

Working with the weak or failing student

The impact on the Practice Educator

Janet Lancefield and Pauline Kewley

Teesside Independent Social Workers' Network

Janet Lancefield

- Social Work experience in all areas, specialising in Child Protection and Family Therapy
- 25+ years experience as Practice Educator, mainly acting as off-site
- Senior lecturer in social work at Teesside University from 1997 – 2011
- Holds Practice Teaching Award and has taught on Practice Teaching programmes

Pauline Kewley

- 36 years of social work experience in all areas in a Local Authority setting, specialising in mental health, safeguarding of children, and adoption
- 33 years' experience as an onsite Practice Educator. Offsite PE for the last 7 years.
- Additional training in psychotherapy and the neuroscience of human development
- Undertakes therapy and supervision of graduates and students

Introductions

Tell your neighbour:

- your name and where you work
- your experience of Practice Education
- a little known fact about yourself
- what you hope to gain from this workshop today

Be prepared to introduce your neighbour to the whole group

Aims of the Workshop

- To explore why students struggle or fail on placement
- To consider strategies to bring out the best in weak students
- To look at the emotional impact on a Practice Educator when working with a failing or marginal student
- To consider the role of universities when a placement is breaking down

We will do this by:

- small group discussion
- consideration of case studies
- looking at some of the literature on working with weak or failing students
- using the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) to evidence a pass or fail
- using feedback from multiple sources to support the recommendation

Small group discussion

- using your experience as a Practice Educator, or when you were a student, or observations of students you have had in your team, think of and discuss the most common reasons for students to struggle on placement.

Why do students struggle?

- Problems in their personal lives
- Specific learning difficulties, e.g. dyslexia
- Unhappy with their allotted placement – not what they asked for
- The placement is not providing the expected learning opportunities
- Personality clash with Practice Educator
- Unfamiliarity of how to behave in the work place
- Unsure that social work is what they want to do

Literature

- Williams, S and Rutter, J (2015) 3rd edition. *The Practice Educator's Handbook*. Sage: London
- Finch, J and Taylor, I (2012)– **Failure to Fail? Practice Educators' Emotional Experiences of Assessing Failing Social Work Students**. *Social Work Education*, 32 (2) 244-258
- Finch, J (2013) *A critical exploration of practice assessment panels: participation, power, emotion and decision making in relation to failing social work students*. The Higher Education Academy

Finch and Taylor 2012

- PE's lack of understanding of the guidance of the assessment framework. (Burgess et al., 1998a 1998b, Vacha-Haase, 2004).
- Attention to different learning styles i.e. visual, kinaesthetic and auditory
- Role confusion in respect of nurturer v enabler, assessor v manager and managing multiple roles.

Finch and Taylor (cont)

- Defining minimum standards of practice – what is “good enough” (Finch 2010).
- Rule of Optimism where student’s positives are over emphasised and concerns ignored.
- Being good enough to meet the competency requirements but not good enough for qualified practice.

Finch and Taylor (cont)

- Emotional impact on both PE and student when failing a student in practice and PE's fear of criticism.
- Gate keeping and upholding the standard of the profession and public protection

Finch – December 2013

- Concerns about practice learning:
 - Social Work Task Force 2009 *“specific concerns have been raised about the ...robustness and quality of assessment, with some students passing the social work degree who are not competent or suitable to practise...”*
 - led to Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme

Finch (2013)

- Challenges of failing students in practice learning setting is also well documented in other professions, such as nursing, occupational therapy, teaching and counselling psychology.
- A perception, from PEs, of little support or advice from the university
- Role confusion: Enabler of learning or assessor of learning?

Finch 2013 (cont)

- Research into Practice Assessment Panels
 - 9 fail recommendations from PEs
 - one upheld, with no further placement opportunity
 - two upheld, with a repeat placement opportunity
 - six, not enough evidence – decision deferred
 - one had a pass recommendation by the onsite and a fail recommendation by the offsite, with not enough evidence to substantiate the fail recommendation

Finch 2013 (cont)

- Evidence to show that if a student's personal tutor was part of the PAP, they would sometimes advocate for the student and argue that they be "given another chance"
- Sometimes "guilt" felt by tutors/universities that the student had not been offered a suitable placement or that they had not been proactive in recognising issues as they arose

Few reliable statistics

- In 2003-4 2.6% of social work students failed a placement
- 2006-7 3.2% of social work students failed a qualifying programme
- 2008-9 2.5% failed a qualifying programme

This does not paint an accurate picture necessarily - some weaker students will drop out/leave before they are failed.

Qualitative Research

- *“...suggests that the experience of failing a student in a practice learning setting can be very challenging to the point where some students may be assessed as competent when the evidence suggests otherwise”*

(Finch 2010; Basnett & Sheffield 2010; Schaub & Dalrymple 2011)

Case Studies

Please spend some time in groups looking at the case studies provided and be prepared to report back to the whole group

References

- Basnett, F and Sheffield, D (2010) **The Impact of Social Work Student Failure on Practice Educators.** *British Journal of Social Work* 40. 2119-36
- Burgess et al (1998a) **Practice Placements that go wrong.** *Journal of Practice Teaching* 1, 48-64
- Burgess et al (1998b) **Managing Unsuccessful or Uncompleted Placements.** *Journal of Practice Teaching* 7, 4-12
- Finch J (2013) *A Critical Exploration of Practice Assessment Panels: Participation, Power, Emotion and Decision Making in Relation to Failing Social Work Students.* London: Higher Education Academy.
- Finch, J and Taylor, I (2012) **Failure to Fail? Practice Educators' Emotional Experiences of Assessing Failing Social Work Students.** *Social Work Education*, 32 (2) 244-258

References (cont)

- Schaub and Dalrymple (2011) *"She didn't seem like a social worker": Practice Educators' Experiences and Perceptions of Failing Social Work students on Placements*. London: Higher Education Academy
- Vacha-Haase et al (2004) Problematic Students: Gatekeeping practices of Academic Professional Psychology Programs. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*. 35 (2), 115-22
- Williams S & Rutter L (2015) *The Practice Educator's Handbook (3rd Edition)* London: Learning Matters

Learning Outcomes

- To explore why students struggle or fail on placement
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