

“...it’s just very hard to fail a student...” Decision making and defences against anxiety – an ethnographic and practice-near study of practice assessment panels.

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Abstract (150 words)

The practice learning site is an important place of determining suitability for social work practice and as such is a key site of gate keeping. Research, both international and multi-disciplinary have consistently highlighted the challenging emotional processes involved in failing a student in a practice learning setting. This research has largely focused on practice educators. What has been not been explored however, are wider decision making processes about students who have failed the placement, namely what is known in the UK as the Practice Assessment Panel (PAP). The paper thus documents findings from an ethnographic study of four PAPs in England, utilising a practice-near analytical approach. Findings centre around three key themes, the deferring of difficult decisions, powerful voices and the unacknowledged emotional climate. The paper concludes that the PAP can be theorised as a powerful projective field and suggests possible ways forward in light of the themes to emerge.

Keywords:

Failing students, decision making, practice assessment panels, defences against anxiety, practice-near, ethnography, social work

Introduction

Nationally and internationally, it is a long established practice that social work students undertake part of their training in practice learning settings. This provides students with an opportunity to put into practice what they have learnt in the safety of the academic environment and more fundamentally, is a key site of gatekeeping in determining suitability for the profession (Finch and Poletti, 2013). There is a growing international and inter-professional research base that focuses on the issues raised by the assessment of trainees undertaking field or clinical placements¹ (Finch and Taylor, 2013). An adjunct to this, is the interest that has developed in the particular issues and concerns raised by students struggling in, or failing their placement. The research however, appears to focus exclusively on practice educators² and supervisors experiences of working with struggling or failing students; and, considers why assessors in practice settings are reluctant to, find it difficult, or find it challenging to fail students. From these explorations, a “failing to fail” narrative has emerged across a number of professions with practice learning requirements. This is seen for example, in nursing (Duffy, 2004; Jervis and Tilki, 2011; Lawson, 2010; Rutkowski, 2007), occupational therapy (Ilott and Murphy, 1997) as well as social work (Shapton, 2006; Schaub and Dalrymple; 2011, Finch et al, 2014). It is also important to note, a limited, but hopefully growing interest in the tutor placement liaison role when issues of student failure arises in a number of professions. (see for example a literature review of nursing and social work research on tutors in Finch, 2014)

The difficult emotional climate that appears to be provoked when working with a struggling or failing students has also been identified by researchers as significant (Duffy, 2004; Bogo et al, 2007; Basnett and Sheffield, 2011; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Finch and Taylor, 2013; Finch et al, 2014). In recognition however, of what one might argue is an over focus on individual practice educators, at the expense of consideration of additional decision making processes and forums, it thus seems pertinent to broaden the research to focus on wider university decision making

processes that impact directly on how practice educators recommendations are subsequently ratified, or not, as the case may be. In this case, the practice assessment panel (PAP), a feature of the UK social work education system, seemed an obvious, important, and to date, unexamined area of critical inquiry.

The paper begins with a brief account of the requirements of social work training in the UK, including a brief history of the PAP as well as its role and remit, recognising distinct differences in practice in universities. The paper then details past and contemporary concerns about placements before focusing on literature that documents the emotional difficulties that are faced by practitioners from a range of professions when having to make difficult to decisions about students in practice learning settings.

The paper's central aim however is to further analyse the ethnographic findings, originally reported in an empirical study of PAPs (Finch, 2013). The paper aims to focus on the issue of emotion in decision making. I intend to achieve this by trying to make sense of my strong feelings that emerged during the field work and to consider how far the intense feelings experienced, may arise, from firstly; my own experiences in the same field and secondly; to consider whether these feelings are the possible consequences of being an observer in a projective field, i.e. I was in receipt of feelings projected by the participants in the PAP which may mirror and tell us something about the practice educator and tutor who are also in receipt of such projections from the students. This is therefore a complex 'field' to make sense of but can perhaps shed further light on the challenges of working with struggling or failing students in practice learning settings. The paper concludes by offering some possible ways forward in view of the emergent themes. The paper begins with a brief consideration of the current requirements around practice learning in England.

UK Social Work Placement Requirements

In terms of placement requirements on both undergraduate and post graduate qualifying social work programmes, English social work students, are required to undertake two assessed practice

placements, totalling 170 days, with 30 additional days used for skills training. Students must work with a range of service users and have the opportunity to undertake statutory tasks and interventions. Currently, social work students in England are assessed against the Professional Capability Framework (PCF), devised by The College of Social Work, now closed by the Government in August 2015, and the precise arrangements for assessment remain unclear.. Currently however, students must ensure they are “ready to practice” before they can commence their placement, and practice educators must effectively gate keep failing students who do not meet requirements

Practice Assessment Panels

Practice Assessment Panels emerged when the two year Diploma in Social Work was introduced in 1991, to replace the former one year qualifications, The Certificate of Social Services and the Certificate of Qualified Social Work. The Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Work (CCETSW), the regulatory body for social work at that time ensured that PAPS were a requirement on qualifying social work programmes. Higham (2008) argues that the PAP was originally conceived as a panel made up of “practice teachers” (now known as practice educators) whose task was one of quality assurance. The relationship of the PAP to the university assessment or examination boards, however, was, (and remains) rather unclear but there was a hope that practice educators’ recommendations should be given greater status and authority. Alongside the changes required for the Diploma in Social Work, students were assessed against a competency model for the first time. Practice Teachers, formerly known as supervisors, were also required to undertake a qualification for the first time – the Practice Teaching Award. Practice Assessment Panels, as they are largely known, thus continued when the degree in social work was introduced, although as Finch (2013) revealed, there are variations in the way the panels are constituted and operate. Panels however, are typically made up of a wide range of stakeholders, including academic staff, practice educators, service users and carers, university practice learning coordinators, workforce development and practice learning managers (Finch, 2013).

Practice Assessment Panels generally have a semi-quasi assessment role alongside a quality assurance role. These functions are contested however and their relationship to the university assessment and exam boards are sometimes unclear and problematic. Many PAPS however, do have a role in upholding, or not, practice educators recommendations and this is important, as PAPS then often have a secondary decision making role in recommending whether a student is offered a repeat replacement, or fails the programme at that point³. Given this important gate-keeping role, it seems clear that the PAP provides a useful, highly relevant and important site of academic exploration in respects of decision making around struggling or failing social work students.

Concerns about Social work Education

Social work and social work education in the UK, particularly in England, has been subject to a plethora of reform over the last decade. Significant policy developments included the introduction of the degree in social work in 2003, changes in the number of placement days, the introduction of more stringent entry requirements, strengthening suitability processes on programmes, as well as registration requirements with a regulatory regional care council. Central to these developments, was that the importance of practice learning was emphasised, and subsequently practice was assessed against newly implemented National Occupational Standards for Social Work (TOPSS, 2002).

A second wave of developments that impacted on social work more generally, concerned the recommendations of a government commissioned social work taskforce in 2009, (SWTF) set up after a much publicised death of a child at the hands of his parents; Baby Peter, which was viewed as yet further evidence of the professions repeated failures to intervene effectively in cases of child abuse, particularly as this followed the death of another child, Victoria Climbié in the same London Borough.

Further developments thus followed. The Social Work Reform Board was set up to implement the recommendations of the SWTF, and as part of this, a College of Social Work was set up. The

college's role was to endorse social work programmes and set standards, some of which centred on practice learning, in particular, the more stringent readiness to practice requirement and strengthening practice educators qualifications. Yet despite these developments within social work education, as well as the focus on practice learning, there nonetheless remain persistent concerns. Finch and Taylor (2013) for example, documented three main areas of concern which historically and currently, centre on practice learning. These involve:

- 1) The quantity and quality of placements
- 2) The perception of low failure rates on placement (and on social work programmes more generally)
- 3) Practice educators' reluctance, inability, or difficulties in failing students on placement.

Indeed the SWTF (2009) raised concerns about the robustness of social work training in England and stated:

“Specific concerns have been raised about the...robustness and quality of assessment, with some students passing the social work degree who are not competent or suitable to practise on the frontline. (SWTF 2009, p. 24)

More recent concerns around practice learning have been highlighted by a Department of Education commissioned report by Narey (2014) and a Department of Health commissioned report by Croisdale-Appleby (2014). Narey (2014) in a widely criticised report, not least based on a poor methodological approach (Schraer, date unknown), raises concerns about the lack of statutory placements available to social work students, suggesting that voluntary placements are not offering a robust experience, or indeed, offering the appropriate learning to enable newly qualified social workers to work effectively in the statutory sector. Narey also suggests a move towards specialist training rather than the current generic model. Croisdale-Appleby's report offers a more nuanced analysis, suggesting that numbers of students need to more closely align to local workforce demands as well as also raising concerns about the quality of placements.

Further concerns have centred on the role social work tutors may unwittingly play in “allowing” unsuitable social work students to pass the placement component and less than transparent ways of managing placement issues (Finch, 2014). As it can be seen therefore, practice learning appears to raise considerable anxiety and it is within this distinct political and emotional context, that decision making takes place.

Emotional Impact

A thematic review on why practice educators appeared to find failing a student in placement problematic has been explored at length in previously written articles (see for example, Finch and Taylor, 2013; Finch and Poletti, 2013). I do not propose to rehearse those arguments here, but rather to signpost these for the reader. My focus in this discussion however, remains firmly on the challenging emotional climate that can emerge so powerfully when issues of struggling or failing students arise in the context of practice learning settings and the subsequent impact and process of decision making. As stated earlier, much of this research has centred on practice educators, yet it still worthwhile considering this literature in order to frame the later debates.

In terms of the emotional impact, Samac (1995), in the context of counselling psychology, described the process of working with a failing student as “gut wrenching” and found that both supervisors and supervisees experienced intense feelings of anger and shame. Bogo et al’s 2007 study of Canadian social work field supervisors, found the process of failing students was emotionally painful. In particular, the decision to fail prompted a value conflict for supervisors. A British social work study by Basnett and Sheffied (2010) noted the stress that was caused when practice educators were required to fail students. A further British study, Schaub and Dalrymple (2013) found that practice educators felt isolated when confronted with failing students, reported feelings of anxiety and dread – as well as feelings of being under critical surveillance by other key stakeholders, namely the university, students and colleagues.

My own research in this area (Finch 2010), documented the uncomfortable and difficult emotions that were experienced by practice educators when working with a struggling or failing student.

These emergent feelings included, anger, rage, guilt and anxiety, which, I argued, could potentially impact adversely on the assessment process.

As the literature on practice education, albeit limited, highlights; the experience of working with and assessing a student who is failing in a practice learning setting, can be experienced by practice educators as emotionally painful and the dynamics that can subsequently result are experienced as complex and confusing. This might be suggestive of key stakeholders engaging in conscious and unconscious defensive behaviours that could impact on the assessment process. For example Finch et al (2014), using data from two previously undertaken studies (Finch, 2010 and Schaub & Dalrymple, 2011), argued firstly, that the concept of projective identification, a defensive response, might be a useful concept to understand the intensity of these emotional exchanges and secondly, that there appeared to be a missed opportunity to use these feelings more effectively, to view them as a form of communication rather than hostile psychic attack.

Particular manifestations, and the naming of certain types of defences behaviours were first developed by Freud and expanded upon by Klein, and indeed the concept of defences against anxiety is central to psychoanalytic thinking. Such defences include, denial, splitting, projective identification, introjection, repression, idealisation, acting out and regression to name but a few. Trevithick (2012), notes the myriads of ways in which we all engage consciously and unconsciously in defensive practices, all of which aim at protecting us from psychological harm or threat, either real or perceived. Winnicott (1958) proposed that the origins of defensive behaviours, arise from our early attachments formed in infancy, and of clear relevance to this discussion, from our early experiences of “failures and let-downs” (1958:61). Indeed, Howe et al (1999) identifies that defence mechanisms originate from our attempts in infancy to “cope with anxiety, abandonment, loss, conflict and emotional pain” (1999:93).

The importance of practitioners recognising, understanding and responding appropriately to defensive mechanisms that arise within themselves, as well as other professionals, service users and carers, is clearly very important, not least because Trevithick (2012) addresses the significant danger that such defensive mechanisms, may “distort our perceptions of reality” (2012:391) and further, that social workers have a duty to try and understand “the complexities of human

experience” (2012:403) and indeed, as can be seen in the practice education, research, if such complexities are not reflected upon, may impact on timely and effective decision making.

The Research

The aim of the original research on which this further analysis is based, was to explore practices in PAPS in England and focused on the following:

- exploring current PAPS practice in universities in England;
- exploring the function, role and remit of PAPS;
- exploring the issues that emerge when failing students are under discussion;
- exploring decision-making processes in PAPS.

The original research undertaken, utilised a dual strand methodological approach, an on-line survey and an ethnographic study. The method used to gather data was non-participant observation (Bailey 2007). Field notes were taken in all the observations and where permission was given, the panel meetings were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. PAPS meetings in four universities in England were observed. The length of the PAPS meetings differed significantly in each university but typically, portfolios would be reviewed in the morning by panel members, followed by a formal panel meeting in the afternoon, usually lasting between two to three hours. In two of the panels observed, access was negotiated to observe the entire event. In the remaining two sites, the formal panel meeting was observed. The PAPS between them discussed both undergraduate and post graduate social work students, covering the first and second placements. It is important to note differences in practices, with some PAPS discussing particular cohorts of students and others discussing all cohorts of students. Access was negotiated through personal contacts and networks.

In total, nine students who had failed the placement were discussed across the four PAP meetings, but that is not to say that all the students failed the programme at that point. This discussion however, further analyses the findings from the ethnographic part of the research.

Practice-Near Research Methodology

The approach taken here, is to utilise a practice-near methodology, rather than the rather practice-distant approach adopted in the initial analysis and presentation of the findings in the original report. Practice-near research, (Froggett and Briggs, 2012; Briggs and Hingley-Jones, 2013) and psychoanalytically informed approaches to research (Cooper, 2009; Hollway, 2009) (design, data collection and analysis), promote a closeness and immersion in practice; utilising methods that promote a highly reflexive epistemological stance. Methods such as non participant observation or in-depth, free associative or biographical interviews are commonly used (Hollway, 2009). These approaches advocate an exploratory, questioning and reflexive researcher positioning that aims to get beneath the surface of everyday phenomena. As part of this emerging research practice, being conscious of, and using one's own emotional response to the data collection process and analysis, as data in its own right, is an important aspect (Cooper, 2009). Thus this analysis utilises my emotional responses in the entirety of the research processes, as a way of further interrogating what was going on underneath the surface. The account is therefore, inevitably a personal and highly subjective approach to the issue.

Ethics

The original research was approved by a University Research Ethics Committee and the usual principles of ethical research practice adhered to, for example, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, gaining informed consent, and the avoidance of harm. Particular consideration was given to ensuring individual panels members gave informed consent to take part and given the very small sample size, measures taken to ensure that individual panel members, or institutions could

not be identified in anyway. It is acknowledged however, that researching one's peers in a relatively small academic community, poses distinct ethical considerations and challenges.

Findings

The deferring of difficult decisions

It was interesting to note that in the nine examples of students failing across the PAPS, eight of those decisions were deferred, either to another meeting (3) a further placement (2), no clear outcome (2) and a repeat placement deferred for a year (1). On the surface, the reasons for deferring the decision appeared reasonable. For example, where decisions was deferred until the next meeting, the reasons centred around; poor practice educator's reports, lack of a tutor report, or a tutor not being available at the meeting. It felt to me as an observer, that these reasons were quick to be proffered, and there appeared to be a sense of relief that the decision making would be put off to another time, usually a smaller, "ad-hoc" PAP, dealing with late finishers or "difficult" cases such as these.

I wondered therefore why these fail cases did not always appear to have enough evidence in the practice educator reports, or tutors reports (or indeed tutors present) to convince the panel to make a definitive decision. There seemed a sense of fear of making decisions too quickly, that might later come back via appeals. I noticed the stories about the placement were also often confused and it was difficult to follow the twists and turns of the events from the various stakeholder perspectives, i.e student, tutor and on and off site educators. This culminated in three examples where the on site supervisor and the off-site practice educator disagreed about the final recommendation – causing the panel even more consternation. The students were thus presented in two very different ways and the tutor was not always decisive or definitive in these cases. There was a sense then, that the placement had been "slippery" and that the tutor, was struggling to catch up and contain the dynamics and divergent views of the student's progress. I wondered whether these examples were perhaps mirroring something significant from practice.

There was therefore, only one example of a definite decision of a fail. The student concerned had been on a repeat placement and issues and concerns that had arisen in the previously undertaken failed placement, were still apparent. Whilst this appeared to be a simple decision (regulations clearly stated a further placement was not available and the only option was to fail the student, meaning a social work qualification could not be obtained) some panel members expressed concern about the “waste” and appeared visibly relieved when they were informed that an exit award, in this case a social care degree, would be available. I felt irritated by what I considered to be an unnecessary discussion, and felt troubled by the panel’s emotional distress, and apparent guilt about this issue. Perhaps, my irritation was two fold, irritation at having been in this situation many times before and perhaps being more hardened to the emotional distress and irritation as a defensive mechanism against the pain experienced by panel members? One could hypothesise that the student’s pain had been projected, via the tutor and the practice educator into the group, and perhaps some members were expressing something of the student’s feelings, i.e a sense of the “waste” of three years study and the “relief”. Indeed it was in this situation, that a panel member commented, “its just hard to fail a student, isn’t it”? I noted no response to this statement.

What was also interesting to reflect on, was perhaps a missed opportunity for the chair to be explicit about the impact of this decision on panel members, acknowledge the difficult emotions suggest that feelings of guilt may arise from such decisions and to remind the panel of their role in effective gatekeeping. It seemed therefore, that the focus in the panels was on the student and, whilst service users were present at all the panels, their wider needs, i.e to be safe, did not appear to take primacy in decision making. There was something therefore about the invisibility, or the lack of explicit acknowledgement of service users needing to be protected from unsafe practitioners, that appeared to unconsciously affect decision making.

Powerful voices

I was acutely aware of what I felt were powerful and dominant voices in the PAP meetings. The powerful voices often, though not always, appeared to be male, older social work tutors,

lecturers or programme leaders. The passionate interjection of one older, female tutor, however, made a significant (and concerning) difference to the direction of discussion in one PAP, and turned what seemed to me to be a clear and unproblematic fail supported by practice learning personnel, to a “defer for a year and redo the placement”.

This was an interesting yet profoundly disturbing phenomenon to observe. The student clearly had personal issues impacting on her progress throughout the course, and progress had been considerably slow with a pattern of deferring and repeating some modules. I felt strongly that the tutor, internalised the students clear failings as her own, suggesting that as a tutor, she had not managed the situation at all well. It felt to me that she “fell on her sword” and the guilt that accompanied this, made it then appear impossible for the panel to challenge the tutors view that this was not a “fail”. This was very powerful in swaying the opinion of the panel, from a clear fail position to perhaps one of indecision and perhaps a reaction or defence to the guilt expressed by the tutor. My response to this was anger, and a feeling that the tutor was manipulative and collusive, and was not able to let this student go. I felt strongly the student wanted the university to let her go but could not make that decision herself. Given the student’s significant struggles throughout the course, I wondered how she would ever manage in qualified practice and it felt cruel not to let her go. My field notes at that instance were stark, although I was also conscious of censuring myself in the language used. I felt intense anger though, perhaps at my own impotence, i.e I was an observer, not a PAP member and so could not intervene. I also felt intense incredulity at the PAP members, powerlessness and inability to act against the powerful, guilt ridden tutor. It could be argued that at this point, strong projective identificatory processes were in operation, emanating from the student, to tutor to the PAP members, who were then mobilised with guilt and ceased to be able to think, act and challenge. Perhaps this also mirrored the passive student, unable to say “no more” and to me, clearly communicating through her evasive and non engaging behaviour with university staff, a wish not to continue with the programme. I was conscious of the words “just let her go” reverberating in my head. Perhaps this was my unconscious desire not to be burdened either with the guilt, perhaps I wanted to be let go from the guilt and pain being observed in the meeting.

The tutors needs' it seemed, i.e in not being able to let go of a substantive investment she had made in the student, (she had been her tutor for some time and had supported her in her personal issues and slow progression through the programme) and the tutor's desire (and need?) for the student to pass the programme, silenced the panel. It also squashed thought of service users needs. It was interesting to note a workforce development manager making a comment that it would not be fair to employ the student as a newly qualified social worker, but this was a lone voice, and was experienced as a weak interjection.

This example, and the decision subsequently made, more than any other observed, felt very uncomfortable. A question was raised about the decision taken, i.e to defer the student for a year and then let her re-take the placement was within assessment regulations. This other "lone" voice was not listened to however. I felt ethically compromised at this point in that I had (and still have) a clear sense that this decision was not appropriate, was ethically dubious, that assessment regulations had possibly been breached and that the gatekeeping responsibilities of the panel members had become very obscured by the very challenging emotional climate. Indeed, my thought processes as this unfolded were extremely powerful. I felt angry and felt that the tutor was manipulative in her approach. What I realise now is that perhaps the tutor has been emotionally manipulated by a student and was perhaps letting the group know about this manipulation in an unconscious and indirect manner.

The Unconscious Emotional Climate

As discussed earlier, powerful defensive processes appeared to be in play at key moments of key decision making. Decision making often became paralysed, with decisions put off, or perhaps even unconsciously avoided? These processes also impacted significantly on me in unanticipated way, and it could be argued that I was perhaps experiencing and mirroring some of these unconscious defensive practice when anxiety arose. In the writing up of the original research report for example, I realised I had been very avoidant (and reluctant) to consider the emotional climate. Indeed, it was the very last theme to be identified and only towards the end of the writing process. This suggested to me that I was perhaps re-experiencing (or mirroring) the

reluctance of the panel members to acknowledge the emotional climate. The possible resonance with the defences against anxiety thesis thus became apparent. Yet having made this realisation, for many months, I could not progress with this article and felt very stuck about how these theories could be employed in a way that wasn't just circular reasoning, i.e finding evidence to fit the theory.

It was also interesting to reflect that my field notes were very censored and what was in my head at the time of the observations, were considerably sanitised when writing my thoughts and reflections down. I felt some conflict between my professional self and using appropriate professional discourse and my personal self and very unprofessional, colloquial discourse. It is also interesting to reflect on my difficulties writing this paper and how "stuck" I felt, in trying to be clear about the focus of the paper and making decisions about appropriate theories to utilise. Indeed, this paper, has taken almost a year to write and often I felt completely immobilised and was unable to progress the work. It could be hypothesised, that this "stuckness" or immobilisation, was very much mirroring the nature of the PAPS themselves, i.e difficulties around making decisions when issues of failing students emerged. This in turn could be a reflection of the "stuckness" of students in being able to make the necessary development, of being immobilised, not being able to think or understand what was required and frustration at not being able to make the necessary development. Again, at times in the observations I felt a palpable sense of frustration when discussions about decisions seemed to me to be unnecessarily long and pained.

Discussion

As it can be seen, the above exploration highlights some potential concerns in the decision making process, but it must be remembered that the nine students under discussion across the four PAPS were a tiny minority. I was also struck by the careful scrutiny and the time spent by panel members in reading the students portfolios. Typically, meetings were all day long and significant proportions of students' portfolios were examined and critically commented upon by panel members. I therefore have wondered if social work is the only profession that has this

system? This leads me to consider whether this is reflective of a profession lacking confidence in itself, perhaps absorbing the negative public image and public and political anxiety it has of itself. Social Work therefore is a unique profession, in that it is characterised by uncertainty and anxiety and has to contain the anxieties and preoccupations of often emotionally fragile service users alongside managing public perceptions and anxieties around what is often perceived as a “failing” profession (Finch and Schaub, 2014). Unlike nursing, with its “angel of mercy” narrative, there exists no such positive view of social work. Rather, we either snatch children from families without just cause, or else, fail to respond adequately to cases of child abuse. Cooper and Lousada (2005) for example, argue that when issues of child deaths at the hands of their carers come to light, the subsequent public outrage that is usually directed towards social workers, is often motivated by an unconscious anger that social workers have failed to protect the public from the knowledge and realisation that such horrific abuse exists in society.

It could be argued therefore that the PAP is a projective field, managing challenging projections from not only tutors, practice educators and students but also unconscious projections from the public, politicians and from service users. Thus the PAP may be a field that is both subject to internal and external projective fears about failing in its broadest sense and is perhaps a unique space in this aspect. It should therefore not be a surprise that making decisions about failing students is subsequently experienced as painful, and as such, defensive responses are employed to guard against the projections.

It is important however to stress that this small – scale piece of research, is not suggesting that there is a failure to fail within PAPS, indeed, as aforementioned, I noted very careful scrutiny of the portfolios and reports. Panel members were able to distinguish the varying quality of portfolios and provided intense assessment of students’ work, as well as critically assess the quality of placements and practice educators.

Concluding Comments

There are some significant limitations to the study (both original) and in this further analysis. It is recognised that the number of sites was very small and therefore the findings are somewhat tentative and certainly not generalisable. Additionally, the approach adopted for this further analysis, is highly subjective. Despite the inherent limitations of the study, it is clear from the findings, that they have resonance with previous studies that have focused on practice educators, namely that being in contact with struggling or failing students, can provoke uncomfortable and difficult feelings and at times, these feelings may impact on decisive and timely decision making. As the discussion noted earlier, decisions about the failing students were often deferred. Another key point arising from this study, is a more theoretical consideration of the PAP as a projective field, one where both internal and external worlds collide, provoking unconscious defensive responses to the anxious projections. Further, the findings open up the possibility for a larger, more representative study, utilising similar, practice-near methods.

Additionally, the findings may suggest some practical ways forward. Firstly there is a need identified to prepare PAP members adequately for the task, particularly new PAP members. Indeed, at one PAP observed, trainee practice educators were mentored and supported by more experienced PAP members. Secondly, from the observations, it felt there was a number of missed opportunities for the PAP chair to be more cognisant of the emotional climate and respond explicitly to the feelings that powerfully emerged. This would perhaps include being explicit and naming the feelings that may emerge, such as guilt, sadness and genuine concern for students, and the investment tutors and practice educators will have certainly made in students.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Higher Education Academy for funding the original research project, on which this article is based. I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable support provided by Vida Douglas, Discipline Lead for Social Work and Social Policy at the HEA. Thanks also to Hannah Linford, research assistant, and special thanks goes to Alberto Poletti, Senior Lecturer in Social Work at Bedfordshire University, who aided the project considerably, with his last minute and invaluable help with the field work.

¹ In acknowledgement of a global readership, it is imperative to make explicit the UK specific terminology used in this paper. The term “placement” or “practice learning setting” is used interchangeably in this discussion to describe what is referred to in other countries as the practicum or the field placement.

² The term practice educator is used in this paper to describe the person tasked with undertaking the assessment of the student in the field and is a UK term. It is recognised that internationally, other terms are used, for example field instructor is used in North American contexts.

³ It is important to note, that there are differences in assessment regulations across the UK with regard to the placement component. Some programmes therefore, can override the normal academic assessment regulations regarding the right to resubmit or re-take a module. This is not the case in all universities where students have a right to repeat a failed placement unless suitability issues are raised

⁴ An on-site supervisor refers to the person who supervises the student as well as working in the agency. This might be a qualified social worker who feels they don't have the time to be a practice educator but usually is an alternatively qualified practitioner.

⁵ An off-site practice educator is a qualified social worker (as well as practice educator) and will visit the student every other week to undertake the assessment/supervisor task. The supervision is shared with the on-site supervisor.

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