

Training the trainer: A topical discussion exploring the development needs of placement supervisors in social work field education

KATHERYN MARGARET PASCOE¹

University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

This article engages in a topical discussion regarding the training and development of staff who supervise students on placement (referred to as practice educators), with specific reference to social work education. Focused on compulsory placements for qualifying social work degrees arranged by higher education institutes, the discussion draws upon international and cross disciplinary literature. The complex role of the practice educator (PE) is introduced, evidence of the need for training presented, and core knowledge and skills outlined. A brief overview of several regulated training programs offered to social work PEs is included before discussing barriers that inhibit access and completion of training including workload pressures and lack of time. The article closes with implications and considerations for further research and practice. Readers are encouraged to critically consider what is currently being delivered in their context, and if it meets the needs of PEs.

Keywords: Training, social work, professional development, work-integrated learning, placement supervision

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an educational approach encompassing a broad range of activities and experiences where students engage with tasks that align with the roles and responsibilities expected in the professional workforce aligned with their discipline (Zegwaard et al., 2023). WIL is commonly characterized by an integrated curriculum that provides purposeful opportunities for students to transfer knowledge attained in the classroom into practice with meaningful and authentic work-focused tasks in association with an external stakeholder, including but not limited to an employer, client, community, government agency or professional body (Zegwaard et al., 2023). Often associated with students being immersed in a host organization, supervised by an employer in an environment external to the higher education provider (Henderson & Trede, 2017), WIL, however, extends beyond this conceptualization and can include campus-based activities that are set by external stakeholders, such as product design, conducting a community-based project, or service reports (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023).

The benefits and potential opportunities that WIL offers students have been discussed extensively, including socializing students into the profession, establishing networks in their chosen field, supporting professional identity development, aiding in student career planning, enhancing graduate competencies, advancing knowledge and skills, and preparing students for the work force. (Dobbins & Fell, 2020; Henderson & Trede, 2017; Jackson, 2024; Smith-Ruig, 2013). Subsequently, WIL has become an “integral part of HE [Higher education] courses across the globe” (Fleming et al., 2021, p. 706), evident in a wide range of programs including medicine, teacher training, social work, business and sociology (Dobbins & Fell, 2020; Smith-Ruig, 2013). The voices of employers have also influenced this growth, with calls for graduates to have more practical, applied and transferable skills including communication, problem solving, and teamwork (Smith-Ruig, 2013). Regardless of the length of time or form of WIL, it must be deliberate and have clearly articulated goals and objectives to offer meaningful experiences that scaffold student learning (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Henderson & Trede, 2017; Jackson, 2024). Furthermore, although WIL may be completed in an environment external to the higher

¹ Corresponding author: Kathryn Pascoe, katheryn.pascoe@otago.ac.nz

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education institution (HEI) context, the HEI manages the WIL program and responsibilities typically include setting assessment criteria and/or frameworks, preparing students for their placement opportunities, ensuring students have the required pre-requisite knowledge, and establishing and maintaining relationships with the host, student and other stakeholders (Henderson & Trede, 2017).

This article engages in a topical discussion focusing on the training and development of workplace staff who supervise students on placement (referred to as practice educators) with specific focus on social work education. Social work spans a wide range of practice contexts including but not limited to primary health, child care and protection, community development, advocacy, mental health, disabilities and justice. Often encountering high caseloads, resource constrained environments and exposure to threats, social workers engage with complex challenges and support some of the most vulnerable populations in society (de Saxe Zerden, 2024; Ravalier et al., 2021). Graduates, therefore, need to be prepared for the realities of practice and be supported in developing their capabilities and confidence to enter the workforce. In social work education, WIL most commonly takes the form of work-based placements, also known as field work, and are a compulsory component to qualifying degrees worldwide (Cleak et al., 2022; Fronek et al., 2023). The number of minimum days or hours vary across countries and regions. For example, in Israel, students must participate in at least 850 hours of field work to complete the Bachelor of Social Work (Segev et al., 2021), and a minimum of 840 hours are required across at least two placements in New Zealand (Pascoe, 2025). The regulator of social work in Wales states student must complete a minimum of 1400 hours of practice-based learning across the three year Bachelor (Social Care Wales, 2021), yet the Council on Social Work Education (USA) accreditation standards only require Bachelor programs to provide a minimum of 400 hours of field education (CSWE, 2020). Irrespective of the length of time, HEIs and placement hosts hold a professional and ethical responsibility to ensure the learning undertaken prepares students to be competent graduates, and that there are appropriate opportunities to develop professional practice through a range of learning activities to expose students to the varied nature and realities of social work (Cleak et al., 2016). Work-based placements, therefore, rely on highly knowledgeable, skilled social workers employed in the field who are willing and able to step into the practice educator (PE) role to supervise students during their WIL.

Drawing upon international literature in the field of social work and beyond, this topical discussion begins by introducing the role of PEs before summarizing research that attempts to articulate the necessary knowledge and skills pertaining to the role. The subsequent continued professional development needs of PEs in social work education are highlighted, and an overview of current training programs is offered. Barriers that inhibit access and completion of training are outlined before closing with a discussion of implications for further research and practice.

THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE OF PRACTICE EDUCATORS

Supervised student placements are central to social work education and have long been considered the “capstone of academic experience” (Dettlaff, 2008, p. 317). With the need for adaptability and innovation in the delivery of WIL in response to changing practice context challenges such as necessary safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fronek et al., 2023; Repesa et al., 2023; Saxton et al., 2024), minimum requirements and standards govern placements in social work education. Whilst variation in length suggests there is a lack of agreement internationally about the amount of time students require on placement to achieve competence (Hay et al., 2023), a key feature is the supervision of students in a workplace setting where PEs “play a vital role in student development of workplace proficiencies” (J. Kay et al., 2014, p. 59). Referred to as field educators, placement supervisors, practice

assessors, field instructors or practice educators throughout the literature, this role refers to the employee within the host organization that holds responsibility to oversee the tasks of the student during their placement, as well as supporting their learning and development. Referred to as PEs throughout this topical discussion, their role is central to the delivery of qualifying social work degrees.

Engaging in interviews with placement coordinators, research conducted by Hay (2020) in New Zealand investigated factors that influence experiences and outcomes for social work students on placement from the perspective of university staff who oversee social work WIL programs. The research emphasized the importance placed on the role of the PE, which was seen as “one of the biggest determinants of a quality practicum” (Hay, 2020, p. 56). Previous research with postgraduate students found supervision was related to placement satisfaction “both directly and indirectly through its influence on efficacy in the field” (Kanno & Koeske, 2010, p. 23). Irregular supervision, however, has been reported by students and associated with perceptions of unsafe practice (Hay et al., 2019). A supportive and available supervisor shapes the quality of learning (Hay et al., 2023), and satisfaction with supervision can influence students’ subsequent employment decisions (Hay et al., 2019). Described as “gatekeepers for the profession” (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2022, p. 86), PEs are crucial in developing the next generation of social workers, therefore, their role and development needs warrant further consideration.

Role Complexity

The role of the PE is highly complex, traversing multiple tasks and key responsibilities (J. Kay et al., 2014). Drawing upon qualitative interviews with industry supervisors in Australia and New Zealand across business, sport and sociology WIL placements, Fleming et al. (2021, p. 712) found supervisors saw their role as that of an educator to “help the students learn and develop as professionals in the workplace.” These findings suggest PEs may be aware of the impact they have on facilitating students to enhance practice and transfer knowledge into the workplace, yet the PE position is multifaceted. PEs are tasked with roles and responsibilities that frequently extend beyond an educational remit to incorporate aspects of pastoral care, administration, and upholding standards in the profession (J. Kay et al., 2014). Such complexity is evident in the additional responsibilities of enabling learning, managing practice to ensure the delivery of quality services, overseeing induction, assessing student competence, providing student feedback and contributing to the future of the profession (Finch & Taylor, 2013; J. Kay et al., 2014; Whitehead et al., 2023; Yeung et al., 2021). Unlike the role of a mentor which is focused more on role modelling, information sharing and coaching (Smith-Ruig, 2013), PEs must also assess competence and make a recommendation to the HEI as to whether students pass or fail their placement. Tension can arise navigating the dual role of educator and assessor, alongside juggling the demands of daily practice (Finch & Taylor, 2013; Yeung et al., 2021). The complexity of the PE role is further acknowledged when considering the risks of inadequate supervision and where the student may be exposed to poor working practices or an inadequate learning environment (Cameron et al., 2019). Recognizing that practices observed during work-based placements can impact students’ ethical behavior (Papouli, 2014, p. 10), the significance of the PE role cannot be ignored. Student competence and personal and professional development are influenced by their relationship with their PE which can shape their understanding of what is good practice and influence future learning, graduate skills, and professional reputation (Ayala et al., 2014; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2022).

Examining the challenges that arise when PEs are faced with failing students, the work of Finch and Taylor (2013) engages with the unacknowledged emotional responses of PEs in social work education. Working with a failing student on placement was found to invoke “intensely uncomfortable feelings in

practice,” with potential to obscure PEs’ evaluation of student performance (Finch & Taylor, 2013, p. 253). The PE role is recognized as being an inherently conflictual role (Yeung et al., 2021); however, authors found “some social work students are being passed inappropriately”, placing importance on PEs being adequately trained to understand their role and assessment processes (Finch & Taylor, 2013, p. 253). The work of Bogo et al. (2007) draws attention to the conflict of values that can occur when PEs are faced with awarding non-favorable outcomes on student assessments whilst also trying to uphold principles of empowerment and strengths-based practice. Clear guidelines on the correct procedures and policies for terminating student placements, therefore, is essential (Bogo et al., 2007; Finch & Taylor, 2013).

Ultimately, the role of PEs in social work education requires the supervisor to support students in connecting theory to practice, developing applied skills, navigating ethical dilemmas, and critically reflecting on the role of professional values before entering the work force (Finch & Taylor, 2013; E. Kay & Curington, 2018; Papouli, 2014; Parga & Doyle, 2020). Core knowledge, including a foundational understanding of adult learning theory and pedagogical aspects of WIL (J. Kay et al., 2014), the use of supervision models, and managing workplace conflict are all important to fulfilling the PE role (Parga & Doyle, 2020). Social workers, therefore, must be skilled in both practice, and teaching and learning strategies to take on the PE role (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Such knowledge and skill, however, is not instinctive or fundamental to qualifying degrees, therefore, PEs often need additional resources, development opportunities, and training to effectively fulfil the role.

EVIDENCING THE NEED FOR TRAINING

The need for training and development for PEs to effectively support student learning on placement has been evidenced both within, and external to, social work education. For example, gathering perspectives from students who have completed WIL in the broader field of allied health, Dobbins and Fell (2020, p. 338) found students “have felt the most knowledgeable party in the relationship” identifying gaps in the knowledge of their PE. Consequently, this has led to a loss of respect for the PE, with one student clearly stating, “you can lose faith” when this occurs (Dobbins & Fell, 2020, p. 339). Students observed inadequacies with the training of their PEs, noting that they were underprepared and “would benefit from some more training on actually how to teach, how to engage, because I don’t think it is something that comes naturally to everybody” (Dobbins & Fell, 2020, p. 339).

The need for training is further emphasized in PEs’ reflections on their role. The work of Fleming et al. (2021, p. 712) found supervisors understood the importance of helping students develop their professional practice, yet some openly admitted they “had no idea what students were learning at university and how this might relate to the types of knowledge that could be transferred into workplace activities.” Despite their willingness to support students, the evidence emphasizes the important role HEIs have in helping PEs understand the types of practices appropriate for WIL, strategies for facilitating knowledge development and transfer, and to align workplace practice opportunities with the curriculum. While universities should provide host organizations and PEs with handbooks and guidelines, there is a broader call for training to prepare PEs, with the authors claiming “it is evident that universities need to do more” to ensure that all supervisors are adequately prepared and aware of their multidimensional role and how to facilitate learning (Fleming et al., 2021, p. 716). This reiterates the work of Bogo et al. (2007) and Finch and Taylor (2013) who highlighted the need for establishing training and support mechanisms for PEs in social work to avoid potential tensions and challenges in social work education.

A common narrative evident in social work literature is the apparent need for, yet lack of, training for PEs, whereby social workers often have little supervision training (Miehls et al., 2013; Pascoe, 2025). In a study exploring social work student placement experiences, Cleak et al. (2022) argue it is not who is providing supervision, but how well they supervise students that has the largest impact on learning. Students recommended that all PEs, whether employed in the placement host agency or externally contracted to provide supervision, be trained in how to supervise. This reflects the findings of Hay et al. (2019, p. 27) whereby focus groups with social work students from eight institutions in New Zealand drew attention to the lack of training for PEs prior to placements commencing, highlighting this “as potentially affecting the quality of supervision.”

In a previous study focused on the New Zealand context, Hay et al. (2016) found similar results when surveying PEs directly. Their analysis indicates PEs found the experience of supervising students on placement contributed to their continued professional development (CPD), however, they did not necessarily have training prior to taking on the role and were subsequently learning in action. Participants commented on facing challenges in feeling competent when they had no background in tutoring or teaching, evidencing how, just as a social work student may face a crisis in confidence (Dill, 2017), so too may their PE. Lastly, when interviewing social workers on their experiences supporting students on placement, Lateef et al. (2023) reported participants asserted more training was required to support PEs in taking on the teaching role. While the International Federation of Social Work Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (2020) states that every School of Social Work should aspire to have “provisions for the continuing professional development of its educators,” it remains unclear who is captured by the term educators, as PEs who supervise placements are rarely employed by HEIs and do not necessarily receive an additional stipend or salary for taking on a student in their agency. The literature, however, highlights that without adequate training, preparation and support, some PEs may be “ill-equipped to perform responsibilities expected of them” (J. Kay et al., 2014, p. 63).

Essential Knowledge and Skills

Understanding the complex role and training needs of a PE is linked to core knowledge and skills that are central to the teaching and learning of students during their placement. This includes risk management, ethical awareness, pastoral care, power dynamics, delivering feedback, cross cultural practice, online delivery and adult learning theory. These are discussed in turn.

In a qualitative study where WIL placement coordinators employed in HEIs were interviewed, Cameron et al. (2019) explore ethical dilemmas and risks associated with students completing WIL whilst also being employed by the host agency. Discussing the importance of ethical awareness for all parties involved in placement arrangements, Cameron et al. (2019, p. 83) highlight how PEs who are unable to identify and manage risks “may be unable to provide the education, modelling and support to develop profession-ready students with ethical awareness.” This research identified key responsibilities, core skills and knowledge that are central to the PE role but may not be part of the everyday activities of the employee supervising the student. Additionally, the authors drew attention to the importance of pastoral care for students on placement, arguing a higher level of care may be required as many students were reported to have a “lack of workplace experience” (Cameron et al., 2019, p. 87). The lack of previous experience in a work-based setting is not unique to this study, with previous research highlighting similar challenges whereby students were unfamiliar with “the realities of a workplace” (Smith-Ruig, 2013, p. 775). Combined with students potentially facing significant financial hardship associated with lengthy unpaid placements, challenges navigating on-going care responsibilities alongside studies, or anxieties associated with placement logistics (Bartley et al., 2024;

Hulme-Moir et al., 2022), an awareness of student wellbeing and pastoral care is arguably a growing element of the PE role.

Extending on the consideration of power touched on by Dobbins and Fell (2020), Rees et al.'s (2020) research contests the traditional conceptualizations of asymmetric power relationships between supervisor and student by examining processes of feedback in WIL. Conducting interviews with students (n=26) and supervisors (n=25) across six academic disciplines, findings suggest fluid power dynamics are present. Narratives of resistance accompanied by examples from both students and supervisors illustrated instances where students had actioned their power by challenging supervisor feedback, ignoring feedback, or critiquing the practice of their supervisors. Whether enacting their power consciously or unconsciously, Rees et al. (2020) suggest student behavior can undermine PEs and calls for dialogic feedback practices to navigate such tensions. With both students and PEs constructing themselves as victims in their narratives, it is evident that power dynamics and feedback processes need careful consideration to support learning and development within WIL and is an area of knowledge that is essential for effective teaching and learning relationships. With a myriad of factors that can support or inhibit the uptake of feedback, attention to a range of techniques is important to navigate the immediate learning needs of the student and to scaffold learning to support the development of independent competent future professionals (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2022).

Supervising culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students is a further element of WIL that offers both opportunities and challenges to the PE role. Measuring perceptions from PEs supervising both health and non-health placements, Lee et al. (2021) compared survey results from participants who had overseen the placement of CALD students and those who had not. Findings suggest specialized skills and support with additional training was necessary for PEs engaging with CALD students. The authors go on to state that ultimately, all supervisors reported low levels of support in their role resulting in the conclusion that "tertiary institutions may lack the mechanisms to monitor and control access to and delivery of supports and training to fieldwork supervisors" (Lee et al., 2021, p. 679). Lee et al. (2021, p. 680) argue that the "nature of the work undertaken by fieldwork supervisors typically does not differ substantially" due to benchmarking or underpinning standards, therefore a system of training to prepare PEs was deemed achievable.

Cross cultural practice has gained attention in providing meaningful WIL opportunities in social work education specifically, whereby Ross et al. (2019) explore the challenges of managing quality placement experiences in the face of language and/or cultural barriers. Employing an online survey method for gathering the experiences and perspectives of PEs supervising international social work students in Australia, Ross et al. (2019) found cultural and linguistic differences have been viewed in terms of student deficiencies rather than an opportunity for mutual learning or extended professional development. There is a need, therefore, to enhance PEs' professional skills for cross cultural supervision to challenge any student deficiency narratives and promote inclusive education to better align with core social work principles of anti-oppressive practice and empowerment. Arguably, supervision that is "responsive to the distinctive learning needs of international students during social work field placement" is essential for equitable outcomes as cultural identity and ethnicity are key factors that shape supervision encounters (Hicks & Egan, 2024, p. 2185).

In the context of New Zealand, Mooney et al. (2020) interrogate the consideration of bicultural competencies in social work placements, recommending appropriate external cultural supervision be embedded in WIL. Conducting research with Māori social work graduates and Māori PEs, findings stress the importance of establishing a culturally safe environment for indigenous students to thrive

and “observe, experience and critique their culturally appropriate models and concepts” (Mooney et al., 2020, p. 56). Despite literature recognizing the importance of culturally safe environments to support student learning (Hicks & Egan, 2024), further research is needed to assess how indigenous and non-indigenous PEs conceptualize a culturally safe space and how this can be established across organizational contexts, nations, programs and ethnicities.

Examining how to improve WIL learning for Pacific social work students in New Zealand, Hay and Mafile’O (2022) highlight how existing WIL frameworks have historically been based on western pedagogies and may need to be reviewed to consider whether they are fit for purpose to facilitate personal and professional development for indigenous students. Their research found understanding indigenous values, concepts, knowledge, and beliefs, including culturally safe practices, is essential to supporting student learning, however, this may be a required area of learning for both HEI staff and PEs to improve placement experiences (Hay & Mafile’O, 2022). Additionally, in a national survey of social work PEs in New Zealand, the desire for training opportunities to develop enhanced opportunities for bicultural competencies in placements was the second most sought after topic, with participants highlighting this knowledge as important to their role (Pascoe, 2025).

In a traditional WIL placement model for allied health care, students, their supervisor and service users are co-located at the placement site (Whitehead et al., 2023); however, the COVID-19 pandemic saw a rapid shift to remote placements and subsequent rise in remote supervision conducted with the use of technology including teleconferencing software (Fronek et al., 2023; Whitehead et al., 2023). Whilst some PEs may have had previous experiences using telecommunication technologies for supervision, for many, this was a new form of delivery and new policies were needed in response to such changes (Fronek et al., 2023). Research identified numerous challenges with online supervision, including difficulties in developing rapport with students as online platforms “affected the naturalness of their communication with students” (Whitehead et al., 2023, p. 293) and reduced instances of informal communication that occurs within face-to-face environments (Lomas et al., 2023; Whitehead et al., 2023). Concerns of wellbeing were identified by PEs who expressed compounding issues when delivering negative feedback to students online, especially if there was uncertainty about the level of support available to the student (Whitehead et al., 2023). With these added complexities, Whitehead et al. (2023), highlight the need to develop training resources for PEs new to remote supervision arrangements and ensure adequate opportunities to develop appropriate digital communication technology skills. The pandemic has opened opportunities to explore the continuation of remote practices to make the most of the flexibility and accessibility it can offer (Fronek et al., 2023; Hodge et al., 2026; Lomas et al., 2023; Saxton et al., 2024). Remote placements and online supervision facilitated through videoconferencing software or telecommunications did exist before COVID-19 although on a much smaller scale and with a focus on servicing remote regions (Ducat et al., 2016). Students, however, need to develop online capabilities to reflect contemporary workplace realities with remote delivery becoming an ongoing element of professional practice (Hay et al., 2023; Hodge et al., 2026). Intentional use of online technology to provide effective supervision is at the core of authentic learning for students during virtual social work placements (Saxton et al., 2024), and understanding the challenges faced and skillset required to deliver effective online supervision requires a planful transition wherein additional resourcing, training, and policies are likely required.

Whilst research has found PEs are celebrated as central to quality WIL, placement coordinators have expressed concerns that PEs who do not demonstrate good practice to support students can present as a challenge to HEIs (Hay, 2020). The work of Hay (2020, p. 56) acknowledges the importance of training, with one participant stating that the PEs

need to be given the tools to provide quality supervision, to know its value, to understand why we emphasize it, to know about student, adult learning theories and they need to know how to support a student in those first couple of weeks.

In particular, the importance of adult learning theory is raised as part of understanding core teaching and learning pedagogy. Following in-depth interviews with practicing social workers who had been PEs in Norway, Nordstrand (2017, p. 491) reports potential clashes in placement expectations between PEs, HEIs and students, suggesting social workers “receive very little in the way of pedagogic training, and confusion about expectations might reflect this.” Deemed essential for gaining a deeper understanding of how students learn on placement, Papouli (2014) stresses the importance of understanding and applying learning theory to be able to respond appropriately to diverse student needs. The central role of theory was previously raised by Cleak and Smith (2012) arguing the importance of utilizing adult learning theory for encouraging students to be active participants in their learning and to draw upon a range of teaching and learning techniques as a PE. In a more recent critical commentary, Parga and Doyle (2020) identify potential gaps in PE competence, highlighting that social workers may have a strong understanding of clinical skills, values and social work theory, yet lack foundational knowledge of learning theory which is necessary for both meeting the needs of students and promoting quality learning. Overall, the literature positions adult learning theory as central knowledge, yet suggests this is missing from the training and development opportunities available and emphasizes that the knowledge needed for the role cannot be assumed inherent (Pascoe, 2025).

This topical discussion has identified core knowledge and skills that need further attention in PE training. Alongside the need for understanding what is taught in the degree and remaining up to date with emerging knowledges (Dobbins & Fell, 2020; Fleming et al., 2021), areas include: managing risk (Cameron et al., 2019), providing pastoral care to support student wellbeing (Bartley et al., 2024; Cameron et al., 2019; Smith-Ruig, 2013), understanding feedback processes and power (Dobbins & Fell, 2020; Rees et al., 2020; Whitehead et al., 2023), appropriate and authentic methods of assessment including processes for failure (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Bogo et al., 2007; Finch & Taylor, 2013; Jackson, 2024), cross cultural and bicultural competence to supervise ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse students (Hay & Mafle’O, 2022; Hicks & Egan, 2024; Lee et al., 2021; Mooney et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2019), methods for effective online supervision (Fronek et al., 2023; Saxton et al., 2024; Whitehead et al., 2023) and understanding teaching pedagogy and learning theories (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Nordstrand, 2017; Papouli, 2014; Parga & Doyle, 2020).

TRAINING OFFERED FOR PRACTICE EDUCATORS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

In some nations including England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, there is regulated training and formal credentials a social worker must complete before being able to independently supervise students on placement. Waterhouse et al. (2011) investigated the transition from practitioner to PE for social workers in England. Their research found that, despite having mandated training for the role, there was wide variability between institutions in the practice learning module offered across the nation, and the training was critiqued as being too brief to cover the essential knowledge and skills necessary for the role. Ultimately, the training was deemed as “problematic in ensuring quality provision,” and contributed to the decision to introduce new national benchmarking to strengthen training and create consistent learning outcomes for PEs (Waterhouse et al., 2011, p. 97). An updated framework was subsequently piloted in 2010, and implemented in 2013 (Finch & Taylor, 2013) and completion of the training contributed toward accepted evidence of CPD as required by Social Work England.

The current credential in England is known as the Social Work Practice Education Postgraduate Award. The program is delivered by multiple HEIs across England, with content designed to support social workers to develop their skills in creating and delivering an effective learning environment alongside the opportunity to supervise their first social work student on placement. The training program must meet the Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) which are regularly reviewed to respond to emerging industry pressures and research (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2022; Waterhouse et al., 2011). The training is divided into two modules or stages. Although some variability across institutions remains, the stages typically map onto the expectations and requirements for each of the student placements depending on the level of study. The program is not regulated by Social Work England, but it is academically accredited and must adhere to the *Practice Educator Professional Standards for Social Work* set by the professional association (BASW, 2022).

Built into the profession's CPD framework and both academically accredited and professionally regulated, social workers in Northern Ireland must complete the Professional in Practice, Practice Teaching Program (PiPPT). Delivered through the University of Ulster, the post-qualifying credential consists of two modules that equate to 90 credits at a Master level (Northern Ireland Social Care Council [NISCC], 2022). The first module focuses on preparation and planning for effective placement learning, including induction for students and aligning learning outcomes and activities against the learning standards. The second module engages with the complexities of managing student placements and addressing student competence, including exploring the purpose of supervision, an introduction to adult learning theory, and understanding appropriate methods of assessment (NISCC, 2022). Candidates are partnered with qualified PEs to support their development throughout the training and must complete assignments to demonstrate their application of learning. Typically, this qualification is completed alongside supervising their first student, as candidates are required to reflect in action and report on the progress of the student they are supervising.

In Wales, social workers must similarly complete a professionally regulated and academically accredited course, known as the Enabling Practice Teaching credential (Social Care Wales [SCW], 2020). Social Care Wales (2020, p. 4), the Government institution tasked with setting the standards for social work training and regulation, explicitly recognizes PEs have "a critical role in deciding if students have the sufficient skills and knowledge to become a professional social worker," and as such, require social workers to complete a 20 credit post-qualifying micro credential before independently supervising their first student. Delivered by several HEIs across Wales, the micro credential focuses on placement preparation and assessing students on placements. Candidates must evidence they can draw upon appropriate skills and techniques to enable student learning and "make sound judgements about their competence in social work" (SCW, 2020, p. 4). The program maps on to the *Code of Professional Practice for Social Care* (SCW, 2017) and values set out in the *National Occupational Standards for Social Work* (SCW, 2011). Before entry into the program, candidates must have agreement from their employer to ensure commitment from all parties in supporting the completion of the training and commitment to placement standards (SCW, 2020).

Whilst no thorough evaluations of the current training examples outlined could be found and processes for funding remain unclear in the literature, Yeung et al. (2021) interviewed experienced PEs in England who had completed the practice education award. Findings mirror previous discussion which articulate the complexity of the PE role and further illustrates feelings of tension or conflict faced when navigating the position of both educator and assessor. The study found participants encountered multiple challenges including managing student resistance to direction, uncertainty in providing critical feedback, and tensions between supporting student success whilst also maintaining

professional standards. Despite having completed formal postgraduate training in practice education, findings reiterate the importance of ongoing professional development to enhance skills, knowledge, and confidence to support social workers in the PE role (Yeung et al., 2021).

In a small-scale evaluation of the PiPPT program in Northern Ireland (MacDermott & Harkin-MacDermott, 2023) findings detail how participants valued the tools for assessment introduced in their training to assist in determining student competence. The evaluation, however, did not capture the impact of said training in terms of teaching and learning strategies employed in placement supervision, and findings predominantly focused on perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning opportunities.

What these training program examples have in common, however, is a shared integration or alignment to the professional CPD framework, as set out by the respective Nations' social work regulatory authorities. Outside of the United Kingdom, some Universities offer institution specific development opportunities, yet the consulted literature further indicates limited peer-reviewed impact evaluation of said programs, and PEs can be left at "the mercy of whatever the School creates for their training" (Parga & Doyle, 2020, p. 2). Whilst evidence suggests training and development opportunities for practice educators is necessary, Lane (2023, p. 42) argues this needs to be "based on evidence from research on what constitutes best practice." Programs should engage in regular reviews to ensure training remains up to date with literature and research in WIL to continually "develop and update professional development curricula" (Dettlaff, 2008, p. 335).

Barriers to Accessing Training and Development

Although social work PEs have been described as having an openness to lifelong learning (Jivanjee et al., 2015) and placing value on training, particularly those designed specifically for PEs (Zuckerman et al., 2017), literature also evidences several barriers to engaging in CPD opportunities when offered. Workload pressures have been consistently cited by PEs as problematic (Nordstrand, 2017; Pascoe, 2025; Segev et al., 2021). Contributing to a lack of availability, time constraints associated with workloads can prevent the completion of training (Parga & Doyle, 2020). Once completed, a lack of time can also create a barrier to transferring learning and behavioral change into the workplace (Dettlaff, 2008). While PEs are calling out for further resourcing, support and training in relation to their role, this must be accessible and offered at a time and location that meets the needs of the practitioners (Lateef et al., 2023; Pascoe, 2025). Furthermore, access to training, if offered, may still face barriers if the host organization does not value the PE role, as management needs to be willing and motivated to "release their workers to come in and do training about practicum, recognizing that that is good for their organization and it's also good for us [HEIs]" (Hay, 2020, p. 57).

Recognizing how workloads and availability is shaped by organizational context, training may be more readily accessible if offered in the workplace, raising important considerations of how HEIs could partner with local agencies and organizations to ensure stakeholder buy-in when developing and promoting training. Ayala et al. (2014) examine the potential for online learning to address such challenges, with relevance to institutions that offer their qualifying programs by distance or cover a large geographic region or rural community. This recommendation remains relevant to contemporary contexts where online or hybrid methods of teaching qualifying and post-qualifying social work education have been adopted and evaluated for more than two decades (Horwath & Shardlow, 2000; Robbins et al., 2016; Roberts-DeGennaro et al., 2005). The literature consulted, however, has not addressed the concept of inclusive education for training the trainers, and attention to accessibility in

terms of additional learning needs, neurodiversity and/or diverse abilities within the network of PEs must also be considered. Whilst access, equity and inclusion in WIL have been addressed in considering the needs of the students (Mackaway et al., 2025), this too must be considered when designing training materials and development opportunities for PEs.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The literature illustrates the important role of PEs in supporting student learning and development during WIL. Focusing on the case study of social work, there is a clear need for training for PEs, highlighting the complexity of the role and substantial areas of knowledge and skill required. Although some training programs exist, as already addressed, formal provisions are not standard outside of United Kingdom for social work, and it cannot be assumed that what is applied in one context can be directly transferrable to another. Should a PE be ill-equipped to effectively take on the roles and responsibilities associated with supervising students on placement, this may compromise the student's learning, impacting on their graduate competencies and overall preparation for practice.

Mandatory registration for social workers is making traction in western nations around the world and regulated professionally accredited tertiary level degrees are increasingly required for initial registration. With professional registration comes the need to evidence CPD for annual practicing certificates and renewed registration as social workers, therefore, an examination of the interest, need and professional implications for micro-credentials or comprehensive frameworks for training is relevant. There remains no consistent agreement on what should be included in a training program. Elements recognized across the literature as holding value, however, includes methods of supervision, learning theory, cultural responsiveness, online delivery, managing conflict such as student failure, and pastoral care. While understanding HEI policies are needed to ensure WIL workplace practice opportunities adhere to relevant regulations and requirements, this topical discussion prompts HEIs and WIL coordinators to consider what training is offered to PEs and if there is opportunity to collaborate across institutions in potential future delivery. Such a case could be made to support quality of learning for students on work-based placements. PE training however, must consider implications for the broader context of WIL. Considerations of PE workloads and subsequent availability, workplace culture and associated costs for both provision and completion are essential to ensure any training developments are responsive to the challenges faced by the profession and will not exacerbate any existing difficulties such as securing sufficient placement opportunities (Hay, 2018). These complexities justify the need for future research that seeks to address the potential opportunities and limitations for delivering training programs for PEs in WIL. Readers are encouraged to critically consider what is delivered for PEs in your field and context, and if it is fit for purpose in light of the evidence presented.

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In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

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