



How Power Dynamics and Relationships Interact with Assessment of Competence: Exploring the Experiences of Student Social Workers Who Failed a Practice Placement

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Abstract

Students have identified practice placements (or practice learning) as the single most important factor of social work education, but it is usually where issues of professional suitability become apparent. Whilst most students successfully complete their placements, a number experience difficulty and a minority ultimately fail. Protecting the profession from students not deemed suitable for professional practice requires a rigorous gatekeeping function and fair standards. On receipt of written consent, we interviewed eleven social work students who failed placement, and accessed progress reports written by Practice Teachers/Practice Educators. Participants included nine females, mean age of 33 years, seven failed their final placement and eight had registered with university disability services. Professionally transcribed interviews were analysed using an adapted version of Braun and Clarke's method. Identified themes included the impact of personal issues; importance of working relationships; use and misuse of power; assessment and decision-making processes and developing insight and useful feedback. Students valued the opportunity to reflect on their experience and provided clear recommendations for improving how Practice Teachers, on-site supervisors, Tutors and peers can provide a supportive learning experience for

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students who require additional support during placement, and how to communicate concerns regarding competence more effectively.

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Introduction

Practice learning or field education consistently plays a central role in the formal training of social work students, where knowledge, skills and values acquired in the classroom are integrated into practice. Students have identified practice learning (or practice placements) as the single most important factor of social work education (Wayne *et al.*, 2006; Brodie and Williams, 2013), but it is the place where issues of professional suitability usually become apparent (Robertson, 2013). In Ireland, students are formally assessed by a Practice Teacher, who is a qualified social worker employed by the placement setting, with specialist training at Master's degree level (i.e. Practice Teaching Award). In other jurisdictions, the person responsible for assessing students is a practice assessor, practice educator or practice supporter (Finch, 2010).

Whilst most students successfully complete their placements, a number experience difficulty and do not meet the threshold to pass. According to Parker (2010) failing placement can have profound effect on all stakeholders including the student, supervisors, other staff within agency teams, academic staff and fellow students. Protecting the profession from students not deemed suitable requires a rigorous gatekeeping function and fair standards, supported by academic institutions (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Bogo *et al.*, 2007). Despite the centrality of placements within the social work curriculum, there is very little research undertaken into the termination of placements from any perspective (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2013). This article attempts to address this gap by highlighting the experiences of social work students from four participating Irish universities, one stakeholder group commonly neglected in the research (Furness, 2012; Finch, 2015).

Background

Existing literature largely focuses on the rarity of placement failure, the quality and quantity of placements providing appropriate learning opportunities, and the Practice Teachers' reluctance to fail students, commonly linked to inconsistencies and confusion within the processes of

student assessment. Precise numbers in relation to placement failure are hard to find. Finch and Taylor (2013) reported failures across a social work programme in England were 3.2 per cent in 2006–2007, and 2.5 per cent in 2008–2009 (GSCC, 2010). There is no national register to capture students failing a placement, but figures held at one university estimated that approximately 3 per cent of students fail or face severe difficulties within their placements each year (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010). The figures available do not reflect the larger number of students who face significant difficulty on placement, or are categorised as an ‘incomplete’ because they voluntarily withdraw before failing.

Research highlights the reluctance of supervisors and universities to fail students (Bogo et al., 2007; Parker, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013). Brandon and Davies (1979) showed that it is extremely rare for a student to fail placement, despite problems identified. The paucity of agreed definitions of competency and performance indicators has prevented the development of reliable and valid instruments to measure competency in social work placements, which often result in supervisors awarding above-average ratings (Regehr et al., 2011). The rarity of failing students is linked to the processes and protocols provided by universities, as discussed below.

Profile of failing students

Social work students have diversified due to family and employment responsibilities, or experiencing serious psychosocial and mental health issues. According to Hussein et al. (2007), there are low attrition rates in social work across UK universities; however, students from ethnic minority groups, male students and students with a self-reported disability had poorer progression rates. According to Finch (2010), white Practice Teachers were afraid to fail black students in case they were accused of racism. According to Furness (2012), practice educators observed that male students were more likely to fail placement and commit serious professional misconduct. Evidence suggests placements struggle to accommodate social work students with disabilities (Finch, 2010; Keisel et al., 2018; Zuchowski et al., 2019) with one reporting (Keisel et al., 2018) students were required to self-manage their situation and either down-play or not claim disability status for fear of stigma and discrimination. Of more concern was the ‘notable number of students in this study had experienced failed placements’ (Keisel et al., 2018, p. 704).

There is general agreement that qualifying students must demonstrate certain behaviours, competencies and characteristics, as outlined in professional social work standards (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2013; CORU, 2014; Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2019; Social Work England, 2020). According to Bogo et al. (2007),

factors other than those typically identified in assessment documentation play a significant role in supervisors' evaluation and ranking of student performance, with many ranking personal attributes over procedural skills. Unprofessional student behaviour includes damage or disrespect to service users', crossing professional boundaries, being judgemental, having serious issues and not using supervision (Furness and Gilligan, 2004). Other unsuitable behaviours include: inability to demonstrate key values, skills and knowledge required for practice, lack of professional integrity, disrespect for persons, socially unjust practice and resistance to learning (Croaker *et al.*, 2017), poor student communication, lack of student engagement with practice, limited capacity for reflection, insight or demonstrating social work competences (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2013), inability to take direction, lack of commitment, mental health issues, personality problems, elongated absences and fitness to practice (Murray and McGovern, 2015).

Despite concerns about performance and suitability, some weaker students pass placement due to inexperienced supervisors giving them the 'benefit of the doubt' or feeling guilty for insufficient learning opportunities (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Finch, 2010; Regehr *et al.*, 2011; Finch and Taylor, 2013). Qualitative research undertaken with twelve social work Tutors in England (Finch, 2015) revealed challenges of managing placement failure, concerns about Practice Teachers or poor-quality placements and conflicts between protecting service users from dangerous or incompetent practitioners and university systems. Tutors suggested small voluntary agencies took too many students, viewed them as 'staff' and failed to offer opportunities that offered adequate student learning and enabled 'weak' students to pass (Finch, 2015, p. 13).

Emotional impact

Failing a student also impacted on the Practice Teacher (Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011), with some experiencing anxiety and isolation, especially when their recommendation for a fail was rejected or overturned by the university. Practice Teachers enabled and nurtured alongside assessing and maintaining standards, which created a disturbing paradox and contributed to the reluctance to fail students (Finch and Taylor, 2013).

For the majority, placement represents invaluable learning which can positively influence the student's future professional career. However, failing placement generates challenging emotions, including guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, stress and frustration, which undoubtedly affect the student's sense of identity, self-esteem and confidence (Finch, 2010). Burgess *et al.* (1998) reported that students who fail might exhibit anger,

frustration and disappointment, which a student participant in Murray and McGovern's study (2015) articulated in the following: 'I felt I'd let myself down and everyone else' (p. 61). We hope that this article will add to the limited research, offer insights for Tutors and Practice Teachers who support a diverse student group, including those with underlying health or personal issues.

Methodology

Design and setting

The study consisted of two phases: (i) quantitative analysis of anonymous demographic data on students from four Irish Universities (that is, Queen's University Belfast, Trinity College Dublin, Ulster University and University College Cork) who failed a placement; and (ii) qualitative interviews with students who failed placement during January 2015 to January 2019. This article will report findings from phase 2. Based on our understanding of the emotional journey failing students experience, [Maynard's \(2003\)](#) theoretical framework informed the development of the interview schedule and our interpretation of the findings. Maynard's devices for communicating bad news: (i) forecasting (a warning of impending bad news); (ii) stalling (keeping recipients in suspense); (iii) and being blunt (bad news conveyed abruptly), offered a way to explore how students received and responded to the news they were failing placement, and what meaning they derived from the overall experience.

Recruitment and sampling

The opportunity to participate in this research was communicated to all social work students registered with the four participating universities through an invitation letter, participant information sheet and consent form uploaded to Practice Learning module sites. Inclusion criteria included: registered as a social work student, formally failed a placement, not involved in an appeal or legal action regarding the placement outcome and provided written consent. Eleven students were recruited upon receipt of written consent. Ten participated in face-to-face interviews and one provided written responses to questions outlined on the semi-structured interview schedule (see [Figure 1](#)). Relevant student progress reports from student records offered the Practice Teacher's perspective.

- Tell me about your experience of failing placement.
- Who was involved in the decision-making process?
- What were the reasons for the outcome?
- How was this communicated to you?
- Who supported you during this experience?
- How did this experience impact on your both personally and professionally?
- What did you share with family, friends or peers?
- What was it like to share your experience with others?
- What support was offered prior to repeating your placement?
- How did this experience impact on your career?
- In retrospect, what have you learned about yourself or what would you have done differently?

Figure 1: Sample questions from semi-structured interview schedule

Ethics

Full ethical approval was obtained from the School Research Ethics Committee (Ref: EC/256) and all students provided formal written consent prior to the interview which included consent to access the progress report submitted by their Practice Teacher.

Data collection tool and process

A pilot interview tested the appropriateness of questions, feasibility and duration of interviews (Addington-Hall *et al.*, 2007). After capturing demographic data from students, we conducted the semi-structured interview using questions outlined in Figure 1. The schedule ensured that pre-identified issues were explored using relevant probing questions (Eatough and Smith, 2008). Each face-to-face interview lasted 45–100 min (mean 60 min), was audio recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

An adapted version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis underpinned data analysis, which included becoming familiar with extracted data; generating initial codes; searching for themes across transcripts; defining and naming themes into categories; and reporting our analyses in the results section. This approach allowed 'flexibility, theoretical freedom and usefulness' as a research tool to provide a rich and

detailed account of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78), and enabled us 'to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

Three authors read the transcripts and regularly discussed the accuracy and rationale for emergent themes (Bryman, 2008); prior to selecting relevant quotes to support the following identified themes: the impact of personal factors; importance of working relationships; use and misuse of power; assessment and decision making processes; and developing insight and useful feedback.

Results

Demographic results

Eleven students participated in the qualitative phase of the study (two males and nine females) aged twenty to fifty-three years (mean age 33 years). Prior to studying social work, most had paid (i.e. auxiliary, care assistant and police), voluntary (i.e. Samaritans, Child line and homeless hostels) or informal caring roles for relatives. Others had completed social care placements for academic or vocational qualifications. Motivation to study social work stemmed from an interest in empowering others, working with people, or having observed the positive outcomes from social work intervention in relatives' lives. Eight students had a registered disability (six mental health and two dyslexia). Six failed a children's placements (i.e. family intervention, family support, looked after children, fostering and disability) and five failed an adult's services placement (i.e. mental health, older people and learning disability). All were registered on a three-year undergraduate degree programme. Four failed first placement (first semester of the second year) and seven failed final placement (second semester of final year).

Theme 1: The impact of personal factors

All students indicated pre-disposing personal factors that prevented them fully embracing the learning, including violent relationships, teenage pregnancies, social services involvement, difficult upbringings and multiple losses. Depression or anxiety was disclosed by six students, with one stating support from Social Services had motivated them to embark on social work training. However, her supervisory experience highlighted low self-confidence, anxiety and being unable to 'stand up for myself' (ID05). Intermittent anxiety, depression and a relative's sudden death negatively impacted on another (ID07). Four students disclosed recent relationship breakups:

My marriage broke up. There have been lots of life changing experiences going on during my education...I was under an awful lot stress with my husband at the time (ID04).

Mental health became more problematic for another after a relationship breakup, which resulted in him going 'into a downward spiral of depression and self-medicating' (ID07). Another student struggled to manage her ex-boyfriend's threats and deteriorating physical health, alongside placement requirements (ID10). Findings illustrate how personal relationships negatively impacted on physical or mental health during placement, and the ability of students to concentrate on course requirements.

Eight students disclosed being actively involved with university well-being and disability services due to pre-existing health conditions. One declared dyslexia on her student profile, so was 'allowed extra time and support with proof reading, and visual learning aids' (ID08). However, she still struggled with the volume of written agency work and deadlines. When a Practice Teacher highlighted poor quality of written work, another student disclosed dyslexia and blamed the University for failing to share this information on her behalf (ID09). The student's perceived lack of prevented timely support being offered and damaged the working relationship.

Three students had parents receiving emergency medical treatment, which resulted in juggling the demands of placement with hospital visits and caring responsibilities. One student described her experience as follows:

My mum took ill the time I was on placement. She was in the hospital for a good while and then she was in Intensive care for about a week. They didn't think she was going to make it...So whenever I was on placement, you know, I was leaving at five and picking up my sister and driving for 100 miles, then driving back and getting ready for the next day, and trying to fit in all my work and that in between (ID09).

These experiences informed the motivation of students to study social work or shaped their coping strategies; and adverse events heightened their vulnerability and created a 'domino effect', which ultimately prevented successful completion of placement.

Theme 2: Importance of working relationships

Students on placement are required to develop a productive working alliance with a number of stakeholders, including Practice Teachers, supervisors and Tutors. Not all students described working relationships as wonderful or problematic.

I didn't really get on well with my Practice Teacher. I think that had an impact as well...I just think that she didn't like me from the start. I had actually said to a friend the week after I had started, I'm going to fail this placement, because my Practice Teacher doesn't like me (ID09).

Some students perceived 'complete clashes of different lifestyles' (ID04) or 'clashes of personalities' (ID01; ID06; ID11) resulting in difficult and unsupportive relationships. One student described her experience in the following: 'I did not feel comfortable approaching my Practice Teacher and therefore, personally feel I lacked support from her' (ID08). Others felt 'intimidated' (ID04) or 'manipulated' (ID10), which resulted in strained working relationships and communication/relationship breakdown. One participant said: 'I felt she was quite manipulative. I'm a very open person and I felt like she was almost putting on a face to me and then a different face behind my back' (ID10). Some suggested blurred professional boundaries following an exchange of personal information by the Practice Teacher (ID04), conflicts of interest being ignored (ID10) or inappropriate text messages (ID03), which they felt interfered with an objective assessment of their practice. One student described her experience:

Like you do not send a student a text saying 'I am so proud of you chick' like we are besties and then like fail them a week later. I just want you to be my teacher, I don't even want you to be my friend, you are not meant to be my friend (ID03).

One suggested the Practice Teacher was 'nit-picking' by making unsubstantiated claims about the student's low self-confidence linked to how she dressed (ID09). In contrast, another student who had successfully completed the repeat placement at the time of data collection was able to compare the relationship s/he had with two different Practice Teachers.

I feel if I had had the Practice Teacher that I had there [repeat placement], I definitely would have got through it with flying colours. A wee bit more support, a wee bit more open arms, you know...It was a safe place, it felt safe and I felt comfortable and I was able to reflect on how I felt. She didn't judge me in that space and that was amazing and that's what I needed, cos I am quite a reflective... (ID05).

However, one student believed that the 'easy going' supervisor (ID04) was not competent in their new role, which resulted in limited clarity and support.

For some students, the Tutor was described as 'great' (ID11), 'supportive' (ID03), 'accessible' (ID05) or prompted the student to reflect on the impact of specific scenarios.

[Tutor] did say at mid-point, that there's nothing wrong with this academic work, but I think he also helped me make some of the tougher decisions, like "[student], you got overwhelmed", he didn't actually say

it like that, but it made me step back and think, did I get overwhelmed? (ID06).

Whilst one student felt emotionally supported, s/he believed the Tutor was powerless in terms of influencing the proposed outcome of the placement, or lacked support from the University.

I just think my Tutor didn't know what to do with me. My Tutor was good, but I felt she wasn't supported from this end [university]. She supported me emotionally as much she could but she couldn't really help any other way...because you are not going to get support from the university to complain against the university (ID01).

In contrast some students did not find their personal Tutor helpful, normally due to an under-developed relationship or being allocated a new personal Tutor prior to placement so they 'didn't even know each other' (ID10) or 'I just didn't feel like I knew her well enough to talk through things' (ID02). Some believed if they had a personal Tutor who knew them well, they would have received more support or openly shared the difficulties on placement.

Theme 3: The use and misuse of power

Power differential between the student and the various professionals involved in the decision-making processes underpinned relationships, with one describing it as a 'slight power imbalance' (ID04) and another describing it as 'immense' (ID05). Another student reflected on the negative impact of the hierarchical working relationship on her own health.

My actual placement was extremely supportive but I can't say the same for my Practice Teacher. Sadly, this hierarchical relationship created anxiousness and vulnerability which naturally impacted on my sleep pattern, my thought processes and my skin, leaving me exhausted, confused and questioning the role of a Social worker (ID02).

One student was disappointed when the on-site supervisor said 'you didn't deserve to fail and that's why I'm gunning for you, but there's very little I can do' (ID 002). The imbalance of power was reiterated by another student who believed the 'University should not give the Practice Teacher so much power' (ID10). These findings offer insight into the perceived use and misuse of power within the working alliances and frustration from students who felt unsupported or vulnerable during placement, due to poor working relationships. The student transcripts illustrate how working relationships positively or negatively interacted with practice learning processes, including the student's assessment and final placement outcome.

Theme 4: Assessment and decision-making processes

Students raised quality assurance issues based on their confusion around the systems and processes used to assess and communicate their professional competence. For example, the midpoint review meeting which is the formal decision-making forum when the ‘training team’ (that is, Practice Teacher, on-site supervisor, Tutor and student) meet to review the student’s progress, and students are normally told if they are on track to meet the necessary practice learning requirements within the placement time frame. One student had underestimated the importance of submitting written work for deadlines or the midpoint review meeting in terms of progression.

The mid-point was the crucial one, and I genuinely didn’t really realise that it was the process of moving towards failure. I sort of felt that I missed that a wee bit, whether I’d been told or whether I wasn’t, but it doesn’t matter as things were happening with my own mental health and I didn’t get the written work submitted on time (ID06).

For one student, the midpoint meeting ‘was really difficult’ due to communication, power imbalances and poor working relationships:

My own Tutor was off sick, so somebody else stood in for her who I hadn’t met. So I had her, my Practice Teacher that I didn’t get on with, and my on-site...so the only person that I felt in that room supporting me was my on-site who was saying she didn’t see any concerns with my practice and she was happy with how things were going. But my Practice Teacher said differently because she was assessing me based on my written work (ID09).

One student said that at the midpoint review meeting the Practice Teacher ‘thought I could improve my written work and pass placement. However, one or two weeks after handing in work, I was told I failed’ (ID08). This echoed experiences of two other students who received positive feedback at the midpoint review, but were told a few days later that they were unlikely to meet the requirements:

Yeah, I passed literally my mid-point with glowing reviews about it, three observations all passed, signed off everything...then on the Monday we had the meeting with my Practice Teacher, my on-site and me and they basically said look we just don’t know if you are going to pass at this stage, we think if you had more time you would pass, but within the three weeks we don’t think you are going to meet all the requirements...and after that they called in an independent Practice Teacher and she decided ‘no’ as well, somehow it wasn’t passing and then I didn’t pass (ID03).

In some instances, an independent Practice Teacher gave a second opinion on the student’s competence, based on a range of written work, agency records and a direct observation of practice. However, students

highlighted issues with the process. One student's independent Practice Teacher 'came in about a week before the end' (ID03), which was too late. Another indicated that both Practice Teachers were in 'the same training team' (ID02), which compromised the objectivity and independence of the assessment. One said the Practice Teacher's assessment of written work contradicted the student's normal academic standard (ID09), and others highlighted ambiguous feedback on written work and direct observations. One student indicated the following:

I think I passed my first and second direct observation, and my third one I wasn't told I had failed but I didn't get any feedback on it...she never said it wasn't a pass...I didn't read my Practice Teacher's report before it was submitted to panel but I remember reading it going this is actually nice compared to what she was saying to me. Verbal feedback was very, very negative, with no constructive criticism. Then I read her report and the only thing it identified was that I missed risk a couple of times or I didn't deal with them effectively (ID01).

Finally, three students who completed first placements in day care believed they did not offer continuous opportunities to work alongside social workers, and disadvantaged them on their final placement:

The first placement, I think it needs to be more social worker orientated rather than family centres and day centres where it's more like social care you are doing...I did one assessment the entire time I was there...I wasn't getting the experience (ID 009).

One student questioned how a student social worker could pass without 'actually seeing the role of a social worker except for one day so...' (ID 002). These findings implied bias or ambiguity, which impeded the assessment process, including poor communication, working relationships and decision-making processes.

Theme 5: Developing insight and useful feedback

The learning journey for most students illustrated improved insight and resilience. Some students revealed self-awareness of stubbornness (ID01), low self-esteem (ID03), poor self-confidence (ID05) and perfectionism (ID07), which eventually translated into resilience or strength. One student illustrated a journey of self-discovery as she emerged from feeling depleted to feeling strong and resilient.

Well on a personal level it massively knocked my confidence. It created a process of just, like worrying about things, of feeling rubbish, like my self-esteem went down, like I didn't know if I was good enough for anyone. I just wanted out. There was no fight in me...I learnt, like it has really strengthened me, like I am way more resilient now than I would have been before. Like I would advocate for anything and anyone and I am really sure of my strengths and weaknesses (ID03).

One student reflected on the consequences of being a 'perfectionist' in the following:

I think my perfectionist side...I am quite a perfectionist and it can sort of hinder me and lead to things like procrastination as well because you are almost afraid of failure, because you want to be perfect and you are afraid it is not going to be perfect almost (ID07).

As illustrated in the findings, the emergence of self-awareness was evident at the time of interview, but in most cases, this was only after successfully repeating their placement, or having 'time out' to reflect on the experience of failing. When students reflected on what might have helped, one suggested bringing a supportive person to decision-making forums.

When the decision was made that I was failing placement, allow me to bring someone with me to support me as for anyone this is very upsetting and distressing. I had asked for someone to accompany me to additional review meeting and was advised I couldn't bring anyone (ID08).

Others suggested improving communication between academic staff and students during placement, to promote open communication and to minimise barriers for struggling students. A sense of embarrassment prevented one student from contacting the university: 'I probably should have contacted [Tutor], I think, and been more open about issues that I was having. I just always have this fear of them thinking that I wasn't capable' (ID10).

One acknowledged that University staff are reliant on students being honest: 'It is hard for you in University. Unless the student tells you, you are never going to know, if you know what I mean' (ID03). Another acknowledged that s/he was unaware of support services: 'Maybe the university would have provided amazing support, but I didn't ask for it' (ID09). One suggested that when students are failing, the Universities should ensure assessment processes are fair and outcomes are evidence based and investigated. 'Like first thing why is the student failing, where was the evidence along. Like these Practice Teachers cannot be let away with this' (ID03). Another student suggested implementing 'checks and balances' (ID02), to monitor the quality of practice teaching and assessment recommendations. Another felt 'lost in the middle' of disputes between practice learning and the University, which raised 'duty of care' issues and denial of responsibility (ID01). Some suggested more recall days, or direct contact with the University Tutor during placement.

Discussion

This study offers a unique opportunity to hear the voices of student social workers regarding their experience of failing a placement, and offers

rich insights into their perceived vulnerabilities and processes employed by Universities and placement agencies, which mirrored Maynard's stages of forecasting, stalling and being blunt (Maynard, 2003). Whilst this research did not canvas the views of the Practice Teachers, participants consented to the research team accessing progress reports written by Practice Teachers.

All participants disclosed a personal or health crisis or a long-term issue, which they believed had prevented full engagement with learning and development. Most admitted they had underestimated the full impact of these issues, until they had the benefit of hindsight. With the increasing number of student social workers declaring psycho-social or mental health issues (Finch, 2010; Zuchowski *et al.*, 2019), students should be encouraged to consider if placement is timely and appropriate. Students are encouraged to disclose pre-existing or recent personal or health issues, which may influence performance or require reasonable adjustments. However, placements may struggle to accommodate reasonable adjustments (Finch, 2010; Zuchowski *et al.*, 2019) with some students being encouraged to downplay or self-manage their needs (Kieselm *et al.*, 2008). Our findings indicate that some students chose not to seek reasonable adjustments, which resulted in reduced support. Furthermore, Practice Teachers may misinterpret the student's personal and professional struggles as incompetence, lack of motivation or an inability or unwillingness to complete practice-related learning tasks in a timely manner. Schaub and Dalrymple (2013) reported similar findings from Practice Teachers who failed students based on associating a student's lack of engagement with incompetence and poor social work values.

Academic literature highlights the importance of high-quality supervisory relationships, which influences the learning and support required for students to progress successfully (Roulston *et al.*, 2018; Wilson and Flanagan, 2018; Cleak and Zuchowski, 2019). After disclosing personal or health vulnerabilities, some participants perceived their Practice Teacher as unsupportive, judgemental, incompetent or manipulative, which left students feeling bewildered and powerless to advocate for themselves, and echoes functional power highlighted by Parker (2010). Hosken (2013) contends that supervision needs to be 'shaped by humility rather than the more popular goal of competence' which can be fostered when a supervisor and supervisee consider their work together (p. 91). This social justice approach (Walker *et al.*, 2008) could be an effective strategy to combat the power imbalance and implicit privilege identified by many participants in this study. Furthermore, it could promote more effective communication between training team members (student, Practice Teacher and Tutor); an explicit duty of care towards all students; and self-esteem and self-confidence, particularly where blocks to learning or vulnerabilities are clearly identified

(Hosken, 2013). Houston (2015) argues that practice learning can perpetuate students' construct of oppression and misuse of power by significant others and practice educators should consider how a reflexive model to encourage insights and understanding of the student's situation. Such an approach might also promote 'forecasting' (Maynard, 2003) and enable Practice Teachers to communicate concerns about competence or practice more effectively with students.

Some participants noted that their Practice Teachers or on-site supervisors felt unsupported or confused, due to perceived ambiguity and inconsistency around the assessment and procedural processes, which mirrors findings reported by Basnett and Sheffield (2010) from Practice Teachers who supervised failing students. Other research reported Practice Teachers feeling powerlessness and concerned about their assessment responsibility, with some anticipating that failing students could compromise their career (Finch, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Finch, 2015), or result in them being labelled as racist (Finch, 2009). Parker (2010) reported the profound effect that the process of students failing placement has on all stakeholders. Furthermore, it has been suggested that shrinking budgets, increasing enrolments in higher education and the risk-averse context shaping health and social care sector have eroded placement standards and professional integrity (Wallace and Pease 2011; Cleak and Zuchowski, 2020), which may underpin defensible decision-making by supervisors and Universities, rather than a fair evaluation of a student's practice. According to Kenta *et al.* (2018), the system of assessment has to be fair, robust, standardised and fit for purpose.

Bogo *et al.* (2007) highlight the 'gate-keeping' responsibility that Practice Teachers have in relation to ensuring that only those deemed competent enter the social work profession. However, the lack of standardised definitions of competency and the lack of agreed performance indicators (Regehr *et al.*, 2011) have hampered attempts to develop reliable and valid instruments to assess competence during social work student placements. Finch (2015) emphasised the importance of transparent and supportive processes to specify what behaviour would warrant a fail, and assist Practice Teachers to clearly link practice with assessment criteria ensuring students are ready for the profession. Having clarity around competency may help to prevent 'stalling' or keeping students in suspense (Maynard, 2003). Furness and Gilligan (2004) suggest that inexperienced Practice Teachers are more likely to give students the benefit of the doubt and pass rather than fail them, which raises concern about the reliability of their 'gate-keeping' role (Bogo *et al.*, 2007). Practice Teachers need to receive training in advanced communication skills so that they can manage conflicts in a professional manner, continuously provide honest, timely and meaningful feedback to students, and convey information in a way that is not 'blunt' (Maynard, 2003). Furthermore, students should never feel oppressed, bullied or powerless during their

professional training. Social work values and clear boundaries should underpin positive working relationships between students and their Practice Teacher, On-Site Supervisor and Personal Tutor.

Some of our participants experienced assessment by an independent Practice Teacher towards the end of placement. However, they identified flaws in the process based on the timing, nature and lack of objectivity of the assessment. [Parker \(2010\)](#) also reported concerns about the rigour of such systems, and recommends that this role needs to be independent. Formal assessment of student's practice and competence should only involve staff who are experienced and are familiar with the broad range of student's work.

Although participants communicated with their Personal Tutors prior to failing placement, some felt they did not receive appropriate levels of support or advocacy. Participants suggested this was due to under-developed working relationships or perceived powerlessness of the Tutor/University, compared to the powerful role of the Practice Teacher in determining the assessment outcome. [Finch \(2010\)](#) described this theme in her interviews with practice assessors who reported a sense of powerlessness and oppression between themselves and the University, particularly in relation to the assessment process, which [Parker \(2010\)](#) recommends using collective power and effort to challenge. Findings from [Murray and McGovern \(2015\)](#) highlight the importance of practice teachers adopting a task and outcome approach to provide a better understanding of why students fail, to identify areas of concern and to generated evidence of their assessment. Students, Practice Teachers, on-site supervisors and Tutors should formally review progress, identify concerns and gaps in learning at mid-point review meetings. Action plans should be formally agreed and shared, to allow the opportunity to address any concerns.

Three participants suggested that their placement offered insufficient learning opportunities, which resulted in gaps in their knowledge and understanding of the social work role. Earlier research ([Cleak et al., 2016](#); [Roulston et al., 2018](#)) found a significant relationship between student satisfaction with their placement and having a qualified social worker as their on-site supervisor. Universities and practice learning agencies have a responsibility to provide viable, quality placements, with appropriate levels of support and supervision appropriate to the student's stage of professional development. Practice Teachers taking students who are repeating placement need to ensure that their agency can meet the learning needs of the student.

[Murray and McGovern \(2015\)](#) indicate that failing placement has a negative impact on the self-esteem and confidence of students, with some feeling angry towards their Practice Teacher or themselves ([McGovern, 2021](#)). [Burgess et al. \(1998\)](#) also identified that failing students exhibit anger, frustration and disappointment, which mirrored our

respondents. Participants in our study felt ashamed of failing placement due to the reasons and consequences of the fail, including not progressing or graduating with their peer group. Shame was a response to failing placement identified by Finch (2010) which affected the student's sense of identity, self-esteem and confidence. In some instances, shame prevented them using informal or peer support networks and created anxiety about what information the Practice Teacher would share. Murray and McGovern (2015) also identified student anxiety, emerging from fears of who would know it was a repeat placement and concerns about performance. Practice Teachers taking repeat students need to offer higher levels of support and supervision to rebuild self-confidence and self-esteem, should ask the student about the previous fail but avoid labouring the point, and check what preparation the student has done prior to repeating their placement.

Limitations

In terms of methodological limitations, the authors acknowledge the small sample size and the different way placements are coordinated and supervised across Ireland, meaning findings are not generalisable to all qualifying social work programmes. This study canvassed the views of students to address a gap in the academic literature, and the authors acknowledge that these findings derive from their perceptions and recall of placement experiences. Transcripts only convey the student's perspective, which could not be corroborated or contradicted by the Practice Teacher or Tutor. Practice Teaching reports were available to the researcher conducting interviews, but findings do not represent the experiences of Practice Teachers, on-site supervisors and Tutors.

Conclusion and recommendations

This qualitative study provides a rich insight into the experiences of student social workers who failed a placement. It raises a number of concerns regarding the quality of some practice learning experiences, the blurring of professional boundaries between students and Practice Teachers, and the perceived powerlessness of students.

Prior to placement, Tutors should develop supportive relationships with their students and encourage students to disclose vulnerabilities regarding personal or health issues with their Practice Teacher to allow for reasonable adjustments. Opportunities for peer support should be available to all students during placement to prompt critical reflection on practice learning outside the formal supervisory relationship.

Additional communication between Tutors and students outside recall days and formal practice learning meetings should be offered.

Professionals who know the student best, and have sight of a wide range of agency-related records and evidence should conduct assessments. Given the concerns surrounding the objectivity, autonomy and power of independent or second opinion practice teaching roles, this role needs reviewed. Practice Teachers should offer students ongoing feedback around progress and learning needs. An agreed action plan should be jointly developed to ensure clarity regarding performance issues and actions required by the student (shared with the student's training team including the agency's practice learning coordinator).

Previous social work experience did not aide these students, but limited learning opportunities on first placement appeared to impact on progress during final placement.

Failing placement had a negative impact on the self-esteem of students and carried considerable shame, which prevented students accessing informal support networks, minimised transition from closed to open awareness and increased anxiety around repeating placement. Student support meetings or Practice Assessment Panels should provide opportunities to reflect on placement, facilitate personal or professional growth and promote the resilience of students through an agreed student support plan.

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