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'An altruistic act to give back'—the social work practice educator role in Ireland: motivation, satisfaction, challenges, and supports

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ABSTRACT

Social work education is undergoing significant expansion, and internationally, securing requisite numbers of student placements to meet expanding numbers is challenging. This is similarly the case in Ireland, where the system is reliant on social workers assuming a practice educator role in addition to performing existing social work duties. Despite the pivotal role of practice educators, their perspectives are under-researched. In this article, we explore the perceptions of social work practice educators in Ireland to understand how motivation, challenges and support impact their role satisfaction. Based on a sample of 107 social workers and using both quantitative and qualitative data, we reveal that social workers have strong intrinsic motivation to engage in practice education, and this predicted their satisfaction with the practice education role. The extent of challenges encountered negatively impacted their satisfaction, and perceived support was an important amplifier of the motivation-satisfaction relationship. We highlight the precarity of the Irish model of placement procurement, as motivation to provide placements may be lost when individual practice educators leave their posts. We highlight future research, policy and practice implications of our findings.

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Social work education; social work placement; work integrated learning; practice education; practice educator; motivation

Introduction

The past two decades, have witnessed increasing demand for student enrollments in social work education in parallel with decreasing opportunities for professional placements (Halton et al., 2019; O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022). This has occurred in the context of funding cuts, staff shortages and increased workloads which limit the capacity of social

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workers to support students (Ayala et al., 2018; Cleak et al., 2022; Hardy et al., 2021; Wilson & Flanagan, 2019). Challenges with sourcing appropriate placements is long flagged and is a persistent and ongoing vulnerability within the profession (Murphy et al., 2023; Whiting et al., 2023). Social work placements in Ireland have historically been procured through a network of relationships between university practice education coordinators and individual social workers and managers, which has been described as a 'grace and favour model' (Whiting et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2009). The inherent vulnerability of this informal procurement system, in contrast with centralized or regionalized systems in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and formal university–employer partnerships in England, creates significant challenges in meeting the standards set by Coru, the Irish Social Work Registration Board, responsible for accrediting the social work profession (SWRB, 2019a).

Each year, Irish universities recruit cohorts of registered social workers as practice educators, to whom students are allocated on a one-to-one basis for a fixed placement period in the agency where the social worker is employed. Practice education in social work is governed by Corupolicy particularly the Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers and Criteria for Education and Training Programmes (SWRB, 2019a, 2019b). Practice educators should have a minimum of 2 years post-qualification experience, and the university must provide support and training to practice educators (SWRB, 2019a, 2019b). For the duration of the placement, practice educators carry out a dual role of practitioner and educator (Baum, 2007). Practice educators face a variety of challenges including balancing the demands of their employing agency, with the provision of teaching and learning to meet university and regulatory standards. To date, we have limited insights on how social workers perceive and navigate their role in practice education (Gregory et al., 2025). This is a significant gap given that such insights would be of value to multiple stakeholders in targeting resources effectively, thereby enhancing practice-based education, which is essential for educating future generations of social workers.

Context and theoretical background

The challenge of sustaining a supply of quality placements in response to global expansion of social work programmes is well documented (O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022; Roulston et al., 2018; Short et al., 2023; Zuchowski et al., 2019) and was termed '*an unprecedented wicked problem*' in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Beesley & Devonald, 2020, p. 1146). While collaboration between universities and social work practice educators is considered critical to generate innovative solutions (Jones-Mutton et al., 2015; Zuchowski, 2014; Zuchowski et al., 2019), there are limited insights on the experiences and perceptions of practice educators. This is surprising given the central role of practice educators in enabling student learning through modeling, educating, supporting, supervising and making recommendations in relation to professional practice (Bogo, 2015; Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019; Flanagan & Wilson, 2018; Roulston et al., 2018). Practice educators play a significant gatekeeping role in ensuring professional standards are attained and upheld in the interests of the safety of children and adults who use social work services. They also play a key role in maintaining credibility within

a profession that is much maligned in public discourse for its failures (MacDermott & Harkin MacDermott, 2021; Roulston et al, 2023; Roulston et al., 2018).

Professional placements are fundamental to the development of future social workers, providing a space where theory and practice intersect (Domakin, 2015; McLaughlin et al., 2015; Rawles, 2021). Placements offer formative learning opportunities (Cleak et al., 2022) allowing students to practice essential skills in a supportive environment while attaining practice-based knowledge (O'Brien et al., 2023). Practice education is underpinned by experiential learning principles. Kolb (1984, p. 41) describes experiential learning as

> . . . the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.

Kolb (1984) emphasizes four main learning phases which occur in cycles. These include exposure to concrete experience where learners participate in hands-on activity, followed by the process of reflective observation, then abstract conceptualization, where learners make sense of their experiences and draw conclusions, and finally active experimentation to test conclusions and plan future actions. The importance of experiential learning for the development of future social workers is 'universally acknowledged' (Domakin, 2015, p. 399) and is a cornerstone of social work education (Bogo, 2010). Practice placements have been described as social work's 'signature pedagogy' (Council on Social Work Education, 2022, p. 20; Eaton, 2024). Signature pedagogies encompass instructional and socialization elements of practice that prepare future practitioners to work within their discipline through thinking, performing and acting intentionally, ethically and with integrity (Shulman, 2005).

The conditions for a quality placement identified by McLaughlin et al. (2015) are all predicated on effective practice educators. These conditions include planning and preparation for a student's arrival; planned induction; effective support; regular supervision; competent assessment skills; and a commitment to the code of practice of the relevant regulatory body. The importance of a collaborative, anti-oppressive partnership between the practice educator and student is emphasized, particularly in creating safety for students to open their practice to reflective learning and assessment (Brodie & Williams, 2013; Cleak et al., 2022; Lefevre, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2023). To date, research reveals that placements are valued as central to the development of future social workers, with students reporting high satisfaction with the practice placement experience (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018; Tusla, 2021). Practice educators highlight that placements bring fresh perspectives and enthusiasm to teams and provide a rewarding opportunity for their own professional development (Baum, 2007; Tusla, 2021). However, staff shortages, heavy caseloads, and unadjusted workloads remain significant barriers, creating what O'Meara and Kelleher (2022, p. 17) describe as a 'bottleneck' in the supply of qualified social workers.

Motivation of social workers to engage in practice education

An important question concerns social workers' motivation to become practice educators and/or continue to engage in practice education during their careers (Cook et al., 2024; Tufford et al., 2024). Research suggests that commitment to practice education is

underpinned by a sense of professional obligation, a desire to learn from students, the possibility of recognition and career progression, a desire for professional development, and a sense of obligation to assist in the preparation of the next generation of professionals (Tufford et al., 2024). In addition, becoming a practice educator constitutes a new stage in the professional development of social workers, where they experience both personal and professional learning, including opportunities to reflect on, evaluate, and develop their own practice (Baum, 2007; Cook et al., 2024; Tusla, 2021). Of note practice educators[1] highlight the motivation to develop skills in education, supervision, case management and workload prioritization (Tusla, 2021). Develin and Mathews (2008) emphasize the role of intrinsic motivation for engaging in practice education, including the willingness to contribute to the development of others, and the need to find personal satisfaction and motivation. Other studies highlight motivations such as a deepening sense of connection to the social work profession in addition to evoking memories of their own positive student placement experiences. These practice educators gained satisfaction from giving back to the profession (Cook et al., 2024; Tufford et al., 2024). Interestingly, Cook et al. (2024) suggested that practice education has reparative potential for practitioners who themselves had negative placement experiences as students. Their scoping study on practice education in the UK identified three clusters of motivating factors categorized as generative—a desire to support the next generation of social workers and take on a quality control role; formative—a wish for personal development and growth; and reparative—a wish to address their own personal negative experiences (Cook et al., 2024).

Challenges experienced with undertaking the role

While there are benefits for practice educators and agencies, there are considerable challenges including time constraints and employers' lack of recognition of and adjustment for the additional workload (Domakin, 2015). Bogo et al. (2007) highlight the paradox associated with the dual role of educator and assessor whereby the skills and behaviors required to be a good evaluator, for example recording a fail grade for a student who does not achieve or adhere to normative standards of professional behavior, may conflict with social workers' strengths-based professional orientation. They suggest the gatekeeping role of the assessor may not be fully envisioned by the practice educator when offering a placement and recommend that universities take back responsibility for evaluation and gatekeeping. Other research points to inequalities in the assessment process and recommends shared assessment of students' practice, involving practice educators, social work employers and service users (Caffrey & Fruin, 2019). Other challenges identified by Nordstrand (2017) include students' unpreparedness for the realities and living conditions of people using social work services, unfamiliarity with expectations of the workplace and students facing personal problems that impacted their professional practice. Furthermore, some social workers, predominantly in welfare settings where contractual arrangements in relation to placement provision are in place, felt obliged to accept a practice educator role although they did not want to, due to the additional work required and perceived lack of support from colleagues. In contrast, those working in clinical settings felt their colleagues would be supportive of and contribute to the student's professional development (Nordstrand, 2017).

The role of support for the practice education role

Support for the practice educator role is highlighted in the literature together with strong intrinsic motivation to participate in student education. Supports as outlined in a scoping review from Gregory et al. (2025) include provision of resources to support supervision (Plenty et al., 2016) and good-quality training from course providers. For employers support includes the promotion of skills development and the perception of practice education as a meaningful career pathway that can lead to other professional opportunities (Keen et al., 2010). Better structural and organizational supports can incentivize practitioners to assume and retain practice educator roles. Additional supports are reported by Waterhouse et al. (2011) and include a reduction in workload, increments or other incentives. Also reported is support in relation to career pathways and formal recognition of the value of the practice educator role, managerial support, provision for shared practice education, renumeration that reflected the workload required, and reduced paperwork from universities (Cook et al., 2024). Hill et al. (2019) in a study with 101 practice educators in Australia highlighted that although practice educators recognized the benefits of supervising students, workload relief, additional training, and enhanced student placement preparation by the university were required to make provision of placements more viable. Payments for placements did not necessarily compensate for lack of these measures nor guarantee the provision of more placements. Nordstrand (2017) highlights a growing chasm between social work education and practice, and marginalization of the university sector in the placement process. Addressing this Smith et al. (2024) call for a radical reconceptualizing of the nature of social work knowledge as arising from practice itself. Gregory et al.'s scoping review of research on social work practice education indicates that meaningful partnership working between course providers, employers and practice educators and a shared vision of what constitutes good social work practice creates a more supportive environment for practice educators (Gregory et al., 2025).

Based on this reasoning and empirical findings, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Motivation to engage in social work education will be positively associated with perceived satisfaction among practice educators.

H2: Practice educator perceptions of lack of challenges will be positively related to their perceived satisfaction.

H3a: The extent of perceived support will positively moderate the relationship between perceived motivation and perceived satisfaction such that the relationship will be stronger when perceived support is higher.

H3b: The extent of perceived support will positively moderate the relationship between perceived challenges and perceived satisfaction such that the relationship will be weaker when perceived support is higher.

The purpose of this study is to advance the literature on social work practice educators' motivation to undertake this important role, the challenges they experience and the

impact of supports in explaining their role satisfaction. We define satisfaction for social work practice educators as the perceived level of fulfillment of their needs and expectations related to the role. We propose that perceived satisfaction is directly influenced by both motivation and perceived challenges. We define motivation as the reasons or drivers for taking on the social work practice educator role. We measured both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, for example, commitment to the development of future social workers and/or additional payment. We define challenges as the level of agreement with statements related to the ease or difficulty of carrying out elements of the social work practice educator role. We additionally propose that perceived support, defined as how they were supported by the university, their colleagues, managers and their organization, plays an amplifying role in strengthening the impact of motivation and attenuating the impact of challenges. By focusing on these concepts and investigating their relationships to each other we shed light on important personal and contextual factors explaining practice educator satisfaction. The findings we generate provide important insights into how the role can be enhanced to maximize practice educator perceived satisfaction.

Methods

Context and sample

The research population comprised social workers active as practice educators during the academic year 2022–2023 with six Irish universities delivering social work programmes: Atlantic Technological University, Maynooth University, Trinity College Dublin, University College Cork, University College Dublin and University of Galway. The research received ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at University College Cork. The full population ($N = 510$) were invited to participate in the study. Of those, 107 returned completed questionnaires. Our final sample comprised 84 (78.5%) females, 21 (19.6%) males and two (1.9%) who did not state a gender. The age profile ranged from the 20s to over 60s with a mean age of 42. This is reflective of the gender breakdown within social work as a profession in Ireland (BASW NI/IASW/Northern Ireland Social Care Council/Coru, 2020), as well as reflecting the mean age of social workers nationally (Coru, 2025). The respondents' experience levels were evenly distributed: 52 (48.6%) reported less than 10 years of social work experience, 53 (49.5%) reported more than 10 years, and two responses (1.9%) were missing.

Method and fieldwork

Our study design is cross-sectional, and data was collected using an online questionnaire. Previous research highlights that this type of questionnaire is valuable for gathering study participants' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs (Nedjat-Haiem et al., 2021; Pentaris, 2023). An initial e-mail was sent to all eligible study participants, inviting them to participate. We achieved a response rate of 21%, which equates to one-fifth of the research population responding to the survey. This response rate is consistent with web-based surveys, which typically produce lower response rates than other modes of survey

distribution, undertaken with busy professionals (Cunningham et al., 2015; Deutskens et al., 2004; Holtom et al., 2022).

We acknowledge the potential for non-response bias in the study, which occurs when a proportion of the research sample decline to participate or drop out of the study, and who are systematically different from those who participate (Prince et al., 2012). To mitigate this risk, we sent reminder e-mails to enhance the response rate. Likewise, the homogeneity of the research population acted as a mitigating factor as there are likely fewer differences between responders and non-responders when all are from the same professional group. It was not possible to compare characteristics of responders and non-responders to estimate non-response bias as the responses were anonymous and there was no way to know who had, or had not, responded.

Study measures

To conduct this study, we developed customized measures. These measures were informed by existing literature (Baum, 2007; Flanagan & Wilson, 2018; O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022; Tusla, 2021; Whiting et al., 2023) and research team's knowledge of the sector. The response style to each of the scales was as follows: 1 is strongly agree and 5 is strongly disagree.

Perceived motivation

We measured perceived motivation to act as a practice educator using a six-item scale. Sample items include commitment to the education of future social workers, encouragement from colleagues, encouragement from managers, additional payment and to act as a gatekeeper for the profession. The reliability for this scale was 0.753.

Challenges experienced

We measured challenges experienced using a six-item scale. Sample items include rating: their experience of practice teaching, level of communication from the university, response times from university, advance information for placement, and practical supports such as access to Continuous Professional development (CPD). The reliability for this scale was 0.858.

Perceptions of support

We measured perceptions of support using a four-item scale. Sample items include level of support from team/colleagues, line manager, the practice learning coordinator (university-based) and the university overall. The reliability for this scale was 0.773.

Perceived satisfaction

We measured perceived satisfaction using a seven-item scale. Sample items include level of agreement on the value of students' contributions, agency contribution to student learning, willingness to work as a practice educator in the future, manageability of additional duties, and whether it is perceived to be a rewarding experience. The reliability for this scale was 0.762.

Open-ended questions

We asked several open-ended questions that focused on the following issues: perceptions around the motivators and demotivators to undertaking the practice educator role, enjoyment of the social work practice educator role, and additional supports that could help in the role.

Data analysis

Prior to the analysis of the data, we conducted both confirmatory factor analysis and discriminant analysis to test the robustness of the measures used. All the measures had satisfactory reliability exceeding the .70 cutoff point; they were all robust measures and had construct validity. We also found evidence of significant discriminant validity (Table 1). To test our research model, we made use of regression analysis using SPSS. We also computed the means, standard deviations and intercorrelation among variables.

A thematic analysis approach adapted from Braun and Clarke (2021) was applied in the analysis of the qualitative data. The open text questionnaire responses were analyzed through a systematic process of familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of potential/first-order themes, reviewing and refining these themes to delineate second-order themes and finally defining and naming aggregate themes in accordance with their characteristics and meaning. This process is illustrated in Table 4: Data structure, first order, second order and aggregate themes.

Results

We first present the results of our hypotheses. Table 2 reports the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations amongst all the study variables (age, gender, agency type, Tusla, Child and Family Agency employee, HSE employee, motivation, support, challenge, and satisfaction). In terms of the overall means for the focal variables, the data reveals that study participants reported high levels of support (Mean equals 1.78), high levels of satisfaction (2.06), and high levels of motivation (2.15). In the case of challenges, the mean score is at the mid-point of the scale (2.52). To test that all the variables were distinct constructs, we conducted a discriminant analysis (Table 3). We found that the four variables were distinct constructs for this study's purpose.

Table 1. Discriminant validity.

	1	2	3	4
1–Challenge	**0.739**			
2–Motivation	0.090	**0.542**		
4–Satisfaction	0.565	0.333	**0.659**	
5–Support	0.696	0.126	0.628	**0.707**

Values on the diagonal (Bold) are square roots of the AVE, while those on the off-diagonals are correlations; Shaded boxes are the standard reporting format for HTMT procedure. Source(s): Developed by authors.

Table 2. Mean, STD and Inter-correlations.

Variables	Mean	STD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(1) Age	2.6990	.97854	1							
(2) Gender	1.23	.467	.201*	1						
(3) Agency TYPE	2.16	1.540	.112	.066	1					
(4) Tulsa Employee	3.41	1.971	.019	.129	0.73*	1				
(5) HSE Employee	3.82	2.561	−.038	.027	.078	0.34	1			
(6) Motivation	2.1573	.52146	.075	.093	.010	.032	−.102	1		
(7) Support	1.7866	.65536	−.069	−.010	.118	−.136	.334*	.052	1	
(8) Challenge	2.5257	.61205	−.084	−.029	−.007	−.145	−.156	.153	.308**	1
(9) Satisfaction	2.0634	.66709	.036	.003	.045	−.003	−.094	.297**	.597**	.549**

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
[a]Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.

Table 3. Hypothesis testing.

	Beta	SD	*T*-Value	*P*-values	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Status
Direct effect							
Challenge ->Satisfaction	−0.341**	0.138	2.474	0.013	0.098	0.643	Accepted
Motivation to Engage ->Satisfaction	0.259***	0.081	3.189	0.001	0.062	0.386	Accepted
Support ->Satisfaction	0.256**	0.14	1.825	0.051	−0.053	0.50	Accepted
Moderation Results							
Support × Motivation to Engage ->Satisfaction	0.246***	0.093	2.662	0.008	0.104	0.44	Accepted
Support × Challenge ->Satisfaction	−0.045	0.078	0.577	0.564	−0.243	0.08	Not supported

n= 107; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 3 summarizes the results of our hypotheses testing. Table 3 provides the results of hypothesis testing for the predictors of satisfaction. The data reveals that motivation to engage was positively related to satisfaction (ß = 0.25, $p = < 0.051$) thus supporting HI. The data also revealed that challenge is significantly related to satisfaction (ß = −0.34, $p = < 0.013$) thus supporting H2. We also hypothesized that perceived support would moderate these two relationships (Figure 2). The data reveals that when support is high, the relationship between motivation to engage and satisfaction will be stronger (ß = 0.246***, $p = < 0.008$). We found no moderation effect of support between challenge and satisfaction. Figure 1 shows the structural model of the direct effect of perceived motivation and challege experience on perceived satisfaction and the moderating role of perceptions on support.

Qualitative themes

Table 4 presents the first order, second order and aggregated themes.

Aggregated theme 1: enablers and motivators

The data revealed that the main motivators for undertaking the practice educator role focused on personal and professional growth, altruism and receiving sufficient support. The practice educator role was viewed as an opportunity for growth in several ways. For example, the *process* of practice education and its required

Table 4. Data structure, first order, second order and aggregate themes.

Illustrative quotes	First order concepts	Second order themes	Aggregate themes
"Practice educating enhances my own practice as I am always explaining and justifying my role to the student." "It was very rewarding to see my student develop over the 14 weeks with my support."	Practice educating as a form of CPD	Personal and professional growth	Enablers and Motivators for practice education
"I value the energy and optimism that students bring to the agency" "I enjoy having student who are all different each time and the positive effects they have on the team. They bring new energy, different perspective and the whole team mobilise to support students, bringing out positive aspect in us."	The student brings new perspectives; new energy		
"I just take it as a responsibility that we need to contribute to growing the next generation of SWs. I treat it as an altruistic act to give back." "I had a very positive experience as a student on placement, and I would like the opportunity to give back to other students."	Giving back to the profession	Altruism	
"Providing lots of learning opportunities to my student and watching them grow." "Seeing the student gain confidence, grow professionally and providing a positive practice experience and placement for the student."	Positive impact on students		
"Good support from university, students were very motivated and worked very well." "The support from the Uni was very helpful. Guided well through by tutor and placement coordinator."	Sufficient support provided to practice educator	Support as enabler	
"Support and engagement from both the college and the college tutor was lacking throughout this placement." "I enjoy practice educating but have felt under supported when difficulties arose during placements."	Support lacking for practice educator	Support as a barrier	Barriers and demotivators to practice education
"Workload increases significantly throughout the entirety of placement & even more so if a student requires additional supervision." "My workload demands increased which made the experience more stressful at times."	Workload increases and time commitment	Challenges - from employers	
"The amount of paperwork involved in practice educating impacts my decision to take a student or not." "Paperwork attached to placement report . . . duration of placement for students is very short."	Paperwork and administrative burden	Challenges - from universities and/or regulatory burden	
"On 5 occasions now, I have had involvement with students whose writing skills grammar and spelling are severely below expectation." "I did not feel student was sufficiently prepared for placement in terms of basic skills such as importance of being on time for work presenting yourself in a professional manner."	Student ability/ preparedness		
"The payment for being a practice educator is very minimal after tax considering the time and effort practice educators give to students." "I would be more motivated to take students if the payment wasn't so little. it hasn't increased in over twenty years."	Financial compensation		

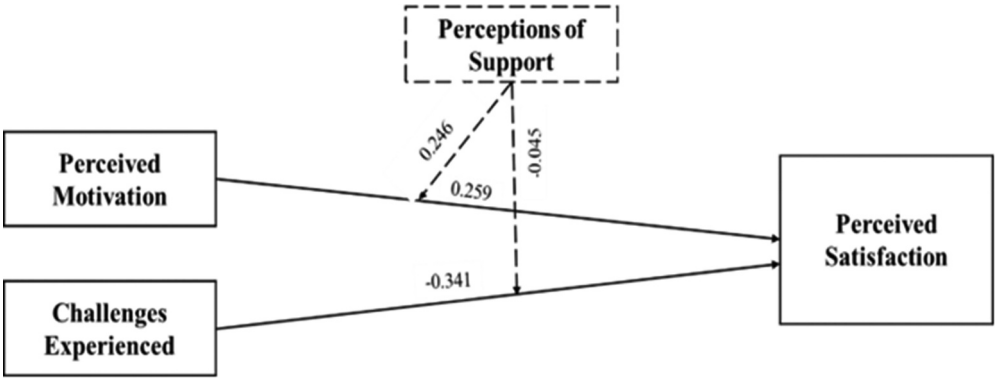


Figure 1. Structural model.

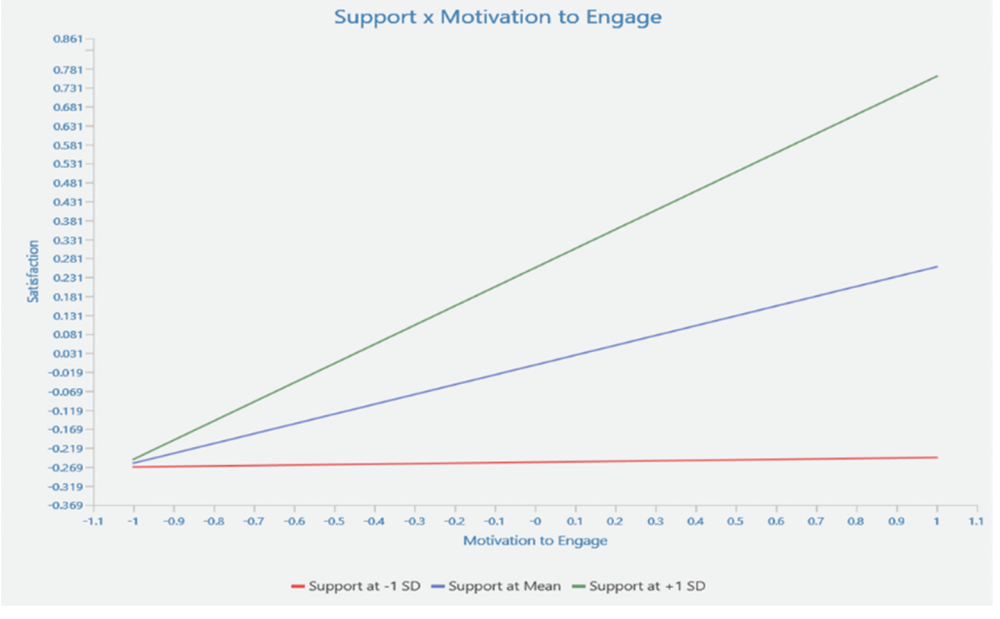


Figure 2. Support moderates between motivation and satisfaction.

reflection positively impacts the practice educator's own practice and as such was considered a form of Continuous Professional Development (CPD), an essential requirement for ongoing professional registration to use the title 'social worker' with the SWRB (2019b). The desire to give back to the profession was a strong motivator for working as a practice educator:

> I just take it as a responsibility that we need to contribute to growing the next generation of SWs. I treat it as an altruistic act to give back.

This desire to 'give back' was sometimes influenced by positive experiences with practice educators when they were students:

> I had a very positive experience as a student on placement, and I would like the opportunity to give back to other students.

Additionally, recognizing the positive impact that educators can have on a student's experience and development as a social work professional encouraged some of the respondents to take on the role:

> I want to help build students confidence and passion about social work.

Support in enabling practice educator participation varied somewhat in that some respondents expressed that they felt sufficiently supported while others reported a lack of support which will be addressed below.

Aggregated theme 2: barriers and demotivators

In contrast to the enablers and motivators for participation in practice education, the barriers and demotivators centered around a lack of support in the role. This included a lack of support from the university, for example when issues arose with a placement, as well as from employers due to insufficient recognition of the additional practice education workload and failure to adjust existing workloads accordingly:

> I do not feel that any support was provided by the university and so any improvement in this area would be welcome

> I did not get any particular support from my team, and my workload was not reduced.

Indeed, time and workload were raised repeatedly by respondents as significant barriers to participation. However, some believed that due to staff shortages in their workplace, an adjusting of workload by employers is unlikely:

> I think in the current climate . . . where we are severely understaffed it is impossible to adjust the workload to afford giving more time to practice teaching, but this would be helpful.

Related to this, were perceptions around the administrative burden of supervising a student. The level of paperwork required to evidence student learning and progression aligned with professional regulatory standards, was viewed by some as a deterrent to undertaking the role:

> The amount of paperwork involved in practice teaching - while I understand the need for it, it also impacts my decision to take a student or not.

The role of financial compensation as a barrier to practice educator participation was minimal. However, some participants stated that they would like to see increased remuneration as the current rate is low.

Discussion

Our study is one of the first to investigate the motivations of Irish social workers to undertake the practice educator role and how this impacts their perceived satisfaction. Our findings make important theory and practice contributions. They show that intrinsic motivation and perceived challenges predict satisfaction. The results suggest that sustaining practice education is less about the motivation of social workers to participate and

more about ensuring that practice educators work within organizational conditions that support the role (O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022).

We theorized and found support for the hypotheses that perceived motivations and challenges would be related to perceived satisfaction. We also found that perceived support would play an important amplifying role. Our qualitative findings support the hypotheses that practice educators are primarily driven by intrinsic motivations, such as personal and professional growth and altruism, rather than external rewards like additional payments. Intrinsic motivation 'refers to people's spontaneous tendencies to be curious and interested, to seek out challenges and to exercise and develop their skills and knowledge, even in the absence of operationally separable rewards' (DiDomenico & Ryan, 2017, p. 1). This confirms previous research that intrinsic motivation plays a stronger role in explaining why practitioners take on the role than external rewards do (Di Domenico & Ryan, 2017; Martin, 2009).

Our qualitative findings also identify key challenges faced by practice educators, primarily related to their workload. Increased responsibilities and time commitments, particularly when supervising students needing extra support, create barriers to their participation. The absence of adequate support exacerbates these challenges, leading to significant stress and difficulties with managing time effectively. Previous research has also identified time and workload issues as barriers faced by practice educators (Cook et al., 2024; Domakin, 2015; Waterhouse et al., 2011). This suggests that the key issue is not whether practitioners value the role, but whether organizational structures allow that commitment to be enacted.

Our findings further clarify how support shapes the relationship between motivation and satisfaction. For example, in the case of motivation to engage, support amplifies that relationship. In the case of challenges, support does not reduce the impact of potential negative effects of challenges on satisfaction. Therefore, the moderating role of support highlights the need for structural supports for practice educators that will not depend on individual relationships with colleagues or members of the university team.

Indeed, others have found that employing agencies that provide adequate support are more likely to encourage longevity in social workers retaining a practice educator role (Cook et al., 2024; Develin & Mathews, 2008; Waterhouse et al., 2011). Additionally, some research has shown university support to fall short of what is expected by practice educators (Hill et al., 2019; Nordstrand, 2017). Kaspi-Baruch et al. (2023) reported that when it comes to practice educators' job happiness, structural supports are crucial. To retain social work practice educators, they recommend future initiatives concentrate on improving and developing support systems and structures. Relationship-based recruitment of practice educators, as is the case with the Irish approach, which lacks formal support and structures, is vulnerable when, for example, a social worker retires or leaves their role, thus taking their motivation to provide and support a placement with them. In effect, the relationship begins and ends with the social workers involved. In recent years this 'grace and favour' model has become increasingly precarious due to the well-documented practice educator recruitment and retention crisis within the profession in Ireland (Whiting et al., 2023). This crisis further underscores the importance of

robust, structural support systems to ensure the sustainability of practice education roles.

Theoretical contribution

This is the first time the experience of practice educators has been gathered in a national research study across social work sectors in Ireland. The study contributes theoretically in three ways. First, it provides national evidence on social work practice educators' determinants of satisfaction with the practice education role in the Irish context and builds on earlier, more targeted research (O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022; Tusla, 2021). Second, it confirms the central role of intrinsic motivation in explaining why social workers undertake the practice educator role, supporting earlier findings that they are driven by professional commitment and the perceived value of placements for students, for themselves and the profession overall (Develin & Mathews, 2008; Tufford et al., 2024). This reinforces the importance of intrinsic rather than extrinsic drivers in sustaining the practice educator role.

Third, the study highlights the key role of support, illustrating how support functions as a mechanism shaping how motivation translates into satisfaction in the practice educator role.

This is particularly evident in our findings, which enhance understanding of the experiences of social work practitioners undertaking the pivotal role of educating a social work student on placement (Tusla, 2021; Waterhouse et al., 2011). In particular, workload and time pressures emerged as the main structural constraints. While most respondents expressed satisfaction with their ability to perform the tasks of the role, their satisfaction with having dedicated time or adjusted workload to accomplish these tasks was significantly lower. This contrast between intrinsic motivators and largely extrinsic barriers is theoretically important. It suggests that while practitioners' commitment to the role is internally driven, their ability to sustain it is shaped primarily by structural conditions. In this sense, intrinsic motivation appears resilient, but not sufficient in the absence of organizational support.

Our findings support recommendations from Develin and Mathews (2008) and O'Meara and Kelleher (2022) that employers should integrate and resource practice education as part of the strategic development of health and social care services. Recognition of the centrality of student education as part of service provision, with commensurate allocation of teaching time as part of social work workloads, is confirmed as essential to the long-term viability of practice-based education and by extension ensuring a skilled future workforce. Despite these pressures, the study also demonstrates the continued commitment of practice educators to provide opportunities for student placements.

Practice implications

As our findings show, there is a positive correlation between motivation and satisfaction, which may be explained through the value the social workers place on the practice educator role. Words such as 'rewarding' and 'satisfying' were used often to describe their experience. Additionally, the findings show when support is high, the relationship between motivation to engage and satisfaction is stronger. Consequently, initiatives

focused on increasing social workers' motivation to engage in practice teaching should recognize and cultivate the existing level of intrinsic motivation as it is core to ensuring that social workers continue to carry out the practice educator role (Develin & Mathews, 2008). This is most likely to be achieved through the provision of supports that practitioners themselves identify as meaningful.

Supports identified by participants include increased support from universities when difficulties arose with a placement, better preparation of students before placement, adjusted workloads, and reductions in paperwork and required formal supervision. These findings suggest that the level and consistency of university and employer support in particular warrants careful review. Any initiative that seeks to persuade social work employers to value practice education and incorporate it in social workers' workloads and work time should be supported and encouraged (Gregory et al., 2025). Organisations must recognize the significance of the practice placement experience for the education of future social workers and for upholding the profession's high standards.

Practice education is essential to the continuity of human service professions such as social work. The imperative to invest in recruitment, support and retention of social work practitioners as practice educators is heightened in the context of ever-increasing pressures in practice including a significant shortage of social workers and a high turnover of staff (O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022). Understanding the issues influencing social workers' decisions to assume a practice educator role enables more targeted investment in practice education by HEIs, employers, representative bodies and government. Overall, the findings indicate that the sustainability of practice education depends less on motivating practitioners to take on the role and more on creating organizational conditions that enable already motivated practitioners to sustain it.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the experience of practice educators to clarify how best to support social workers' involvement in the provision of practice education. Within the context of an international placement crisis, it is critical to direct effort and resources where they can make the greatest impact. Our findings show, in line with international research, that social workers are already intrinsically motivated to take on the practice educator role. The main obstacle to their participation lies in inadequate recognition and resourcing by employers and universities of the demands of the dual role of practitioner and educator. Without appropriate structural supports, from employers such as formal workload adjustments to account for supervisory responsibilities and student mentoring, and recognition of practice education within performance appraisal systems, the sustainability of practice education remains at risk. In addition, universities need to streamline their evaluation processes and provide more intensive supports to practice educators to ensure shared responsibility in complex placement situations. As such, a focus on organizational support, rather than individual motivation, is likely the most effective route to expanding and sustaining placement provision.

Endnotes

1. The term practice educator is used in this article to describe the person tasked with undertaking the supervision and assessment of the student on placement. It is recognized that internationally, other terms are used, for example practice teacher, field instructor or fieldwork educator (Pascoe, 2025).

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