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Practice Teaching: Professional identity and role recognition

Practice Teaching: Professional identity and role recognition

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Key points:

- The role of a practice teacher is operationalised differently both within and across organisations and disciplines
- Role recognition appears to be key to building the professional identity of practice teachers
- A clearer professional identity is essential if educational preparation is to be tailored more specifically to the needs of those undertaking a Practice Teacher role.
- Protected time is an important symbol of recognition for practice teachers
- Practice teachers have the potential to influence how their role is operationalised and need to take a lead role in shaping work processes and structures to create more stability in the role.

This article is the author's own work and is not being considered for publication or been published elsewhere.

Practice Teaching: Professional identity and role recognition

Abstract (150-200 words)

Practice teachers have a significant role in leading education in clinical practice and in the preparation, assessment and 'signing off' of post registration specialist practice students at the end of their programme (NMC 2008).

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a grounded theory study which examined the perceived role of the practice teacher from the perspectives of relevant stakeholders.

One to one interviews were carried out with a purposively selected sample of 21 participants. Data analysis took place concurrently, codes and categories being derived from the data (Charmaz 2006). A focus group interview was conducted further into the study with 6 specialist practice nurse educators (Holloway 2005).

Early findings suggest that the role of a practice teacher is operationalised differently both within and across organisations and disciplines. This confounds the professional identity of the practice teacher and affects the recognition that practice teachers are afforded for their role.

Role recognition appears to be key to building professional identity. The development of a clearer professional identity is essential if educational preparation is to be tailored more specifically to the needs of those undertaking a Practice Teacher role.

Key words: 'Practice teacher', 'education', 'health visitor', 'school nurse', 'district nurse'

Introduction

This study was undertaken during a period of complexity, change and financial constraint in the NHS (DH 2010) a factor which Kirpal (2004) found affected employer commitment to their staff and challenged employees to redefine their professional roles and identities. The number of qualified health visitors and district nurses has been in rapid decline over the past 10 years (DH 2011; Queens Nursing Institute 2013), and whilst the school nursing service has seen some investment and increased workforce numbers the workload demands are still challenging (RCN 2012). In 2011 the Department of Health published plans to deliver a new and enhanced model of service to families and to increase the number of Health Visitors nationally by 4200 by 2015 (DH 2011). This is a significant increase and it has impacted greatly on the workload and profile of practice teachers supporting health visiting students during this period.

The aims of this paper are:

- To examine the perceived role of the practice teacher from the perspectives of relevant stakeholders.
- To make recommendations to inform the educational preparation of practice teachers.

Literature review

A preliminary review of the literature revealed that whilst there was a significant amount of literature in relation to mentoring there was a paucity of research specifically in relation to practice teaching.

Sayer (2007) offers a good insight into the skills used by practice teachers in supporting students to develop the competencies required of a community nurse. Sayer (2007) drew upon the perspectives of practice teachers themselves and identified that practice teachers had a key role in the professional socialisation and development of students as their identity transformed into that of a community nurse.

Haydock et al (2011) used a satisfaction questionnaire to gather both quantitative and qualitative data regarding the perceived role satisfaction and professional burnout amongst 23 community practice teachers employed in five Primary Care Trusts. Their findings suggested that protected time was necessary to plan learning activities, supervise and assess students and that this would require a reduced caseload. Their findings also suggested that increased supervision and support would also enhance satisfaction.

Newland (2009) conducted a questionnaire survey which was completed by 79 practice teachers to investigate the role and professional development of the practice teacher. The survey revealed that 40% of practice teachers were required to take on additional roles in addition to caseload responsibilities and their specialist practice student. These roles included that of a team leader, practice development lead, preceptor to newly qualified staff and safeguarding supervisor.

The review revealed that there was a gap in the literature in relation to how practice teachers viewed themselves and how their role was perceived by students and managers.

Method including ethical approval

The research aims sought an insight into the views of participants who were knowledgeable in their field about the perceived role of the practice teacher. An approach based on grounded theory principles (Charmaz 2006) was therefore considered appropriate particularly since the existing body of knowledge relating to this subject was limited. Grounded theory sits within the constructivist / naturalistic paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). This paradigm assumes that reality is constructed by the individuals participating in the research and that many constructions of reality exist (Polit and Beck 2006).

The research proposal was given university ethical approval and, as the study involved participants employed within the NHS, ethical approval was also granted by the Integrated Research Application System (IRAS).

There is much debate within the literature on grounded theory regarding the place of the literature review. Glaser & Strauss (1967) (cited in Charmaz 2006) suggest that the literature review is delayed until the data analysis is complete. This is to avoid imposing preconceived ideas and forcing the data into pre-existing categories (Charmaz 2006). For the purpose of this study a brief review of the literature was conducted at the outset in order to justify a need for the current research study and to confirm the extent of current knowledge. Literature on practice teaching was examined, but a detailed review of literature relating to mentoring was avoided.

A purposive sampling strategy was utilised in order to identify participants with the relevant knowledge and expertise who could provide rich data relevant to the aims of the study (Holloway 2005). A theoretical sampling strategy was also applied to this study during concurrent data collection and analysis in order to develop the properties of tentative categories by identifying particular informants who would provide a rich source of data in order to saturate developing categories (Birks and Mills 2011).

One to one interviews using an interview guide were conducted with a range of stakeholders including practice teachers, specialist practice students and managers. Open ended questions and prompts were used such as ‘what do practice teachers do?’ and ‘what do you think makes a good practice teacher?’ in order to avoid asking leading questions. This was followed by a focus group interview with six specialist practice nurse educators from five higher education institutions in England further into the study to test preliminary research findings. The interview guide was used flexibly in the one to one interviews and the focus group so that if respondents moved on to discuss a different aspect of the study it was possible to follow this lead without breaking the flow of the interview. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded electronically.

Interviews with students were conducted first as it was felt that their perspectives were less likely to be affected by the changing context of practice outlined earlier. Practice teachers and other stakeholders were interviewed later on when the implications of these changes had become clearer. In order to select a broad range of students including those from different specialist practice disciplines (health visiting, school nursing and district nursing) the participant information sheet was initially emailed to all students registered on specialist practice programmes at the host institution requesting expressions of interest to participate in the study. The participant information sheet included an invitation to participate in the study and a request to provide some biographical data if students wished to be included in the study. From those responding to this initial request a range of students were identified at differing points in their educational programme from the three specialist practice disciplines.

Interviews with practice teachers and all other stakeholders took place during 2011 and the early part of 2012 in a period where the profile of practice teachers was raised considerably by the political context outlined earlier. Nine practice teachers, identified from registers of practice teachers held by local provider organisations, and four managers employed by five different provider organisations in one region in the north of England were interviewed. These managers were identified through local contacts as having responsibility for managing practice teachers. Participants included representation from district nursing, health visiting and school nursing disciplines. Practice teacher participants’ experience of practice teaching extended from supporting one to several students.

	Health visitor	District nurse	School nurse
Specialist practice students	4	2	2
Practice teachers	3	4	2
Managers	1	1	2

The focus group interview with specialist practice nurse educators was undertaken later on in the study to test preliminary research findings. This method was selected as it enabled participants to explore their understandings of practice teaching and of practice teacher education and generate ideas about the most effective strategies to educationally prepare practice teachers for their role. Focus groups aim to benefit from the group interactions and the sparking of ideas from others and data was revealed which might not have emerged so readily from one-to-one interviews (Darlington and Scott 2002). Additionally it facilitated the exposure of areas of inconsistency or conformity for further debate (Gerrish and Lacey 2006).

A fundamental component of grounded theory methodology is concurrent data collection and analysis (Birks & Mills 2011). In order to facilitate this, data was collected over a sixteen month period. This allowed time for transcribing and the identification of some initial codes. Preliminary data was coded manually prior to further data collection in order to facilitate constant comparative analysis.

Results

Early findings suggest that the role of a practice teacher is operationalised differently both within and across organisations and disciplines. This confounds the professional identity of the practice teacher and affects the recognition that practice teachers are afforded for their role in terms of time, access to relevant training and supervision, rewards and status.

Professional identity

This study indicates that all stakeholders perceived that practice teachers have a dual professional identity being both a specialist practitioner (health visitor / school nurse / district nurse) with caseload responsibilities and a teacher. The specialist practitioner role was identified as the core role with the practice teacher role bolted on.

'I'm just a practitioner as part of the team. I certainly don't big myself up as a Practice Teacher'. 'I'm a health visitor fundamentally. I see the Practice Teacher as an additional role'.

Managers and practice teachers in particular described how current organisational constraints including declining workforce numbers and a target driven culture combined with the economic crisis had impacted upon the capacity of practice teachers to develop and enact the role to its potential particularly in relation to leading education. Practice teachers were described as having a leadership role however this aspect of their role was operationalised differently by different stakeholder groups (Health Visitors / School Nurses /

District Nurses) and across and within different organisations. For some these leadership responsibilities included developing standards for specialist practice, identifying learning needs and planning the training of the wider workforce and developing good practice guidance. Others were expected to facilitate clinical and safeguarding supervision and / or undertake specialist roles and act as an expert resource for staff. For others it encompassed management tasks including staff appraisals and leading and managing teams. Practice Teachers, whilst valuing the recognition that they received for their expertise, expressed dissatisfaction that this role was in addition to managing a full caseload and providing day to day support and supervision for one or more students. This was interpreted by practice teachers as the organisation not valuing the educational aspect of their role.

Role recognition

Role recognition was a consistent theme emerging from the data. The type and source of recognition varied and the exact significance was different for different participants. Some practice teachers expressed disquiet that whilst they found the role intrinsically rewarding and felt appreciated by their specialist practice students their perception was that employers did not value or fully understand their role.

'I think there was a lot of ambiguity about what our role was and how expendable we were and that certainly was the feeling that was coming through that we were an expensive commodity'

This was exemplified in that most practice teachers were not given reduced caseloads in order to carry out their additional responsibilities and were working within a target driven culture which failed to recognise the time required to support a specialist practice student.

Whilst all the practice teachers that were interviewed did receive additional remuneration for their role and some identified enhanced access to training and professional development other factors such as a lack of time, space and resources to undertake the role and the expectation that they would manage a number of competing responsibilities were significant for them in terms of being able to successfully carry out their duties.

For Practice Teachers time seemed to be an important symbol of recognition.

'One of the things that would help us at the moment is the recognition.....because we were (in the past) recognised as doing 50% clinical, 50% practice educator.....we're purely clinical now (100%), but there is a big expectation that we do deliver on certain things and that's not recognised.....I found it much easier when it was recognised as 50% that the

expectations of both team and management were very different to what they are now.....if they don't put a figure on it then that supports not going to be there, certainly.

Practice teachers were credited by managers with having an essential role in creating a good quality workforce and as being a big influence on the development of autonomous, safe and self reliant future practitioners. The consequences of a poor practice learning experience were recognised by managers but it was also acknowledged that the current context of practice posed a challenge to practitioners and organisations in terms of providing practice teachers with dedicated time to support student learning.

'I certainly think that in this organisation, you know, there's a commitment to providing practice teachers with the space that they need to practice teach, but you know that's always within the constraints of actually what then comes along and hits you'.

'they're certainly seen as vital to both the organisation, because we're providing and supporting, you know, nurses to go on and do a specialist practitioner course. So they're seen as crucial to making sure that the students are getting a good placement'.

Students described how practice teachers were expected to manage a number of competing demands.

'more and more.....being expected to do a full time job of a district nurse and have a student on top..

'They have a very busy caseload and they have their own team of staff that they have to manage and the Practice Teacher (role) is sort of on top'.

'It's supposed to be 50/50.....but I would say it's more towards 100% caseload plus fitting everything else around it.

Discussion

White and Kudless (2008) suggest that the stress experienced when prescribed or enacted roles conflict with one another can be defined as 'role strain'. For practice teachers the need to manage the competing demands of a caseload conflict with the need to manage and support student learning and, whilst practice teachers have the knowledge and skills to lead education in practice, caseload responsibilities often mean that they have limited opportunities to develop and enact this aspect of their role.

Brun and Dugas (2008) cite the work of Herzberg et al 1959; McGregor 1960; Vroom 1964 and Porter and Lawler 1968 which suggest that recognition is an important factor in

employee motivation. The humanistic and existential view of recognition described by Brun and Dugas (2008) suggests that employees will approach their work more positively if they are provided with 'proper' working conditions. For practice teachers this might include time, financial, material, relationships, communications, power and independence, and an acknowledgement of their role. Some participants did suggest that the role was not well understood, and the evidence in this study suggested that it was understood differently by different stakeholders, and this impacted upon the recognition that practice teachers got for their role and the expectations made of them. Indeed some participants gave examples of approaches that had been used to raise awareness of the role of the practice teacher amongst teams. In addition some practice teachers identified the challenge of identifying time and material resources such as an office in order to engage effectively in one to one teaching.

Lindemann's research (2007) demonstrated how income and education clearly shape peoples opinion of their social position. Employers use pay as a means of giving role recognition and practice teachers have traditionally been awarded a higher pay band. Whilst all the practice teachers that were interviewed did receive additional remuneration they indicated that the situation for new practice teachers was uncertain and some would not receive additional pay. According to Brun and Dugas (2008), the perception that the financial recognition for the role was under threat has the potential to affect how practice teachers approach their work.

Johnson et al (2012) present a theoretical discussion on the construct of professional identity. Johnson et al (2012) argue that education is critical to nurses' professional identity, because it is through education that they can become professionals. The learning environment can play a vital role and influence the construction of professional identity for practice teachers as they learn their role in both the academic setting and through experiential learning in practice (Johnson et al 2012). Practice Teacher students are exposed to differing learning environments depending upon where they are employed. This has the potential to influence the development of the professional identity of these student practice teachers. It is suggested here that the role expectations of practice teachers varies across and between disciplines and organisations confounding the professional identity of a Practice Teacher.

Implications and recommendations

Kirpal (2004) discusses Goffman's (1959) concept of social identity whereby the expectations of others influence the individual to behave as others would do in a similar social or professional context. The rewards for conforming to these expectations might

include some form of recognition or acceptance by the group members and this supports the individual in building the dimensions of their own professional identity. According to this theory the expectations of peers, students and managers could be said to be influencing how practice teachers see their role.

This study identified that practice teachers experience role strain (White and Kudless 2008), and lack a clear professional identity. It also provides evidence of how the role is operationalised differently across organisations and professional groups. Kirpal (2004) suggests that there is a close interdependence between work structures and how individuals define themselves and whilst work shapes the individual, the individual shapes work processes and structures. This would suggest that practice teachers can influence how their role is operationalised and that perhaps education preparation needs to include insights into how practice teachers can be effective in this. Academic preparation will need to make reference to different ways that the practice teacher role is operationalised in practice and incorporates strategies that practice teachers can draw upon to influence and shape work processes and structures and create more stability in the role.

Further research is ongoing to consider what practice teachers specifically need to learn in order to undertake their role.

Practice teachers need to use a range of approaches to raise awareness of their role with their colleagues in order to enhance role recognition and create an environment where time for the teaching element of their role is understood and valued.

Organisations need to consider developing mechanisms which capture the contribution that practice teachers make to leading in the training and development of students and the wider workforce. Service commissioners should consider incorporating targets which reflect this important aspect of practice.

Conclusions

It is suggested here that practice teachers require recognition to be exemplified in a way that supports effective clinical and educational practice. Practice teacher role recognition appears to be key to building a professional identity. The development of a clearer professional identity is essential if educational preparation is to be tailored more specifically to the needs of those undertaking a practice teacher role.

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