An investigation of group learning on practice placements

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Section One: Introduction

There is nothing extraordinary in practice teachers working with social work students in groups. Group practice learning has been common where the opportunities have existed. This has been confined mainly to those situations where a practice teacher has multiple students either in a student unit or is supervising a number of students in different settings on a "long arm" basis, that is to say they were not themselves located at the placement site with the student but in a different office. What is rather extraordinary is that, in spite of the approach having been accepted for many years, it has attracted relatively little interest as a research topic. Electronic searches uncover only a few journal articles, (Bamford and McVicker, 1999; Arkin et al, 1999). Sharlow and Doel (1996), for example, in their valuable book on practice learning devote less than a page to the topic. Nevertheless, there is more than enough in the literature to inform practice teachers who have an interest in group learning. Much has been written on group work as a method of working with people; the benefits of groups for learning are well established and discussion on group approaches to student learning in practice is to be found in the literature of other helping professions, notably counselling, psychotherapy, nursing and occupational therapy (Rosenthal, 1999, Powles, 2000: Mason, 1999; Prieto 1996; Borders, 1991, Ellis and Douce, 1994; Hillerbrand, 1989; Arvidsson et al, 2001).

When a new practice learning centre was set up in Derry Londonderry in 1999 the practice teacher decided that it would be prudent to include some group sessions in the supervision programme so that students could provide support for each other and so that common areas of teaching, for example induction, anti-oppressive practice, portfolio construction, could be dealt with more effectively and economically. From the experience of providing these sessions was born the idea that it might be possible to develop group supervision so that it formed a more significant part of practice learning. Some work had already taken place on the idea by the time that SWAPltsn invited bids for Mini Projects in the summer of 2002.

This report reviews some of the literature on group learning and supervision and attempts to add a little to that knowledge through an account of the experience of students and practice teachers engaged in the pilot project mentioned above, set in a wider context of the experiences of other students and practice teachers in the Northern Ireland area.

Section Two: Literature review

Groupwork

Groupwork as a method of working with people offers some potential advantages as outlined by Brown (1994: 13-15) :

- A setting, mirroring real life, in which work can take place on personal relationship problems and skills.

- A source of mutual support and an arena for problem solving for people who find themselves in similar situations to each other.

- The potential for personal change through the processes of social interaction, including role modelling, feedback and reinforcement.

- The availability of help from a variety of people.
- Opportunities for democracy and self-empowerment which may be absent from a one-to-one relationship.
- A setting which might suit some people who find a one-to- relationship too difficult or threatening.
- A more economical way to work with people.

It is clear that groupwork offers a number of benefits which can be employed in providing learning opportunities.

Group work in education

Jaques (2000) demonstrates how small group discussion helps students to express themselves in the language of the subject, to establish a closer relationship with their teacher, to develop skills in listening, presenting ideas, arguing a case and working as a member of a team. Most importantly, he contends, it provides the opportunity for people to monitor their own learning and so gain self-direction and independence in their studies. Drawing on a range of theories and strategies, he illustrates how the benefits of groupwork can be employed to enhance learning. Students' learning benefits from close and frequent contact with their teachers. They learn better when engaged co-operatively with other students. Their learning is greatly enhanced when they are actively involved, when they are given prompt feedback and when they are presented with a variety of ways of acquiring knowledge. Problem based learning, self and peer assessment, peer tutoring and self and peer monitoring are examples of *metacognitive* learning which involves thinking beyond the immediate knowledge or skills. Students who are able to think beyond what is given, develop deeper understanding and learn more lastingly. (p:52) In a review of learning research Jaques (2000, p53) highlights that:

> "Deep, holistic, relativistic students are more likely to prefer the openness of small discussion groups to the more formal, distant relationships of highly structured lecture courses" and "A mixture of formal lectures, small group work, individual study and project work may be the best for the majority of students".

Abercrombie (1983) demonstrated that students learned more from being able to compare their judgements with that of their peers than from that of their teacher and Nichol (1997, cited in Jaques, 2000, p.53) argues that in group learning situations students are less likely to experience personal failure and more likely to develop an increased sense of responsibility and self efficacy.

Groupwork in social work education

Similar ideas underpin the Enquiry and Action Learning (EAL) approach, developed at the Social Work Department of Bristol University. The key concepts of the approach are problem based learning and student autonomy in learning. Problem based learning, according to Burgess and Jackson (1990), facilitates the integration of academic and practice learning, helps student develop skills in problem solving and increases motivation to learn. It also moves students from being passive to active learners, helps them to develop independent and critical thinking and results in higher levels of attainment. Taylor (1996) sees learning in groups as being a core element of EAL. It recognises and validates the skills, knowledge and ability held by all the students and acknowledges the mutual benefits that arise from the sharing of these. It also provides an environment in which students can learn the skills of working in interdependent relationships, thereby preparing them for practice in teamwork. Further, she argues, working in groups provides students with an experience of power, which occurs through collective identity and collaborative working and mirrors the process of working collectively as agents of change in practice.

Bamford and McVicker (1999) discuss the importance of group approaches within social work education. Students, they argue, are often criticised for coming off courses without the requisite knowledge and skills for the work with groups in which many of them will be required to engage. Not all qualifying social work programmes provide specific groupwork teaching. Many, however, use a group tutorial system, especially since lecturer/student ratios have increased so dramatically. The group tutorial provides a forum, not only for academic and discipline based discussion, but also in which students can experience group processes and interpersonal interaction.

Group supervision

On of the richest sources of material relevant to this report is the literature on the group supervision of staff. Practice teaching has obvious parallels with the supervision of qualified social workers and, of course, there are many similarities between group supervision of staff and group practice learning for students. Kadushin and Harkness (2000) discuss what they refer to as the "group conference". They highlight the appropriateness of group supervision for staff engaged in group work where the interactions that take place in supervision can be used to illustrate and discuss the problems that occur in working with groups and the approaches that might be employed. However, group supervision has a number of other advantages which are now summarised.

1. Interestingly Kadushin and Harkness (2000) start with the potential benefits of time and economy that arise from group supervision. However, as Brown (1994) contends, such arguments are of doubtful validity, since properly conducted sessions may involve equivalent time spent in preparation and evaluation and, as Hawkins and Shotet (2000) suggest, group supervision which arises out of a positive choice rather than as a compromise forced on the participants due to economic restraint, is likely to be more successful.

2. Perhaps a more positive advantage is that in group supervision an increased variety of learning experiences is available. Staff can learn through discussion, simulations, tapes, exercises, etc.

3. They are able to learn from the experiences of each other, occurring both in their current work and in their past. They can share problems they have experienced and solutions they have brought to bear. They are exposed to a range of opinions and viewpoints. Therefore they have a richer source of resources available to them for learning.

4. Staff members can be a source of emotional support for each other, giving and receiving praise, consolation and sympathy. The knowledge that problems are shared helps them to become less personal and allows them to be objectified.

5. Group supervisees are able to compare progress in a way unavailable in individual supervision. Knowing how one is getting on, compared to one's peers can be less worrying than imagining it.

6. Some staff members find individual supervision too intense and find group supervision more comfortable. It can be easier to accept criticism from peers than from authority figures. Since there are a number of roles available within a group people can behave in ways in which they know they are most successful.

7. The supervision process is more empowering. The balance of power is numerically shifted away from the supervisor and the staff may feel safer in presenting differing opinions, or in challenging the supervisor.

8. Group supervision helps to develop peer group cohesion, professional identity and has benefits for teamwork.

9. The supervisor and the supervisee are able to experience each other in a different type of relationship. The supervisor is able to see how the supervisee reacts in a group setting, while the supervisee is able to learn more about the supervisor and also to use her/him as a model in group facilitation.

10. The group supervision process allows for the splitting of roles, which in the individual situation would have to remain with the supervisor. So, for example, while the group confronts and demands, the supervisor can provide reassurance. Alternatively when the supervisor needs to challenge she/he may be able to rely on the group to be supportive.

11. Furthermore the supervisor may be able to find support from the group in attempting to help a member to moderate behaviour. The supervisor also can use the norms of the group to move it in a positive direction.

12. In group supervision the individual can become less dependent on the supervisor moving through a phase of dependence on peers to one with greater dependence on self.

13. Lastly, group supervision provides opportunities for students to learn about each other's cultural and ethnic backgrounds and therefore permits exposure to challenges to stereotypes and biases. Consequently it has a contribution to make in the development of awareness of oppression and modification of discriminatory attitudes.

This impressive list of advantages is balanced, to some extent by disadvantages.

1. Kadushin and Harkness (2000) see a major difficulty in meeting individual needs, the group conference necessarily being directed towards the more general needs of the group. Consequently there may be a danger of it being less focused, structured and relevant than individual supervision.

2. There also is potential for rivalry and competition within the group that may inhibit learning and have negative consequences for teamwork.

3. There is risk of destructive and negative feedback from peers and individuals may keep quiet rather than expose themselves to ridicule.

4. Alternatively group cohesion can be so well developed that individuals come under irresistible pressures to conform. The supervisor may come under attack or have control difficulties.

5. Furthermore the group conference offers hiding places for individuals where they can avoid responsibility by simply accepting consensus decisions.

6. Communication can be difficult as members put individual but differing interpretations on what is said or done.

7. Similarly, what may be a solution for one person in the group can be a difficulty for another.

All these factors can make the facilitation of the group a difficult task and the supervisor, therefore needs well developed skills in managing group situations, which past experience and training may not have provided.

Group supervision in practice learning

In their book on student supervision in social work Ford and Jones (1987) add to Kadushin and Harkness's list of advantages and disadvantages. Uncomfortably, but perhaps realistically, they deal with situations in which group supervision is better than poor individual supervision. There is, they argue "less chance of supervisors inappropriately imposing their own values, methods, preconceptions, even prejudices on a student" (p.96) Not only may group supervision moderate the negative effects of inadequate individual supervision by providing a more positive learning experience but, they suggest, group members may even be able to have a mediation role in situations of conflict between supervisor and student. On the other hand, they contend that there is a tendency in group supervision to concentrate on problems rather than the more positive aspects of learning.

Hillerbrand (1989) provides useful insight into how cognitive psychology can help us to understand why group supervision may enhance learning. Skill acquisition is improved, he suggests, when it takes place in the presence of other students rather than in the presence of "experts". Firstly skills are increased through a student's verbalisation of his/her cognitive processes in the presence of other students. The student must verbalise these processes in order to receive feedback. The students then become models of the verbalisation of cognitive processes for each other. Hillerbrand argues that experts, for example practice teachers, are poor reporters of their cognitive processes. They execute these skills covertly and so are poor at giving post hoc descriptions of their actual processes. Instead they tend to substitute less useful *re-interpretations* of the cognitive process. Students, whose cognitive processes involved in working with service users are less well established and therefore much more overt, find recall and consequently verbalisation, much easier. Consequently, they provide better models and their thinking aloud has significant advantages. Additionally there are a number of other advantages which emerge. Firstly, students, being unfamiliar with the specialised vocabulary of social work are more likely to use language which is understandable and accessible to other students. Secondly they are better at picking up the non-verbal cues that other students use to indicate confusion. These advantages can be capitalised upon through practice group learning. Hillerbrand

underlines the importance of cognitive rehearsal in learning. In practice group learning the student rehearses the statements made by peers by matching them to an internal model. When they listen to the statements made by other students they continually process, weigh and reformulate the information. The monitoring of one's thoughts in this way greatly helps with the developmentof metacognitive skills.

Further, in addition to learning through listening to someone else in this way, the student him/herself also learns through verbalisation of *his or her* cognitive process. Verbalising one's cognitive processes for the purpose of teaching others helps with one's own understanding, and preparing to teach a peer creates a firmer acquisition of the knowledge than simply learning it for oneself. Not only are information processing skills enhanced in practice learning groups but motivation to use the skills is increased. In a process which Hillderbrand refers to as "novice scaffolding" students observe their peers operating at a range of skills levels. They are then presented with opportunities both to increase their own skills levels through the modelling process at the same time as presenting a model for those who are at a less advanced level. A parallel process occurs in which self efficacy is increased in a student when she/he observes a peer review a skill. Research by Schunk and Hansen (1985, cited in Hillderbrand 1989) indicated that students who observed a peer reviewing a skill were more likely to demonstrate increased skill themselves along with increased self-efficacy compared with those who viewed an expert.

Section Four: Aims and Objectives

The study aims to investigate group learning on social work placements in Northern Ireland.

The study objectives are:

- To investigate the placement experience of social work students at the University of Ulster at Magee of learning in groups.
- To conduct a pilot of practice group learning at Partnership Care West Learning Centre (PCW).
- To identify and disseminate good practice in practice learning in groups.

Section Five: Methodology

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used. In addition to a nongraduate route at Jordanstown, the University of Ulster provides qualifying social work education for 25 undergraduate and 40 post graduate students each year. Students complete two periods of practice each of 70 days during the first part of the calendar year. In both 2002 and 2003 the students returning from placement, first and final, were asked to complete a ten-point questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of all students attending a debriefing session immediately following placement. The questionnaire contained a set of quantitative questions (4) related to whether or not the students had had experience of group supervision and if so the frequency and duration of the sessions and a second set of qualitative questions (2) in which they were invited to indicate their experience of the group learning where it occurred. A further set of questions (2 quantitative, 2 qualitative) inquired of those situations that had occurred in group situations that in the respondent's opinion would have been better dealt with in individual supervision and those that occurred in individual supervision that could have been better handled in a group session.

The data collected and analysed from the 2002 questionnaires was used to inform a pilot group-learning project which took place at PCW in the first part of the following year. Simultaneously, a further two situations were identified where students were being provided with group learning on placement. This provided a total of three different practice-learning situations. The pilot project took place in the voluntary sector and involved two practice teachers, female and male. It had originally been intended for four first placement students but unfortunately and unusually two students had to withdraw due to illness. The second practice-learning situation took place in the probation service and involved one practice teacher and three final placement students and the third situation took place in a statutory social services setting and involved six first placement students and two practice teachers, again one male one female. In this way it was possible to obtain data from students in both first and final placements, in both the statutory and voluntary sectors, where there were both one and two practice teachers and with a range of student numbers, 2, 3, and 6. The practice teachers were all "long arm". Each of the practice teachers of the three groups was interviewed during the course of the placement and together where this was the working arrangement. The practice teachers of the pilot

project were additionally interviewed at the end of the placement. All the students involved in the three placement situations were interviewed either in the last week of the placement or by phone after the placement had ended. The preliminary findings were presented at two voluntary sector practice teacher seminars, where the practice teachers brought their own experience to bear upon the findings. All interviews followed a semi-structured format. It was not practical to interview all respondents face to face and some interviews were conducted by telephone. Nevertheless, the same interview schedule was used in each case. The study followed a grounded theory approach and it was necessary to conduct follow up interviews by telephone with three students and three practice teachers.

The data collected and analysed from these interviews, together with the data from the 2003 questionnaires was used to inform a second pilot project involving the same two practice teachers as originally. This project ran for three students, one who had withdrawn from the original placement and two from another programme. The placement ran during the autumn of 2003. These students were interviewed by telephone using the same interview schedule and the practice teachers were interviewed again on their experience of the second pilot.

The quantitative data from the questionnaires was analysed manually. The qualitative data was transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. All the interviews were recorded on tape and transcribed. The data resulting was scrutinised, condensed, focused and simplified, a processed described by Miles and Hubberman (1994) as 'data reduction". This process produced a number of themes and sub themes which are presented in the following section.

Section Six: Findings

End of placement questionnaires

Quantitative data

Of a possible 112 students completing placement in 2002, a total of 60, that is 30 first placement and 30 final placement, students attended the end of semester debriefings and all of these completed questionnaires. In 2003 a smaller number of questionnaires, 42, were returned, 24 by first placement students and 18 by final year students. The number attending the seminars is not known but the reason for the reduced return is probably the fact that it was not possible for the researcher to attend the seminar and ensure, personally, that the questionnaires were completed and returned during the session.

In 2002, 10 (33.3%) of the first year students reported having had group supervision. 9 (30%) of final year students reported that they had had group supervision the previous year and 6 (20%) had had the experience that year. Of these 3 (10%) had had group supervision in both years.

In 2003, 6 (25%) first placement students had had group supervision, 8 (44.4%) of the final year group reported the experience on first placement and 4 (22.2) on final placement, of whom 2 (11.1) had had it in both years.

Taking the two cohorts together group supervision had taken place on an average of 3.4 occasions during the placement, the frequency ranging from once to six times. The average length of time for a session was 91 minutes, ranging from as little as 30 minutes to as much as 160 minutes.

So across the two surveys, 102 students completed questionnaires and 38 students reported having experienced group supervision at some point. Of these 38 students, 3 reported that they not had found the experience useful. Of these two said that it was too short (30 minutes) and the other gave no explanation. The remaining 35 (92%) were positive about group supervision.

Qualitative data

The students were asked a number of questions. Samples of responses typifying the themes identified are reproduced below and tables are also provided indicating the frequency of each response. First students were asked to indicate what they had found beneficial about group supervision. As will be seen from Table 1, the support of other students was the most frequently reported advantage. Students noted:

When I had anxieties I felt I could discuss these issues with other students.

Peer support – reduced isolation.

Support from other students – not on your own.

Got opportunity to help each other with some of the problems we were facing.

Second most frequently reported benefit was the opportunity to share experiences and to learn from the experiences of others:

Get to hear how others were getting on and share good/bad experiences.

Opportunity to share and compare different experiences.

Next, students reported enhanced opportunities for learning, especially in relation to applying theory to practice:

Helped to make sense of theory by discussing what was happening with users and helping to relate theory to practice.

Gained a lot more knowledge of theories and how it related to practice.

Through individual presentations in the group, I was able to learn more in a short space of time.

Request areas of learning and have then met via info sharing.

Help each other to find ways of dealing with some of the problems we were facing in the work.

The other significant theme was around being able to compare progress.

Discovering how other students are fairing in placement.

I felt that I could discuss progress I was making with other students

A small number of students also mentioned a more favourable balance of power, the opportunities to develop teamwork or groupwork skills and one student felt that it offered built-in safeguards for both the student and practice teacher.

Table 1 showing the main benefits cited as arising from group supervision

N=38 frequency	frequency
Support from peers	20
Learning from others experiences	15
Learning from others, viewpoints, sharing ideas, problem solving	13
Comparing progress	7
Empowering	2
Groupwork/teamwork skills	2
Safeguards	1

However group supervision was not an entirely positive experience for all students. Students were asked what disadvantages they felt being supervised in a group had for them. The results are to be found in table 2 below.

The disadvantage most commonly reported was the difficulty in catering for a range of experiences and needs in the group. Examples given were:

> Specific issues that were relevant only to individual placements.

> Discussing things in depth, students working in different areas, not aware of issues

> which impact on individuals.

> Difficulty in having sessions to suit all students concerned.

The difficulty second most frequently mentioned was losing out on individual time:

> It suited the practice teacher as she was trying to see both of us but it worked better for me personally that she see us separately.

> Missed out on individual supervision during the week in which we had group supervision.

Smaller numbers of students remembered the embarrassment of being criticised in the presence of their peers:

> Being criticised in front of another student at times was difficult.

A similar number found the atmosphere in the group intimidating:

> The group was too large and I found it intimidating.

> We never really got the chance to know each other before we were into the work and it was a bit scary.

> I felt this added to extra stress. It felt like a classroom situation.

Two first year students were intimidated by being in a group made up of both first and final placement students.

> The second year students knew more and I felt inferior.

Two others were concerned about breaches of service user confidentiality

Individual students reported some other disadvantages: anxiety that other students seemed to be doing better, power issues with the practice teacher, students differing in their contribution to the group.

Table 2 showing disadvantages experienced

N=38 frequency	frequency
Difficulty in catering for students in a range of placement settings: too general, irrelevant material	7
Not having enough individual attention	5
Being criticised in the group or compared (unfavourably) with other students	3
Intimidating atmosphere	3
Feeing inferior to students at a more advanced level on the programme	2
Service user confidentiality	2
Not doing as well as other students	1
Power issues with the practice teacher	1
Imbalance in students' contributions	1
Not specified	2
No disadvantages	16

Students were asked to identify situations that arose in group supervision that they felt might have been better managed in an individual session. This question produced only a few responses, in fact from just 6 (16%) of the 38 students.

Table 3 showing issues that would have been better managed in individual supervision

N=38 frequency	frequency
Sensitive issues regarding a service user	2
Personal issues	1
Learning about values	1
Receiving critical feedback	1
Issues relating specifically to placement	1
None	32

Conversely all students were asked to consider situations in individual supervision that might have been better managed in a group situation. This provoked a greater response with 33 (32.3%) of the students giving an answer. Both students who had and those who had not experienced group supervision indicated that there were issues in individual supervision that they would have preferred to have seen dealt with in a group.

By far the greatest proportion of students responding to the question felt that they had missed the opportunity to share ideas with other students. This student cites the example of finding it in another worker:

> I had anxieties in relation to a child protection case conference report. I discussed this with my practice teacher and another social worker joined – this added to the discussion and made it less stressful.

The most commonly quoted problem with which they would have welcomed the help of their peers was portfolio construction. This was cited most frequently by first placement students:

> Portfolio building – especially in first year as practice teachers were unsure – it would have benefited to speak with other students.

but also by some in their final year:

> Due to the fact that my practice teacher was undertaking practice teacher award there were issues in relation to portfolio construction that other students may have been able to answer.

The common factor appears to be the relative inexperience of the practice teacher.

Anti-oppressive practice, particularly in the sectarian context of Northern Ireland was cited by a number of students as an area they would have welcomed the opportunity to discuss with peers.

The third main area about which students would have liked to share ideas was in applying theory to the practice situations they were experiencing:

> Group discussions to hear other peoples' opinions of what theory to use etc.

> I wasn't always sure how the theory came in; opinions and information from other sources would have been helpful.

It was rather surprising that hearing about other students' experiences was only mentioned once and that being supported by other students was not seen as important to the whole group as it was to those who had actually experienced it.

Missed opportunities to compare progress were mentioned just as often:

> There were many times I felt isolated and was unsure if I was working at the same pace and quality as other students.

> Reviewing learning objectives within a group would have been beneficial throughout the placement.

Two students reported missing:

> Group confidence to challenge negative practice or power issues.

Table 4 showing issues that would have been better managed in group supervision

N=102 frequency	frequency
Learning from others, viewpoints* sharing ideas, problem solving	25
Portfolio construction	9
Anti-oppressive and anti-sectarian practice	7
Relating theory to practice	5
Other	4
Support from peers	13
Comparing progress	6
Empowering	2
Learning from others experiences	1
Groupwork/teamwork skills	1
None	69

Interviews: Student perspective

The findings from the interviews with the students in the main confirmed the findings from the questionnaires but the detail contained in them provided some additional insights.

The majority of students experienced group supervision as a positive experience:

> We talked about it in a seminar when we got back to college. I was surprised how everyone spoke very highly about it and one girl was very sorry that she didn't have it.

> I thought it was very beneficial, very supportive and helped to cope with pressures.

> I found the small group very comfortable and safer than one to one.

However, three of the six students placed with social services found the experience intimidating

> It was very off putting for a first placement. You didn't know what to expect. I think individual supervision would have been better at the beginning.

> There was no individual supervision initially and sometimes I felt scared and stupid. I didn't know who was my practice teacher. It depends on how comfortable you are in groups and it did stretch you but in the beginning I dreaded it.

This improved over time and two of the students felt that overall the advantages outweighed this disadvantage. The other student stated that she would have preferred not to have had group supervision at all:

> I felt it was quite intimidating in relation to power. I found the practice teacher style quite threatening and it took away from individual supervision. I would have preferred just to have individual supervision every week. Maybe it would have been better with just one practice teacher. You were being assessed by two and you didn't have the same relationship with them for it. You felt you were on the spot in relation to knowledge and felt inadequate. Individual supervision would have been better initially but I wasn't overly keen on it (group supervision) throughout.

Peer Support

Once again the main benefit perceived by students was that of support from peers. Students find placement a particularly stressful part of their social work education. They are faced with new challenges, are often isolated from their friend and are continually under assessment. In these circumstances it helps to know that you are not alone.

> Say you were ever feeling you couldn't do it … everyone else was in the same boat so that made you feel a lot more comfortable.

> There was the social aspect as well. You could talk about your frustrations and maybe relax a bit and get an idea about broader stuff.

> I think it's really good for students, you know, even to see other students, because there are students who are isolated and don't get to see or speak to other students throughout their placement. Like, it's hard enough a placement. Any placement's hard enough.

> When we were bouncing things off each other, you know, it was nice to know that everyone felt the same. I think it helped everyone and made us feel more relaxed.

Students reported that group supervision could provide them with an on-going support system throughout the placement in addition to the opportunity to meet their peers and share experiences, worries and concerns at each group supervision session. As a consequence of group supervision they formed closer relationships with their peers which they could then access for support, if need be, on a daily basis, by making contact by telephone or e-mail.

> Even during the placement we would 'phone each other and say 'What would you recommend (report)? or what am I going to do with this boy? you know. So you have that sort of support, you know, and, of course, like, I think if I'd been on my own without, you know, having the other students, it would have made it so much more difficult.

The students considered this type of day-to-day support to be especially important on occasions when there were no qualified staff members around to ask for advice or where they felt they would look stupid if they asked the practice teacher.

Variety of experience

As in the questionnaires, students pointed to the benefits of being exposed to people who were experiencing a different type of placement:

> I liked being in with people who were in different settings. It gave you an idea of the way it was in other settings and also kind of helped you understand how it worked from their examples because it was different. I mean there was things you could understand better because you could see how it worked in a different setting as well as where you were yourself.

Exposure to others' ideas, understanding theory

Students similarly highlighted how being able to discuss ideas and underpinning theory enhanced understanding:

> I really enjoyed it; it increased my confidence in being in a group and gave me the opportunity to try out new ideas.

> Things were made clearer. I had the knowledge, all right, but it brought it out by being able to talk about it.

It was a good forum for discussion. We would talk and it gave you a better understanding of the reasons for things, like theory and explanations. It was good for letting you know that you were on the right track, like when you would say something and maybe somebody else agreed or they said the same thing or similar and you knew you were right.

In particular opportunities to try out thinking on anti-oppressive practice were highlighted:

You were able to say what ever you wanted and that helped a lot in working out your ideas about things like homosexuality.

I thought it was good in relation to stigma. You could get a better idea of the client perspective. You had more support and were not as threatened on that sort of topic.

It wasn't directed at you as an individual. There was safety in numbers.

I learnt a lot from it – putting theory into practice, anti-oppressive practice and older people – putting it all into context.

And for some group supervision compensated for other built-in placement problems:

It was just my lifeline when I was on placement, being so far away … I had problems in the setting I was in. There wasn't a place for me there. There was no obvious social work model and I had problems clarifying what the role of the social worker was. The group was really important for me in sorting that out.

Facilitation and group processes

Students comments gave a clear indication of the high level of facilitation skills required by practice teachers in group supervision: The students felt that it was important they were prepared for the experience:

I had a pre-placement visit to meet the practice teacher so that made it a lot easier in the group because it wasn't as if it was a group of total strangers.

Other students highlighted the need for the creation of a safe learning environment:

It was hard not knowing people very well at the beginning. There were a couple of instances of bitchiness – putting people down and undermining, but nothing too serious and the practice teacher was able to handle it.

I didn't ever feel that I was being made to feel inferior. It wasn't like we were ever put on the spot to make us look stupid. You knew it wouldn't be the end of the world if you made a mistake. That was the way the practice teachers did it.

I never felt shown up because of the support. If one of us was struggling the others were very quick to help out.

It made you more confident. You could admit your weaknesses a lot more easily.

Some students acknowledged practice teachers' group maintenance skills:

I wouldn't really say there was much of a problem with people maybe not pulling their weight. I mean there was only the three of us and the practice teacher was able to make sure that everyone gave their ideas about things.

Group composition

As in the questionnaire students indicated that they disliked being supervised in a group along with students who they perceived as being further advance in their social work education. One, final year student, remembered her experience in the previous year:

I was in the first year (post-graduate) and I was going in and I didn't know that much about theories and that. I knew it at University, I just didn't feel I knew a whole lot and (the practice teacher) had second years in the same session as us and they were getting up and doing presentations on overhead projectors, saying what theory they were using and all, and I was going 'Oh shit'". I just dreaded it every week it came around.

One student recounted being in an induction session in which qualified staff was included:

> It was quite frightening. Well, in some ways it was, because there was a girl and she'd been a (social worker) before and she was back in but she knew the way they worked, which we found a bit scary to begin with.

Another thought that having students on a different route who were otherwise at the same stage in their social work education could be threatening.

> I didn't like being in a group with a mix of undergraduates and postgraduates.

But this factor seems related to educational profile rather than programme of study:

> In my group there was myself and students from Jordanstown (Dip H.E. programme), but it wasn't a problem because we were all at the same level. (BSc (Hons) student) As had happened in the questionnaires, the students raised the issue of group size:

> I though the group was too big. In the beginning I dreaded it. B would be quite quiet naturally but you would be under a lot of pressure to speak. I thought it would have been better if we had been in our own group of three.

Balance of individual and group supervision

Students variously compared group and individual supervision and theorised on the ideal balance between the two:

> I'd say you need both groupwork and individual work. I preferred the groupwork for the support but one-to-one was better for casework and for looking at wider issues.

> I'd say keep them both.

But the following two quotes illustrate how different students reported different learning needs:

> Coming near the end, when the pressure was on, maybe you could have one (group supervision session) a week. Replace the one-to-one altogether then. That would have really helped when it came to getting the portfolio together.

> To be honest, towards the end then I'd had enough (of group supervision). I have liked to have been able to go out on my own.

All the students were of the view that when group supervision was be offered it should be as an alternative to individual supervision rather than as an addition:

> When you have it as an additional session, it's very time consuming. You really spend a full day having supervision and it takes away time for the office work.

Although there was some consensus in favour of an arrangement where group supervision alternated with individual supervision, a number of views were expressed on how often group supervision should be available. A few students felt that there was merit in replacing individual supervision with group supervision completely, while others felt that:

> It's great to be able to see the other students especially when you get ideas and that but you need to see your practice teacher yourself as well, so I wouldn't want it (group supervision) more than maybe two of three times in the placement.

Those who had experienced group supervision on a fortnightly basis felt that that arrangement was the ideal.

Interviews: Practice teacher perspective

Educational rationale

Although the detail of approach adopted by the practice teachers differed from site to site, the rationale they gave for group supervision was consistently educational and was in keeping with the literature on the advantages of group supervision for deeper learning.

I think for me it was the value of having people sharing that learning experience rather than have me being seen, or who ever it is being seen, as the font of all knowledge. So it was more about "We all have something to bring, so let's put our minds together" and also with particular issues like, for example, anti-oppressive practice, I just find there is so much more richness to have four or five or six of us, whatever number it is, rather than just me and the student discussing, because other people bring other aspects that I wouldn't have thought of. Also then people can challenge each other and get involved in sort of peer, it's not quite peer supervision, but there's an element of it. It's not just about me.

An awful lot of stuff we thought was good quality presentation material and it wasn't going in and for some reason we were doing something that we thought was all the right information but the students weren't absorbing it and the more we were thinking 'Well, couldn't students learn in a different way? Maybe there is something about getting them to say something out loud in a group forum that would help them learn" and also I think students do give credibility toward what each other are saying perhaps more so than (tails off) ……

I've had one situation where I was doing motivational interviewing, I think, and we were trying to extend that. I had one student who said to me "Don't be so daft", he said, "'Tell me'". I was giving him an example that "Tell me" was quite facilitating and he says, "I wouldn't ever dream of saying to anyone 'Tell me'. It sounds really, really pathetic and soft and weak." and I mean he couldn't say the real words and he was wanting to tell me but this was a macho guy that was not remotely going to be into "Tell me" and it was the other two male students that actually said "Well I don't agree with you. I think, in fact, that 'Tell me' is an open way to get someone to respond" and they took it far further than I would ever have dreamt of doing it. I mean, they knew the student as well, so they would have known him better than I do. So there's that too.

Advantages

The PCW practice teachers identified a number of advantages. All of these have been identified in the literature and are only summarised here in the interests of presenting a complete record.

- Opportunities to share and learn from other each other's experiences.

- Emotional support and the normalisation of anxiety.

- A forum for discussion and debate, including the application of theory to practice.

- Opportunities for a wider range of teaching and learning methods, including active learning approaches, problem based learning and learning through discovery.

- Constructive criticism can be more acceptable from peers than from the practice teacher and is more difficult to deny.

- Opportunities to learn about group dynamics and models of group leadership and co-leadership.

- Reduction of the practice teacher and student power differential.

- Cost effectiveness.

Disadvantages: Individual need and production of evidence

The practice teachers identified just two main disadvantages of group supervision. The first, the inevitable difficulty of providing for individual need, has been discussed above. The second was a more practical difficulty and was in part related to the system of competence-based assessment, where students need to be regularly producing written evidence of their competence in practice throughout the placement:

It is much harder to keep a rhythm of work going. With individual supervision you can set the student some work, a process record of an interview they are doing or something, one week, and then you can let them have feedback on it the next. So you tend to lose control over the process of evidence production. I think that is particularly a problem in the voluntary agencies, where the evidence may not occur in the normal course of the work in the way it does in statutory work.

In addition to perceived advantages and disadvantages, there were a number of other common themes:

> The need for students to feel safe
>
> Need for a combination of individual and group supervision
>
> Frequency of group supervision
>
> Content of sessions

how much they say. It can be more important that they're listening actively and responding to what others are saying.

Peer support

All the practice teachers saw value in the students having some time together without the practice teacher being present, for the purposes of supporting each other. At the social services centre this was formally structured in and facilitated by another member of staff. While the practice teachers received a report from their colleague, this was done in a way which did not cause concern to the students. At the other two centres, support from peers happened more informally, over lunch or during breaks.

Co-facilitation

In each of the cases where practice teachers were working together, they spoke of how they had developed their co-working relationship. For the practice teachers at the social services centre this was something which had occurred, almost organically, over time. The PCW practice teachers had taken a more strategic approach. As a first step they followed the planning schedule suggested by Hodge (1985), answering together a number of questions in which they checked with each other issues such as their preferred style of facilitation, their perception of the aims and objectives of the placement and the means of obtaining them and their co-facilitation relationship. They felt that the fact that they differed in gender, nationality and religious tradition could have considerable learning benefits for the students but only if they themselves were clear about what the ways in which they differed and if they had resolved any areas of potential conflict. Both sets of practice teachers who were in co-working relationships built in time for reflection, evaluation, the airing of feelings and planning the next session.

Section Seven: Discussion

Although relatively little has been written on the subject of group supervision and learning on social work placements, there is a significant body of writing and research on group staff supervision and group learning generally. The findings of this project support this body of earlier work and also point to some guidelines for best practice.

The opportunity to give and receive peer support was the benefit of group supervision most frequently cited by those who had experienced it. One practice learning centre had formalised this so that the students were provided with an opportunity to meet together purely for the purposes of supporting each other on a regular basis. A member of staff, not otherwise involved in their learning, facilitated this. In the other centres peer support happened informally. Given the prominence of this benefit for students it seems too important to leave it to chance and it would seem prudent for practice teachers to build this into any group supervision programme. The provision of an entirely separate opportunity, complete with a facilitator, is probably the ideal, since it makes a clear distinction between support and assessment but this may not always be practicable. Students also benefit from opportunities to hear of other's experiences and to be able to share ideas about how to deal with problems and other situations. In this way they experience a different learning experience, only available through working together on a problem. To a more limited extent opportunities to make comparisons of progress were important to students. All the centres included space in their programmes for students to share in this way and again this would appear to be best practice.

The disadvantages of group supervision, as identified by students, tended to be diverse, but could be divided into two main groups. Firstly there appeared to be the almost inevitable disadvantage of being unable to specifically address the needs of students individually without running the risk of focussing on issues which were not relevant to others. As Kadushin and Harkness (2002:399) note group supervision has to be:

"directed towards the general, common needs of all the supervisees and the special, particular needs of none."

It seems clear that, in order to cater for the individual needs of students it is necessary to provide both individual and group supervision. Students frequently indicated that they would not like to forgo a one-to-one relationship with a practice teacher. Many find it a special source of support in itself. It provides opportunities to provide advice individually tailored to the personal characteristics of the student and the individual placement. It also provides opportunities to make links between practice and the student's own life experiences, some of which the student may not be prepared to discuss in a more public forum. It is the only way in which individual students can be given individual feedback, especially if this is of a personal nature. It is also necessary so as to be able to cater satisfactorily for the diverse learning styles of students. It would be nonsense to adopt a programme of group supervision in order to take advantage of the range of learning methods that it presents and then to discard the learning opportunities offered that are peculiar to individual contact. The consensus among the practice teachers was that a system of alternating group supervision with individual supervision allowed them to draw on the benefits of both approaches most effectively.

The second grouping of disadvantages identified by students, on closer examination, may not necessarily prove to be examples of disadvantage at all. Rather, they seemed to be examples of situations that could be eliminated by improvements in practice. The practice teachers at the social services learning centre, for example had reflected upon the discomfort experienced by students in their group and had concluded that there were some changes in practice which they could institute in the future to deal with this, such as making sure that the students had time to familiarise themselves with their individual practice teacher before they were exposed to the group situation. A further learning point for them was that students were better able to openly consider their practice in groups of three rather than six. Similarly employing principles of good groupwork practice could eliminate a number of other situations perceived as disadvantages by the students. Providing half an hour individual supervision for students, in turn, in the same room as other students, does not amount to group supervision and was rightly perceived by the recipients as "short changing" on the part of the practice teacher. Careful consideration of group composition would avoid the situation of first placement students being overawed by those ahead of them in the programme. Stages of group development need to be taken into account, for example attention needs to be paid to issues of inclusion for students, so that they are able to experience the benefits of group learning quickly. Similarly a good group facilitator would be able to handle feedback in such way that the students experienced it positively. Few teachers would consider it good practice to make comparisons between students, should they be favourable or unfavourable. The PCW practice teachers provided a good example of groupwork practice in the work that they had done on their co-working relationship model and in building in time for evaluation, reflection and further planning.

This research indicates that group supervision when done well contributes significantly to student learning. Some students had some reservations but found the experience to be a positive one overall. Only a very few students reported having had such a negative experience that they would not wish to repeat it and in most cases this was with some justification. The overwhelming response of students who had experienced group supervision was extremely positive. One such student made the point that whether or not students experienced the benefits of group supervision should not be left to the chance of being placed with a practice teacher who was responsible for more than one student. Social work programmes should encourage practice teachers who had only one student to form syndicates to come together to provide group supervision for small numbers of students working in similar areas of practice.

Summary of Conclusions

1. The experience of students of group supervision was very positive. Group supervision provides learning opportunities not available in a one-to one relationship with the practice teacher.

2. Students find group supervision most useful when it fully exploits the learning opportunities that can take place in groups. Learning is enhanced by opportunities to give and receive support to and from peers, to share experiences and to develop a better understanding of social work practice and underpinning knowledge through discussion with peers.

3. Students' experience of group learning is most positive when the practice teachers have understood and adopted principles of best groupwork practice. This is particularly the case in relation to planning decisions in relation to group composition and process, facilitation and co-facilitation. Students learn best when they feel safe and are not threatened by the presence of other students or staff who are at a more advanced stage. Practice teachers need well developed skills as groupworkers in order to provide group supervision, just as they require well developed skills in working with individuals in order to provide individual supervision.

4. Students' need cannot be met entirely by group supervision. They also need the individual attention of the practice teacher on a regular basis. The ideal model appears to be one where group supervision alternates with individual supervision.

5. Students' experience of group supervision is so positive that social work education programmes might usefully explore the possibility of putting systems in place that would make group practice learning available to all students not just those who happen to share a practice teacher with some other students.

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