

**Talking About Emotion: how are conversations about emotion enabled in the context of social work practice education?**

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### **Abstract**

It is widely acknowledged that emotion is a potent force in social work practice and practice education which can have a significant impact on both practice and practitioner experience. So too, is the recognition that social work students may face higher levels of stress than their qualified colleagues – social work itself, one of the professions where workers often experience higher levels of emotional demand than do other occupational groups. In terms of professional training courses for students entering the ‘helping professions’, there is a visible theme of heightened student pressure that relates, in some way, to the practicum aspect of their qualifying course. Relatedly, there is a clear consensus that the quality of the student-Practice Educator relationship is a key determinant of student learning and student experience. This article presents the findings of a small-scale qualitative research study, investigating how conversations about emotion are enabled within supervision, from a sample of final year qualifying students (n=4) and Practice Educators (n=5). It intends to make a contribution to the literature concerned with the development of good practice in this area, with a particular focus on the facilitative approaches of Practice Educators and the preparation of students for professional practice.

### **Keywords**

Emotion; Discussions; Students; Practice Educators; Enabled; Supervision.

### **Introduction**

Emotion plays a significant role in social work practice and practice education (Dore, 2016), perhaps most notably influencing decision making and professional judgement (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014; Morrison, 2007). Combine this with the knowledge that social workers and other professionals working in the ‘helping professions’ face higher levels of stress than other occupation groups (see Grant & Kinman, 2013) and it is easy to see why there is widespread agreement about the ‘importance and value of supervision’ (Wilkins & Jones, 2018, p. 454). Given their potency, the topics of supervision and emotion continue to be a focus of current research. Recent studies have sought to develop a greater understanding of what supervision actually looks like (for example, Wilkins, Forrester & Grant, 2017) and to examine the spaces where emotion is talked about (see Ingram, 2015). While the literature concerning qualified professionals, emotion and supervision is generally well established, some gaps have been identified by researchers interested in the experiences of qualifying students and their field educators. Examples include, a lack of empirical information about student experiences of clinical supervision in practice settings (Miehls, Everett, Segal & du Bois, 2013) and that there is ‘little research exploring the views of the role of the practice educator in social care work’ (McSweeney, 2017, p. 32). That said, there is also more to be done to gain a more enhanced understanding of supervision processes, that may or may not prove supportive or enabling to professionals undertaking emotional work, part of what Wilkins et al. (2017) sought to address, and something common to other disciplines, such as mental health nursing (MacLaren, Stenhouse & Ritchie, 2016).

Given that student social workers are on a developmental journey, their sense of professional identity nascent, the level of support provided during this formative process is crucial for learning and positive attainment; a sense of safety potentially protective of both professional practice and learning (Gazzola & Theriault, 2007) – the need for safe spaces to support effective practice (see Ruch, 2007) potentially even more important for this group. Indeed,

students may well face increased levels of stress, ‘exacerbated by their reluctance to disclose that they are experiencing difficulties’ (Grant & Kinman, 2013, p. 4) and compounded by other factors, such as tensions between course and family demands, self-expectations and the traumatic nature of the work itself (see Litvack, Bogo & Mishna, 2010). It is no surprise then that students from social work, and related disciplines, identify important qualities of Practice Educators as – amongst other things – being approachable, open, non-judgemental (see Rodger et al., 2014) and attuned (see Bennett, Mohr, Deal & Hwang, 2012), all of which may contribute to a positive student-educator relationship, one able to ‘weather difficult challenges’ (Litvack et al., 2010, p. 233), including those arising from emotive practice experiences.

This article seeks to make a contribution to the research on emotion as it is discussed in practice education, drawing on the experiences of both students and Practice Educators. It explores the question: ‘How are conversations about emotion enabled in the context of social work practice education?’, focusing on emotive practice experiences. As such, emotions, although somewhat nebulous in definition, are seen primarily as ‘psychological terms describing profiles of physiological responses’ (Nguyen & Noussair, 2014, p. 296).

## **Research Approach**

The aim of this study is to explore and describe how discussions about emotion are enabled in social work practice education. The intention being to contribute to the development of good practice in this area, with a particular focus on the facilitative approaches of Practice Educators and the preparation of students for professional practice.

## ***Participants***

The study was undertaken at one university in South East England. Participants included final year qualifying students and Practice Educators who had worked with said student cohort. Recruitment was achieved via e-mail invitation.

### *Student participants*

Invitations to participate were sent to 34 social work students on a qualifying degree programme, either the BSc (Hons) or MSc Social Work course offered by the university where the research was undertaken. All were eligible for graduation, having received a 'pass' grade from their Practice Educator in relation to their final placement and having also passed all other assessed work. Four accepted the invitation and subsequently participated in the study. All were known to the researcher, who had taught them at some point during their social work training.

### *Practice Educator participants*

Invitations to participate were sent to 30 Stage 2 qualified (see The College of Social Work, 2013) Practice Educators, who had been working with qualifying students in their final placement setting and who had recommended a 'pass' grade for their particular student. The Practice Educators were either agency based or independent practitioners. Five accepted the invitation and subsequently took part in the study. All were familiar to the researcher due to his role at the university where the research took place.

### *Interviews*

Individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken with all participants (n = 9). They were asked the same pre-planned questions, irrespective of whether they were a student or Practice Educator. The flexibility of this method of data collection enabled follow-up responses to be tailored towards exploration of individual experience, with the aim being to

generate rich qualitative data. The questions were focused on exploring a time when supervision featured a discussion about a practice experience that was in some way emotive. Subsequent questions included an exploration of the emotions discussed, feelings related to the discussion itself, the roles taken by both parties involved in the discussion and any learning that had occurred as a result of the discussion. Interviews lasted between 28 and 61 minutes and were audio-recorded.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical approval was given by the relevant ethics committee within the researcher's university. One of the main issues considered, as part of the approval process, was that the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic could be emotive for participants. This was addressed by two primary means. Firstly, by acknowledging that the researcher was a qualified Social Worker and Practice Educator and, as such, would draw on his experience to end the interviews where and when distress was detected. Secondly, by ensuring each participant was clear that they could withdraw from the study at any time – as outlined in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form – before it was accepted that they had given their informed consent to participate.

In terms of addressing any conflict that might occur through participation and, at that point, the lack of degree award – noting that the study took place before the students' graduation – this was addressed, as mentioned earlier, by inviting individuals to participate only where a 'pass' grade had been received or given and, in addition for student participants, where they had also passed all other assessed work. Linked to this, in terms of power and partnerships within research relationships, there is also the point that participants should ideally be involved in or benefit from the research process, rather than being seen 'as 'vehicles' for data collection' (Farrimond, 2013, p. 4). While this particular cohort of student will not

benefit from the research, it is an aspiration that there will be some learning beneficial to future cohorts.

### ***Analysis***

Each interview was transcribed by the researcher, a task that allowed them to develop analytical focus ‘of pointing to particular features of data and of filtering out less important ones’ (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 111). Once transcribed, the researcher began a thematic analysis. Given some of the contentions that surround this approach, primarily related to a lack of transparency or robustness (for example see Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibson and Brown, 2009; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017), the researcher was conscious to maintain a reflexive stance and ensure clarity of process; key elements that should form part of this analytical method (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). While it is accepted that there is more than one way of making meaning from the data analysed in qualitative research (see Braun and Clarke, 2013), this stance not only supported transparency but also rigor. Given that rigor ‘also includes the completeness of the interpretation’ (Yardley, 2000, p. 222), the coding phase involved two processes, with data being coded in terms of both semantic analysis, accepting the explicit or surface meaning of the data, and latent analysis, where the researcher interpreted meaning in order to arrive at an explicit theme categorisation (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Like Hair (2013), during this part of the process I was mindful of my own conceptions of supervision, along with those associated with the role of Practice Educator, expectations of qualifying students and the importance of emotion – something which is, for me, a powerful component of practice (see Dore, 2016).

### **Findings**

The views of respondents shown here are represented by anonymised names, an approach which upholds confidentiality, yet, as Ingram (2015) suggests, allows life to be given to the data.

Three key elements, or theme-families (see Gibson & Brown, 2009), were seen within the data, each related to one or more themes as identified by the researcher:

1 – Practice Educator approach: this included the themes of accessibility, curiosity, valuing the student and attunement.

2 – Discrete enabling actions taken by the Practice Educator: this included the themes of disclosure, permission and informality.

3 – Facilitating an integrated professional identity: this included the theme of connections between previous experiences.

### ***Practice Educator approach***

#### *Accessibility*

All responders (students and Practice Educators) commented on accessibility. This included the recognition by Practice Educators that students may need increased levels of contact from time to time and that it was important to be responsive to this:

Jill (Practice Educator): I said if you need to, I will always be here after you've seen him and we can have a de-brief outside of supervision.

Practice Educators also recognised that being accessible often involved offering a high level of emotional support that went beyond looking at the student's practice:

Michelle (Practice Educator): it's not just about managing their practice although that is that as well, obviously, but, and also, we're not counsellors, I know that, so if I think someone needs counselling then I will say 'I'm not a counsellor', you need to, but you can still use counselling skills.

All five of the Practice Educators who took part in the study recognised the need to be flexible in terms how often they met with the student and the times they did so.

This level of availability, when provided, was valued by students, notably in terms of a space being accessible to them where they could have open discussions and just talk:

Martha (student): I'd be in there for an hour and a half, like, getting it all off my chest and having to have a chance to really reflect and that space, and that time, to really develop those ideas.

One student expressed a desire for more accessible space and the view that they would have liked their Practice Educator to have made it clear to her that if she had needed it, she could have asked for supervision on an ad hoc basis. In sum, this was something valued by all students.

### *Curiosity*

Most Practice Educators and students (n=8) talked about exploring and gave examples of either open questions they had asked or had been asked. In some cases Practice Educators drew parallels between their practice with students and that with service users - something that was not limited to this theme:

Heidi (Practice Educator): I do a lot with kids and stuff that I work with, I do a lot of guessing, you know... that sort of Dan Hughes Pace Approach, where you're being curious with kids and I often say, there's stock... you know, 'I could be wrong but I'm guessing or I'm wondering' - one of the stock phrases - and I always put in 'I could be way off the mark here, I could be wrong' so I'm always curious...

For one student where this curiosity was not present, they reported a sense of disinterest and did not value the supervisory space their Practice Educator offered. In describing an incident in their interview, it was not until the Team Manager stepped in and showed curiosity that the student's feelings changed. In this example, the student felt unsupported after a difficult visit to a family where she was charged with telling the mother's partner that he could only have

supervised contact with the children – two days before her visit the mother had been discharged from hospital having undergone surgery for cervical cancer:

Jess (student): I think if she [Team Manager] hadn't [asked] then I probably would have felt even more like I don't want to do this anymore.

In most cases (n=4) Practice Educators sought clarity and greater depth from students, facilitated by open questions that explored the context holistically, seeking students to broaden the scope of their narratives and initial perceptions. This was also reflected in the student responses:

Emily (student): I told her the story and she said to me 'ok you've told me what happened in the room, but can you now tell me what happened after you left the room?'

### *Valuing the student*

For three of the students, being valued by their Practice Educator related to a sense of validation - each explicitly named validation as something their Practice Educator, or in the case of Jess, her Team Manager, had done during conversations about emotion. The fourth, Martha, noted how their educator 'listened', 'mirrored back' and expressed an interest in what she said. All students appreciated this and it seems to have acted as a way of lifting the amount of pressure they felt, perhaps also offering reassurance:

Jacob (student): so they validated my feelings and that felt like a release.

Jess (student): I felt like someone's listening to me, she's validated my feelings so that I don't feel like I'm being stupid.

Listening to, acknowledging and valuing the student were features of the Practice Educator (n=4) interviews and again the sense of importance from a student perspective sometimes shone through:

Jake (Practice Educator): and she [student] said but you listen, she did actually say you, I can see you're listening, which she said she never had before.

*Attunement:*

All of the Practice Educators demonstrated this in their discussions. For some it related to a clear and conscious recognition of the student's need:

Mary (Practice Educator): she was a little bit more agitated than usual, she was a student who was particularly calm, mature, um, contained... um she was looking for some clarity and I think to be held a little bit.

For others it was more unconscious, less tangible, something they had detected or picked up on:

Jake (Practice Educator): you know, picking up a sense that maybe it's embarrassing for this..., thinking they need to tell me what's going on...

Jill (Practice Educator): so maybe I picked up on that kind of unconsciously because I, we, did talk a lot about...

This theme was also evident for most students (n=3), all of whom reported candid questioning of what was going on for them by their Practice Educators. There was also some evidence of this shown in how Practice Educators made efforts to match the students' presentation:

Martha (student): and trying to match my energy... If I was in quite an energetic mood she would say to me, you know, she would respond quite energetically.

In addition to this student's comments, two Practice Educators made similar observations of their own practice, in terms of being mindful of their students' presentation and endeavouring to match their responses congruently with them.

### ***Discrete enabling actions taken by the Practice Educator***

#### *Disclosure*

Most Practice Educators (n=4) made disclosures about their own experiences. All felt it was important to help students appreciate the demands of practice and to show them that they were not alone in their feelings:

Jill (Practice Educator): I think it is healthy to share, to sometimes share with students, you know, that you're not, ah, what's the word... I can't think of the word, but, you know, you're not untouchable, you know.

One Practice Educator extended this self-disclosure by using an exercise with their student in which they both considered various service user profiles, identifying how comfortable, or otherwise, they might feel when working with different individuals:

Mary (Practice Educator): we'd go through that together and, um, if there's a particular profile that you'd feel uncomfortable working with we'd identify why we might feel uncomfortable.

Students who commented on the disclosures made by their Practice Educators (n=2) appeared to value this, in terms of it helping to show that vulnerability is an inescapable part of practice:

Emily (student): yeah, even [though] she's quite a senior practitioner, she's experienced this and yeah, so it made me learn that it can happen to any practitioner...

Disclosures also helped to model professionalism and professional expectations:

Jacob (student): I know that my supervisor was going through some, I now know... was going through some personal issues but... she showed a good example of, of talking about what was going on for her so that was kind of, that was great for me to look at and to see, see how someone I had loads of respect for, and she was able to be transparent.

### *Permission*

This was also a feature in six of the interviews, mentioned by three students and three Practice Educators. This theme has particularly close connections to *curiosity* and *attunement* yet stood out as a discrete entity within the interviews, visible as a pivotal point. For students, this looked like a catalytic invitation for them to talk about something that the Practice Educator had detected:

Jacob (student): by them opening the doors, they said 'really Jacob what's going on for you?' and I kind of just let it out.

Practice Educators also talked about permission in a facilitative way:

Heidi (Practice Educator): what I felt with Sam throughout is that I would sometimes have to put words to her experiences and almost give her the permission to feel what she felt.

Michelle (Practice Educator): I suppose because I let them explore it without judging and I was open to supporting them to explore it, so we explored it together.

## *Informality*

Again, three students and three Practice Educators spoke about how informality had helped enable discussions. Primarily, this was achieved via use of language, including humour:

Emily (student): and Juliette [Practice Educator] would be like ‘just say it as it is’, so I can be like argh, Juliette that visit was just messed up or f’ed up and she’d be like ‘ah, tell me more about it, what happened...?’

Jake (Practice Educator): it was sort of layman’s language, are you ok, how are you feeling now?

Heidi (Practice Educator): and we had a bit of a joke about it, you know, I do use humour quite a bit.

This sense of informality also related to the recording of supervision: in two interviews responders talked about the merits of not everything being recorded.

## ***Facilitating an integrated professional identity***

### *Connections between previous experiences*

Talking about student experiences outside of the placement and how this might impact, or be impacting, on current practice was a feature of all interviews. In two it related to experiences the student had had in other professional settings, for the rest (n=7) it related to personal experiences - either historic, ongoing or more current. In each case Practice Educators had made attempts to enhance student understanding of emotion, for instance, by helping them make connections between emotions and experiences from different times and spaces, and to enable them to more clearly differentiate between them:

Jess (student): having that time to look at my emotions [in this case with the Team Manager who had stepped in] and kind of work out why they were there, and where they fit in [with] my practice or where they fit in kind of like personal life and stuff.

Mary (Practice Educator): I think thinking about, reflecting on, um, you know, transference and countertransference, thinking about how working with somebody made her feel so she talked about discomfort in working with, um, teenagers and the personal reasons for that.

## **Discussion**

The findings highlight a variety of different ways in which discussions about emotion, between qualifying social work students and Practice Educators, are enabled and facilitated. In providing an accessible space for students where the Practice Educator is emotionally available and emotionally attuned to the student, difficult and emotive conversations can and are had. This sense of support seems to be a central plank of what the Practice Educators were able to offer students and, in all cases, bar the one where the Team Manager took over the supervisory role, a clear commitment to the student and their learning is evident. Indeed, there seemed to be a strong consensus as to what the nature of supervision should look like in terms of this. A similar consensus and aspiration has been found in other studies exploring supervision for qualified practitioners (Hair, 2013; Wilkins et al., 2017), yet, unlike the practice revealed in the current study, its realisation has been found to be hindered by organisational contexts that feature a lack of training and a ‘preoccupation with risk and individual fear of being blamed if something goes wrong’ (Wilkins et al., 2017, p. 948) - defensive practice, such as this, a symptom of procedurally driven work (Ruch, 2012), which, unfortunately, remains common to some sites of contemporary practice. Hair (2013) also

found that the necessity for supervision to have an administrative focus was likely to include some kind of performative evaluation that may cause practitioners to feel unsafe, impeding the discussion of sensitive practice issues. It is therefore encouraging to see that in spite of the inherent need to act as an assessor, the Practice Educators in this study appeared able to balance this with a nurturing role.

While the current study's focus is on Practice Educators who have undergone appropriate training, it is their ability to provide a supportive experience that is of interest in terms of enabling discussions about emotion, something which can support emotional resilience and practitioner wellbeing (see Grant & Kinman, 2013), and therefore which may hold learning points for practice education and social work practice more widely. Of note here is the Practice Educators' use of self-disclosure, an act, as the literature from counselling shows, that may enable students to identify and reflect on their interactions with service users (for example see Ganzer and Ornstein, 2004) and something which can help demonstrate expectations and model the qualities expected of students (for example see Woods, 2015). This is particularly salient as some research suggests that students value (McSweeney, 2017) and seek role-models in their relationships with their supervisors, who can have a profound impact on the development of a professional identity (Miehls et al., 2013), although this is not a universal observation (see Rodger et al., 2014). Within the process of self-disclosure, the Practice Educators' willingness to show personal vulnerability helped students to feel that they were not an exception - in the sense of being weak, unable to cope or silly - and that their experience of emotion was not just acceptable, but understandable, and is something that forms a significant part of practice that requires acknowledgment. When this level of empathy and congruence is missing from relationship between students and their Practice Educators, it can act as a barrier to learning and understanding, as Barlow and Hall note 'When students experienced emotional distress in a setting where their field instructors were

‘‘comfortable with the uncomfortable’’, they felt confused and alienated from their field instructors and their own emotional responses’ (2007, p. 409).

In making disclosures about themselves, Practice Educators were not only showing that vulnerability is a natural part of practice, they were also co-constructing an emotional language with the student and perhaps it helped them to position themselves as dedicated listeners, grounded in humility (see Smythe, MacCulloch & Charmley, 2009). Given that ‘field students are repeatedly exposed to the brutal conditions of clients’ lives’ (Barlow and Hall, 2007, p. 399), the unthinkable experiences (Ruch, 2007) that they have been confronted with, either directly or indirectly, may prove hard to elucidate, and practitioners may not feel comfortable in using the language of feelings (see Ingram, 2013). Moreover, selecting the nature of words to translate any experience into language may not be as straightforward as it might first appear, due to questions of specificity and interpretation (Smythe et al., 2009). For some participants a level of informality also played a role in facilitating the discussions. This included the use of everyday -layperson’s - language, use of humour and more limited recording. The use of humour has been recognised as a positive coping strategy for other helping professions (for example Williams, 2012), yet it should be used with caution and accompanied by support, as its use as a coping mechanism can vary significantly for students and may increase their levels of stress (see Moran and Hughes, 2006). In terms of informality more generally, Ingram (2015) found that, for qualified workers, informal contacts with peers were seen as valued and safe forums where emotion could be explored. Building in a level of informality may have acted to reduce the power dynamic between students and Practice Educators, affording trust and therefore a sense of it being a supportive relationship (Grant & Kinman, 2013). Where trust has not been secured, students may be more likely to conceal their difficulties (Bennett et al., 2012), the danger being that both the

student and their practice becomes unsafe: drawing on Emerson, Gazzola and Theriault (2007) note that when counsellor supervisees felt unsafe, both learning and practice suffered.

Practice Educators also gave quite explicit permission for students to talk about their emotions and, in fact, went further than this in setting it as an expectation that such discussions were necessary and professional – crucially the Practice Educators also showed they valued their individual students and this afforded a feeling of validation which may have contributed to the sense of relief some students reported, after they had opened up about particular difficulties, pressures, feelings. Other research indicates that being validated can lead to feelings of empowerment (Gazzola & Theriault, 2007). Together, these two components stand in contrast to the experiences of some qualified workers who, akin to constraints found in the organisational context, have been faced with rather oppressive circumstances. Indeed, it has been found that some workers feel that the expression of emotion will result in a ‘mark’ being placed against them or that the articulation of complex emotion will be interpreted as a ‘well-being issue which takes it away from the realms of a practice-based discussion and into an individualised support and welfare arena’ (Ingram, 2015, p, 908). For those practitioners, in shutting down the inclination and ability to allow oneself to become vulnerable, opportunities to explore areas of perceived weakness are lost, severing an early step towards understanding (Dore, 2015).

The findings of this study show that levels of curiosity - supported by openness and attunement - were high and critically reflective in nature, evident in some of the ways Practice Educators positioned their questions to students, often directly addressing an unspoken or partially illuminated issue. Crucially, the questions employed were open and concerned with exploration. Arguably, this provided students with the critical challenge necessary for effective practice (Munro, 2011), creating opportunities for biases, and associated distortions, to be corrected. ‘What’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions were utilized,

offering some variation to the ‘what’ and ‘when’ questions deployed by social work supervisors in the study by Wilkins et al. (2017), who state that the exclusion of ‘why’ and ‘how’ might make it harder for practitioners to explain or understand why they are completing certain tasks and lead to a lack of managerial oversight in terms of how workers are behaving with the families they are seeking to work. Given the inherent power differential within the Practice Educator-student relationship ‘why’ questions should perhaps be used with caution, given the potential for them to be heard in an accusatory tone. Their use may also limit the sophistication of wondering questions that are built from ‘what’. These types of questions can help foster curiosity and raise awareness in others (Davys & Beddoe, 2010), potentially encouraging an interest in some of the ‘invisible dynamics that shape their [students’] thinking’ (Ruch, 2012, p.80).

In relation to this, the findings show that awareness was further developed by broadening the students’ holistic appreciation of emotion and helping them to develop a more integrated sense of self. Two key stages were evident within this process. The first involved the Practice Educator exploring, with the student, the impact of emotion located in different spheres of the student’s life – personal and professional – enabling them to begin to make connections between the, for some, seemingly divergent, emotional areas. Here, the Practice Educator acted as a pivot, stepping into both the student’s personal and professional self and, in doing so, helped ‘the professional to emerge’ (Dunk-West, 2013, p. 117). The second centred on gaining a deeper understanding of the connections made and the impact that intertwined and unchecked emotion can have, detrimentally, on practice (Grant, Kinman & Alexander, 2014) and wellbeing (Grant & Kinman, 2013). Primarily, the focus here, as described in the interviews, was on enabling the student to separate out one emotion from another and to identify its original source. Perhaps something easier said than done, particularly if primary feelings are also a source of anxiety or embarrassment - anxiety that

can be compounded by the notion of demonstrating competence (for example, see Maidment & Crisp, 2011), hence the need for a sense of safety (Hair, 2013; Ingram 2015; Ruch 2007). Essentially, the integrated self is one that is emotionally intelligent, emotional intelligence itself a prerequisite for effective practice (see Dore, 2016). From the content of the interviews, particularly in relation to this theme of an integrated professional identity, it is evident that fostering the development of this attribute was a clear feature in the discussions of emotion: the students were encouraged to monitor their own and other's feelings, to learn to discriminate between them and to then use that information to guide their thinking and action (Morrison, 2007).

### **Limitations**

The foremost limitation of this study is that it is small-scale and based on participants who were linked to only one university. Given that the starting point for the study was for participants to identify a time when supervision featured a discussion of a practice experience that was in some way emotive, the limitations of the research being based at one university are apparent in terms of there potentially being site or course specific issues that had some effect upon the level or intensity of emotion felt by participants: for example, particular course structure and content may heighten feelings of anxiety for students and specific paperwork requirements may affect the pressures felt by Practice Educators. It is hoped that not inviting individuals to participate until all academic and practicum work had been completed and passed, would have helped to avoid such magnification - if ever it did exist. The self-selection of participants also presents a challenge in attracting only those who have an interest in the research topic or, given its sensitive nature, those who feel they have the confidence to participate. In terms of the recruitment of Practice Educators, research has shown that experience can aid the development of confidence and competence, with Practice

Educators who have worked with five or more students more likely to report a feeling of being equipped for the role (Waterhouse, McLagan & Murr, 2011). If a lack of confidence were to be a barrier to participation, then the experiences of less experienced Practice Educators may have been omitted.

Thinking about Practice Educators further, no demographic data was obtained during the course of this study and, significantly, no distinction or record was kept of Practice Educator participants in terms of whether they were agency-based (on-site) or whether they were long-arm or independent, based away from the team where their students were placed (off-site). Given the administrative and procedural focus of the supervision found in studies by Hair (2013) and Wilkins, Forrester & Grant (2017) and the suggestion that an off-site model of practice education may have advantages, in terms of increased objectivity and there being greater opportunities to link theory to practice (Furness & Gilligan, 2004), this may have proved to be a significant difference to factor into the analysis, yet the small sample size is unlikely to have permitted any meaningful comparison to have taken place. Furthermore, it is possible that a greater level of insight might have been garnered had students and their Practice Educators been recruited to the study in their relational pairs, in terms of exploring situational perspectives and contrasting experiences and understandings. However, this could also have worked to reduce participation due to increased feelings of vulnerability and possible questions over ownership of the narrative generated.

## **Conclusion**

This study offers an additional insight into the ways in which conversations about emotion are enabled and facilitated between qualifying social work students and Practice Educators. It was found that the discrete actions of disclosure, permission and informality, enabled the

opening up and unpicking of student experiences, offering opportunities for increased understanding and, therefore, professional growth. As discussed, although not explicitly investigated within this study, professional development or perhaps more accurately, the foundations for professional development, can be seen in terms of enhancing emotional intelligence and professional identity. Crucially, the facilitation of discussions between students and Practice Educators featured the exploration of emotion in an environment that was accessible, curious, validating and attuned to the students' emotional and developmental needs – not that the two are necessarily easily distinguishable. In this sense, Practice Educators appeared to have a strong value base and reasonably clear understanding of their role in terms of respecting uniqueness (The College of Social Work, 2013) and - borrowing from the wider literature on social care work - helping the students to 'understand how their own values, beliefs, feelings affect practice' (McSweeney, 2017, pp. 35-36). To understand more about how to work with emotion to enable professional development, further research looking at a range of practice education models is needed, sensitive to the levels of experience that Practice Educators have – part of this might also involve looking at the interface between practicum and university-based teaching. A closer examination of student characteristics may also be worthwhile, given that more men and students of either Asian or black ethnicity fail social work training courses, for men this may be influenced by a reluctance to ask for help and an ability to admit fault (Furness, 2012); two acts that could potentially prove emotive and provoke a strong sense of vulnerability.

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