**Conflicting and competing roles and expectations: the conundrum of failing social work students on placements.**

**Summary**

The relatively limited literature on failing students on social work placements tends to focus on the emotional reactions of the participants. The aim of this paper is different because it explores whether it is the student who is failing or whether stakeholders are failing the student by being unclear about expectations of a student on placement. This study examines whether the problem of failing students needs to be recontextualised within a wider framework of roles and expectations of social work. The paper is derived from a wider study into the expectations of participants of the social work degree. The results indicate that interviewees hold contradictory and inconsistent expectations of students, which may contribute to the difficulties encountered by tutors, practice educators, and students when a student is failing. The findings are linked to the wider context of the present reform of social work education and concerns about students’ suitability for professional practice.

**Keywords:** failing, students, expectations, practice learning.

**Introduction**

Failure of social work students is a conundrum. It is a puzzling question or problem for three reasons. Firstly, there is relatively little written on the subject. Secondly what is available tends to lack a clear theoretical approach. Finally, partly perhaps because of the preceding reasons, it is not clear whether there is a problem. This paper examines whether the problem of failing students needs to be recontextualised within a wider framework of roles and expectations of social work.

The importance of improving the quality of both student placements and student assessment on placement has been highlighted by the Social Work Reform Board. The requirement for all students to be assessed by a qualified social work practice educator, the introduction of the practice educator standards and the establishment of the 30 day skills programme are examples of this emphasis.

One of the main weaknesses of current literature on failing social work students is the lack of a wide research base or theorised approach (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Parker, 2010). Developing a stronger research base and greater theorisation, this paper is based on a wider study into the expectations of stakeholders of the social work degree. Despite limitations, the research approaches student failure from a more systematic view by a consideration of the understandings of a range of stakeholders (academics, students and practice educators), which is contrasted with a tendency in some of the other studies to focus on one group. Focussing on a single group may provide only a limited univocal understanding of a process (author’s own, 2009).

There are limited available figures on student failure on placement. Hussein et al. (2009), for example were unable to obtain sufficiently meaningful data to compare practice placements with student progression because there was a lack of detail about placements from nature and duration to, most importantly, type of assessment and the outcomes of different placements. They concluded more research needed to be undertaken on placements and student progression (Hussein et al., 2009). The absence of national figures on student progression on placements is a significant problem in identifying the conundrum of student failure in this area (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010). Some studies have had to resort to ‘guesstimates’ by generalising from rates of failure on their programme to offer a possible national figure (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010).

The lack of an agreed baseline for ‘acceptable’ student failure and, particularly, sufficient detail on placements and student progression clearly makes it difficult to establish whether students' progression on placement is appropriate or otherwise.

**Literature review**

The available studies on failing social work students tend to focus on the phenomenological experience of one particular group (usually that of the practice educator: Parker, 2010) and addresses the question: what does the experience of failing mean for the practice educator? Studies highlight such emotions as sadness (Shapton, 2006) or finding the process stressful (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010).

There are a smaller number of studies that consider the experience of students. One such study explored the experiences of Black African students (Bartoli et al, 2008). In this paper the authors addressed the difficulties students experienced in adjusting to the expectations of social work placements within England. The point is rightly made that there needs to be a mutual adjustment or re-alignment of understandings from academics and practice educators as well as Black African students. Further work is likely to be required on the effects of personal characteristics such as ethnicity and other features such as gender with regard to student failure (Hussein et al, 2009, p. 7; Furness, 2011).

Another study on student experiences (Parker, 2010) explored student feelings of powerlessness, lack of control or fear of reprisal. A perhaps similar suggestion to that made in Bartoli et al (2008) is that students’ experiences and opinions need to be heard in this area.

This study needs to be set within national and international debates about the nature and role of social work. Since devolution in the UK social work in each of the four nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) has developed within the systems of their individual nations. This paper is restricted to social work in England. Within England there are tensions and differences about what is expected of social workers. For example, social work in England is sometimes seen as based on the International Federation of Social Work (2014) with a focus on human rights and principles of justice (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014). Others adopt a more narrow approach emphasising the legal duties of the state to intervene to protect vulnerable individuals (Narey, 2014). This debate about social work can produce conflicting models and interventions (Munro, 2011). However, although restricted to England, tensions and differences about the nature and purpose of social work can be found in other European countries (Woolf et al, 2011; author’s own, 2015). Therefore, this paper can be seen as part of a wider European debate about the role of social work in 21st century Europe.

**Comparisons with nursing**

This debate about social work and its implications for failing students is not limited to social work. As an example of similar tensions in another profession, concerns about failing nursing students have been explored in similar ways. Like social work there is relatively little literature on the topic (Scanlon et al., 2001). Studies have tended to focus on the feelings of mentors (the term for practice educator used in nursing). The danger of ‘failing to fail’ is also acknowledged. Competing and conflicting roles and expectations are discussed in nursing literature but tend to revolve around the lack of time mentors have to devote to their students and the competing demands of the mentors own workloads (Pulsford et al., 2002).

Whether there is a wider context of a loss of trust in professions is beyond the limits of this paper. However, it may be suggested that the tensions in social work and nursing may reflect this mistrust of professional expertise (authors own, in press). Examples of such ‘suspicion’ can perhaps be seen in the Brexit and Trump results in UK and USA in 2016.

**Research questions**

The data utilised in this study address the two questions of this paper:

1. What are the expectations of participants of students on the social work degree?
2. To what extent can these expectations illuminate an understanding of the conundrum of student failure on placement?

**Methodology**

A qualitative case study of a social work degree programme in England was undertaken after obtaining ethical approval. There were two stages (2008; 2011-2012) to the research strategy and data collection. Stage 1 data collection in 2008 was initially gathered to generate findings based on New Labour’s modernisation of qualifying social work education. However, the establishment of the Social Work Reform Board (and the reform agenda in social work education) in 2009 transformed social work education in England. In the light of these changes it was necessary to widen the study to include the proposed reforms to social work education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with academics (10), practice educators (8) and academics involved in practice learning (2). Two focus groups were undertaken with service users (11) and three focus groups with students (17). A total of 48 participants were involved in the data collection. The data was analysed by coding and developing themes from the initial coding adopting Braun and Clark’s (2006) six-stage approach. This is a six-stage analysis, which begins with familiarisation with the data, leading into generating initial codes and ending with a completed set of themes.

The interview was adopted for academics and practice educators because each individual possessed knowledge of the old as well as the new programme and could compare and contrast them. Focus groups were considered preferable for students and service users because they could comment only on the programme in which they were involved.

All participants received written information sheets and completed signed consent forms. In terms of recruitment, academics with previous experience of teaching on other social work programmes and on previous awards such as the Diploma in Social Work were contacted. Practice educators with experience of the Diploma in Social Work as well as the social work degree were prioritised where possible. Only students in their final year at the university were contacted because they would have the greatest experience of the programme and would be on their final placements, which tended to be in statutory settings. There were only two practice learning posts and both of these academics were recruited. All existing service users were contacted but only the 11 participants agreed to join the focus groups. An attempt was made to have a focus group of young service users but the young people were not in a position to participate. Academics, students and service users were interviewed at the university. Practice educators were visited at their place of employment.

Two main themes emerged around expectations relevant to failing students on placement: organisational and professional. The conflicts between these themes (and sub themes) and their effects on student performance are considered.

**Organisational expectations**

There was an acknowledgement from participants that the expectations of the organisation were not always consistent with the expectations of students and the university or academics.

*“Sometimes we hear them say because we are students that’s why we’re still doing this. They have this organisational structure – when you get there eventually you just fit in* (student)”.

There is a very clear sense of the separation even oppositional approach between them (the practitioners) and us (the students) when a student reports “*sometimes we hear them say”*. The phrase suggests the students overhear a conversation, perhaps even are discussed even when the practitioners are aware they can hear the conversation. The proverb about children being seen and not heard may be apposite here: the practitioners do not take seriously the students’ views and actions because they have not matured into practitioners. The conversation both tends to exclude (it is about the students) and includes them (the students hear the conversation). What is particularly interesting is the student’s explanation of why the social workers make this comment. The student suggests says that it is the organisational structure that elucidates why the social workers talk about rather than with the students, why they indicate an immaturity or lack of understanding by the students.

**It’s a job**

The main way in which students are expected to act in an organisational context is by getting “*on with it*”(student). In one sense learning has to be by “*doing”* (practice educator). However, the expectation is that students are able to perform as if they are in a “*new job*” (practice educator) rather than students learning how to become future practitioners. Students are expected to be “*equipped, running on their first day*”(practice educator). Students will be “*dumped”* (student) with work and will have only limited contact with the practice educator. In a sense students are *“plunged”* (academic) into statutory work such as child protection and will “*struggle”* to complete the work (academic).

**A robotic process**

The job that students are expected to do is carried out in a robotic way*:*

*“It can almost turn into a kind of robotic process and it’s funny because you actually see professionals who have been there for a very long time and it’s all ‘this is how I do it’”* (student)

Experienced practitioners explain their practice as a repetitive activity rather than a reflective or theorised practice. Students are expected to work within a particular framework (for example, *doing* children or care management). At the forefront of a student’s mind *is “getting my work finished before 5:30”* (student).

**Endless form filling**

The nature of statutory social work seems to focus on a bureaucratic approach to social work practice. Students are expected to be able to produce relevant formal documents and be computer literate rather than demonstrate clearly delineated social work skills such as communication and empathy or a wider or broader conception of social work, which can still be found in other types of social work.

*“When intervention comes about it’s very much about fitting in a certain bureaucratic guidance about when you intervene.”* (academic)

An academic contrasts present day social work practice with how he originally used to be able to undertake “*informal”* activities with service users. For example, he could help service users redecorate their homes. These types of activities promoted developing a “*good relationship”* with service users (academic). These opportunities are no longer available and the focus is now on managing resources Social work is *“much more bureaucratic with less flexibility”* about how social workers practise (academic).

**Professional expectations**

Social work is still understood as being about working with people, helping them to develop and improve their lives. As a profession social work has the *“capacity to affect change in people’s lives”* (academic). Helping others to transform and improve their lives is what the profession is about. One student in a voluntary setting describes how she is able to work directly with service users and the team explore theory and practice issues. However, generally the direct interventions with service users “*comes a poor second”* (student) to sitting in front of a computer screen and completing online assessments.

**Bringing about change**

Students come into the profession, wanting to improve the lives of service users by bringing about change in their lives and environment. In some sense they want to change the world and resolve social ills.

“*What did interest me in practice, and still interests me, is the capacity to affect change in people’s lives. That’s what would interest me, to be able to work with people, see change happen, recognising that might be a very slow process for some people*.” (academic)

This academic explains how she chose to opt out of statutory social work because it was not able to provide the kind of work she felt social work was about. Working directly with service users to improve their lives is what social work is about.

**Intellectual practice**

The academy expects students to understand what they are undertaking in practice. Using theory students explore how best to intervene and support service users. They are expected to use theories on anti-oppressive practice, for example, to challenge oppression. Students are expected to adopt a holistic approach, seeing the wider context of a service user’s world rather than focus on a narrow or medical approach.

*“You actually need to have some theoretical knowledge in order to do the work. You need to know why you are doing what you are doing and not just follow rules and do what you are doing. So that for me, it’s a much better way to work because if you can intellectualise why you do what you do, you are going to be a much better worker because you are actually going to be able to think about what you are doing.”* (academic)

Being able to “*intellectualise”* the reasons for what a social worker does will make the social worker a “*better worker”.*  Being able to provide a theoretical justification to an intervention will enable the social worker to advocate on behalf of a service user in a more successful way (academic).

**An example of conflict of expectations and the risks of failing**

One of the students recounted a story of a fellow student who had to deal with a disgruntled service user:

*“He was trying to stop them from going back into the office and raising hell. He thought it would stop him from damaging his own prospects and stop a big issue and thirdly he’s going to do things the right way which will empower him in the future. One week later the social worker tapped him on the shoulder and said ‘We don’t encourage making complaints’.”* (student)

The student acted to empower the service user as part of the professional expectation of improving people’s lives. By providing the service user with information about the complaints procedures, the student hoped the service use would not cause an incident in the office, which was not in the service user’s interests. Also, the student was making use of theory (empowerment) to decide on an intervention.

However, the response from the social worker was to warn the student that the organisational expectation was not to encourage complaints. Challenging bad practice is not necessarily promoted within organisations despite professional expectations on empowerment and service users’ rights.

If a student dares to raises issues, there is a fear among them that there may be an adverse effect on their passing their placements or obtaining a good reference:

*“To come in to a place and challenge bad practice is a bit naïve.”* (student)

The university may promote challenging oppression or bad practice, but, in reality, students may be confronted with being removed from the placement precisely because they take seriously what they have been taught about their professional roles and values:

*“What we learn in university we learn to challenge [murmurs of agreement from other students] so we are prepared to challenge that person, challenge oppression. But what are we portraying in reality? Does it help much to challenge and change policies? I know a lot of people have had problems in challenging and then they say they don’t what you in placement.”* (student)

**Discussion of results**

There is nothing new about the claim there is too much expected of social work and social workers (Barclay Report, 1982). However, it is suggested that the expectations of students as expounded in this study are overly demanding and contradictory. Organisational and professional expectations contrast and conflict with each other. The themes arising from this paper may even contribute to the suggestion that there is at present a debate or struggle about the nature of social work (Author’s own, 2015). If social work is reduced to a routine type of bureaucracy or r*obotic* (student)activity the knowledge base of social work becomes irrelevant (Singh and Cowden, 2009).

Lack of clarity and competing understandings of expectations have been explored in other professions (Phillips et al., 1996a; 1996b; Watson, 1999; Bray and Nettleton, 2007). The organisational expectations of students in this paper are centred on the performance(Ball, 2004) of tasks determined by agency requirements. These activities are described as repetitive, bureaucratic and overly demanding. Increasingly social work is portrayed as a routinised role (Broadhurst et al, 2010). A number of studies have undertaken research on the use of standardised assessment forms in children and families social work (White et al, 2009; Broadhurst et al, 2010; Thomas and Holland, 2010). The findings indicate that professional practice is “*constrained”* (White et al, 2009, p. 1213) by the standardisation of assessments, which produces formulaic information(Lash, 2002) to support electronic recording. The danger with this sort of material is that it reduces the role of the social worker to a bureaucratic transcriber of data, which is denuded of context and narrative (Lash, 2002; White et al, 2009). The complex stories of human beings, which require professional interpretation and assessment, become lists of mere information (Aas, 2004).

Contrasting expectations are not confined to students. Research on newly qualified social workers tends to indicate that social workers continue to experience contradictory expectations in their first year of practice (Bates et al, 2010; Jack and Donnellan, 2010). For example, there was a sense of “*reality shock*” (Jack and Donaldson, 2010, p. 309) stemming from the confrontation between the ideals they had of social work and the realities of practice which focused on accountability and control.

Assessing students on placement with contrasting expectations will inevitably affect and challenge a transparent and consistent approach to student assessment. Lack of agreed and consistent roles and expectations are likely to result in uncertainty and anxiety about whether a student is failing (Bray and Nettleton, 2007). It may be contended that student failure (or non-failure) is as much a question of the roles and expectations of modern social work as a ‘problem’ of student assessment. Bray and Nettleton (2007, p. 854) make a similar point from a nursing perspective and suggest there needs to be greater understanding of expectations “*from a wider multi-professional context”.* Mismatched expectations are likely to lead to divergent expectations and understandings of whether students are progressing successfully on placement. The assessment process is a context based activity (Cowburn et al, 2000) going beyond the practice educator and student relationship and experience. Expectations underlie the context of assessment. Offering for example, a second opinion to failing students (Cowburn et al, 2000; Parker, 2010) does not provide an independent or “fresh” view because the contrasting expectations in present day practice provide different approaches to the nature and quality of social work practice. Expectations need to be explicitly articulated. The problem, however, is how practice educators can assess students against contradictory expectations.

The Munro Review (2011) of child protection explicitly acknowledges the prescriptive and procedural focus of child protection practice in England. The report reviews a number of contradictory expectations (Author et al, 2016) such as:

* Bureaucracy v professional expertise;
* Compliance culture v learning culture;
* Compliance v relationship-building;
* Prescription v autonomy;
* Promotion v direct work.

It is suggested that the binary oppositions identified in Munro are similar to the two contradictory expectations identified in the present paper. Munro argues there should be more focus on relationship skills and direct work with service users. However, as this paper indicates, the organisational expectations of social work are deeply engrained and may prove resistant to a move towards what this paper calls professional expectations (Whittaker, 2011).

The Social Work Reform Board has attempted to re-invigorate the professional integrity of social work by reviewing social work from prequalifying to post qualifying training and practice. The descriptors for students on placements and at the point of qualification refer to students gradually obtaining and applying to practice the knowledge, skills and values” of social work. The findings from this paper suggest that applying knowledge, skills and values in practice may prove problematic for as long as there remains contrasting expectations of students.

Together the Munro Review and the Social Work Reform Board argue for a more professional approach to social work, meaning a greater focus on knowledge, skills and values, including the development of direct relationship based skills. A contrast may be drawn between the two reports. The Munro Review contains detailed analysis but relatively vague and limited proposals. The Social Work Reform Board is full of recommendations but short on analysis and explanation of its recommendations. It remains to be seen whether the combination of Munro’s analysis and the Social Work Reform Board’s recommendations will transform social work into a more professional occupation. Possible recommendations for a way forward could include (author’s own, 2016): assessments; ethical exercise; and ‘grassroots’ education. A more open’ or developmental approach could be introduced in assessments to provide a more narrative concept of assessments (Thomas and Holland, 2010; author et al, 2015). The use of vignettes based on contemporary debates and tension in social work practice can provide opportunities for students to identify and engage with contemporary debates within society about the role of social workers (Doel et al, 2010). Finally, ‘grassroots’ education (Tobis, 213) with students working directly with service users and learning from service user groups and communities can help engage students with the lived experiences of service users. However, assessing students on placement (or elsewhere on the programme) will itself continue to prove problematic until the struggle for social work’s identity is won (author’s own, 2015).

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