Italian and English Practice Educators[1] Experiences of Working with Struggling or Failing Students in Practice Learning Settings[2]   By Jo Finch and Alberto Poletti

Introduction:

This chapter explores the findings from a comparative study of Practice Educators' experiences of working with struggling and/or failing students in Italy and England. The chapter thus explores the comparative study undertaken and the findings, which are centred around three key themes: emotions and feelings, emotional processes and relational processes. We then consider the possible reasons for the differences that emerged from the findings of UK and Italian practice educators; locating these differences largely in the differential statuses of the profession in each respective country and their assessment requirements.

Lastly, we go on to consider a methodological point; given that assessed practice learning is common on qualifying social work programmes across the world (Shardlow and Doel, 2002) and; that the practice learning site is relatively under researched and under-theorised, in comparison to other areas of social work policy and practice; we will make the claim that it is a worthy site of exploration for understanding the nature of assessment and teaching and learning relationships in social work education. We will argue further, that the practice learning site, can be used as a specific case study, to understand and interrogate the *"under the surface"* nature and culture of social work in particular countries or regions of countries. Our starting point in this discussion therefore, concerns the rationale for our interest in the issue of social work students struggling or failing in placements.

Interest in the topic:

Our current roles as Social Work Lecturers in two British universities require us to manage situations with students who are struggling or failing in practice learning settings. Our role in terms of placement liaison is relatively clear; we need to ensure that due process occurs, i.e. that the university policies are followed, that students' rights are upheld and to offer emotional and practical support to both students and Practice Educators. There is a further important dimension, namely, our responsibilities and duties towards service users, to ensure they are not subject to the harm potentially caused by an incompetent or even dangerous practitioner. As the study of British social work tutors[3] by Finch (2014) revealed, tutors often feel a conflict between their duties imposed by regulatory and professional body requirements, and the universities procedures which aim to protect students' rights. This is particularly acute for the majority of social work lecturers in the UK who were formally social workers and remain registered as social workers[4].

Our interest in the issue of assessing struggling students has however been raised earlier in our careers as practising social workers in England and Italy, most notably when we came across social workers whose conduct caused us concern. We also worked as practice educators, or as it is known in Italy, '*supervisori di toricinio'*, in our respective countries, and both had to manage struggling and failing students. We both therefore had direct experience of some of the challenges social workers experience when dealing with struggling or failing students, both emotionally and practically, and were keen to explore this further. In all of these professional experiences, we felt that perhaps there was a reluctance to fail students in practice learning

settings. We suspected that this was a concern internationally and indeed, the literature bears this out.

The Existing Literature:

We noted in the literature, originally sought out for one of the authors' doctoral study on why it appeared difficult for practice educators to fail students (Finch, 2010), three main themes to emerge. Firstly, concerns about a perception of low failure rates on social work programmes, particularly in practice learning settings (Coulshed, 1980; Raymond, 2000; Finch and Taylor, 2013). Secondly, a suggestion that practice educators find it difficult or might be reluctant to fail a student (for a thematic review of the reasons why this appears to be the case, see Finch and Poletti, 2013). Finally, that working with a struggling or failing student was experienced as a challenging and emotionally difficult experience.   We also noted that these issues were not just social work education ones, rather, they were shared concerns across a range of cognate professions with an assessed period of practice in the field, for example nursing, occupational therapy, teaching and counselling psychology.

In terms of the themes around the emotional challenges of working with a struggling or failing student, Bogo, Regher, Power and Regher (2007) writing from a Canadian social work standpoint, argue that practice educators experienced difficult conflicting emotions when having to fail a student. A British social work study found that practice educators found the experience of failing a student very stressful (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010) and similarly Schaub and Dalrymple, (2011, 2013) found that practice educators felt unsupported, isolated, frustrated, anxious, persecuted

and lost confidence when having to make difficult decisions about students. This was noted in comparator professions, for example, Samec's (1995) study of a group of North American psychotherapy supervisors working with failing students experienced a range of difficult emotions including, guilt and anger. Gizara and Forrests' (2004) study starkly revealed that the experience for supervisors in working with failing candidates was, "horrible…painful….very sad….a gut wrenching experience" (2004:p136). Duffy's (2004) British study of nursing mentors also found similar phenomena, namely a reluctance to fail nursing students and the accompanying emotional distress. We were interested to explore this further, in the context of British and Italian practice educators' emotional experiences of working with struggling students.

The study

The study was not traditionally comparative as such – rather the Italian fieldwork, commenced after the study had been undertaken of British practice educators' experiences. The original study thus aimed to explore why it appeared so challenging for practice educators to fail students in placement when required, and exposed the emotional unpleasantness of the task. This revealed itself in practice educators feeling angry and guilty; which may potentially impact adversely on the assessment process. We were interested to see how far the findings revealed in the original study might accord, or differ, from the experiences of practice educators in a country with both a different assessment system and model of social work.   This would allow us to interrogate the findings from the UK study further, to highlight perhaps taken for granted assumptions made in the original data analysis, to consider how far the culture and status of

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social work might impact on the experience and to consider how far assessment systems play a part in the experience.

The studies were qualitative in design and the research method utilised in-depth interviews. Twenty practice educators from Britain and six practice educators from Italy were interviewed. The British participants were all qualified practice educators, working in a variety of social work settings, statutory and voluntary, adults and children and families and between them, worked with ten universities across England. The Italian practice educators, all worked in statutory settings, adults and children and families in a North Italian region; and between them worked with two universities. At the time when the research was conducted in Italy, there were no formal qualifications required by social workers to be practice educators, although some Universities had organised courses for their 'supervisori di tirocinio'. The sample was purposive in that all participants had had experience of working with struggling or failing students.

As we have argued previously (Finch and Poletti, 2013) there are distinct methodological advantages in undertaking comparative European research in social work, as it allows researchers opportunities to develop new insights and understanding of the phenomena under exploration. Further, as Cooper, Hetherington, Baistow, Pitts and Springs (1995) have argued in the context of comparative research on child protection practices across Europe, such approaches provide a unique opportunity to critically reflect upon on our own distinct practices and cultures. Comparative approaches therefore, offer researchers the chance to explore local, regional and universal representations of social work (Kantowitz, 2005; Shardlow and Wallis, 2003) and so our study aims at making explicit, cultures and practices surrounding practice learning in two

European countries. In undertaking this comparative work, we recognise that the two countries practices in terms of the models of welfare (see Lorenz, 2006 for example), and social work practice and education, whilst similar to some extent, also present with distinct differences, and so we explore these further in the section below.

The UK Context

In the UK, social work is considered a profession, albeit, a relatively *new* profession but is one that is not well respected with the UK (Cree, 2013). As such, the profession is often attacked by politicians, media and the general public, particularly when a child dies at the hands of its carers (Butler and Drakeford, 2011) and social workers are often the scapegoats in these situations (Douglas, 1995). Indeed, it has been argued that social work in the UK is very much misunderstood by the general public and is often seen as a failing profession (Finch and Schaub, 2015).

In terms of social work education, there have been a plethora of reforms over the last decade, which all aimed at strengthening the profession and developing public trust and confidence (Orme et al, 2009). The degree in social work (formerly a diploma in social work) was one such development and was introduced in 2003. The introduction of the degree heralded some new requirements, which included the number of assessed days in placement increasing from 130 to 200, a curriculum informed by the Department of Health, stricter entry procedures and fitness to practice criteria being strengthened (DOH, 2002; Finch and Taylor, 2013).

This period of reform also saw "social worker" becoming a protected title, registration and CPD requirements, the setting up of regional care councils to regulate social work and social work education, and the setting up of The College of Social Work. The most recent round of reforms saw the replacement of a competency model of assessment in practice learning settings, to the introduction of a national Professional Capabilities Framework - thus whilst there might be variations on the particular requirements of practice learning portfolios which usually contain students contributions in the form of reflective learning summaries and the practice educators direct observation and mid-way and final assessment reports, students are assessed nationally on the same standards.

Social work students in the UK (including both undergraduates and post graduates) thus currently undertake two placements, usually 70 and 100 days, and are required to be assessed by a qualified social worker who also is required to have practice learning qualifications, namely the Stage 1 Practice Educators Professional Standards to assess first placement students and Stage 2, Practice Educators Professional Standards to assess final placement students and newly qualified social workers (College of Social Work, 2012). In terms of the assessment process itself, the accepted practice is that practice educators make an assessment about the student's capability in the form of a recommendation – the decision is then usually taken to fail the student in a meeting often referred to in the UK, as a practice assessment panel (Finch, 2014).

The Italian Context

In Italy the welfare system is different to that in the UK and is characterized, by the residual role of the welfare state (Facchini, 2010). Indeed Lorenz (1994) describes this as a rudimentary (1994:26) welfare system with minimal legal rights to state welfare. The system instead, promotes the central function of the family (Nadini, 2003). Other distinguishing features of the Italian welfare system can be identified in the territorial differences in the provision of services (Fargion, 1997; Arlotti, 2009) and in the fragmentation of institutional statutory responsibilities (Ferrario, 2001; Vandelli, 2004).

In term of social work education, in the last twenty-five years, Universities have maintained a crucial and central role in training generations of front line professionals (Facchini e Tonon Giraldo, 2010). The creation of the degree in social work in 1990, not only has given to the profession a formal and established academic recognition, but has also offered graduates the possibility to continue their studies and obtain higher academic qualifications. On the other hand, however, it was also possible to observe a decrease in the importance given to practice learning placements in the overall curriculum at the expenses of related academic disciplines (Campanini, 2009a). Additionally, social work is not considered a profession and is poorly paid compared (Campanini, 2009b; Fargio, 2008; Villa, 1991) and this is perhaps compounded by a blurring of a distinction between formal and informal care, where often unqualified, volunteer or alternatively qualified practitioners work.

Due to the changes that had taken place in Social Work Education, since 1993, everyone who obtained a social work degree was required to pass a post-qualifying exam in order to be licensed (Fargio, 2008). For the purposes of the current paper it is important to note that individual

Universities set up different placement requirements for their students in terms of duration and assessment criteria. At the time of the research, the two main universities the Practice Educators interviewed had worked with; required students to have two different practice learning experiences of 300 hours each, which based on a 7 hour day, equates to approximately 86 days in total (43 days per placement) . As it can be seen, this is significantly less than UK practice learning requirements. The chapter now goes on to document the findings from the comparative study.

The findings

Feelings and Emotions

It was significant to note the array of strong feelings that emerged in the narratives of the British practice educators. These included guilt, anger, rage and shame. Practice educators were explicit for example, about the guilt they experienced when having to make difficult decisions about students. Claire, like a number of practice educators discussed feeling guilty, she states;

> *"…it was the first fail, I felt terribly guilty…I had sleepless nights, felt quite sick….I felt incredibly guilty".*

This was also seen strongly in the narrative of Daisy, who, in a meeting with the tutor and the student was asked to make a recommendation. She states:

"and then the guilt really set in….the sacrifices she's made…this is her

livelihood, her career and it's all my fault…I felt like I am a rotten shit."

We noted that anger seemed to accompany the guilt, and this again, was notable in the English practice educators' narratives. Anger was thus expressed at the student as well as the university. Jenny for example, was able to acknowledge her angry feelings about the student, she comments:

"I was just very angry at times….I was angry with the student."

Claire also commented that *"I was really pissed off with him [the student]".* The anger was seen most starkly and uncompromisingly in the narrative of Daisy, and it was concerning to note how profane the account was, and indeed, how far the narrative detracted from a professional discourse. In recounting the story of the failing students, Daisy imagines a conversation with the student, she states;

"…and I did think, the next time you shout at me, I might actually

shout back at you, because who the fuck do you think you are?"

We noted differences in how Italian practice educators from Italy expressed themselves when discussing the emotional climate.   As such, we saw decreased levels of emotionality and a more reflective, thoughtful stance displayed. For example, for Paola, the experience of failing a student was described in a thoughtful and respectful way. She states:

> *"I felt sorry, it wasn't a pleasant situation, but at the end it was me who had to take the final decision"*

That said, as we go on to discuss later, there was anger expressed towards the university but again, Italian practice educators accounts were more measured.

Emotional processes

We also noted emotional processes occurring, this time in both Italian and British practice educators' narratives, particularly those around what we term "internalising failure". What we saw in the narratives was a process of practice educators' internalising the students failure as their own and for the UK practice educators, may potentially impact on their ability to fail the student.

Antonia, an Italian practice educator, for example, discussed her experience with a failing student. She states:

> *"For a long time, I wondered where I made the mistake with that student".*

Antonia thus sees the student's failing as her own. This was also seen in the British practice educators' narratives. Lily, a very experienced practice educator of not only social work students but also nursing students, terminated a placement after a student made an extremely homophobic comment. She states:

> *"I still feel I must have done something wrong with that one because I couldn't enable him…to see why his way of thinking was inappropriate in social work, never mind in society."*

Lily therefore, did not see her actions to terminate the placement in a positive way, i.e. as evidence of appropriate gate-keeping practice, rather, she saw it as failure on her part. Terry, an English practice educator, sums up this process in a stark and uncompromising way. He states:

> *"So I think for someone to fail….most of the time there has to be failure on both parts….I would say that 90% of the time if the students fails, there's something wrong with the practice assessor".*

This process therefore of the internalising of students' failure, as their own, may serve to impact on the practice educators' ability to make a fail recommendation in respect of the student. This phenomena is seen in both countries practice educators' accounts, yet as we will argue later, there seems particular political pressures, alongside a negative public image of social work in the UK, that make this more acute for British practice educators.

Relational Processes

We were interested in how practice educators from both countries expressed relationships, with both students and the university. As we discussed earlier, British practice educators appeared quite angry about the experience and this impacted on how students were spoken about – more

often than not, in unprofessional, blaming and disrespectful ways. For example, Lily described the student in the following way:

> *"…she was absolutely terrible, she was appalling, she was abysmal and no way should she ever be near clients….there were a million difficulties with her…she was incredibly arrogant and rude..she was also very aggressive."*

Tim also described the student in a less than professional way. He described the student as:

> *"…poisonous, he was venomous…he was a flipping nightmare".*

Daisy, as we saw earlier, appeared particularly animated by the student and continued with a non-professional discourse. Daisy made repeated comments about the student's body size (the student was significantly overweight), linking it to a lack of ability to withstand the physical and mental demands the job would pose. Daisy went further however, in quite disturbing ways, fantasising about how service users would react to the student. She states:

> *". . . they'll [service users] call you a fat bitch because you are fat . . . it will be their way of releasing, hurting you".*

Daisy continues in this way, she considers both staff and service users reacting adversely to the student; staff would be assertive and uncompromising in their criticism of the student's conduct and behaviour, and service users might be physically violent to the student, in response to her demeanour. Daisy she states: "

"I thought, you know what, you're a sneaky cow. You're just so self-obsessed, you are absorbed in your own world and you've got issues with anger management"

These narratives contrasted significantly with how the Italian practice educators spoke about students. For example, Francesca, who had extended a placement for a student who was experiencing difficulties adapting to the social work role comments:

"She was young, I felt sorry for her, but I am sure she would learn from the situation".

Antonia, despite having worked with students where significant concerns had arisen, commented on her continuing cordial relationships with them. She states:

"With a few students I am still in touch nowadays…they are now good practitioners."

It is important to note that not all British practice educators discussed students in such ways, and indeed, a minority, were able, like their Italian counterparts, to discuss the issues that had arisen in a thoughtful, reflective and professional manner.

Both Italian and British practice educators' narratives revealed at times, difficult relationships with the universities and the individual social work tutors they encountered. There was concern that universities were not open to hearing concerns about students. Katie for example states:

> *"So I went and had a meeting at the university after things had broken down to discuss it…they were only interested in what he [student] had to say".*

Practice educators from both countries spoke about their concerns that universities did not like to fail students and they felt pressure from the university to pass the student, although could not identify how this pressure was revealed. One British practice educator, Susan spoke of a *"surreptitious discouragement of failure"* and Lily felt that the university were not open to the possibility of students failing in placement because of a need to *"preserve its red brick status".* Martha commented on her feelings that the tutor was not taking her concerns about the student seriously. She states:

> *"…we had such….difference of opinion that I really questioned my own judgement because I thought…this is somebody who has, you know, 20 years of teaching…and I seem to be the only one who thinks there is a problem…he doesn't seem to think there is a problem with this student. I ,must admit, I really felt the college did not want to fail this person."*

Paola, an Italian practice educator, made similar comments, she states:

> *"I couldn't understand the reason of their decision…perhaps failing a student doesn't look good on them."*

Italian practice educators did not talk about the university or tutor in quite as hostile or angry way but nonetheless a frustrated discourse emerged. Maria, for example, states:

"When things don't go as they expect, sometimes you don't understand what they [universities] want from us".

However Italian practice educators appeared to accept the universities ultimate role in the decision making process, which made relationships less hostile than their British counterparts. Indeed, as Francesca states:

"Universities should make the final decision, they know the students better than us....we can only judge what we have seen during the placement".

This contrasts significantly with some British practice educators who were angered when the university did not uphold their recommendations. Peter for example, states:

"I mean, when I did the report...I remember feeling, what the fuck...!!

Likewise, when Tim's recommendation of a fail was overturned by the university on the grounds that the students practice did not demonstrate "dangerous or risky practice, states:

"I have to say that I didn't feel the same. I thought the evidence was absolutely crystal clear...I was really concerned".

Both British and Italian practice educators did however express concerns that universities hid information about students – information that was important in terms of providing a good learning experience. Paola for example was concerned that the university had not made available information about previous concerns that had arisen about the student, although she was reflective in her response. She states:

> *"…often they don't tell us everything, or perhaps, they cannot disclose information because of confidentiality."*

There was particular concern about information about health or disability not being disclosed. Katie, a British practice educator, whilst mindful about issues around confidentiality of HIV status – felt it was important to have known the student had a positive status because of the context of the agency in which the student was placed, an agency which supported people living with HIV and AIDS. There was also concern raised by some British practice educators that universities had not provided them with details of students; disabilities. Emma for example, complained that the university had failed to inform her about the student's needs around learning. She states:

> *"…the tutor at the midway, said, have you read the access report?. It turned out she [student] was dyslexic".*

Practice educators from both countries therefore, revealed narratives that universities appeared secretive, hid relevant and important information about students and did not want students failed.

Reasons for the Differences?

Some of the reasons for the differences in the findings may include, the very different assessment procedures and the clear (and accepted) ultimate decision making power held by the Italian university. This is not as clear or as straightforward in the UK context, which appears to sour further the relationships between practice educators and the universities, particularly when practice educators' recommendation (often felt to be decisions) are not upheld. We would also suggest the lack of an assessment framework in Italy, serves to protect Italian from the emotional pain of having to fail a student alongside the shorter placement requirements and the universities key role in decision making. Additionally, the lack of importance given to the practice learning component on Italian social work programmes may also contribute to the reduced levels of emotionality. Lastly, the culture of social work in each country also needs to be considered as a factor in promoting these differential responses. For example the low status (and accompanying semi-professional status) in Italy, does not appear to provoke the public anxiety and risk adverse practice that we see in the UK. Nonetheless, despite some significant differences between the two sites under exploration we can see some important similarities.

The Practice Learning Site

The findings, whilst important in themselves, in terms of the contribution to the relatively limited, but growing international interest in research and theorisation in practice learning, may also contribute to a methodological point. Namely, that the practice learning site could be conceptualised as a space which may reveal the tensions, dilemmas, challenges and culture of

social work in various countries. For example, the lack of importance given to the placement component in Italy results in a less anxious decision making process alongside clarity that the university makes the final decision –nonetheless tensions are revealed which may reflect the relative status of the academy versus social work practice. In UK, the placement component, which takes up half of a qualifying social work programme, appears to provoke anxiety, which is perhaps reflective of wider anxiety in social work. (Finch and Schaub, 2015). Social work is thus seen by the public as a failing profession, notably when children are killed by their carers, and this anxiety appears to emerge, or perhaps made conscious, when students are struggling or failing in placement. Unsurprisingly, this was most acute placements in children and family statutory settings. What was also apparent was perhaps a battle for control of social work in the UK, namely how the two components, academic learning and placement uneasily sit together. It is interesting to note currently, this battle explicitly continues with a new post graduate training scheme currently in operation, "Frontline", which limits learning within the university and instead, relies on an immersion model, i.e. "training" occurs within social work agencies.

Area for further research

The findings suggest three area that would benefit from further exploration. First, the research raises significant concern about the quality of gatekeeping practice in placements and it was interesting to note how a national assessment framework in the UK does not appear to make it easier to fail a student when required. Second, the research raised some concern about the relationship between the field and the academy and this would benefit from further exploration,

not least to test the hypothesis as to how far good relationship improves decision making in respect of marginal or failing students. Third, the findings suggest a need for international research in practice learning more generally, to consider what are the best ways of assessing students as well as managing more effectively challenging and painful emotional dynamics. Given the importance and centrality of practice learning on many social work programmes across the world, we remain concerned at the comparatively limited research being carried out in this area.

Conclusion

Whilst there were clear differences in the levels of emotionality experiences by the practice educators from the UK and Italy – nonetheless, some important and original themes emerged from this comparative study. Namely, concerns that universities may hide negative information about students, that working with struggling or failing students can be emotional and fraught experience for practice educators, that relationships between practice educators and universities often appeared conflictual and that the expectations of the universities were not clearly understood by practice educators. The importance of effective gatekeeping practice was revealed in the comparative analysis and some legitimate concerns were raised in both countries, that for different reasons, practice educators may find it difficult, or not fail students when required. Finally the findings indicate a need for practice educators who are cognisant of the emotional climate and can work confidently with challenging and uncomfortable feeling that may

emerge in teaching relationships, particularly when a student is struggling or failing. (4971 words)

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[1] The term practice educator is used in this chapter to describe the person who undertakes the assessment of a social work student in placement. We recognise that other terms are used internationally, namely, field instructor, practice teacher, practice supervisor or field supervisor. It is worth noting that other terms were previously current in the UK at the time the research was undertaken, these include practice teacher and practice assessor.

[2] The term practice learning setting and placement are used interchangeably in this chapter. We recognise that other terms are used internationally, these include practicum and field placement.

[3] It is important to note the variety of terms used, tutors is used to denote the person responsible for liaison and visiting the practice placement. These may be hourly paid roles or part of the duties of a social work lecturer.

[4] It should be noted that not all social work lecturers in the UK are qualified social workers, although this does a pose an interesting dilemma about the extent of protection of title.

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