explored the importance of communication and collaboration for the practice educator/student relationship and the emancipatory qualities of positive power

❑ Michael (2005) found that research participants were eager to dwell on positive stories

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Other Research cont.

❑ Appreciative Inquiry is about what gives life to a system; asking questions that strengthen the capacity to anticipate and extend individual or collective potential;

❑ AI is used in political research (Saha, 2012)

❑ As a methodology for managing organisational change (Ricketts, 2002)

❑ For Spiritual study (Rowett, 2013)

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Continued….

❑ For analysis of leadership studies (Schiller et al, 2011)

❑ As the ethos for positive psychology research (Sheldon and King, 2001)

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Three Staged Research Study

❑ *First Stage*; small group interviews to focus on anticipated changes and change to role due to the reforms being implemented

❑ *Second Stage*; individual interviews six months later to explore the impact of the changes

❑ *Third Stage*; sharing the findings with social work forums to identify ways to strengthen the support and clarify the PE role.

❑ Linking together 4 stages of AI; *Discover-Dream-Design- Deliver.*

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Outline of Stage 1 of Research

❑ Four small group interviews with 12 practice educators in total has been completed.

❑ The group interview structure was based on the first stage of the AI ' 4-D Model' (Coghlan, 2003)

❑ Discovery; appreciating what gives life

❑ Dreaming; envisioning what might be

❑ Designing; setting out action plans

❑ Delivery; determining what might be

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Continued…

❑ Group interviews focussed on the first stage of the '4-D' cycle; Discovery with the following structure;

❑ A reflective exercise to consider experiences of assessing students

❑ Sharing of peak experiences or success stories

❑ Identifying three wishes for practice learning as part of the changes

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Three Wishes

- ❑ Enthusiasm from social work agencies to have students on placement
- ❑ More consistency across different HEI's about practice learning
- ❑ Increased training, support and monitoring of practice educators
- ❑ Peer support for practice educators
- ❑ More guidance on what constitutes 'good enough' assessment
- ❑ A raised profile for practice educators across a range of work areas

Three Wishes

- ❑ More research opportunities like this to share ideas
- ❑ For social work as a profession to be valued across multi-disciplinary teams
- ❑ Increased focus on social work theory to enhance practice
- ❑ More recognition of the complexity of the practice educator role, particularly where a student may be failing their placement
- ❑ For practice educator's themselves to appreciate the need for their continual professional development

Next Step; Individual Interviews

- ❑ The individual interviews were carried out with 12 practice educators and focussed on capturing early impressions about the new PCF assessment process and first experiences
- ❑ The interviews started with an over-view of Appreciative Inquiry and the first stage of the research. The Three Wishes statements were shared
- ❑ The interview structure were semi-structured
- ❑ First questions on early impressions

Individual Interviews

- ❑ Kolb's experiential learning cycle was used to explore the practice educator's role and holistic assessment
- ❑ The interview then focussed on strengths and skills and an analysis of what makes practice assessment successful and enjoyable
- ❑ This was followed by an exploration of the range of support practice educators will need to progress
- ❑ The final emphasis considered on-going changes

Individual Interviews

- ❑ Drawing to the end questions; What is the best piece of advice you could give a new practice educator who wants to learn from your experience?
- ❑ What do you think the practice educator role will look like in 5 years time?
- ❑ Share ideas about how the different communities of practice may benefit from the research outcomes

Individual Interviews

- ❑ The implementation and analysis of the individual interviews has an emphasis on the 'dream' and 'design' stages of AI
- ❑ The initial small group interviews and the individual interviews will aim to provide material to benefit different social work groups or communities of learning; there are several distinct yet merging groups;
- ❑ Practice Educators and Social Work Students
- ❑ Service Users and Family Carers
- ❑ The University and Social Work Forums

Triangulation of Research

Exploration of the Perspectives of Professional Social Work Forums on Recent Changes for Practice Educators.

Planned Steps

- ❏ Presentations to social work forums about the research carried out
- ❏ Sampling through requesting information about support for practice educators in a questionnaire/feedback form
- ❏ Feedback on the data gathered
- ❏ A journal article to be written as a culmination of the findings across the three stages of the research study

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Aims for Extending Research;

- ❏ To share the findings of the research and establish wider participation
- ❏ To triangulate the data and look at infrastructures of support in place to share best practice ideas.
- ❏ To disseminate material gained through collaboration and increase the output through a paper or journal article; the 'deliver' stage of the research

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Feedback from SW Forums

- ❏ Ratification from BASW to widen the scope of recommendations for increased support
- ❏ Clearly set out CPD opportunities as part of the PCF career structure
- ❏ More research on practice education and more formalised support structures
- ❏ Development of local action learning sets
- ❏ Use of IT such as Skype to develop practice learning and supervision

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Feedback continued

- ❏ Guidance on what constitutes a 'good enough' student assessment
- ❏ Progression policies on supervision, mentoring and appraisal
- ❏ Better connections between Independent Practice Educators and placements; shared supervision
- ❏ Regional master classes in adult learning and specific themes such as supporting failing students
- ❏ Recognition of different support for independent and on-site practice educators

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Feedback continued

- ❏ More recognition of the similarities and the differences between assessing undergraduate and postgraduate students
- ❏ Building on from the PEPS training; refresher training to develop professional confidence as part of CPD
- ❏ Recognition of the wider role that practice educators can play across HEI and or direct employer

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Reflections on the Research

- ❏ Although the focus of the research and underpinning methodology is based on positive practice the underlying difficulties can be identified
- ❏ Interesting parallels between the research and other work being carried out as part of the social work education reforms
- ❏ The importance of open and collaborative relationships between the student and the practice educator which recognise the power differences

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Reflections on the Research

- ❏ The relevance of Kolb's experiential learning cycle for practice educator's assessment of students on placement; direct contact, reflection on practice, links with theory and active experimentation

- ❏ The vital importance of a critically reflective approach in practice education to develop 'new ways of knowing' (Fook,2000)

- ❏ The research can be shared across different communities of learning (Wenger,1998)

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Analysing the Data

- ❏ The individual perspectives of practice educators will be analysed to identify shared perspectives and 'relational responsibility' (Mc.Namee+ Gergen, 1999)

- ❏ Key themes will be identified to highlight how wider benefits can be gained; Reason + Bradbury, 2001, refer to ' communities of inquiry' as a necessary catalyst to implementing change

- ❏ Recommendations will be centred on the questions; ' what can be done differently'?

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Analysing the Data

- ❏ In addition, the question needs to be asked; ' what might need to change in order for this to happen'?

- ❏ Boyatzis (1998) devised a coding framework for qualitative data which recognises the highly inductive themes emerging from raw data

- ❏ The final element of the research implementation will be the reflective analysis of the process to evaluate the mixed methods qualitative approach used

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Analysing the Data

- • Nvivo Code Validation Themes;
- • Experiences of Assessing Students
- • Support for PE's using PCF Assessment
- • Views on using the PFC Assessment
- • Supervision and Guidance
- • Relationship between Student and PE
- • Experiences of Failing a Student
- • Communication Skills

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Appendix 12: Individual Interview Number 11.

The interview sample illustrates the interaction between the coding and the phrases that held particular resonance from the eleventh individual interview. The process of drawing out the key phrases, by highlighting them in blue for frequency and red for specific meaning and then connecting them to the codes and the final key themes has been exemplified. The entire interview was transcribed as 19 pages of text. There were 66 fragments of dialogue underlined in total and 23 open codes identified. 12 combined codes were then highlighted and all 6 key themes were seen to be pertinent to the data gathered. The following short excerpts show the interview questions followed by segments of the transcribed interview.

Question: Existing Experience of Using PCF Assessment with Students?

Response: "*So I was using that last May for a student. And it was eye-opening because I think it was a very different framework. There has been very little introduction, or if there had been, I'd missed it. But very little in terms of what we needed to do. What I welcomed with joining Brent was actually that they had some learning action sets that they provided for practice educators in terms of beginning to understand how to assess against that framework…… So I think the penny clicked last summer about the new approach and its application. And since that time I've worked with a Bucks New masters student against the framework. So it's been quite a challenge to work with the second year Bucks BSc students, because of the old framework and actually having to think 'What is that again?'"*

Question: What Support has been Available for Using PCF with Students?

Response: "*You know, Brent provided all of their practice educators – it was afternoons, I think, bringing external speakers in, things like that, to actually start to prepare us for the assessment process. And then, because of the ASYE funding via Skills for Care, because that's where our funding comes from for the staff who are accessing it via Skills for Care, they also had these one-day workshops. So very much last year just starting to introduce PCF and people from the College of Social Work came to talk about it, the assessment framework….So I would talk about a case with another colleague and then she'd say, Okay, this is the domains that you've met and these are the reasons why I think you've done it because you talked about this here and you talked about that. So it really brought it to life for me in terms of, not just professionalism and this domain and that domain but actually how do you understand it and transfer it to supervision discussions, but without saying to the student or the newly qualified, 'Well we've done professionalism today', but it was actually in that discussion, critical thinking, it will come through as professionalism because you're prepared for supervision. But, as I said, I think last year May, I was looking at these documents thinking 'How do I assess against this now with no training prior to the student starting? And she was a failed student, so she was redoing her placement. So*

she was very anxious as well of being assessed against a new framework as a final year student. It was learning curves for all of us".

Question: Is there a Particular Learning Experience which has had an Impact on your Personal and Professional Development as a Practice Educator?

Response: *"I would say yes, yes, and it's never gone away actually. As a newbie, so when I qualified in '94, you know, you think you've conquered the world. So, in terms of thinking through career, and it's a story that I share with students actually, the newly qualified – at the time there was only either the mental health assessor training or the practice teacher's award. So I went down the practice teacher's award because I've always worked with young people. And I embraced that, the learning and everything else. But I had the student from hell! And so it was a twenty-five year old with a thirty plus old woman, she questioned my age. She has her own difficulties which was not ever explained to me…. But it was awful, it was an awful experience for me in terms of challenge and things like that. And I remember I passed her on the premise that I was quite fearful of not passing her… I just scraped through the practice teacher's award. And what stuck with me for a very long time just in terms of being true to the assessment process irrespective of what they feel about you".*

24 Open Codes Emerging from the Data:

Reflection on Role

Resilience

Assessing Adults

Challenging Placements

Failing Students

How Practice Educators are Perceived by Others

PEPS Training

Lack of Exemplars

PCF as a Learning Tool

Professional Judgement

Structure of the Domains

Uncertainty

Power Dynamics

Gate Keepers

Students Perceptions of the PE

Quality of the Relationship

Students' Additional Needs

Action Learning Sets

Workshops

College of Social Work

Role Confidence

Competing Programmes

Funding

Peer Support

9 Combined Codes

Failing Students

Negative Experiences

Assessment Ambiguity

Quality of Relationships

Power Dynamics

Role Definition and Uncertainty

Planned Workshops

Increased Support for PE's

Peer Support

Emerging Key Themes

The Practice Educator Role

Experiences of Using PCF

Relationship Between Student and Practice Educator

Support for Practice Educators

Impact of Change for Practice Educators

Appendix 13: Further Examples from the Data to Illustrate Examples of Participants' Peak Experiences and Provocative Propositions.

Examples of Peak Experiences

"Being able to support a new supervisor and the strong rapport that was built up following the process of failing a student was a peak experience in my learning, as mutual trust was achieved"	Individual Interview 5, Wendy
"Success from a very negative experience of failing a student and carrying out the gate-keeping role; reflection on this afterwards was one of the most positive experiences of my life"	Individual Interview 9, Mary
"A student changed gender during the placement. The personal and professional process of change was incredible and the impact for me as a practice educator was huge. The student was able to make this huge journey and pass the placement. This was a very steep learning curve for me"	Group Interview 2, Sarah
"I was supporting a practice educator who was really wrestling with failing a student. I felt like it was so important that I provide as much support as I possibly could to really help that practice educator to understand this was her decision…..so that was a peak experience, even though it was a negative kind of situation.	Group Interview 2, Daisy
"And actually to see the physical and emotional change, it was an amazing journey and a real sense of achievement at the end"	Group Interview 3, Marilyn
"Once I'm with the students, usually I get really energised and sort of – you know those light bulb moments that they have and seeing how much they improve over the year or six months that you have them"	Group Interview 1, Davina
"Once it was addressed, yes she shifted her learning as well and the second part of the placement, she just turned it around completely. And it was really positive and very steep learning curve for me"	Group Interview 2, Daisy
" And when you have a really, really effective student, there's that synergy, you know, and they're learning from you and experiencing new things and feeding back, that means an awful lot to you as an educator doesn't it?"	Group Interview 1, Tahira

Examples of Provocative Propositions

"For the research to be linked in with the whole social work framework to ensure that ideas actually happen and that this is part of the whole process"	Feedback Form 2, Rachel
"Practice educators joining with employers to look at jointly commissioned opportunities"	Feedback Form 4, Kamina
" More respect for the social work profession from the media and society in general"	Group Interview 4, Joan
"More peer support to create a community of learning through on-line forums and local support groups"	Group Interview 4, Wendy
"In another ten years you won't be able to practice without a masters in social work and I think we're going to have to embrace it because the speed of change in social work over the last ten years is phenomenal".	Individual Interview 12, Sally
"I think we can influence changes….what I fear is that the practice educator role will become diminished….but I would like to see the practice educator be much more involved".	Individual Interview 1, Davina
"I think that what will happen is that the tutor, practice educator, assessor and verifier will all have to work together as a unit. And I think that we could all share and develop the learning, it would be really good".	Individual Interview 9, Mary
"I want us to get to the point where agencies out there are calling us up and saying: 'Do you have any students that you would like to send to us?'"	Group Interview 1, Davina