

# Do we need a second opinion here?

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**Summary:** In contrast to research undertaken in other aspects of practice teaching, relatively little attention has been paid to measuring the effectiveness of practice teachers. This paper begins with an attempt to establish why it is important that we take the issue of practice teaching standards very seriously, focusing in particular on the ever increasing prospect of legal action against practice teachers alleged to be incompetent and the possibility of a connection between a practice teacher's incompetence and his or her incompetence as a social work practitioner.

Ways of supporting and monitoring the performance of practice teachers are explored with these considerations in mind before moving on to consider how practice teachers who cannot or will not change practice which is deemed to be incompetent should be managed. The paper concludes with some final reflections with tentative suggestions as to how to monitor the practice of other social work educators.

**Key words:** practice teaching effectiveness, legal risk, performance monitoring and appraisal

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## **Introduction: Making the case for the monitoring of practice teachers**

Social work educators have long appreciated the critical importance of practice placements in the professional metamorphosis of social work students. Efforts have been made to consider how we may enhance the learning opportunities for students on placement, but, as Ellison (1994) has observed in an American context, 'one of (the) areas of neglect appears to be the measurement of effectiveness of field instructors' (practice teachers). Vonk et al (1996) also note that 'little research has been undertaken that evaluates, documents, and supports the importance or process of field work supervision as it relates to the development of competent and successful social workers'. Knight (2001) suggests that the relative absence of empirical studies in what constitutes effective field supervision will make 'the (practice teacher's) already difficult task of moving from practitioner to educator even more challenging'.

There are two significant reasons why this may prove to be a costly omission. Firstly, as Skidmore (2001) has observed, 'publicity given to the Human Rights Act 1998 and a variety of other initiatives, has brought with it an increase in the willingness of students and candidates to complain if they feel dissatisfied'. He goes on to make the valid point that 'students undertaking professional training are more likely than others to complain if things go wrong, since they may lose any chance of the licence to practice which acts as the gateway to their chosen profession.' Given the critical role that practice teachers play in student placements it is incumbent on those involved in social work education to ensure that supervision offered is of a high standard and that it is regularly monitored. Shortfalls can then be identified and appropriate action taken to remedy the situation.

The second reason is less easily discerned but no less significant. Alongside their other responsibilities as supervisors practice teachers act as role models for students on placement. Knight (2001) contends that 'field instructors rely on skills they have used in their practice with clients; 'the supervisor's capacity to discuss 'taboo' subjects, encouraging open discussion and negative feedback' are 'practice skills (which) may enhance their students learning'. Citing Stoltenburg, McNeill and Delworth, Deal (2002) asserts that '(practice

teachers) are also encouraged to discuss troublesome aspects of the supervisor-student relationship with students as a model of how to process relationship issues with clients'. Citing Fisher, Rogers (1996) notes that 'it has been argued that the core qualities for effective practice teaching lie in the practice teacher's own competence as a social worker'.

Perhaps it would be helpful to explore this hypothesis a little further at this juncture. One of the skills of the social work practitioner lies in his or her capacity to empower clients to explore problematic issues in their lives and then to consider ways in which they might be resolved. Social workers need to make effective use of such skills as listening, questioning etc in order to help clients do this for themselves. Such skills (among others) must be used in like manner by practice teachers seeking to facilitate the development of students as part of an adult learning process. It would seem reasonable to suggest that if practitioners are unable to use these skills in a practice teaching context it may be that they are experiencing similar difficulties within the context of their own professional practice. One might reasonably conclude that there is a correlation between the manner in which a practice teacher works with clients and the way in which she/he works with students.

Monitoring the performance of practice teachers has two spin offs. Firstly standards in practice teaching can be safeguarded. Secondly, the supervisor gains an insight into the practice teacher's own professional practice with clients (where the latter is a singleton practice teacher with his/her own caseload). The practice teacher's supervisor thus may gain an additional perspective on the practice of a team member who also acts as a practice teacher to students.

Having justified the need to monitor standards in practice teaching we may move on to consider how this could be done. This is not to imply that standards in practice teaching are not currently being monitored: it is merely intended to offer ideas to contribute to this important debate. The options postulated may also be seen as supporting and developing the skills of practice teachers as it is the opinion of the present writer that the two are often inextricably bound together. The article will conclude with some suggestions as to how we may manage situations where the practice teacher cannot or will not develop skills to enable him or her to perform as a competent practice

teacher. The discussion will be of particular relevance to singleton practice teachers though some suggestions will be of relevance to practice teachers in training teams as well.

## **Practice teacher support and quality assurance**

The provision of training through the Practice Teacher's Award has made an invaluable contribution in helping practice teachers to provide a quality service to students. However the support and training offered to practice teachers as they continue in this role is less in evidence. While some practice teachers of their own volition continue to appraise themselves of developments in practice teaching, others may rely on knowledge gained on practice teaching qualifying courses. The consequence of this may be that standards could fall, particularly with singleton practice teachers who lack the support of colleagues who are also involved in practice teaching. The attendant dangers of this have been mentioned earlier in this paper.

There are a number of different ways of tackling the problem. Firstly, practice teachers need the support and guidance of others which comes from sharing with practice teachers who are going through a similar experience i.e. supervising a student on placement. Bogo and Power (1994) studied the influence of educational methodologies and factors on new (practice teachers) perceptions of helpfulness of the training provided by one school of social work and concluded that 'the importance of a supportive, collegial group where members felt comfortable to work on similar issues appeared to be an important variable in the perception of helpfulness'. The value of a small group format to assist in the training of practice teachers is further endorsed by McChesney and Euster (2000) who suggest that 'active learning teaching methods, using a small group format, promote a climate for interesting and comfortable interaction among (practice teachers) and may serve to strengthen social work (practice teacher) training'.

While the perceptions of these researchers relate to practice teachers in training the continued use of small groups in the support and further training of practice teachers would not only enable them to keep up with developments but also provide agencies which employ

them with information about standards being met by their employees. It is not being suggested that agencies should operate a hidden agenda in this regard. First and foremost groups should be set up to support and train practice teachers; it may be that such information would arise incidentally in the way that it might do when team leaders offer supervision to team members.

It might be argued that the idea of both supporting practice teachers and monitoring their quality is a dichotomy. While one must acknowledge that there is some validity in this suggestion the author would contend that any tension which may arise in this regard is unlikely to be any greater than that which arises during the usual supervisory process. The emphasis of the work done in small groups would, in any case be about the consolidation and development of sound practice teaching methods with an appreciation that all those in attendance are seeking to improve their performance. Urdang's (1999) findings tend to underscore the view that practice teachers welcome such support. She stated that

agency supports as well as school-based seminars were important to the subjects .... Those subjects receiving group and/or individual supervision in regard to their 'practice teaching' expressed positive feelings about this assistance.

Where two or three singleton practice teachers are supervising students either in a smaller agency or within a particular client group it may be possible for them to work in tandem when it comes to offering support. Clearly this would need to be agreed by all involved and would require the informed consent of students and tutors effected etc. Such a 'buddy' system could operate in addition to the more periodic support/teaching groups mentioned earlier and might to some extent assuage concerns of researchers such as Rogers (1996) who note that the development of trust among practice teachers is crucial before they are prepared to expose their practice. He states that 'exposing one's work to others, especially when it is in an early developmental stage is risky. This explains why brief episodic types of training are less likely to be effective. It takes time to develop the trust necessary to take risks, to challenge others and be challenged'. It would be important for an experienced practice teacher to act as

mentor for the 'pairs' of singleton practice teachers to provide advice as required and to ensure that the potential for 'bad habits' in practice teaching is kept to a minimum. Lacerte's et al (1989) observation that 'mentoring is a highly motivating factor for (practice teachers)' would lend credence to this suggestion.

Having discussed the value of groups in both a supportive and teaching capacity it may be profitable to consider how to further evaluate the performance of practice teachers. While most practice teacher qualifying courses attempt to ensure that this occurs on an ongoing basis in supervision and by, for example, a questionnaire completed by the student at the end of the placement, perhaps more attention could be paid to evaluating the specific behaviours exhibited by practice teachers which students find helpful or unhelpful. One might suggest that while some valuable information can be obtained in supervision with students, Brown and Bourne's (1996) observation from their own experience that 'students' behaviour on placement confirm just how powerful the role of practice teacher is felt to be by the student, and how with all but the most confident it can have a profound effect on their behaviour' is a reminder that serious criticism (where this is merited of course) is unlikely to be offered during the supervisory relationship itself. While practice teachers themselves may be less conscious of the extent of the power they wield – Lefevre (1998) notes in her survey that 'just over half of experienced practice teachers had felt, at times, that their student was more powerful than they were' – we must assume the presence of such a dynamic, particularly while the placement is ongoing.

We can, nonetheless, acquire important information about the nature of the student's experience on placement if both practice teachers and students could separately complete appraisal forms at the end of the placement i.e. after the result is known to the student. Such appraisals should concentrate on the *behaviours* exhibited by the practice teacher which the student considered to be helpful or inimical to his or her progress on placement.

There would be some merit in considering how other related disciplines like nursing appraise the performance of those who teach students, i.e. clinical instructors. For example, Gignac-Caille and Oermann's (2001) study of nursing students' perceptions of the characteristics of effective clinical teachers used relatively simple

indicators such as 'explains clearly' and 'correct student's mistakes without belittling them'. Kotzabassaki et al (1997) conducting a survey of Greek nursing students' perceptions of the 'best' and 'worst' clinical teachers used similarly simple indicators such as 'answers carefully and precisely questions raised by students' and 'listens attentively'. Both students and clinical teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire and the ratings accorded to each characteristic by both groups yielded important information for the researchers.

Such questions, set alongside others dealing with such 'macro' issues as 'is supportive' could offer a detailed picture of the practice teacher's performance across the placement; if completed by both the student and practice teacher separately it could help to clarify practice teachers' perceptions of their strengths and limitations and provide valuable information for future training as well as monitoring the quality of practice teaching being offered by the agency. It is incumbent on us as educators to ensure that we continually seek to improve our practice. There may be a welcome by-product in asking students to complete such a questionnaire in that it may, in some measure, redress the power imbalance which exists between practice teacher and student. Everitt and Hardiker's (1996) suggestion that we should 'engage in evaluation as a tool for empowerment' is particularly apt in this regard though we must bear in mind, as an important proviso, Sinicrope and Cournoyer's (1990) conclusion, based on a study of student ratings of (practice teacher) behaviour, that 'student ratings of placements may reflect unique student concerns rather than the actual quality of supervision'. Nonetheless some degree of generalisation is possible where, for example, similar concerns emerge with regard to the same practice teacher across a number of student placements.

It is important to stress that the aforementioned appraisals should not be seen as superseding the practice teachers' responsibility to seek feedback from students on their performance while the placement is in progress i.e. at regular supervision sessions. Information acquired in this way may complement information accrued from end of placement appraisals as the context in which it is gathered differs significantly.

It would be important for agencies, universities and/or for regional bodies with responsibilities for placing students to 'track',

in broad terms, practice teachers' performance with students on placement. This may yield important information. For example, if it was discovered that the same practice teacher had failed four out of his/her last five students on placement this may indicate that the practice teacher is expecting too much of the student. Obviously one would not wish to push this too far; it is perfectly possible that the four students would have failed the placement with any competent practice teacher but the fact that this happened would warrant some further consideration.

A further method of monitoring practice teaching standards might be to ask an experienced practice teacher – perhaps a member of an agency training team – to undertake periodic observations of the practice teachers' supervision of students, read some supervision minutes taken etc. Clearly this would require the consent of all those involved. In essence, it is an extension of the role of the practice assessor assessing the competence of candidates on the Practice Teacher's Award Course. Such practice would of course need to operate across the agency i.e. to include training team members etc.

Singleton practice teachers have sometimes expressed a wish to revise their knowledge of social work models of intervention etc. in the belief that this would enhance their ability to work with students. College tutors, for their part, have expressed an interest in making greater use of the experience of agency workers such as singleton practice teachers in teaching students at college. While some use is made of practice teacher skills in this way, it may be useful to make still greater use of them as far as their busy work schedule permits. The greater involvement of singleton practice teachers in college based learning may be reciprocated by tutors in colleges and universities doing occasional teaching inputs at practice teacher support groups which meet periodically in the various agencies. In this way, among others, singleton practice teachers could keep more up to date with social work theory and methods etc. Such activities might help to address Knight's (2001) concern, quoting Curiel and Rosenthal (1987) that 'schools and programmes of social work must work closely and on an ongoing basis with (practice teachers) introducing them to the knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire and to help students bridge the gap between classroom theory and practice in the field'.



Informal discussion by the author with the students themselves on the topic of practice teaching standards led them to make a suggestion which might make an important difference at a critical point in the assessment process. Our discussion of the use of a Second Opinion Practice Teacher led some students to propose that in order to balance what they perceived to be the likely professional alignment of both as practice teachers, consideration should be given to the appointment of another worker familiar with the standards required but who was not first and foremost a practice teacher i.e. the person involved could be an experienced tutor from another similar programme, an operational manager with previous but recent practice teaching experience etc. Students stressed that they were not suggesting that a Second Opinion Practice Teacher would not do a competent assessment but felt that he or she was bound to be influenced, even subconsciously, by their similar professional perspective.

## **Preparation of students for placements**

Having spent some time considering the importance of monitoring the effectiveness of practice teachers' performance, it may be useful to consider how best to prepare students going on placement. Students need to be given as clear an appreciation as possible of the standards etc, to expect. Thus students could be empowered to make their own contribution to monitoring practice teaching standards in the sense that they would know when they are entitled to complain. First placement students often have only a superficial appreciation of the roles of the practice teacher, tutor and on site supervisor and an equally superficial appreciation of the nature of the work they will be expected to do. This point may be underscored by Skidmore's (1999) comment 'that most student complaints that reach CCETSW are about placement related issues (indicating) that it might be helpful to give more attention to preparing students on an individual basis for their placement'.

While clearly a major point of their learning on placement revolves around gaining such knowledge, students need to have a greater understanding, at least to a basic extent, of what is expected of them.

Pre-placement visits and initial training team meetings are of course invaluable in this regard but it would be very beneficial to appraise students of information relevant to any placement in a more gradual way while students are at college. For example, experienced practice teachers from statutory, voluntary and private agencies could visit universities and colleges prior to students going as placement. Perhaps a half – day convention could be organised (along similar lines to school career conventions) with students being given the opportunity to talk to experienced singleton practice teachers, one to one, from a variety of potential placement settings. They could hopefully emerge from such informal meetings better informed about the role of practice teachers and the nature of the work they may be expected to do without any attendant concerns of appearing too vulnerable with somebody who will act as their practice teacher over a three to four month period. Over and above the logistics of bringing together hard pressed social workers, great care would need to be taken not to raise their hopes of getting first choice placements etc.

One might contend that the advantages of the aforementioned arrangements outweigh the disadvantages if such events are responsibly organised. Students would hopefully be better prepared for placements, having a clearer idea of what is expected of them and others, and would thus be better able to recognise any legitimate areas of concern. This might go some way towards addressing Skidmore's (2001) concern that 'the exact role and responsibility of all concerned in the delivery of the programme should be defined' if offered in tandem with efforts to clarify the tutor's role etc. Once again the link between these activities and the monitoring of practice teaching standards can hopefully be discerned.

### **Some suggestions for managing students' anxieties about practice teachers**

Larger agencies i.e. agencies where there are groups of five or six students on placement at any one time, may offer opportunities for them to meet on a relatively informal basis periodically across the placement. Such meetings can be very supportive of students working

with singleton practice teachers in different offices. The meetings could initially be convened by an experienced practice teacher from the agency (perhaps a member of the training team) who is not otherwise involved in teaching the student. A student in difficulty may feel better able to approach this person if he or she has concerns about the quality of practice teaching on offer.

It is readily acknowledged that if this option was made available to students it could be open to abuse; for example a student whose practice was genuinely poor and who felt in danger of failing the placement could inappropriately complain that his or her difficulties were the consequence of poor practice on the part of their practice teacher. There would be a considerable burden of responsibility on the practice teacher who convened the group to explain his or her role very clearly with particular reference to their remit. He or she would, for example, have to check if the concern(s) had been raised with the practice teacher involved, whether or not the agreed procedures had been followed etc.

The advantages of such arrangements are two fold: firstly the student, in confidence, could discuss his or her concerns without feeling constrained by the disabling effect of the power imbalance which is bound to exist between the student and their own practice teacher. Secondly, the possibility would exist of the student testing out a concern in confidence without raising it to the status of a complaint. Such a prospect would hold considerable appeal for students who genuinely believed that the service being offered to them was effecting their performance on placement but who felt that to make a complaint 'officially' would turn a difficult situation into one which was beyond remedy.

Cognizance must be taken of Skidmore's (2001) advice that 'complaint procedures themselves should be clearly set out, tested and well publicised'. Students may know of their right to complain but may not know how to make a complaint or indeed about the grounds on which they can complain. (The point made in the previous paragraph may be significant here).

Finally greater use might be made of the experience gained by those who regularly act as Second Opinion Practice Teachers. While the brief of the Second Opinion Practice Teacher is to consider the competence of a student whose work has been referred to them, the

corollary of this is that they acquire some information about the standard of the practice teaching with the student whose work they are asked to consider. In some instances they may believe that the service offered by the practice teacher has played a significant part in the difficulties experienced by the student and this begs the question of what they do with this information. Leaving aside important issues of their accountability which cannot be explored within the remit of this paper, at the very least a mechanism should be found to feedback information about practice teaching standards to the agencies and universities involved. Such information might be given on a general basis in report form to agency practice teachers, university personnel etc, with care taken not to identify particular practice teachers whose performance has drawn comment.

### **Complaints procedures: A structured approach**

Having discussed a number of different ways in which the work of practice teachers can be both supported and monitored, it may be politic to return to the concerns which prompted this inquiry into practice teaching standards. While efforts to assist practice teachers to develop their skills often meet with success there may be some who either cannot or will not make changes which feedback from students among others strongly suggest should be made. Some of the procedures used in managing social workers whose practice is poor are of value here, but there are perhaps additional complications where students are involved which merit deeper consideration.

While it is tempting to feel daunted by the rather more litigious climate in which we practise, we may use this positively to ensure that standards for practice teaching and procedures for students and others to seek redress for any grievances are as clear as they can realistically be. This could provide a benchmark from which we can measure whether or not standards are being maintained by practice teachers and other educators involved in the process of educating students. While some progress has been made in this regard there still appears to be some confusion, particularly in regard to where the onus of responsibility lies whenever students raise a concern or make

a complaint. Such a situation has existed for some time. As far back as 1990, Elliott observed that 'detailed placement guidelines – whose purpose [was] to lend clarity and focus to the placement ... instead [encouraged] a pigeon-hole approach'. He continued 'In the last resort, if serious problems develop, a cotton wool bureaucracy that extends into the further reaches of the college and the agency alike, beckons in tempting manner'.

Nearly a decade later Skidmore (1999) seeking to offer guidance and advice in regard to legal and administrative matters relating to CCETSW programmes, indicated that there were still issues which needed to be addressed where problems emerged on practice placements. He stated ' There have been cases where there has been an allegation of unsatisfactory performance or improper behaviour by a practice teacher. Sometimes this has led to confusion as to how the allegation should be dealt with, i.e. whether by the agency as the employer or the programme'. He goes on 'This is a good example of why it is important to have clear procedures and definitions of roles and responsibilities in advance of things going wrong'.

One of the ways in which this complex issue may be resolved would be to give the regional bodies charged with social work and social care workforce regulation, registration and training – such as the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) – an explicit role in overseeing the development of clear procedures for the resolution of student complaints etc. Part of this would include the need to ensure the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in diploma and degree qualifying programmes are as clearly defined as possible.

Skidmore (1999) proposes several possible options available if, after investigation, the practice teacher is deemed to have been incompetent. He suggests, for example, that the programme may not wish to use that person again or take up the issue with the practice teachers' employer. One possible concern about the option of simply not using the supposedly incompetent practice teacher again lies in the aforementioned hypothesis that as many of the skills of practice teaching are similar to those of the social work practitioner question marks may remain over the practice teacher's fitness to practise as a social worker. This is, of course, a hypothesis but those charged with investigating the alleged incompetence of a practice teacher may still need to address this issue. Should they believe that there

was a case to answer in this regard, the issues may be dealt with as part of the supervisory process coupled with additional training etc. Progress could be monitored in this way and if no improvement was forthcoming, in the last analysis the agency's disciplinary procedures could again be invoked.

Currently bodies like NISCC, GSCC, and CCW have the authority to 'hear' cases of alleged misconduct against social workers. Perhaps they could also be given responsibility to 'hear' cases of practice teacher incompetence where the issues could not be adequately handled by the agencies and colleges involved. One of the effects of this would be that 'grey' areas could be tested out, and in the longer term a clearer picture of what constitutes good practice teaching would emerge.

This latter measure is rather draconian and would be used really as a last resort. It is to be hoped that the issues could be resolved before this but it would be important to have this as an explicit responsibility of the Care Councils<sup>1</sup>, regional or even national body to ensure that there is less confusion over how to deal with incompetent practice teachers. Ultimately the 'buck' would stop with the regional authority whose decision in the matter would have much greater significance than that of a smaller agency and would prevent the incompetent practice teacher simply moving on to another agency and continuing to act as a practice teacher.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion represents a tentative effort to consider the importance of supporting and monitoring the performance of practice teachers in the increasingly litigious climate in which we work. The author would stress that while efforts are being made to monitor and indeed improve standards in practice teaching we must widen the debate on how to do this even more effectively as we may be called to account for our actions as part of legal proceedings.

The debate about standards in the field of social work education cannot of course be restricted to the performance of practice teachers while students are on placement. There needs to be an

equally determined attempt to monitor the quality of college based tutors' contributions as this significantly impacts on the quality of learning opportunities offered to students on placement. Normally on site supervisors are not required with singleton practice teachers but where a long arm arrangement is in place there are grounds for suggesting that the performance of an on site supervisor should be appropriately monitored as they have a key role to play in the day to day management of the student, provision of appropriate learning opportunities, participation in quadripartites etc. Such a debate is beyond the scope of this paper but as the roles and responsibilities of social work educators are inextricably bound together, it is a debate which needs to take place.

In the last analysis, some may argue that there is a risk of making the process of supporting and monitoring the performance of practice teachers too bureaucratic; there is some risk, perhaps, of stifling the individualism inherent in the practice teacher's role. The reality is that no two practice teachers will ever supervise students in an identical fashion. While this charge must be taken seriously there is a need to monitor, to a greater degree, supervision standards vis a vis practice teaching in a way that is both practical and defensible should legal challenges be made against those who provide education to social work students. As most readers will know, this has started to happen. We must deal with the challenges posed to us in the era in which we practise or rue the painful consequences of not doing so!

## Note

1. This would be the situation. A student could complain about a practice teacher's suitability as a practice teacher and/or social worker who in turn could be called before the relevant conduct committees and face suspension, re-training or withdrawal from the register if the case was proven.

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