Assessment in Field Education: Capability, Competence and Contradictions

Introduction

The assessment of struggling or failing students in practice learning settings has consistently received attention in international social work and related disciplines. An associated concern has been raised, that field educators, across professions, may be reluctant to fail students when required. Students at risk of failing their field placements, starkly highlight the inherent contradictions and emotional challenges that such assessment processes typically raise. By focusing on the issues failing students raise for field educators, as well as agencies, colleagues and more importantly users of human service organisations, light can be shed on the contested nature of field assessment.

The chapter explores three areas: (1) the field education assessment process; including models used and the limitations of such approaches; (2) the challenges of working with a student who is at risk of failing the placement; and (3) the reasons why it might be challenging for field educators to make a fail recommendation. Finally, the chapter discusses a five-step cyclical model for field educators and students to use when the student is at risk of failing the placement.

Terminology

An immediate question to consider, is deciding what term to use in describing a student who is at risk of failing their placement. The term ‘struggling’ has been used by Finch (2017) to acknowledge that while all students struggle with some aspects of the placement, sometimes those struggles do not get resolved, and can be indicative of a student at risk of failing. The term “failing student” is also used, a descriptor that potentially pathologises students. An associated risk of using this label is that the student’s future conduct may be viewed as evidence of failing, and may adversely affect student self-perception. Indeed, the word “fail” is an extremely emotive and contentious word, one that field educators might be reluctant to deploy. A range of other terms have been used to describe students at risk of placement failure, for example, ‘marginal’

(Brandon and Davies, 1979; Heycox, et al., 1994); “sub-standard” (Lamb et al, 1997; Gizara and Forest, 2004; Elman and Forrest, 2007); and “problematic” (Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Kaslow et al, 2007), all of which feel somewhat value laden and at odds with social work values.

The phrase ‘at risk of failing’ is used in this chapter as an attempt to distinguish between the usual struggles and challenges of field learning (discussed in other chapters), and situations where a student is not making progress in the expected way, to the extent that they are at risk of failing the placement. The next section of the chapter provides a brief overview of social work field education before going onto consider assessment.

The Field Education Process

The field placement provides a key site of professional gatekeeping, in ensuring those not suitable or not yet competent for social work practice, do not go onto become qualified practitioners and potentially cause harm to users or patients of human service organisations. The North American accreditation body for social work, the Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) in 2008, described field education as the signatory pedagogy of social work (CSWE, 2008). The CSWE educational policies and standards document noted that a “*signature pedagogy* represents the central form of instruction and learning in which a profession socializes its students to perform the role of practitioner” (2008, p. 8). The CSWE did however stress that the two interrelated components of social work education, the classroom and the field, were of equal importance. Whilst some US academics have questioned the extent to which there is evidence within field education of “signature pedagogy” (Holden et al, 2011), the importance of field education cannot be understated. Similarly, more recently in Australia, field education has also attracted the label of ‘distinct pedagogy’ (Egan et al., 2018; Zuchowski et al, 2019)

The importance of field learning however is clear and is seen in the significant amount of time spent in field settings. For example, when the social work degree was introduced in England in 2003, the required number of placement days increased from 130 to 200 (over two placements) which accounted for fifty percent of the course time for undergraduates and indeed, three quarters for postgraduate students (Finch, 2010). In Australia, two placements must be undertaken, totaling a minimum of 1000 hours (AASW, 2012), and in New Zealand, the requirement is 120 days, with a specified 50 days for the first placement (Ballantyne, 2016).

Assessment Models

Assessment of students on placement varies significantly across the world, with some countries like England, having national assessment systems, and others, such as Italy, are region specific (Finch and Poletti, 2013, 2016). Australia has a national approach to what needs to be assessed, specified in a range of performance/learning outcomes informed by the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) Practice Standards and Code of Ethics. Assessing how the various learning requirements are met is not straightforward, given that social work itself and the notion of what is 'good enough' social work practice are both contested. A dominant approach to the assessment of social work students in practice are competency models (Finch, 2017). Such approaches usually take the form of a range of competencies, or in the Australian context, performance outcomes.

A dictionary definition of competency is the "ability to do something successfully or efficiently" (Oxford Living Dictionaries, date unknown, page number). A competency approach to assessment is one where a range of discrete outcomes or tasks are identified, and a social work student is required to successfully perform and demonstrate these outcomes or tasks. An aspect of the field educator role is to assess whether the student has performed the learning tasks to the required standard. In competency models, there are usually key areas of competence, which are often broken down into smaller sub competencies. In writing about professional workplace learning Eraut (1994) argues that the assessment of competence should include:

1) A collection of evidence about performance and capability
2) An indication of the standards of competence about which judgments have to be made
3) Cross-referencing to indicate which piece of evidence should be used for each distinct judgment of competence

(1994:206)

There has been criticism of a competency approach, not least that such assessment systems can produce a “tick-box” approach to the task of assessment of professionals in practice (Franklin and Melville, 2015). O’Hagan (1996) argues that such approaches to assessment, runs the risk of the dilution of social work values, cannot be objective, and that performance indicators are a too simplistic account of what goes on between a worker and a service user. In other words, tick box approaches do not assess capacity over time, nor do they adequately capture the reality of the complexity of social work practice, such as professional judgment, ethical deliberations or critical self-reflection.

O’Hagan (1996) makes a further point that competence approaches lack rigor in addressing issues of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. Parrott (1999) argues that the move towards competency assessment models in the UK context, saw the emphasis on the “development of basic roles and tasks of social workers “…[that]..narrowed the definition of what should be included in the social work training curriculum.” (1999:7) Parrott (1999) argued that this narrowing was deliberate, to produce social workers that “did not critically engage with social inequality and injustice” (1999:7).

In England in 2013, the Professional Capability Framework (PCF) replaced the former competency model, based on the National Occupational Standards for Social Work, which was made up of six key roles, broken down into 21 units (Maclean with Lloyd, 2013). The aim was to ensure that placement assessment was holistic, and professional, rather than occupational. It also aimed to address some of the criticisms

inherent in the competency approach to the task of assessing students in practice, not least the focus on assessment at the expense of learning, and the lack of focus on overall progress and development (Maclean with Lloyd, 2013). The PCF (refreshed in 2018) consists of nine domains: 1) Professionalism, 2) Professional Leadership, 3) Contexts and Organisations, 4) Skills and Intervention, 5) Critical 6) Reflection and Analysis, 7) Knowledge, Rights, Justice and Economic Well Being, 8) Diversity and Equality, 9) Values and Ethics (BASW, 2018).

Where competency models are used, the need remains for field educators to be attuned to the potential criticisms and limitations of these models. Educators should remain focused on holistic learning and assessment and avoid tick box formats where possible. The discussion now moves on to consider the concern that there may be a failure to fail students in field placements.

Failure to Fail?

The “failure to fail” narrative is strong within the nursing literature. Duffy (2004) for example, explored nurse mentors experiences of working with failing students. Her conclusions were stark and suggested that nurse mentors were failing to fail nurse students when required. Her study was helpful in suggesting possible reasons for this alleged failure to fail which are explored later in this chapter. The “failure to fail” narrative was taken up by other nurse academics, for example, Jervis and Tilki (2011); Larocque & Loyce (2013) and Hunt (2014).

The failure to fail narrative similarly features in social work literature, for example Shapton (2006) explored the differences between academic modules and the placement module, suggesting it was harder to fail the placement modules. Finch and Taylor (2013) in a rather provocatively entitled article, “Failure to Fail?” argued that the evidence that practice educators are failing to fail students is not empirically proven, yet this narrative remains strong in a number of countries. In New Zealand in 2018 for example, the government claimed newly qualified social workers were not adequately

prepared for the demands of frontline practice (Beddoe et al, 2018). Linked to this is a concern that there is a low failure rate within social work field education internationally (Finch, 2017). This, it is claimed, is evidence of poor standards of assessment by both universities and field educators, and results in students passing social work programs who are not competent or ready for the realities of front-line practice (Sharp and Danbury, 1999). In the UK, the failure rate has been around 2-3% and this has not changed despite the changes in the social work qualifications over the years (Finch and Taylor, 2013). A key consideration is to critically question what can be inferred from the failure rate in social work programs. Also of importance is to consider how assessment practices can be improved to resolve the challenges of assessing students in field settings, which is the focus of this chapter.

Challenges in Assessing Students

Field education and assessment is complicated. These complexities come to the forefront when students fail to meet the requirements. This is not a new thesis, as an old but relevant UK study Brandon and Davies (1979) raised this precise point. A student at risk of failing, highlights the complex and multidimensional nature of assessing competency and what is “good enough” (Furness and Gilligan, 2004:465) in practice learning settings, and highlights the emotional challenges that inevitably emerge in all teaching and learning relationships.

One approach used to help field educators be alert to possible signs that the student is struggling to progress, is what Finch (2010) has called “the trait approach”. This means being aware of the signs and symptoms of a student at risk of failing so that the issues can be immediately addressed and strategies devised to aid the student in their continued placement learning. It is important to note that all students need guidance, support and help when in placement, and all need to be given clear, non-ambiguous and continuous constructive feedback. Indeed, this is another issue that can make practice learning settings challenging and complicated, in that a student is in effect, being continuously assessed.

Returning to the trait approach, a number of authors have identified a range of traits, behaviours or indicators that a student is at risk of failing.

Authors	**Behaviours, Traits or Indicators**
Syson and Baginsky (1981)	Lack of commitment, Inability to learn or develop or apply theory to practice, personality/personal problems, rigidity, inability to make relationships, lack of feelings/insensitivity inability to cope with emotional stress, lack of perception of client's problems, damaging to clients.
Burgess et al (1998a and 1998b)	Poor communication and interpersonal skills, a lack of basic ability, poor understanding of the social work role, an absence of professional boundaries and a lack of motivation with an accompanying unwillingness to learn.
Schaub and Dalrymple (2011)	Poor or inappropriate communication, lack of professionalism, lack of adherence to social work values, lack of insight
Finch (2017)	Avoidance, struggling with reflection, cannot analyse complex situations, dishonest, not motivated or enthusiastic, not following clear and direct instructions, poor timekeeping, value base a concern, lack of boundaries, personal factors getting in the way.

Table 1. Behaviours, traits or indicators that a student is at risk of failing

As outlined in Table 1, some of the traits identified in practice are very broad and unspecific. For example, what does 'poor communication' actually mean? There is a danger that the trait approach can become unintentionally oppressive to students. It is also important to understand the context of some of these behaviours or traits as in isolation they do not necessarily equate to a failing result. Like all sign and symptoms approaches, it is not always straightforward for practitioners to acknowledge or recognise such phenomenon in real life situations. For example, Finch's (2010) study of

field educators' experiences of working with struggling or failing students, found that when some field educators were asked hypothetically to name signs and symptoms of a failing student, they came up with similar lists. Of note, when they were asked to discuss the experiences of their current student, some educators struggled to see these very issues in their own student; instead, minimising or finding mitigation for the issues at hand. At best, such indicators should be used judiciously, and the context of the behaviour reflected upon. Equally important for field educators are the reasons why it is potentially challenging to fail a student on placement. These are now explored.

Why is it challenging for field educators to fail students?

The evidence from social work research, as well as cognate disciplines, suggests that working with a student at risk of failing can be challenging (Finch, 2017). This is because, aside from the practical challenges and contradictions of field assessment, working with a student at risk of failing can be a stressful experience for a field educator. Associated with this, is the concern, albeit not empirically proven, that practice educators may be reluctant to fail students. What can be stated, based on current evidence, is that *some* practice educators *may* find it difficult to fail a student in a field placement. This does not mean however, that field educators do not fail students when required (Finch, 2017).

Exploring why failing a student in a field setting can be a challenge is a more positive and helpful approach than the blame that is inherent in the 'fail to fail' narrative. Understanding why it might be challenging to fail students on placement, accords with social work values, and is helpful to all stakeholders involved in field education, not least to enable reflection and develop good assessment practice. A number of reasons therefore, have been put forward to explain why *some* practice educators may find it difficult to fail *some* students in a field placement. These include:

- not using the competency assessment system appropriately or effectively (Hughes and Heycock, 1996, Shardow and Doel; 1996, Shapton, 2006)

- Procedures for dealing with placement issues, not being followed properly (Burgess et al, 1998a, 1998b; Duffy, 2004; Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Kaslow et al 2007)
- Field educators not being adequately supported by the agency and/or the university (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Finch, 2014)
- Role strain or confusion (Cowburn et al, 2000, Duffy, 2004, Finch, and Taylor, 2013)
- Fear of litigation (Duffy, 2004; Cole and Lewis, 2003; Royse, 2000; Raymond, 2000; Vacha-Haase et al, 2004)
- Rule of Optimism (Vacha-Haase, et al 2004).

There has also been academic interest in the emotional experience of working with a student at risk of failing, and the associated possible adverse impact on the assessment process. Writing from a Canadian social work educator perspective, Bogo et al (2007), found that having to fail a student on placement caused field educators to experience a value conflict, which in turn, caused some emotional distress. Schaub and Dalrymple (2011) found that practice educators, when working with a student at risk of failing, felt isolated, stressed and did not feel supported by key personnel in their own agencies as well as staff from the university. The study reported that field educators feared the consequences of being subject to a formal student complaint when failing a student.

The experience of working with an at-risk student, has been reported as stressful (Finch, 2010, Duffy, 2004, Gizara and Forrest, 2007) and as negative (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010. Indeed, international research from a number of professions with assessed practice learning requirements has identified the emotional impact raised by working with a student at risk of failing. A range of occupations have all documented the distressing emotions that can be experienced by practice educators, for example, Ilott and Murphey (1997) from an occupational therapy perspective; Duffy (2004) from a nursing perspective; Gizara and Forrest (2007) from a counselling psychology perspective; and Finch (2010) from a social work perspective. These emotions included; anger, rage, shame, guilt, sadness and frustration. The focus on emotional states is

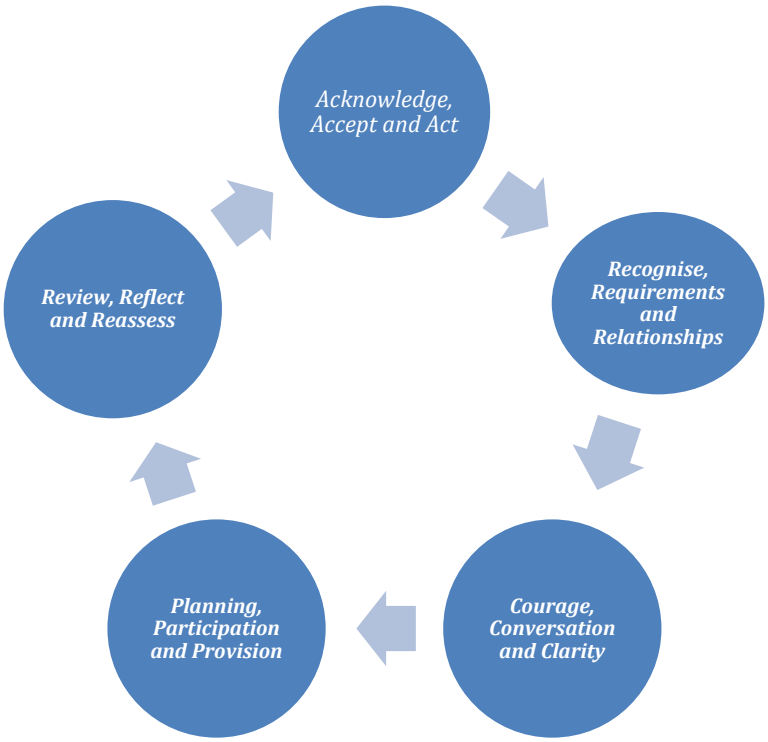
important, not least on the possible adverse impact on the assessment process. Understandably, a student might experience strong and intense emotions about the possibility of failure, not least of which include internalised feelings of anger, fear and guilt. These feelings can accompany the huge emotional and financial investment students have inevitably made (Finch and Schaub, 2015).

Impact on Assessment

Finch et al, (2013), and Finch and Schaub, (2014) have suggested that an uncontained emotional environment might be a contributing factor to field educators not managing the assessment process in an appropriate way. In other words, such intense emotional states, as reported in the research, may obscure the assessment process, by field educators not being able critically reflect, think or act. Drawing on psychoanalytical notions of defences against anxiety, Finch et al (2013) hypothesised that processes of projective identification may be in operation. Projective identification is an unconscious communication from one person to another, in the form of affect or emotion (Frosh, 2012). It is more than transference however, rather it is process of the expulsion of "unwanted or threatening ideas into their environment" (Frosh, 2012:162) and is an unconscious mechanism in which a person expels themselves of their unwholesome parts that are unbearable and, "are very deeply denied in the self" (Segal, 1992:36) onto others. A response to being the object of projective identification, can be mobilisation, e.g. acting out some of the students uncontained emotional state, or immobilisation, e.g. not being able to reflect, think or act. The intensity of feelings is such that other defensive behaviours may exhibit themselves, e.g. splitting, avoidance, internalisation, blame or denial (Finch and Schaub, 2015). This can, for instance, manifest with practice educators internalising the students' failure as their own (Finch, 2010). The chapter now considers how to work positively, reflectively and ethically with a student who may be at risk of failing a placement.

Working with Students at Risk of Failing

The five step cyclical model below is adapted from Finch's 15 step model (2017:107-111) and has been developed for all practitioners assessing and mentoring students in field or clinical settings. The model is as follows:



1) Acknowledge, Accept and Act

The first step is for field educators to acknowledge, accept and "see" that the student is not making the expected progress and that there is a concern that requires the field educator to act.

2) Recognise, Requirements and Relationships

The second step is to identify what it is the student is doing, or not doing, and link it explicitly to the assessment framework and the particular domain, outcome or competence. This ensures that it is about the requirements of the *profession*, rather than *the field educator's* standards or expectations. Maclean (2012) argues there is a need to be clear about the expected standards and ensure that the student understands the standards in a practice context.

3) Courage, Conversation and Clarity

The third step is to explicitly address the issue with the student as soon as an issue arises. As previously discussed, not addressing issues in a timely fashion was identified by field educators as one reason why they found it difficult to fail a student. It is acknowledged that an explicit conversation takes courage but as Maclean (2012) points out, not having the conversation sometimes causes the problem to escalate.

4) Planning, Participation and Provision

The fourth step is to devise an action plan, which clearly details strategies and future plans to enable the student to address the issues. This should be a co-produced document and should identify actions on part of the field educator and the student. Clear outcomes need to be identified with timescales. This document needs to be framed in the language of step three, i.e. it needs to be explicit, clear and unambiguous, what the student and field educator is required to achieve and by when.

5) Review, Reflect and Reassess

The fifth step is establish a review process that ensures issues are satisfactorily addressed by the student and that progress is being made. Continuous reassessment is essential, as is allowing space for the student to reflect and review their progress. Reflection is integral to this cyclic process.

Concluding Comments:

This chapter has explored assessment in field education. It has considered the models used to assess practice learning, the challenges of working with a student who is at risk of failing the placement; and has discussed how it can be challenging for field educators to make a fail recommendation. The experience for students when they are at risk of failing is likely to raise complex emotions and so field educators must remain highly

attuned to the emotional climate and dynamics that exist in all teaching and learning relationships. Seeing projective identification as communication, rather than psychic attack and acknowledging the feelings the student may be unable to bear, will be helpful.

A five step cyclical model has been proposed, that if followed in a timely way, can assist the field educator and student to navigate this challenge. In situations where this model is followed but does not result in satisfactory student progress, the process is likely to result in a failing grade.

This chapter is wide ranging in its coverage, which reflects the contested nature of what is 'good' social work practice and similarly, what is assessed as 'good' or 'competent' student placement learning. It is acknowledged that inevitably, a field educator will work with an at-risk student sometime during their career. Such situations require calm, reflective and thoughtful responses so that difficult emotions do not oppress the student and/or adversely impact on the assessment process.

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