Participation, Power, Emotion and Decision Making in Relation to Failing Social Work Students: An Ethnographic and Practice-Near Exploration of Practice Assessment Panels

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1) Qualitative study of practice educators experiences of working with failing students and why difficult to fail (DSW thesis) Finch, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013).

2) Qualitative study of tutors experiences of working with struggling or failing students in placement (Finch, forthcoming)

3) Mixed method study of practice assessment panels (including an ethnographic exploration of PAPs, looking at decision making around failing students (Finch, 2013)
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Comparative study – U.K. and Italian practice educators experiences (Finch and Poletti, 2013)

Exploration of how far the concept of projective identification may help us to understand the difficulties in failing social work students in placement. (Finch, Schaub and Dalrymple, 2013)
Background

- Historical concern about low failure rates on social work programmes and particularly the placement component. (2-3%)

- Research (albeit limited) from range of professions internationally, which have also shown the challenges in failing students in practice learning settings (e.g., Bogo et al., 2007; Samec, 1995; Gizara and Forest, 2007; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010)

- Interested in reasons why working with failing students in practice learning settings appears to be such an emotionally painful experience.

Comparative study of UK and Italian practice educators experiences (Finch and Poletti, 2013)

Exploration of how far the concept of projective identification may help us to understand the difficulties in failing social work students in placement (Finch, Schaub and Dalrymple, 2013)

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Practice Assessment Panels
• Feature on qualifying social work programmes since 1991 (when DipSW introduced)
• Has quality assurance and quasi-assessment function.
• Upholds (or not) practice educators recommendations
• Staffed by tutors, practice educators, SW ers and service users
• Differences however in remit of PAP across HEIs.

3) Mixed method study of practice assessment panels (including an ethnographic exploration of PAPs, looking at decision making around failing students (Finch, 2013)
Placement Requirements

- Social Work students (BA and MA) required to undertake 170 days of assessed practice.
- 2 placements (70 and 100 days) with different service user groups
- Assessed by a practice educator who is usually a qualified social worker
- 2nd placement required to be assessed by stage 2 qualified practice educator.
- 2nd placement requires students to undertake statutory tasks & interventions
- Students (since 2013) assessed against The College of Social Work devised, Professional Capability Framework (PCF)
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Practice Educator works with and assesses student over 70 or 100 days - writes a report and recommends a pass or fail

External examiner reviews then decision formally ratified at assessment board. At UEL failed placement means student exits (as professional regs override academic regulations.

PAP looks at students portfolio, PE report, tutors report and reflective statement written by student and makes a decision to 1) uphold practice educators recommendation (or not) and 2) consider whether a repeat placement is to be offered.
The Research Undertaken

Research Aims:

• An exploration of group decision making processes in PAPs.

• An exploration of the challenges faced by PAP members when making difficult decisions about students.
The Research Undertaken

Methodology & Methods:

- Online survey of HEIs delivering qualifying social work education in England.
- Pilot ethnographic study of PAPs in 4 HEIs in England.
- Non-participant observational method & “practice-near” approach.
- Data (field notes & transcripts) thematically analysed
The Research Undertaken

Methodology & Methods:
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The Four Sites

- Different types of universities, i.e. old and new, in different parts of England.
- Between then, the PAPS looked at BA & MA students, placements 1 & 2.
- 10-27 people sat on PAP
- PAPS observed met in morning to quality assure/look through the portfolios, then formal meeting in afternoon
- Between them, the PAPS discussed 9 failing students – very, very small percentage of total numbers of students discussed
9 fails discussed

- the deferring of decisions;

1  fail upheld – no repeat placement
2  fails upheld with repeat placement (60 days for 1 and no time given for another)
3  fails – decision deferred to next PAP meeting
2  fails – no clear outcome or statement of what was to happen next
1  fail upheld repeat placement but placement to be deferred for a year.

1  out of 9 results in a fail with no further placement opportunity (ie fail the course)
6/9  final decision deferred (until next meeting or after repeat placement)*
* Changes this year to bursary, repeat placements not funded.
Findings

• the deferring of decisions;
• powerful voices dominating decision making;
• the role of service users and carers;
• the practice of “filling in the gaps”;
• the unofficial grading of passes;
• the impact of the emotional climate on decision making.
The tutor’s voice appeared powerful and decisive when discussing their tutee.

- powerful voices dominating decision making;

BUT….

Not all the tutor’s were present at PAP.
Findings

- the deferring of decisions;
- powerful voices dominating decision making;
- the role of service users and carers;
- the practice of “filling in the gaps”;
- the unofficial grading of passes;
- the impact of the emotional climate on decision making.
History of service user and carer involvement in social work programmes….

- the role of service users and carers;

- But differing levels of engagement by service users and carers.

- In large PAPs, voices of service users and carers felt lost.
  - Tokenistic?
Findings

• the deferring of decisions;
• powerful voices dominating decision making;
• the role of service users and carers;
• the practice of “filling in the gaps”;
• the unofficial grading of passes;
• the impact of the emotional climate on decision making.
All panels members engaged in story telling to explain why student was failing the placement

Need to explore further to see how these discourses influence assessment decisions

• the practice of “filling in the gaps”;}
Findings

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Findings

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• the impact of the emotional climate on decision making.

“Good pass”

“Absolute pass”

“Bare pass”

“resounding pass”

“student deserves to pass”

“Clear pass”

“borderline pass”
Findings

• the deferring of decisions;
• powerful voices dominating decision making;
• the role of service users and carers;
• the practice of “filling in the gaps”;
• the unofficial grading of passes;
• the impact of the emotional climate on decision making.
“it's just hard to fail a student, isn't it?”

- Guilt at failing student?
- Tutors heavily invested in students
- The events of a placement often got confused and muddled.
- Anxiety around decision making

- the impact of the emotional climate on decision making.
My Emotional Responses

FRUSTRATION

IRRITATION

I.E

DEFENCES

AGAINST

ANXIETY

ANGER

BOREDOM
My Emotional Response

Could not tolerate the pain?

“just fail her, stop talking about it, just fail her!”

ANGER

Self-censorship
“I am really weary and bored with this…my back really hurts, am hot and tired”.

BOREDOM
My Emotional Response

FRUSTRATION

“Make the decision, please...how much help and support does this student need...this is a fail surely...”
Discussion of Findings

• Unacknowledged emotional pain when having to make difficult decisions.

• Unconscious defences against anxiety observed in panel members and myself?

• Panels at times, appeared to mirror the placement, i.e. split panel, confusion over the events, lack of clarity about final recommendation.

• Concern about how prior knowledge of student is brought into discussions.

• The dominance and power of the tutor in decision making but tutor not always there.

• Prior knowledge of student relevant in decision making – issue re transparency & fairness.
Recommendations

• Preparing PAP members adequately, recognising the emotional climate & the emotional impact of failing students on members
• Recognising the investment made by practice educators, tutors and students in the placement assessment process;
• Ensuring the quality and consistency of practice educators’ reports;
• Strengthening processes prior to the placement, namely, admissions and readiness to practice;
• Ensuring tutors manage the placement process in an effective and timely manner, and being available at PAPs;
• Ensuring parity amongst panel members in terms of contributions and decision making
• Ensuring service users and carers are included in a meaningful and equitable way in decision making
Concluding Comments

• Pilot study – need for larger, more representational study.
• Greater scope for theorisation, i.e. psychoanalytical theory, decision making, emotional labour etc.
• Current political climate makes such research quite “dangerous”, i.e. not helpful to perpetuate the “failing to fail narrative” (although no clear evidence this is the case in SW education).
• Anxiety of panels, may reflect current anxious state of social work and the fear of “getting it wrong”.
• But… the PAP system is a robust quality assurance mechanism and has quasi-assessment role.
Thank you for listening
Any comments, thoughts, reflections or questions?
Bibliography

Finch, J. (forthcoming) “Running with the Fox and Hunting with the Hounds” Social Work Tutor Experiences of working with Struggling or Failing Students, British Journal of Social Work


