Practice Education Strategies: a thematic analysis of approaches to practice education within Local Authorities and Trusts within the West Midlands Social Work Teaching Partnership

Context and Purpose of discussions

In line with 3.03 of the Programme Plan which states that the West Midlands Social Work Teaching Partnership (WMSWTP) will continue *'to develop and embed a regional practice education strategy. To include: • Recruitment, retention and recognition of PEs • Promoting an understanding of PEPS refresh • Regaining and retaining currency • Practice educator CPD • Supply, demand and quality assurance of placements • Support and development of practice supervisors'* a Practice Education Strategy working group has been established to support the progression of a regional practice education strategy. Within this working group, it was identified that some, but not all, partners were working towards a practice education strategy with some partners more advanced with this than others.

To better understand the progress each partner has made towards developing a practice education strategy and to identify any support required from the WMSWTP, it was agreed that the programme team would hold one to one discussion with each partner (beginning initially with statutory social work provider partners/ placement provider service) to explore this in more detail. This report has been produced using thematic analysis to identity the key themes arising from these discussions, with the aim of sharing examples of good practice across the partnership.

It is recognised that many Children's and Adults' services operate differently from each other, even within the same LA/Trust, so separate conversations were held with practice education/workforce development leads from the two sectors (where this was a different person). Some Children's and Adults' services shared practice education (PE) responsibility and organisation, in which case one interview was held with that authority/trust. The data referred to in this report has been calculated from the responses from these 29 Adults/Children's services across 18 partners.

For the purposes of this report, each respondent is referred to as a 'service representative' and data is presented in terms of individual 'services'. In collating quantitative data, where practice education was covered jointly across both Adults and Children's services within a partner agency, these have been counted twice for the purposes of the data collection. *For example, in relation to factors affecting the number of placements offered, where this was linked to workforce strategy, if there was a joint Adults/Children's approach to the practice education strategy then we counted twice - once for Adults, once for Children's).*

Recruiting and Retaining Practice Educators:

We asked the service representatives what they felt were the main barriers and enabling factors to PEs being willing and available to take on a student and/or to complete their PE training. The most reported barrier was the impact of Covid-19 and working remotely, which twelve services **(44%)** felt presented significant challenges. For example. some service representatives suggested that PEs may be put off due to the challenges of virtual assessment and may not feel confident to support students under these conditions. Another closely linked theme reported by service representatives **(37%)** was the workload and capacity of PEs, this was felt to be directly linked to the challenges in recruiting PEs.

Financial Incentives:

16 services (55.17%) offer financial incentives to PEs, at varying rates. Five service representatives (18.5%) suggested that a lack of financial incentives may be a barrier to recruiting or re-engaging PEs, and two services were planning to introduce incentives to try and increase uptake of PEs. However, there was no clear link between offering financial incentives and the availability of PEs. Of the two services who reported having no issues with recruiting PEs, one offered a financial incentive and the other didn't. Workload pressure was reported as a barrier to recruiting PEs even where financial incentives were offered, again highlighting the difficulties with capacity and workload across the region currently.

Workload Reduction:

Seven services (25.93%) provided formal workload reduction to PEs, and 8 services provided it when requested and/or at the discretion of the line manager. Five services (18.5%) had no formal workload reduction in place for PEs. There was no clear link between workload reduction and retention of PEs.

Two services (7%) reported that a lack of support from management prevented them from recruiting more PEs, and a culture within the organisation that does not value social work or practice education.

Progression Pathway:

Six (22.22%) of the service representatives we spoke to specified that the PE role is part of the progression pathway, which they feel attracts more interest in the role. One service representative reported that they have no need to even promote the PE role because it is widely known to be part of the pathway, and social workers will approach them requesting to train for the role. Because there was no direct question about the progression pathway, it is likely that there are more services who are doing this, but may not have disclosed it during these discussions.

Similarly, although only two representatives declared having a formal requirement for PEs to continue taking students, it is likely that this is happening elsewhere across the partnership.

Lack of currency /confidence

One local authority said that the biggest factor in their service that is a barrier to PEs being willing to support students, is being out of currency from not having recently worked with students. This has led to many PEs feeling a loss of confidence in their ability to support students and there is a need to refresh their skills and knowledge because of this.

Factors influencing the number of placements offered:

During the interviews, the service representatives were asked what factors inform the number of placements they can offer to HEIs, and we have been able to identify some common themes as follows:

Numbers of available qualified Practice Educators

Twenty-three service representatives **(79.31%)** identified that the number of placements they can provide is largely influenced by the number of PEs they have available at any one time or the number of PEs in training. Several services stated that they are working on lower numbers of qualified PEs (PEPS2) and are trying to increase this due to factors such as movement into management roles as well as less interest in PEPS training in some services. Several services are using independent PEs to help ensure they can meet demand for student placements. The number of qualified PEs available to

support HEI student placements was also impacted by factors that we talk about further below such as a commitment to supporting other social work routes.

Links with workforce strategy

Twelve services **(41.38%)** identified that the number of placements they provide is directly linked to their workforce strategy and a further two (7.41%) identified that they plan to link their placement provision to workforce strategy moving forwards.

Services linked their placements strategy to their workforce strategy in several ways. One service is considering how many NQSWs they want to recruit and then mapping this to the number of placements offered.

Most services did not take such a pre-emptive approach, but they did offer placements predominately to Level 6 students on statutory social work teams with the hope that they would then wish to go and work for the organisation upon qualifying. Several services spoke about this in terms of a 'grow our own workforce' strategy as the placement experience would enable the student to become embedded within the organisation and support a transition into the organisation as an NQSW. Several services said that they regularly recruit NQSWs from final placements and this has proved successful.

One service identified that they are starting to take the approach of offering students a first and a second placement within their organisation to encourage students to consider then applying for an NQSW post within their organisation.

Two services tend to prioritise students who live within a certain geographical radius of the organisation, believing the student would be more likely to consider post qualifying employment.

Not all the services we spoke to link their placements strategy and workforce strategy, as some stated they have no issue with recruitment, and for them, the issue is more in terms of the retention of experienced staff.

The impact of the Social Work Apprenticeship and other routes into social work

Ten services **(37.04%)** said that the number of placements they can offer is impacted by the social work degree apprenticeship, supporting employer led courses such as Step Up to Social Work, Frontline and Think Ahead as well as the AMHP programme.

Firstly, this related to the increased demand on the numbers of available PEs. This varied across the partnership, due a range of approaches to the contrasting learning experience (CLE). In some services there is one 30-day CLE in year 3 and several services noted less impact upon the demand of PEs in this instance. However, in some agencies, the placement or contrasting learning experience format is in keeping with the traditional HEI routes (70 days for year 2, and 100 days for year 3). Whilst in many services there is a reciprocal swap between Adults and Children's, it was noted that a PE and a work-based supervisor are still required during placement. Many services try to ensure the PE for the CLE is within the placement team, but this limits capacity for that team to be able to support HEI students.

The extent of the impact on the number of PEs also related to the role that the PE takes within the social work degree apprenticeship. For example, one service said that as the PE is involved with an apprentice across all three years, this impacts on them being able to support other students such as HEI students at the same time. Whilst other services said that the PE is only needed during placement. Several services didn't feel the impact in terms of PE numbers because they utilised external PEs, for example, provided by the HEI. Alternatively, one service said that practice education leads within the service took responsibility for supporting the apprentices.

Another impact of the social work degree apprenticeship is in terms of the capacity of social work teams to absorb the additional workload that is required. Again, the issue is that social work teams are feeling the pressure of workload and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and are either not stable enough, or do not have the capacity to take both apprentice and HEI social work students on their teams.

Wanting to support/respond to HEI demand

Two services we interviewed identified wanting to support HEI's as a factor in how many placements they can provide. Whilst other factors may mean that ultimately, they cannot control this, they spoke in terms of doing their very best to accommodate demand even if this meant in some cases, the practice development lead/practice education lead taking some students as well.

Barriers to offering placements:

When we explored barriers to offering placements with the service representatives, some key themes emerged which we have identified below:

Capacity/Stability of teams-

Seventeen (58.62%) services we spoke to identified that _workload_ on their social work teams was a significant barrier to the number of placements they were able to provide to HEIs. In almost all cases this was linked back to the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was expressed in different ways. However, in terms of workload, it was expressed in terms of increased workload and complexity of work that social workers are dealing with. One service said they will be restricting the number of placements they will offer to HEIs as they know that their workforce needs to recover. This related not just to PEs, but also to onsite supervisors and social work teams more generally. It is acknowledged that workloads on social work teams were high prior to the pandemic so this isn't necessarily an issue that can be wholly attributed to Covid-19. However, it may be for many that Covid-19has exacerbated pressure that already existed within services.

There was also a theme arising in terms of _stability_ of teams to be able to effectively support students. Fourteen services **(51.85%)** spoke about issues that we would consider falling within this. The Covid-19 pandemic in this sense was said to have affected the stability of teams because the skills base of NQSWs entering the workforce is noticeably reduced following final pre-qualifying placements that were largely virtual.

Other factors that affected the _stability_ of teams that were non-related to Covid-19 included organisational restructure causing a feeling of uncertainty and stress amongst staff (one service) and the service being subject to external monitoring by Ofsted meaning staff are feeling under increased scrutiny and mindful of performance targets for example (two services). Neither of these scenarios was felt to be conductive to a supportive and nurturing environment for a student.

An additional factor that was reported to affect the stability of some social work teams was in terms of difficulties with recruitment and retention of experienced social workers. Five services said that there are issues with their teams being 'under-staffed' and three expressed that they have a lack of experienced workers. Three services reported concerns of have high numbers of NQSWs so their teams being inexperienced and therefore a difficult environment to support students. NQSWs embarking upon their ASYE are also in need of shadowing opportunities from colleagues and it was pointed out by one service that there can be a tension between ensuring students are given ample shadowing opportunities but also that the NQSWs receive good experiences too.

Regionally, there is a commitment to providing quality social work placements and staff want to support students but feel unable to due to workload pressures. Two (7.41%) services expressed concern that where teams and PEs are not in a place to support students appropriately or effectively, further increasing number of placements could be detrimental to the experience of the social work students and the morale of the social work teams. One service (3.7%) stated that it is to the benefit of their workforce strategy that placements are a positive and enriching experience for students because the student would be more likely to apply for a position as an NQSW. There was a sense conveyed by several partners, that placement supply and demand needs to be seen in the context of a bigger picture facing social work teams at present which can only so far be seen in the quantitative data provided.

Attitude of senior management/team managers

Three services (11.11%) spoke about attitudes of senior management or team management being a barrier in that they are not supportive towards practice education and having students, seeing other things as a priority currently. For example, there being a focus on meeting performance targets and workload being a priority in the first instance. However, conversely, two services (both within one local authority) said that there is a strong message from their senior management about the value and importance of having students and it is strongly encouraged. This is felt to have a positive benefit to the culture within social work teams to accepting and being supportive of students on their teams.

No barriers-

Only one service (3.7%) we spoke to did not identify any current barriers to offering placements.

The extent to which there is a 'whole team approach' to supporting students

The overall response to this question was very positive across the region. It was identified that there is a very positive approach and a desire to support students across most social work teams. One service said that 'there is a positive approach to taking students, there is a passion for it, but workload limits capacity'. We have collated below, some comments that were made by services which show the positive attitude of social work teams to supporting students:

- *"Mostly, teams recognised the value of supporting students"*
- *"They see students as bringing something new and exciting"*
- *"Social workers are supportive because they remember their own student days and recognise the importance of the placement opportunities"*
- *"Staff like having students and recognise importance"*
- *'We don't actively do anything specific (to promote a whole team approach) but teams are very inclusive and adopt student into their teams"*
- *"There is a strong message is being sent out by senior leaders that it is important to have students in teams. Sometimes it gets a little resistance but there is a clear message that they need to be taking students, and a strong commitment to this".*
- *"Each team is encouraged to support learners in some capacity"*
- *"Everyone is involved in induction"*
- *There is a "good learning culture, very positive, they like having students. The P.E leads support as well, which frees up the capacity of teams".*

A minority of responses that we received suggested that the service had a less positive attitude and culture towards practice education and supporting students. One service said, "the culture within ** isn't entirely supportive of practice education- it isn't seen as a particularly high value role". Where it

was identified that there wasn't a particularly positive culture, this was acknowledged and being worked on.

Where there had been previous negative experiences on a social work team with a student, this was identified as a barrier in the sense that the team was much more cautious about supporting further students. One service identified that there had been 'traumatic' experiences previously on the social work team regarding placements breaking down and staff were worried about this happening again.

Support for Practice Educators

PEs are supported to learn, develop and network in a range of ways across the region. The most common support identified (21 services, 72.41%) was via Practice Educator forums, Communities of Practice or reflective sessions with other PEs. Partners commented that attendance was variable but felt to be valuable support by PEs generally. Only 7 services (25.92%) provided resources to support PE learning and development, such as theory cards/apps and books, and 26% offered specific CPD sessions to PEs. This was largely felt to be due to budget constraints. Specific supervision from the Practice Education lead was provided by 6 services (22.22%). This was felt to be of particular value for supporting PEs learning and development, because supervision with line managers doesn't always offer the opportunity to reflect specifically on their PE role. Other services offered 1:1 coaching/mentoring (11%) and specific peer support for PEs (15%).

Collaboration with HEIs regarding student placements and practice education

We spoke to the services about their relationship with HEIs in terms of student placements and practice education more generally. All services reported a positive relationship overall. Comments included that there was a 'brilliant 'relationship with the HEI and fortnightly catch-up meetings are held' and that there were 'good links' with staff in the HEI particularly concerning placements and profiles. Several services spoke of a desire to help each other out that they "recognise the need to help each other." Some services prioritise their closest HEI partners (in the geographical sense) for placements that they have available.

Challenges that arose in the collaborative relationship between services and HEIs included:

- Services feeling a sense of pressure to meet the demand of placements. This seemed to be experienced at various levels across different agencies. There was a sense that placement demand is increasing but it isn't possible to continually increase placement capacity in line with that demand. Three services identified this as a challenge (11.11%).
- Information not being shared by a HEI about a student and this then causing challenges on placement. Services said it was crucial to their gatekeeping role and responsibility to the public, that they were made aware of issues that could impact the student on their placement. Two services identified this as an issue (7.41%).
- The timings of the PEPS 1 / 2 course not matching with when student profiles are sent which can create some issues as services would map out which staff they have enrolled on the PEPs course to then be able to match against the student profiles. One service identified this as an issue (3.7%).
- Differing requirements (in terms of student portfolios for example) that can create challenges for PEs. This was identified by three services as an issue (10.34%).

Examples of collaborative working between local authorities/trusts and HEIs were as follows:

- Support with staff training
- Reciprocal support /offer – e.g., PEPS fee reduction in return for student placements

- Collaborating on training offer for on-site supervisors who are not social work trained to increase numbers of on-site supervisors

Nine services (33.33%) we spoke to have relationships with and take students from outside of the West Midlands Teaching Partnership.

Quality assurance of practice educators and the placement experience

We asked services about what procedures they have in place within their agency in relation to the quality assurance of both their PEs and the placement experience. Eleven (40.74%) of the services we interviewed stated that they do not have any systems in place currently. Ten of the services identified that they use questionnaires or direct feedback from the student to gain feedback and monitor the placement experience (37.04%). One service identified that they audit portfolio reports completed by PEs (3.7%). Two services identified that they gain feedback and monitor the quality of placements through conversations with social work team managers and maintaining close links with social work teams (7.41%). Four services identified that they gain feedback directly from practice educator to understand issues within their service that could impact on the placement quality (14.81%). One service said that they use observations of practice to monitor the quality of PEs (3.7%). Finally, two services identified that they gain feedback from students about their placement experience at student forums which are held throughout the placement (7.41%).

How placement funding is currently used:

We asked services how their department uses the payment given to them for each student placement provided. Of the eighteen responses received, seven services used the placement fees to fund the honorarium for PEs, and six put the money back into learning and development or PE training. Three services reported that the money was put back into the social work department, but not specifically for Practice Education. One service used the money to fund a PE lead role post, one paid an external provider, and one used it for resources. There was response that stated that the money received from student placements was used, in part, to fund the PEPs 1 and 2 courses.

Inactive PEs:

We spoke to services about the systems they have in place to identify and support PEs who are not currently supporting a student. Fourteen services (48.28%) had a database or list of PEs, and records were kept of the date of qualification, and when the PE last took a student. This helped them to identify when PEs were at risk of losing currency, so that they could put plans in place to keep them active.

Two services (7.4%) made it a formal requirement for qualified PEs to continue taking students, which they felt helped reduce the risk of PEs losing currency. Conversely, other services felt that by not formally requiring PEs to take a student, they could guarantee that active PEs were passionate and committed to the role. Five services (18.51%) were using refresher courses delivered by HEIs to support inactive PEs to refresh skills and knowledge to prepare them for taking another student.

For PEs who didn't wish to formally take on a student, some services offered other opportunities to help maintain their currency, such as by supporting with ASYE.

What are services doing to promote practice education within their organisation?

Through discussions we established that there are various ways that services are trying to promote PE within their organisations. The most popular means of doing this across all the services was via emails

asking for expressions of interest (seven services) and via supervision as part of learning and development discussions (eight services). The next most popular means of promotion were via newsletters to staff (four services) and via practice education being added within career progression pathways (four services). Two services promote PE within team meetings and three services have used promotional events or celebration events as a promotion of PE. Two services said that they don't do anything in terms of promotion but that attitudes and interest in PE is really good, so they don't necessarily have a need to promote.

What actions are Local Authority and Trust services taking to increase placement supply?

Through our conversations with service representatives, we were able to identity actions that are being taken to try and increase placement supply in the future to meet the demand from HEI student placements. Actions being taken include:

- Staff can take a break between students, so they are more willing to take on students
- Development of mini virtual student hub model where student would be based in small team of PEs/students and move around different teams to try out different service areas on their placement to mirror service user journey through service
- Promoting Practice education and the PEPS course to increase numbers of PES with the aim of their being at least one PE (PEPS2) and one on-site supervisor (PEPS1) on each social work team
- Making it an expectation that teams will each comment to taking /supporting one student per year- two services are considering this approach currently
- Use of academy staff to work with team managers to build support for 'team around the student'
- Working with universities to ensure PEs who have lost currency can access refresher courses
- Development of a pre-PEPS training course to refresh social workers on theories, models and approaches as well as reflective models to bring their knowledge and skills up to date
- Working with non-social work teams within the service and within the PVI sector to increase capacity to support placements
- Consideration of giving financial incentives to PEs/on-site supervisors in recognition of the work involved and the value in the role.
- Delivering a PEPS course internally within the organisation (one local authority currently does this, reporting it works really well and they can better inform what is taught within this.
- Consideration of practice education being added within career development pathways
- Utilising the combined PE course, to fast-track social workers to PE2 qualification.
- Specific development of new roles with responsibility for Practice Education such as an Advanced Practitioner role supporting PEs and NQSWs, which would be based in individuals' teams rather than the student unit.
- Creation of an online induction for students where people from different teams and within their host team give introduction and explain job roles which helps the induction process for the student and helps the team to understand they each have a role in supporting students.

How can the WMTP support organisations to develop their P.E strategy and support practice education across the region?

These discussions have provided service representatives with the opportunity to suggest how the WMTP can continue to support them to develop a PE strategy and continue to support PEs.

The most common suggestion was for the WMTP to provide resources for PEs. Some examples given were resources to help PEs when supporting and assessing students with dyslexia, having a central resource library for PEs on the WMTP website, online theory cards and information, and access to journals. CPD sessions for PEs were also identified as being a useful method of support for PEs. Service representatives indicated that CPD sessions should be relevant to both new and experienced PEs, and that recording the sessions or having multiple dates would help PEs to be able to attend. Service representatives welcomed continuing support to address the placement supply and demand issue, and opportunities for evidence, ideas and best practice to be shared.

Other less common suggestions were to provide funding to develop student hubs, mentoring for qualified PEs, training for on-site supervisors, and funding for incentives/honorarium.

What actions is the West Midlands Teaching Partnership taking to respond to the themes arising from the discussions?

- Practice Education discussions will be held with HEI colleagues to continue exploring and addressing these themes.
- PE exemplar and existing Quality Assurance documents shared with partners.
- CPD webinars for PEs (the first two are Relational Supervision and Induction)
- Planning to develop an on-site supervisor programme.
- Developing a PE resource section on the WMTP website
- Communities of practice for PEs being considered within different sub-regions
- The Programme Team is researching potential providers to deliver some specific CPD relating to students with dyslexia.
- This report will be shared with all partners.

Conclusion

Predictably, these discussions have indicated that placement offers are limited by an insufficient number of available PEs, as well as the weakened capacity of teams to support students. The dominating factor impacting on the recruitment and retention of PEs appears to be workload pressures and capacity, with the effects of Covid-19 and low staffing levels contributing significantly to this issue. Particularly within Children and Families social work, recruitment and retention is a challenge nationally, and the WMTP is exploring ways to address wellbeing issues and support social workers to feel able to stay in their roles. Specific CPD is being offered which addresses wellbeing and provides social workers who are most at risk of leaving the profession with opportunities to grow and develop. It is hoped that as services recover from the impact of Covid, staffing and workload pressures will improve, more social workers will be willing able to take on the PE role.

It is clear that PEs are generally well supported by their organisations. There is evidence of a positive learning culture throughout the region, with practice education seen as a valuable role and teams very supportive of students generally. Where there are issues and challenges, service representatives are pro-active in their approach to creating a PE strategy to address these and to continue to promote practice education within their organisation. There were also some good examples of collaborative working with HEIs and areas of improvement which will help to inform the next stage of the discussions process with HEI representatives.

Report completed by Debora Stewart and Sarah Brain (Consultant Social Workers), October 2021.