

Proximity in Practice Education: Considering two different models of social work practice education

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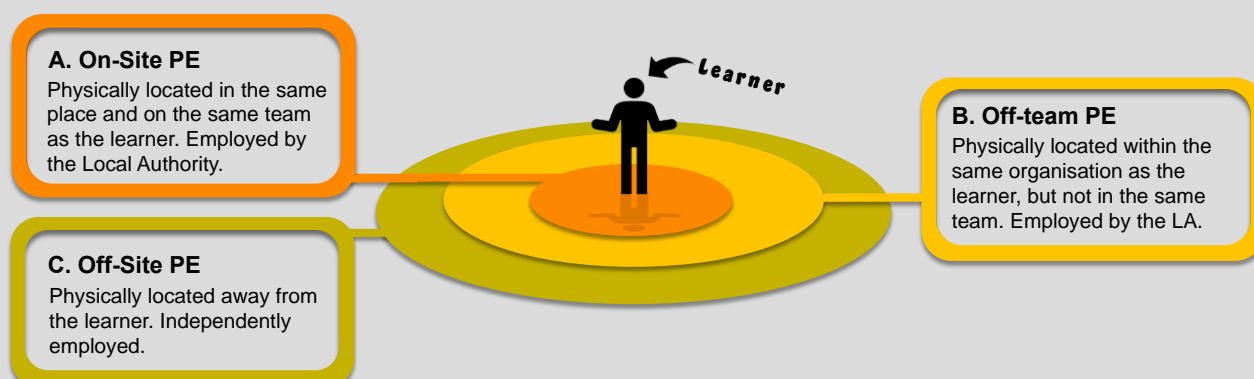
Introduction

This paper explores two different models of social work practice education within Local Authority (LA) placements. It is based on data from 4 focus groups with 9 student social workers and 9 practice educators. We examined strengths and limitations of the **“on-site” model** of practice education (student and practice educator are located within the same social work team) in comparison to the **“off-team” model** of practice education (practice educator is located on a different team to the student, but within the same LA). Results indicate that on-site and off-team models both offer viable pathways for supporting and assessing students on LA placements but there are differences and the models both have distinct advantages and disadvantages.

Social Work practice education

Studies (inter)nationally highlight that social work students view **practice placements as the single most beneficial part of their training** (Roulston et al., 2022; Egan et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2015; Brodie and Williams, 2013; Wayne et al., 2010). However, student experiences are not always positive as statutory placements can feel like a matter of “survival” (Walker and Gant, 2021). Practice Educators (PEs) also often feel overwhelmed by the pressure of supporting and assessing students in addition to their roles and can feel scrutinised from several vantage points (i.e. the student, team, managers, university tutors and service users) (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2013). Traditionally, PEs are **“on-site”** (co-located) or **“off-site”** (employed independently and at a distance from the placement) (BASW, 2022). In practice, there is another sub-category of practice education, which we refer to as **“off-team”**. An off-team PE works for the same LA as the student but practices in a different team (see Image 1).

Image 1. Three models of practice education



Practice educators' supervision and assessment can be improved by '**contextual understanding**' of the placement (Zuchowski, 2016 p. 424). Working for the same LA as the student provides some of this valuable context, yet the off-team model is unresearched. Given how instrumental social work placements are to students' professional development, and how central the role of the practice educator is in supporting and assessing placements, it is important that this practice is evaluated.

Research methods

We used focus groups to understand the meanings participants attached to practice education (Payne, 2021). We selected final year BA students who were due to undertake a placement within a LA, and on-site PEs who were equipped to facilitate these placements. The sample of students came from two different universities in the North-West of England. Initially, 24 potential participants were identified (12 students and 12 Practice Educators), of which 18 made an informed choice to participate in the research (9 students and 9 Practice Educators). Practice Educators were allocated to work with students either in an "on-site" or "off-team" capacity. The 100-day placements then progressed without any involvement from the research team and focus groups were scheduled for the end of placements. Participants were divided into four groups:

- Focus Group 1 – "Off-team" Practice Educators (4 participants)
- Focus Group 2 – Students with "off-team" Practice Educators (5 Participants)
- Focus Group 3 – "On-site" Practice Educators (5 Participants)
- Focus Group 4 – Students with "on-site" Practice Educators (4 Participants)

Focus-groups took place via Microsoft Teams and were recorded (with consent) to enable transcription. Groups were asked: *In relation to working with your Practice Educator/student, what worked well; In relation to working with your Practice Educator/student, what didn't work so well; What was your relationship like with your Practice Educator/Student; What were your supervisions like with your Practice Educator/Student; Do you think it would have been better, or worse, if your Practice Educator/Student were on the same team as you/on a different team to you?*

Limitations

We focused on a relatively small sample in one region of the UK so findings cannot be generalised. Focus groups facilitators were known to some of the participants, and it is possible that this familiarity could have influenced the discussion (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). Finally, many of the PEs had only had one student to reflect on. Results may have been different with more experienced PEs.

Findings

Findings are presented under three themes (supervision, assessment, and relationship). These themes are discussed below and summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: themes and subthemes

Overall Theme	On-site subthemes	Off-team subthemes
Supervision	(i) Supervisions are more task-centred and case focused (ii) Ongoing informal supervision	(i) Supervisions are more reflective, incorporating theory (ii) Consistent formal supervisions
Assessment	(i) Easier to gather evidence of professional capability/development (ii) Easier to find opportunities for direct observation of practice (iii) Greater reliance on direct monitoring of students work/practice	(i) Harder to gather evidence of professional capability/development (ii) Harder to find opportunities for direct observation of practice (iii) Greater reliance on feedback from student, on-site supervisor, colleagues and PWLE.
Relationship	i) Harder to maintain professional boundaries. ii) Students are more likely to feel overly monitored. iii) Relationship more likely to be described as being “intense”.	ii) Easier to maintain professional boundaries. ii) Students are more likely to feel over-supervised. iii) Practice Educators more likely to be viewed as someone “separate”.

Theme 1: Supervision

The off-team model appears to allow for more **reflective and critical conversations** during supervision, rather than being overly focused on case work.

[On-site practice education] became for me a very – like a practical supervision role rather than actually having that time to reflect, so I’ve really enjoyed being able to step away from that...talking about your cases all the time and how you’re manage that, and really give the student the time separately to reflect on how things are going, and the space I think for [them] to be able to be a lot more honest with me (Practice Educator, Off-team).

With my [off team PE] we sort of do more reflecting and looking at theories, whereas you don’t get to do that in supervision with the [on-site supervisor] because we’re just going over case management and what I need to do... it’s nice to have that sort of reflection time with the Practice Educator (Student Social Worker, Off-team)

One of the benefits of the on-site model is that it appears to allow for much more **informal supervision**. Students with on-site PEs highlighted that it was beneficial being able to ask

for help and support as and when it was needed, as opposed to having to schedule in a formal discussion:

It's like being able to have that informal sort of supervision... it's just being able to look across the desk, say a name, and say "can I be supported with this?" And it's like "yeah", and then we'll talk about it (Student Social Worker, On-Site)

I've done both before [off-team/on-site]. This one's on-site but I have found a massive difference, I think it's so much better. I think just in terms of your informal observations as well as informal supervision, you can pick up so much (Practice Educator, On-site)

Off-team PEs' detachment created formal, protected supervision sessions that enabled critical reflection, but limited opportunities for informal supervision. On-site PEs benefited from informal opportunities, but formal supervision often became more focused on day-to-day practice than reflective practice.

Theme 2: Assessment

A significant benefit of informal (on-site) supervision and observation this is there are plenty of opportunities for students to showcase their development and learning, and for PEs to assess practice. It can be more challenging for off-team PEs to observe and assess students. All four off-team PEs agreed that they felt at a "slight disadvantage from not physically being there":

If I had been on the same team I would have been seeing [them] more or pushed [them] and because I'm not seeing it, I'm probably a little more anxious that [they're] not doing as much (Practice Educator, Off-team)

Students also expressed concern about their PEs ability to assess whilst not being physically present:

[My PEs] not seen how I'd been in the office and how I'd interacted in conversations and things like that... I think that was hard because [they] have the power to fail me, but [they] can't actually see what I'm doing day to day. So [they] don't know whether I'm doing well. I could be doing really poor and [they] could be right, but then I could also do really well. But [they're] not seeing it (Student Social Worker, Off-team).

Despite concerns PEs developed strategies to mitigate for the disadvantage of not being on the same team. E.g., creating a *WhatsApp* group with the student and on-site supervisor, others arranged opportunities with other teams to gather a range of feedback, and some participants situated themselves in the same office as the student at times. A significant advantage of being in the same LA as the student was that some PEs were able to monitor the students written work:

My practice educator, although she's off team, if she wanted to, she could log on to our system and check my written work (Student Social Worker, Off-team).

On-site PEs and students were not concerned about being able to schedule direct observations of practice but there was a concentration of power in the role of on-site PE, given reduced reliance on feedback from others. This is explored further below.

Theme 3: Relationship

Students with on-site PEs experienced **difficulties managing the relationship** with their PE because they felt as though they were being monitored to such a degree that it made them feel uncomfortable:

You feel like you're being watched constantly. And I think that puts me on edge. That makes me work less proactive, I think... It's awful, and then you start making mistakes because you know they are watching you. It's like, if someone's watching you type something, you start making mistakes because you know they're watching. And yeah, I think when my PE was off-site, I didn't have that feeling. I just kind of got on with it (Student Social Worker, On-site).

In contrast, off-team PEs recognised the benefits from that degree of detachment:

You can be a little bit more critical because you can kind-of say "who made that decision?" or "why do you think they made that?" – and I think because you're not in the same team and they don't feel like you're going to be running back to the manager or another team member saying "well this is what she said in the meeting" they feel the ability to be a little bit more open and honest about being critical sometimes about the team and the processes (Practice Educator, Off-team).

Although the relationship between off-team PEs and students appeared to benefit from a degree of detachment, this model was not without problems:

I feel a little bit like I'm almost bad cop and [the on-site supervisor is] good cop – and often I feel like I'm saying, "you haven't had much contact with your service user this week, what's happened?" (Practice Educator, Off-team).

Whilst this perspective was not always reflected within the discussion between students with off-team PEs, on occasion it does appear that this degree of detachment could also have negative implications, whereby students felt that their off-team PEs were not always available to support them when they needed it.

Summary

On-site and off-team models of practice education both offer viable routes for supporting and assessing students on statutory placements. However, there are key distinctions between the two models, and both have advantages and disadvantages.

On-site practice education can provide students with informal support in between scheduled supervision and the on-site PE is often more available to answer questions as needed. Additionally, students with on-site PEs appear less likely to worry about building evidence to support a pass, and on-site PEs are likely to find it easier to assess students because opportunities for observation (both formal and informal) are more readily available. However, the intensity of the relationship between on-site PE and student, coupled with a lack of independence, can be uncomfortable for students who frequently felt as though they were being monitored and supervised too closely.

Off-team practice education offers regular support from a professional who is detached from the team, but still familiar with many of the work systems. Students supported by an off-team PE are more likely to benefit from supervision sessions in which they critically reflect, apply

theory, and draw links with the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) which echoes the benefits of off-site supervision (Egan et al., 2021). Students are also less likely to feel they are being monitored closely, which means the relationship can be less intense and there is less scope for micromanagement. However, it can be more challenging to gather portfolio evidence when the PE is off team because there are less opportunities for informal observation. This places an increased responsibility on students to showcase their learning through supervision or reflective logs.

In summary, both models of practice education offer viable pathways for assessment. When the differences are acknowledged, it may be possible to make adaptations to improve the experience of practice placements for both students and PEs, or even match learners and practitioners to the model that is most likely to suit their needs.

Key recommendations

- Those facilitating LA placements should consider **both on-team and off-team** practice education models, as both provide opportunities for learning.
- LAs which use the **off-team** model should provide PEs with time to observe and support students. PEs should have access to written work, opportunities to base themselves in the same office as students, and sufficient time for observations. It would be beneficial for on-site supervisors and PEs to build a relationship, clarify expectations and establish clear lines of communication.
- LAs who use the **on-site model** should not over-burden PEs with the full responsibility for supporting and assessing students. Instead, on-site PEs should actively seek opportunities to share the role with others and avoid micromanaging students.
- There is a need for **further research** into the role of on-site supervisors in supporting social work practice placements (regardless of the model being used), and into how alternative models of practice education impact upon individuals with diverse needs and characteristics.

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