"Running with the Fox and Hunting with the Hounds" – Social Work Tutors' Experiences of Managing Failing Social Work Students in Practice Learning Settings

Abstract

The paper explores the issues raised by social work students failing in practice learning settings from the perspective of university tutors, by drawing on existing literature in this area from social work and nursing, as well as findings from a small-scale empirical qualitative study. The qualitative study was influenced by practitioner-researcher and practice-near paradigms; and is based on interviews with twelve social work tutors in England. The findings reveal that tutors are able to articulate the important tasks and functions of their roles when issues of failing students in practice learning settings arise, although the process can be challenging. The challenges include: supporting practice educator and student, concerns about other tutors' practices, the difficulties in promoting appropriate professional standards and values within higher education contexts and frustrations with practice educators and placements. Only a third of the respondents (four) however, articulated their gate keeping roles and responsibilities although this was not without its difficulties.

Given the current reforms in social work education in England at this present time, with greater emphasis on threshold standards at entry level, and at key stages throughout the programme of study, the research is timely in terms of the critical consideration of the tutor role and challenges inherent in promoting appropriate standards.

Key Words

Social work tutors, failing students, practice learning settings, practice educators, managing placement failure

Introduction

Internationally, practice learning is considered an important component of social work training (Raymond, 2000; Shardlow and Doel, 2002; Furness and Gilligan, 2004). It is also a critical site of gatekeeing, ensuring incompetent social work students do not become qualified practitioners (Lafrance et al, 2004).

In the UK however, there have been long standing concerns about the placement constituent on qualifying social work programmes. These concerns have focused on three areas: firstly, the quantity and quality of placements (Kearney, 2003; Skills for Care, 2006; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014); secondly, the rarity of placement failure (Coulshed, 1980; Shapton, 2006) thirdly, practice educators' reluctance to fail students (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Finch and Taylor, 2013); and related to this; the unpleasant emotional experience associated with failing students (Bogo et al, 2007; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013). The experiences of social work tutors working with students failing in placements however, has not been subject to the same academic scrutiny as practice educators. Indeed, as the discussion documents, there is an extremely limited research base.

Set against these pessimistic concerns around placements is the policy context. There have been a number of key developments in England that have aimed at strengthening social work education and in particular, the placement component. Firstly, the introduction of the degree in social work in England in 2003 and more recently, the developmental work of The Social Work Reform Board (SWRB). The paper goes on to explore these developments, documents the extremely limited research in this area and then discusses findings from a small qualitative study of English social work tutors experiences of working with social work students struggling or failing in placement.

Given the international readership of this journal, it is imperative to clarify the terms used. Practice educator is used to describe the person undertaking the assessment of the student in practice, known as field instructors in North American contexts. Placement or practice learning setting is used interchangeably to describe what is known elsewhere as the field placement or practitcum. Tutor, is used to describe the person employed by the university who undertakes the placement visit, often known as faculty liaison in North American contexts. In the UK

context, a social work tutor might be employed on a casual basis to specifically undertake the role of placement liaison, or might also be a permanent member of lecturing staff.

A further contextual note concerns the assessment system in the UK. Practice educators are tasked with making a recommendation about the students competence in practice and these decision are usually upheld (or not) by what is often known as a "Practice Assessment Panel", staffed by a range of stakeholders, including tutors, then formally ratified at an examination board (Finch, 2013).

Developments in Social Work Education and Practice Learning

The introduction of the degree in social work in 2003 in England marked a significant policy shift, one that emphasised practice learning.   The number of assessed days in practice, increased from 130 to 200 (now 170 days) and students were required to evidence they were "fit to practice" before commencing the placement. Indeed, Jacqui Smith, the Minister of State for Health at the time, commented on the need for student social workers to undertake much of their learning in practice settings (Department of Health, 2002). Practice assessment subsequently focused on evidencing key roles, as set out in National Occupational Standards for Social Work (TOPSS, 2002). Alongside the introduction of the degree, The Care Standards Act (2000) saw the setting up of four regional regulatory bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and as well as registration requirements, "social worker" became a protected title.

The second major policy shift occurred in 2009. A Social Work Task Force (SWTF) was established by the Labour Government in England in the aftermath of the death of a young child, Peter Connelly, at the hands of his carers.   The SWTF undertook an examination of social work practice and made a number of recommendations. Whilst ostensibly looking at front line practice in England, the taskforce also raised concerns about practice learning.

An important outcome of the SWTF, was the setting up of the SWRB to oversee a programme of development, with a continued focus on practice education and a move from a competency

to a capability model. The Professional Capability Framework was thus developed and led by a newly formed College of Social Work in 2013.

In the summer of 2012, the General Social Care Council (regulatory body for England) was abolished by the government. The regulatory function is subsequently managed by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), which require students to meet a range of Standards of Proficiencies (HCPC, 2012a).   Additionally, social work programmes are obliged to meet a range of Standards of Education and Training (HCPC, 2012b), a number of which centre around the provision, monitoring and standards in placements (HCPC, 2012c).

The developments have emphasised both the importance of practice learning and the need for robust assessment. The role of the social work tutor in supporting and maintaining appropriate threshold requirements in the field is now heightened. It is surprising therefore, that there has been so little academic exploration of the social work tutor role and what has been undertaken, is now dated. Indeed, Degenhardt (2003) laments that in terms of social work education, whilst the "…tutor's role is pivotal" (2003:65) it is both "underestimated and under-researched" (ibid). Critically exploring social work tutors' experiences when issues of struggling or failing students arise is thus indicated.

Literature Review

The Social Work Tutor Role

Established practice in the UK is that social work tutors visit students on placement on two occasions, at the outset and midway, and less commonly now, a visit at the end of the placement (Borland et al, 1988; Collins, 1994). This is to ensure that appropriate learning opportunities are in place to enable students to meet assessment requirements, ensure universities policies and standards are being adhered to and monitor the progress of students (Bamford, 1997; Watson and West, 2003).   The social work tutor visit to the placement is important, and in the context of this discussion; appropriately manage underperforming or failing students.

A consideration of what is, or ought to be, the social work tutor's role in terms of placement management is necessary, as this clearly becomes pertinent when issues emerge. What little research has been carried out in the UK, acknowledging its dated nature, suggests that the social work tutor role is complex (Brandon and Davies, 1979; Milner and O'Bryne, 1986; Bamford, 1987; Collins, 1994; Degenhardt, 2003) although distinct tasks and roles have nonetheless been identified. An old, but germane study, Brandon and Davies, (1979), argue that a social work tutors' role encompasses: supporting new practice educators, helping students integrate theory and practice, and to notice parallel processes within practice educator/student relationships. Further, tutors reported that they occupied an arbiter role in managing relations between practice educators and students, and had a role in "maximising field opportunities of their students" (1979:18).

Collins (1994) argues that the role encompasses a number of functions such as "co-coordinator, communicator, consultant, supporter, advocate, arbiter and teacher" (1994:8). Hackett and Marsland's (1997) study, found that tutors had distinct roles in imparting knowledge about the students' possible learning needs, maintaining university policies and procedures and providing clarity around assessment.

Given the significant paucity of literature in social work about the tutor role, it felt necessary to explore comparator professions for further insight. A literature search revealed a greater exploration of this within nursing education. Given some significant similarities with social work education, namely, the requirement to undertake assessed practice and the importance of field liaison, this offers some justification for inclusion here although it is acknowledged that there is a likelihood that similar research may have been carried out in other professions with assessed practice learning requirements.

In term of the nursing literature Kerridge (2008) argues that the role of a tutor is to provide educational support to clinical staff to enable them to support student nurses. This suggests that nurse educators, like social work educators, have a dual support role with both practice mentors and students. Further tasks identified by Kerridge (2008) include; support students' practice learning, help students integrate theory and clinical practice and model a critical

approach to practice.   In a similar vein, Braine and Parnell (2011) argue that a tutor's role is to support students pastorally, whilst helping students to engage with the theoretical and practice elements of the course.

Working with Struggling or Failing Students

The research base is even narrower in exploring social work tutors' experiences of working with struggling or failing students in practice learning settings. Brandon and Davies (1979) noted "the reluctance of…tutors to stand firm in the defence of standards" (1979:51).   Of further concern, was that both tutors (as well as practice educators) were reluctant to take a stance in favour of failure. They observed:

> "…an impression of difficult decisions postponed by avoidance, which are all the harder to take at a later stage because of the investment of time." (1979:44).

Whilst it is clear that decision making in respect of a student failing in placement has become clearer than was the apparent case in 1979, the authors' nonetheless, note the influence of the tutor in the assessment decision, both indirectly and directly, vis-à-vis the work undertaken with the practice educators and at subsequent assessment boards. The tutor, it seems, is potentially influential in assessment decisions and this was noted more recently by Parker's (2010) study of student experiences of placement failure and Finch's (2013) study of practice assessment panels decision making in respect of students failing on placement, noting the often powerful and dominant voice of the tutor at key decision making moments.

Whilst not focusing on failing students per se, Hackett and Marsland (1997) explored the tutor-student-practice educator triad in the context of child protection placements.   They describe this relationship as "a power charged learning system where issues of status and authority are constantly at the fore" (1997:52).   The study found that tutors' abilities to challenge practice educators were limited and pre-existing concerns about students were difficult for tutors to discuss at formal meetings. Tutors in the study, resorted to "covert power strategies" (1997:

56) to manage this tension.   The strategy of using surreptitious, or less than transparent ways of managing placement issues, emerged in the empirical work, and will be explored later on.

Concerns about social work tutor practice in terms of placement liaison, has emerged in several other studies. Degenhardt's (2003) study, whilst focusing more broadly on the social work tutor role – both within university as well as in terms of placement liaison, noted that tutors were perceived by both practice educators and students, as ineffectual in managing crisis situations.   Finch (2010) noted concerns about conflictual relationships between practice educators and tutors. Practice educators' also expressed worries about differences in tutors' practice and focus of intervention; i.e. some tutors were reported to focus their efforts on ensuring the student passed, whilst other tutors were felt to be more receptive to the possibility of student failure.   Research undertaken by Schaub and Dalrymple, (2011) found that when concerns about students arose, practice educators did not feel their worries were addressed with the urgency required nor felt adequately supported by tutors.

Within the nursing literature, Litchfield, (2001) explored tutors' experiences of working with students who were failing their placements. Tutors were reported to be uncertain about what to do and intervention often focused on encouraging the student to withdraw.

The Emotional Impact

A significant theme to emerge from the research on practice educators and supervisors, concerns the emotional impact of working with a failing student. Parker (2010) notes that the experience of placement failure is "distressing for all" and Milner and O'Bryne (1986), argue that social work tutors, may tend to "social work" struggling students, rather than manage them appropriately as "educators". They describe the experience for tutors as:

> "…unpleasant, messy, emotionally fraught, carrying also the threat of appeal and subsequent litigation. It is, therefore, to be avoided at all costs…"

> (Milner and Bryne, 1986:21)

This contrasts however with research undertaken by Burgess et al (1998a, 1998b) which focused on the issue of social work placement failure in Scotland from the perspective of tutors, students and practice educators. Tutors reported feeling relatively immune from the often difficult dynamics to emerge between practice educators and students, and did not report undue emotional distress. In a nursing context, Larocque and Luhanga (2013) found the impact of a failing student on faculty staff was significant and that the experience was considered a difficult process.   They also noted a fear of reputational issues for universities when issues of failing students emerged.

The literature reviewed therefore suggests, that firstly, the tutor role is complex and contains a number of potentially conflicting roles; second that tutors may be reluctant to confront student failure in placement settings; third, there may be a disinclination to confront and challenge poor supervisory practice in placements; fourth, that working with a failing student in a practice learning setting may be a difficult experience for a tutor and lastly, more generalised concerns about the quality and effectiveness of tutor practice.

The Research

As discussed earlier, the current policy context offers a useful rationale for undertaking such inquiries at this time, coupled with the very limited research base that explores the experiences of tutors when managing placement concerns. The research therefore, hopes to initiate a renewed interest in the tutor role in social work education, as well as contribute to the evidence base.   The research undertaken, for those reasons, explores social work tutors' experiences of managing placement failure, to see if the themes identified in the literature review are indicative of current preoccupations, as well as to inform future research in this area.

Methodology and Methods

A qualitative methodological perspective guided and framed the empirical work. The research design was influenced by practitioner-research paradigms (Shaw & Gould; 2001; Shaw and Lunt, 2011) as well as practice-near approaches (Froggett & Briggs, 2011). In terms of the method, semi-structured interviews were employed. Twelve tutors were interviewed, with nine interviews conducted over the phone and three interviews conducted in person. As it can be seen, the sample is small and the study exploratory and open in nature. The interviews were around an hour in length, were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Participants were recruited via a social work education bulletin board as well as by direct approaches. The interviewees were drawn from universities across England. All were qualified social workers and nine were also qualified practice educators. Two of the tutors interviewed were hourly paid tutors, tasked with undertaking placement visits and the remainder were employed permanently as Senior Lecturers in Social Work. Six of the interviewees had other distinct roles in terms of placement learning, including coordinating placements, preparation for practice and placement module convenor. All the interviewees had experience of managing placement failure in their role as tutor, (ranging from two to five tutees).

The interviews were thematically analysed and drew on the voice centred relational approach (Gilligan, 1982). This is an approach that advocates four distinct readings of the transcripts. The first reading aims at identifying the plots, subplots, metaphors and imagery. The second aims at drawing out the different identities expressed by the respondent. The third focuses on relationships, and the last reading takes account of structural factors. The themes that emerged from each reading were then combined to form overarching findings.

In terms of ethics, the research was approved by a university ethics committee and the usual standards of ethical research practice have been adopted. All the participants consented to

take part. The names used are pseudonyms and institutions are not identified. It is recognised however, that researching one's peers has distinct ethical considerations.

Limitations of Study

There were clear limitations to the study undertaken. First, the study was small, i.e. only twelve participants were interviewed, and so generalisations cannot be drawn. Second, as the participants were self selecting, it might have biased the results. For example, the concern about other tutors practice might be indicative of why participants chose to take part. Additionally, tutors who chose to participate, may be those who were confident in managing student failure and have a well developed understanding of their role. It was also interesting to note that half the sample, had other responsibilities within practice learning and therefore may have developed further confidence and expertise through these activities, as well as the majority (nine) being former practice educators.

Lastly, the study did not explore the full range of other duties performed by the permanent members of staff which, it could be argued, might be important in how tutors experience and position themselves in relation to managing poor performance in placement settings. It was interesting to note however that all the participants were working in post 92 universities. This is clearly an area to follow up in a further study to ensure important variables are taken into account.

Findings

Tutors' Roles

Tutors were able to identify a number of tasks and roles generally, as well as tasks when placement concerns emerged. These centred on adhering to the universities written policies around placement concerns.   For example Robert, like a number of tutors, discussed what he did when issues emerged on placement:

> "…if there are any problems, either the student or the assessor can call me back out again, and we draw up an action plan, and we would usually go out two weeks later to review how its going."

Similarly, Jane states:

> "…so the first port of call would be to call a meeting with the agency and see if we could work a way through, an action plan or something like that."

There was a high degree of similarity in how placement issues were managed; typically, tutors responding to concerns quickly, undertaking an additional placement visit in which an action plan is devised and subsequently reviewed.   There was also a consensus amongst the about what constituted evidence of student failure, for example; dishonest behaviour, persistent lateness, poor communication skills, poor organisational skills and oppressive and discriminatory attitudes.

Tutors also saw their roles as ensuring university policies and procedures were followed, as well as supporting practice educators and students. Support for practice educators centred on providing clarification of the universities requirements and expectations. There were more nuanced and complex understandings proffered however, which went beyond tasks and generalised statements of support. Warren for example, saw his role as being to raise standards of practice, both in relation to work undertaken with service users as well as practice learning; and if necessary, challenge practice in placements. Warren also felt his role was to try and standardize learning opportunities, so all students, whatever their placements, would have similar learning opportunities. Gerry saw his role as supporting practice educators to make explicit concerns about students in placement meetings, i.e. helping them to "say the unsayable". For Gerry, the tutor role came to the fore when issues of placement failure arose and Gerry was one of the few tutors who explicitly recognised the anxiety practice educators experienced in such situations, and saw a role in containing this anxiety.

Emma saw her role as "facilitative and supportive" to both the practice educator and the student but also acknowledged she made assessments of how far the practice educator had the

required knowledge to assess the student appropriately. Margaret and Pam, like other tutors, felt that an important part of their role was supporting students, protecting students' rights and ensuring due process occurred, although discussions of roles in terms of students were not explored at length, rather, in a passing, more cursory manner. It was of concern to note, that only four tutors, i.e. a third of the sample, explicitly discussed their gate keeping role and associated responsibilities towards service users. The gate keeping role however, was not without its challenges, as will be later explored.

Challenges of Tutor Role

Tutors talked at length about the particular challenges they faced in the context of managing placement failure. These challenges centred around four areas: managing and supporting both practice educators and students at the same time, other tutors practice, conflict with university systems, and concerns about practice educators and poor quality placements.

Supporting Practice Educators and Students

Some tutors, though not all, expressed concerns about how to support practice educators and students at the same time. Ruby for example, expressed an uncomfortable narrative of "being in the middle" and spoke of the challenge of having to reconcile and make sense of the different versions of events that were presented. Thomas also discussed the challenges of being in the middle of conflicting perspectives. He was also aware of the need to, what he termed, advocate and defend the student, yet at the same time, was concerned about undermining the assessment of the practice educator, whilst also being required to ensure the learning opportunities were of the appropriate quality.

Adrian managed this tension by adopting a dichotomous position in terms of what he termed his "official role" and his "unofficial role". His "official role…absolute role on paper" included,

ensuring all processes were followed and that students' rights were protected. He saw his "unofficial role" as:

> "…empowering the practice teachers [educators] in a different way when they find it hard to fail, when they feel that failing a student or not passing a student will reflect badly on them or helping them understand that it doesn't reflect badly on them if they fail the student, quite the opposite."

Adrian acknowledged that this, rather furtive practice, was in direct contrast to what had been agreed in the learning agreement about how placement concerns should be managed. Adrian aptly described this as "running with the fox and hunting with the hounds" suggesting a degree of duplicity. Adrian acknowledges this. He states:

> "…the main challenge is that I feel slightly hypocritical sometimes because what we say to the students is 'this is transparent process and we won't have any conversations or do anything you don't know about but in reality, there are those conversations [with practice educators] which are sometimes a little more frank than those with the student might be."

This sense of duplicity was also seen in the narrative of Robert, who sometimes used training sessions for practice educators at the university as an unofficial opportunity to discuss student concerns. He also had informal and hence unofficial phone calls with practice educators. These practices were seen in other narratives, for example, Miranda, Pam and Margaret.

Good Tutors and Bad Tutors

Narratives of "other" tutors' practice emerged in the interviews. Some participants raised concerns, alongside frustration, about what they considered to be poor practice demonstrated by their colleagues. Carol for example discussed clear policies and practices around managing failing students , yet expressed frustration, when "other" tutors appeared to have not engaged with these processes. She states:

> "...when I chaired the PAP [practice assessment panel] I'd be sitting there looking at some of the portfolios, thinking, hang on a minute, this tutors been out there dealing with all these issues – why was this placement not terminated?"

Gerry raised concerns about tutors who did not follow the process, or who made, what he felt were "snap" or "ill considered decisions", which later "came back to haunt tutors" which meant that at times, fails could not be upheld as due process had not occurred with the result that students had legitimate grounds for complaint and appeal.

Carol questioned her colleagues practice several times during the interview, she states:

> "...there is the level of complexity around the skills of the training team around the student...you've got some practice educators that are brilliant...but also to be fair, I question the capability of some academic staff."

Gerry raised concerns about "other tutors" not being responsive to practice educators concerns about students. Tutors failing to be pro-active and respond in a timely fashion, in Gerry's view, often had the effect that either situations quickly became very problematic or else practice educators would then avoid the non responsive tutors, and make contact instead with the "good" tutors, i.e. those who were perceived to respond quickly to emails or phone calls. Jane also raised this concern. She states:

> "...Some tutors are more active than others and I think that being pro-active you can prevent a lot and I think it's important that the tutor is proactive in getting to difficulties early and negotiating how to resolve them."

Adrian questioned whether some of his colleagues were "too soft" in how they assessed academic work in the first year, particularly in the preparation for practice module, which despite evidencing the students lack of readiness to undertake a placement, was ignored by tutors. Warren spoke of himself as a "tough tutor" and claimed that students and practice educators made comparisons between him and other tutors they had been in contact with.

Additionally, Jane raised the issues of "tensions" amongst her colleagues about how placement fail was managed and dealt with – tensions that were perhaps either mirroring, or reinforced tensions with the wider university.

Conflict with University Systems

A number of social work tutors raised concerns about what they felt was a conflict between the norms of social work education; in particular the need to protect service users from dangerous or incompetent practitioners and the university systems, which did not always appear to recognise the intricacies of professional practice. The tendency of universities to treat the placement module like any other academic module; with the automatic right of re-doing the placement unless serious suitability issues emerged, caused tutors consternation.

This was the case at Carol's university, where there was an automatic entitlement to retake the placement unless fitness to practice issues were indicated. For Carol, if due process had been followed and students given every opportunity, then if the placement was failed because of practice issues, students should not be given another opportunity. Carol also felt that "…in many universities like ours, they don't like to fail students."

Jane described the "constant tension" between professional and academic norms and stated that decisions to fail students and not offer them a further placement were not always upheld by the university. Other tutors, i.e. Ruby and Pam in particular, raised concerns about fitness to practice panels being university wide and so were not social work specific. Some tutors felt the panels were dominated by medical approaches to fitness to practice issues. Carol, for example, whilst acknowledging the process had improved, had concerns. She states:

> "…there are still problem with it…we have to argue and insist that somebody who is a registered, qualified social worker, is part of the panel…you've got to have a professionally qualified one on the panel".

Carol continues with this theme further. She states:

> "...we have to fight sometimes to get them [the university] to even listen to our professional regulations. We have had a real struggle with that."

Thomas expressed frustration with the university appeal system, which did not appear to be fully compatible with professional requirements and processes. For example, he discussed an incident, whereby a practice assessment panel upheld a fail decision made by the practice educator and a second opinion practice educator. Thomas was also supportive of the fail decision in his role as tutor and felt the student had been fully represented at the panel, however despite serious issues that had emerged on placement:

> "...the student has appealed and it's gone through a university process which has ended up retaining the fail decision but providing the student to have a further repeat placement".

These concerns however were not the case for all tutors, which suggest that for some universities, professional requirements can be comfortably accommodated within university systems. This raises a concern about equity for students across programmes in England, with some students being given an opportunity to undertake a repeat placement in some universities, giving them longer to develop their practice, than students in other universities, where repeat placements are not an automatic right but are dependent upon a number of factors. This is clearly an area that would benefit from further exploration.

Concerns about Practice Educators and Placements

Tutors revealed both concern and frustration about practice educators and placements. These concerns centred firstly on perceptions of reluctance to fail. Adrian for example, discussed an incident whereby a practice educator passed a student where lots of concerns had been noted. Adrian felt the practice educator had "...bottled it...". He states further:

> "I think it was easier to pass than it was to fail them...it's a combination of things, partly a bit laziness where they are, for whatever reason, reluctant to do the hard, extra work.."

16

Gerry was concerned about the inability of practice educators to explicitly address concerns about the student in placement meetings. He states:

> "They're terrified of it because they think that they're being asked to judge and assess before they're ready to assess…many of them want to be nice… I think the niceness factor needs to be decreased and maybe they need to get more demanding."

Jane expressed concerns about off-site practice educators taking on too many students and raised a further concern, which was evident in other narratives, about small voluntary agencies taking on too many students, using them to staff the agency and not offering enough in the way of stretching learning opportunities, hence enabling "weak" students to pass.

Some tutors, for example, Emma, Miranda and Robert, expressed a less critical and more understanding perspective, acknowledging increased pressures on practice educators due to the current economic climate, resulting in reduction of staff and the increasingly complex and demanding work undertaken due to higher thresholds.

Discussion

The findings of this study accord with themes that emerged from the literature. For example, one theme, is that the role of a social work tutor is multi- faceted, complex and poses distinct challenges.   The study thus reinforces the vital role tutors play in promoting threshold standards. An important function, again, as indicated in the literature review, and seen in the findings of this study, centres on the need to support practice educators to fail students when required, as well as ensuring quality standards are maintained within practice learning settings. These tasks however, are felt as conflictual when set against the need to support and protect the student, and ensure due process occurs. One strategy to manage some of these tensions, as the both the findings and the literature highlighted, centres on the use of "unofficial" practices to potentially influence the assessment decision, or offer advice to practice educators without students knowledge. These furtive, non transparent practices, suggest that tutors are also

caught up in dynamics where they cannot "say the unsayable", i.e. explicitly articulate concerns to students.

Some of the challenges identified in the literature review, namely, the emotional pain caused by this work and avoiding confronting poor practice educators, did not emerge in this study. The findings suggest that tutors, on the whole, did not report undue emotional distress and were able to articulate their practices in relation to challenging practice educators as well as to support them to fail students if required, within the guiding framework of the policies and procedures of the university. Of course, like all qualitative inquiry, there may well be a difference between what tutors state they do and what they do in reality.

Some of the concerns noted in the literature review about variations in tutor practice, were echoed by tutors in this study. It was sobering to note tutors expressing misgivings about their colleagues' practices and the potential consequences. Whilst anecdotal to a certain degree, this may suggest that not all tutors are engaging adequately and fully in the task of managing placement concerns.

An original finding to emerge, not seen in the existing literature, centred on some tutors' frustrations with university processes which, at times, was felt to be in direct conflict with social work norms and values. In particular, the focus of whose rights took precedence emerged strongly, i.e. student rights versus the publics' rights to be protected from incompetent or dangerous practitioners - precisely what the HCPC (and other UK regulatory bodies) demand of universities. Linked to this, the different ways universities treat the placement component, raises serious concerns about equity across the UK.

A further issue that did not emerge in the literature review, concerned gate keeping. In this study, only a third of the tutors explicitly discussed their gate keeping duties, although this was not without tension. Carol for example, discussed the challenges in supporting students as well as protecting the public. This became even more complex and pronounced within the university context, which, Carol felt, prioritised students' rights over the publics' rights. Gerry also recognised the tension between supporting students and his responsibilities as a gatekeeper to the profession, noting "the huge amounts of responsibility I have towards

students and also to the service users."   Emma however, did not appear to experience challenges around gatekeeping. She recounted that on placement visits, her first thought was the service user. Miranda also did not appear to experience tension in her gate keeping role , instead, she was unequivocal and unforgiving. She states:

> "…unfortunately there are students who should not be in social work and we have to make that decision. If you can't make that decision, I don't think you should be a tutor because…your responsibility lays towards the profession."

This raises questions about how far tutors acknowledge and operationalise their important gate keeping role. The critical and uncomfortable question is then raised as to whether not yet competent students are being passed in placements; and the unwitting role that tutors might play in this.

Conclusion

Whilst acknowledging the limitations, the study makes an original contribution to the sparse research base and identifies a number of issues and concerns. It is clear that the tutor role is complex and challenging. It is also an important and necessary bridge between the field and the academy and is vital in ensuring thresholds standards are maintained. The findings also demonstrate that tutors face a number of associated challenges when managing under performance in practice learning settings.   These challenges centred around four areas, supporting both practice educators and students, concerns about other tutors' practices, the difficulties in promoting appropriate professional standards and values within higher education contexts and frustrations with practice educators and placements.   The findings are clearly relevant to the UK and other countries where the social work tutor plays a role in monitoring and managing placement issues

The study, a starting point in what will hopefully ignite academic and professional interest in the tutor role in placement liaison, particularly where there are difficulties with under

performing students, or indeed underperforming practice educators and placements, highlights a number of areas that would benefit from further exploration.

First, a consideration of how tutors other demands and duties as senior lecturers, namely teaching, administrative and research demands might impact on how tutors position themselves in relation to placement concerns. Linked to this, the use of HPLs to undertake the placement visits was raised as a potential concern by permanent tutors as it was felt that temporary tutors would not have the same breadth of knowledge of the student's learning needs.

Second, the issue of how widespread the apparent conflict between academic and professional regulation is, needs further exploration. Linked to this area, an exploration of the differences in assessment practice across the UK (namely the criteria for repeat placements) is required to ensure consistency across the UK and also timely because of recent changes to funding repeat placements.

These two areas suggest a need for a larger, more representational study which could also focus on a further consideration of the tutor role generally and when issues of under performance on placement occurs, as well as a consideration of what good practice in this area looks like. It seems obvious that research looking at practice educators and students experiences of tutors when managing their placement concerns would also be useful.

Overall the tutor role, certainly in the UK context, is vital when issues of concern arise in practice learning settings and it is clear that the tutor plays a significant role in managing these issues, yet the role is not without distinct complex challenges as this study has revealed.

20

Bibliography

Bamford, D. (1987) *The Personal Tutor in Social Work Education,* Cranfield, Cranfield Press

Basnett F., and Sheffield D., (2010) The Impact of Social Work Student Failure upon Practice Educators, *British Journal of Social Work,* 40, pp 2119-2136

Bogo, M., Regher, C., Power, R. And Regher, G. (2007) When Values Collide: Field Instructors Experiences of Providing Feedback and Evaluating Competence. *The Clinical Supervisor,* 26 (1/2)**,** pp.99-117.

Borland, M., Hudson, A. Hughes, B. and Worrall, A. (1988) An Approach to the Management of the Assessment of Practice Placements. *British Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 18, pp:269-288

Braine, M.E. and Parnell, J. (2011) Exploring Student's Perceptions and Experiences of Personal Tutors, *Nurse Education Today,* 31, pp:904-910

Brandon, J. and Davis, M. (1979) The Limits of Competence in Social Work; The Assessment of Marginal Students in Social Work Education, *British Journal of Social Work,* Vol. 9, pp 295-347

Burgess, R., Campbell, V., Phillips, R. and Skinner, K. (1998a) Managing Unsuccessful or Uncompleted Placements, *Journal of Practice Teaching*, Vol 1. (1) pp:4-12.

Burgess, R., Phillips, R. and Skinner, K. (1998b) Practice Placements that go Wrong, *Journal of Practice Teaching*, Vol. 1 (2) pp:48-64.

Collins, S. (1994) Placements Visits by Tutors from College Based Programmes, *Social Work Education,* 13 (3) pp. 4-23

Coulshed, V. (1980) Why is Placement Failure so Rare? *Australian Social Work,* 33 (4)**,** pp.17-21

Croisdale-Appleby, L (2014) *Revisioning Social Work Education: An Independent Review,*

Department of Health: London.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attach

ment_data/file/285788/DCA_Accessible.pdf (accessed 13/5/14)

Degenhardt, D. (2002) Teacher or Supporter? The Social Work Tutor's Role in Students' Professional Development, *Journal of Practice Teaching*, 4 (3), pp:4-67

DCSF (2009) Social Work Task Force. London, Department for Children, Schools and Families (http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf   downloaded 25/8/09

Department of Health (2002) Requirements for Social Work Training, London, HMSO

Finch, J. (2010) *Can't Fail, Won't Fail – Why Practice Assessors Find it Difficult to Fail Social Work Students. A Qualitative Study of Practice Assessors Experience of Assessing Marginal or Failing Social Work Students,* DSW Thesis, Falmer, University of Sussex

Finch, J. (2013) *A Critical Exploration of Practice Assessment Panels: Participation, power, emotion and decision making in relation to failing social work students,* York, Higher Education Academy (accessed 2/5/14)
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/disciplines/hsc/Social-Work-and-Social-Policy/A_critical_exploration_of_PAP_Finch

Finch, J. and Taylor, I. (2013) Failing to Fail? *Practice Educators' Emotional Experiences of Assessing Failing Social Work Students,* Social Work Education (Special Edition, Field Education in Social Work), Vol. 32 (2) pp:244-258

Froggett, L. and Briggs, S. (2011) Practice-Near and Practice-Distant Methods in Human Services, *Journal of Research Practice*, Vol. 8 (2) available from http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/318/276   (accessed 23/5/13)

Furness, S. and Gilligan, P. (2004) Fit for Purpose: Issues from Practice Placements, Practice teaching and the Assessment of Student's Practice. *Social Work Education,* Vol. 23 (3)**,** pp 465-479.

Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development,* Cambridge, Harvard University Press

Hackett, S. and Marsland, P (1997) Perceptions of Power: An Exploration of the Dynamics in the Student-Tutor-Practice Teacher Relationships within Child Protection Placements, *Social Work Education,* 16 (2) pp:44-62

HCPC (2012a) *Standards of Proficiency*, London, Health Care and Professions Council

HCPC (2012b) *Approval Process*, London, Health Care and Professions Council

HCPC (2012c) *Standards of Education and Training*, London, Health Care and Professions Council

Kearney, P. (2003) *Framework for Supporting and Assessing Practice Learning*. London, Social Care Institute for Excellence.

Kerridge, J.L. (2008) Supporting Student Nurses on Placement in Nursing Homes: The Challenges for the Link Tutor Role.   Nurse Education, 8, pp:385-396

Lafrance, J., Fay, and. & Herbert, M. (2004) Gate-Keeping for Professional Social Work Practice. *Social Work Education,* 23**,** pp:325-340

Larocque, S. and Luhanga, F.L. (2013) Exploring the Issue of Failure to Fail in a Nursing Program, *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship*, Vol. 10 (1) pp:1-8

Litchfield, J. (2001) "Supporting Nursing Students Who Fail: A Review of Lecturers Practice, *Nurse Education in Practice,* 1 (3) pp:142-148

The College of Social Work (2012) *Practice Educator Professional Standards and Guidance,* London, The College of Social Work, *http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org/uploadedFiles/TheCollege/_CollegeLibrary/Reform_resources/Practice-EducatorProfessional(edref11).pdf (accessed 6/6/12)*

Milner, J. and O'Bryne, P. (1986) The Impact of Failing Students on Tutors, *Social Work Education,* 6 (1) pp:21-23

Parker, J. (2010) When Things go Wrong! Placement Disruption and Termination: Power and Student Perspectives, *British Journal of Social Work,* 40, pp:983-999

Raymond, G. T. (2000) Gatekeeping in Field Education. IN Gibbs, P. & Blakely, E. H. (Eds.) *Gatekeeping in BSW Programs.* New York, Colombia University Press.

Schaub, J. and Dalrymple, R. (2011) *"She didn't seem like a social worker": Practice Educators Experiences and Perceptions of Failing Social Work Students on Placements,* London, Higher Education Academy, http://www.swapbox.ac.uk/1151/ (accessed 3/4/13)

Shardlow. S. & Doel, M. (1996) *Practice Learning and Teaching,* Basingstoke, Macmillan Press Ltd.

Shapton, M. (2006) Failing to Fail: Is the Assessment Process Failing the Caring Profession, *Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning,* 7 (2) pp 39-54

Shaw. I. and Gould, N. (2001) Inquiry and Action: Qualitative Research and Professional Practice in Shaw. I. and Gould, N (Eds) *Qualitative Research in Social Work*

Shaw, I. and Lund, N. (2011) Navigating Practitioner Research, *British Journal of Social Work,* 41 (2) pp:1548-1565

Skills for Care (2006) Practice Learning Taskforce http://www.skillsforcarelondon.org.uk/Member/PracticeLearning/PractceLearningTaskforce.aspx accessed 19/4/08. London, Skills for Care

TOPSS (2002) National Occupational Standards for Social Work. Leeds, Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services (TOPPS).

Watson, D. and West, J. (2003) The Role of the Tutor in Social Work Education. Building an Emancipatory Tutorial Relationship, *Social Work Education,* 22 (2) pp:139-149