

First practice placement: Great expectation and anxiety of a cohort of social work students

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Summary: This paper presents the findings of a small-scale study examining the expectations and anxieties of social work students regarding supervision for fieldwork instruction. A cohort of students in their first year of a postgraduate programme for professional training was questioned about their aspirations and anxieties as they approached their first period of practice placement assessment. Their responses were wide-ranging and varied, and shed light on what they wanted from their supervisors and supervision. Students' concerns related to supervision as a vehicle for compliance and performance issues rather than as a purveyor of culture and values for social work. It is viewed by the respondents as an important site of learning and development whose opportunities for promoting self-awareness and the skills of critical reflection must be safeguarded. This paper argues for the importance of listening to students in order to shape the delivery and mode of fieldwork supervision, and posits supervision as a means of fostering notions of social work values that are prerequisite for practice.

Keywords: practice placement; student learning; supervision; social work education

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the expectations and anxieties of a cohort of social work students at a university in England. It also intends to provide some insights for practice teachers to respond to the concerns of students in their first practice placement. According to a number of social work educators across the world such as Goldstein and Harris (1996), Bennett and Coe (1998), Yeung, Lee and Chung (1998), Ford and Chui (2000), Clare (2001) – and also, Shardlow and Doel (2002), Leung, Hu and Ip (2002), Fortune, Lee and Cavazos (2005), Parker (2006), and Wayne, Bogo and Raskin (2006)– the field practicum is a crucial part of social work training which stresses the importance of learning by ‘doing’ and integrating theory with practice in an agency. The contribution of practice-based training or placement has been ascertained by a number of studies which seek to investigate the meaning of practice learning from the students’ and social work educators’ perspectives (see, for example, Doel & Shardlow, 1996). Undeniably, supervision plays a significant part in monitoring and facilitating student learning at different phases of the field placement (Pepper, 1996; Thompson, 2005). What are the major concerns students usually have before commencing their placement? What do they expect from their supervisors? What are the key factors affecting the practice learning process of the student? In many respects, students, university lecturers and practice teachers may have different views on what helps or hinders the student’s practice learning. To fill the gaps, this paper aims to answer some parts of the questions raised by examining the views of a selected cohort of the first year social work students entering their field practicum.

Expectations of field practicum in social work

Field supervision is a vital part of the social work programme at the university. As outlined by Kadushin and Harkness (2002), three main functions of field or student supervision are management, education and support.¹ Similarly, Young (1967) refers the role of the supervisor as administrator, educator and helper. The management function assumes

that the supervisor plays the role as an agency administrative staff member to co-ordinate, plan, and assess the job performance of the supervisee for whom he or she is held accountable and some of these tasks often include continued discussion and negotiation with other agency staff (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). The education function is to facilitate student self-directed and critical reflective learning through a wide range of supervisory methods such as formal and informal sessions. The helping function is to ensure that students are learning in a supportive and nourishing environment where they are not under undue stress and pressure where possible. In student supervision priority is often given to the learning and professional development function, and the helping function is usually secondary to the education and administrative function.

A body of literature has explored field supervision, the supervisor's behaviours and the student's expectations of the supervisory process (see, for example, Fisher, 1999, Gray, Alperin & Wik, 1989, Henderson, Cawyer & Watkins, 1999, Knight, 2001). In particular, Fisher (1999) explores how students view the role of the supervisor in field placements, and whether the perception of supervision varies between beginning and advanced trainees. Fisher (1999) concludes that students with varying levels of expertise do not differ significantly in their 'perceptions of supervision or helpful supervisor behaviours during supervision' (p. 70), and both beginning and advanced trainees outline the supervisor providing clear, specific feedback and empathy as the most important behaviours. Likewise, Knight (2001) explores the student-supervisor relationship in another way by assessing the field instructors' behaviours. This study assesses what behaviours the supervisor undertakes in placement and how effective these are on students at different stages of placement. In Knight's (2001) study, students report that task-focused practice which is concerned with outcomes such as enabling students to adjust in the placement setting, providing students with supplementary reading and learning more about the fieldwork setting is a useful supervision tool especially at the early stage of a field placement. Also, regular supervision, exercises in orientation to field placement and encouragement of student's autonomy are all viewed as favourable supervisor behaviours. A significant theme in this study is that of the supervisor taking on different roles throughout placement. Knight (2001) suggests that the instructor-student relationship is an 'evolving one' and may require

different skills at various phases of the placement learning process (p. 373). Both the Fisher (1999) and Knight (2001) studies explore what roles the supervisor may adopt in a field placement and how students view supervisory roles. However, their research focuses more on what is done during a field placement rather than what students expect or anticipate.

Other literature has also suggested various student expectations. For instance, Gray et al. (1989) highlight that students expect structured supervision, with their supervisors providing them with 'realistic expectations about performance' (p. 90). In their study, students, faculty members and field instructors are all included to gain a better understanding on how the parties involved view the field placement learning process and the associated roles. Their study demonstrates that students expect their field educators to have appropriate training, regular supervision sessions and readily available outside allocated supervision times. In addition students expect the supervisor to take on the role of a consultant and provider of knowledge based on direct practice (Gray et al., 1989, pp.94-96). A significant finding in their study is that students expect a greater amount of time dedicated for support-based supervision, or on issues unrelated to their direct practice, which are matters the faculty members and field educators are unaware of at that time. This reflects how views may differ between students and educators on field supervision. There is an ongoing need to explore what all parties expect, and incorporate these views in establishing a productive form of supervision in placement.

Henderson et al. (1999) similarly highlight that the field supervisor should possess adequate knowledge and experience and structure time effectively. This study goes one step further to outline that the 'ideal' supervisor should be supportive to the student and effectively strike a 'balance between direction and autonomy' (Henderson et al., 1999, p.48). Their research further demonstrates that the students sampled valued the establishment of a good student-supervisor relationship in field practice, identifying trust, respect, empathy and an approachable and attentive supervisor as important factors. Students also expect honest feedback from their field supervisors, identifying not only the need for supervisors to provide continual encouragement but also constructive criticism. Henderson et al. (1999) explain that students may experience anxiety due to the prospect of evaluation in field placement.

Anxiety experienced by students

Students' anticipating or experiencing anxiety in field placements has been explored in a number of research papers. Nisivoccia (1990, p.9) reports that 'feelings of incompetence' and the students' dependence on others for instruction can leave the student feeling anxious about the placement experience. In this study, students acknowledge that they feel anxious due to fear of being judged, not being accepted in the workplace or their position as a trainee worker not being valued. Her study also shows that the field instructor's reaction to the student's initial bout of anxiety associated with placement contributes to the overall effectiveness of the learning process. That is, the field instructor² can be accepting of the student and encourages them to use the knowledge and skills they have already acquired through study. Nisivoccia (1990, p.13) also highlighted that the field instructor criticising the student can 'inhibit further learning' and make the trainee more anxious in the field placement.

Pepper (1996) identifies similar factors that can cause difficulties in the supervision process as Nisivoccia's (1990) research highlighted such as a having a demanding or rigid supervisor, performance anxiety and a change in learning new behaviours. Although Pepper (1996) looks at the role of supervision in the workplace and not specifically on students however her research still highlights factors that can result in supervision being a negative experience and hence ineffective. Another difficulty in the supervision interaction that Pepper (1996, p.56) identified is when the student and the field instructor have different attitudes towards the 'value and priority of supervision'. Similarly, if the student views the supervisor as an authoritative figure in a position of power it may leave the trainee feeling anxious about the entire field placement experience. Evaluation is an important part of the supervision process in field placements and integral to the student's development. For these reasons, the evaluation process can prove to be threatening to the student, making them anxious. If the field instructor presents feedback in evaluation in a demeaning or overly critical way the student's anxiety can be heightened. Pepper (1996) also identifies that different cultural beliefs and values can cause tension in the supervision process, which also leads to the student feeling more anxious in placement supervision and less likely to fully engage in the process.

Research conducted by Sun (1999, p.106) reinforces that students on their first field placement are usually quite 'young and inexperienced' which may make this experience quite stressful (p. 106). Sun (1999) explores various issues that could have led the student to develop feelings of anxiety during their placement, through the study of 23 social work students' experiences at the end of their first placement. One issue arising from this research is the lack of confidence and skills in working with client populations. This includes anxiety related to work placement with clients of different races and cultural backgrounds and a lack of personal and professional experience. This issue is quite similar to what Pepper (1996) discusses with regards to anxiety brought about by cultural differences. Sun (1999) also explores other areas that may cause anxiety for students on their first placement such the stress associated with taking on the client's problems as their own; or, being overly concerned about the professional climate in the field agency such as their future status within the organization and whether or not support from other staff can be found. Another source of anxiety for students is their dependence on the supervisor to adequately perform their role in the field placement (Sun, 1999).

On another note, the anxieties which mature students experience may be different from the young and inexperienced ones. Mature students often have to juggle with other demands of various roles such as parents, partners and caretakers of relatives. Students with considerable prior experience may think that they should 'already know things' and may also believe that their practice teachers and other placement colleagues think the same about them. They may have high and sometimes unrealistic expectations on their academic results. All these, in one way or another, raise the levels of anxiety. However, a study conducted by Nelson (1978) concluded that there were more similarities than differences between beginning and advanced supervisees in terms of supervision focus, goals, methods and desired supervisor behaviour.

There is research that explains various methods of responding to a student's anxiety during a field placement. Freeman's (1993) research highlights that students rate supervision as 'better' when structure was provided and this structure can create an informative environment where the student can develop new skills and also allow for roles and responsibilities of the student and the supervisor to be defined clearly. She also outlines five components the supervisor should specify to provide structure, including explaining the roles and responsibilities

of every participant; providing information on the usual proceedings of a supervisory session; providing theory–orientation, and expectations of work performance; and providing criteria for evaluation and giving prompt feedback from the supervisor. These components can be dealt with to provide structure and be proactive in dealing with a student’s anxiety that may interfere in the learning process of the field placement.

Grossman, Levine-Jordano and Shearer (1990) also research how student’s reactions, such as anxiety, in a placement can be responded to effectively. They highlight that students are confronted with various sources of anxiety, arguing that it is a mistake to ignore the personal aspects of practice in field placement, as trainees should be encouraged to explore their ‘assumptions, biases, and the influence of past events on their judgements’ (Grossman et al., p. 25). Their study offers a five-stage framework for recognizing and responding to the students’ reaction to clients and placements. The first stage is engagement and orientation, where the field supervisor and student make contact and this enables the supervisor to make initial impressions of the student’s strengths or weaknesses. The next stage is that of assessment, which entails the supervisor assessing the student’s anxiety in the placement and in which areas that may need further discussion. Planning is the third stage in which the student, field supervisor and faculty member develop various placement tasks. This phase allows the supervisor to further explore any areas that may cause anxiety for the student and explain the limitations of avoiding these areas. The fourth stage of implementation prepares the student to recognise and deal with situations that leave them anxious. This stage includes supervision as a means for bringing any difficulties to the attention of the student and the field educator, which enables discussion of methods for dealing with these reactions. The final stage is termination in which the student can reflect on the areas where they experienced emotional responses such as anxiety, and how they develop perspective and closure so as to move on effectively with their life. Grossman et al. (1990) argue that emotional responses from students on placement should be dealt with as general as possible. More specifically, supervisors should utilize these responses as a means of recognizing, understanding and coping with these reactions such as anxiety, to meet the client’s and student practitioners’ needs and their learning goals.

In summary, clarifying and matching the student and fieldwork educator’s expectation and dealing with the student’s emotional strains

and stresses prior to the commencement of field practice are vital to improve the student satisfaction and overall outcome of learning in placements (Yeung et al., 1998; Maidment, 2000). Findings from these studies suggest that student learning is enhanced when there is congruence in terms of perceived effectiveness of teaching methods being used between field educators and students; a trusting supervisory relationship; availability of learning opportunities to integrate theory and practice; and accessibility of fieldwork educators when needed. Also, unclear expectations on the method of learning and teaching, and standards of performance increase a student's anxieties.

Method of study

The majority of literature that explores supervision focuses on the supervisor's behaviour or the student's experiences of supervision. There is a need to concentrate on the student's expectations before they begin their first year placement, their associated feelings and concerns regarding supervision. This small-scale and exploratory survey aims to investigate these themes amongst a class of 28 social work students who completed the first year of their training and were about to start their first field placement. The research instrument used was a one-page questionnaire that consisted of two open-ended questions and some questions on personal information. The two open-ended questions were:

1. 'What are your expectations of 'supervision' in the coming placement?'
2. 'What are your fears and anxiety experienced prior to the placement?'

The intention of using this simple survey method was to collect some preliminary findings of the student's views of the first placement. It is hoped that the results of this preliminary work helped inform how similar research of a much large scale could be conducted subsequently. The total of completed questionnaires that were returned was 25, and the response rate was high (that is, almost 90%). A thematic analysis of the responses was conducted by involving 'the identification of codes from the data' (Rice and Ezzy, 1999, p.192) by one research assistant and the researcher himself.

The study sample contained 20 females and 5 males. Fifteen (60%) respondents reported that they had previous work experience in the field of social work and human services. For example, four of them worked a basic grade worker in the residential setting, and two worked as a resettlement worker in a mental health hospital. There was evidence that the social work training attracted mature students who had some relevant experience prior to admission in the master's degree in social work in England. Special attention has been paid to examine whether their prior work experience may have an impact on their expectations of the field placement when analyzing the data.

Findings

From the sample of students preparing for their first-time placement, great expectations were abound. The following are the most common responses from the students about what they anticipate supervision entails as well as what they expect from a field supervisor.

Expectations on supervision

Honest feedback – constructive criticism

A recurring expectation of placement supervision highlighted by students was that of 'honest feedback'. This feedback entails both positive comments on work done in placement and also feedback regarding areas for improvement. The students regularly referred to this honest feedback as constructive criticism. This means for the supervisor to 'offer constructive suggestions as to improve knowledge and practice' (Respondent 6, female, inexperienced) to the student but also to offer an alternative perspective on work done whilst in placement. Supervisors should constructively analyze the student's work in an honest way through identifying their weaker areas of practice and exploring other alternative forms of practice (Respondent 21, female, inexperienced). This constructive criticism will allow the student to find more appropriate and efficient ways of practising whilst on placement, and ultimately, improve on their skills as social workers

(Respondent 11, female, inexperienced). She pointed out constructive criticisms should be 'aimed at development of skills'. The majority of female students with little or no experience expected supervision to include honest feedback from their supervisors regarding the strengths and weak areas of the students' work.

Qualifications

Many students identified the expectation of having a qualified supervisor whilst in placement. 'Qualification' implied not only the necessity of having vast experience in the field (Respondent 7, female, 18-month alcohol counselling), but also to have knowledge on how to supervise students. This may require actual training of the supervisors to provide a basis of what is expected of them, but also to ensure a consistent level of quality of supervision provided to all students. Recapitulating the fact that students require feedback during supervision. The more experienced supervisors are better equipped to provide students with accurate and beneficial information. If the supervisors do not have the required experience to supervise students, they may be doing injustice to the student by giving poor feedback and training in the field. This defeats the whole purpose of sending students on placement. Having qualified supervisors provides the students with a 'source of knowledge' (Respondent 15, female, inexperienced) of the specific field of work the agency undertakes but also first hand experience of the social work profession.

Contract – regular supervision

Having a contract drawn up between the field supervisors and the students was another expectation identified through this study. Supervision can be more effective if a contract has been compiled. Students explained in their responses that the contract should be negotiated between the student and the supervisor (Respondent 1, female, 8 years as a residential worker; Respondent 3, female, inexperienced). This would be an ideal situation for two reasons. Firstly, to ensure both parties agree on what supervision should entail and understand what is expected of them. Secondly, the discussion about the supervision contract can identify the best way to approach supervision taking into consideration the students learning style as well as the supervisors teaching methods. By having an agreement on what is involved in the supervision, and how to match different

teaching methods with different learning styles, will improve the student–supervisor relationship. This may include an agreement of weekly supervision, but regardless of the arrangement in the agreement, there should be a specific time allocated for supervision (Respondent 17, female, 2 years as a community worker). This need to codify the regularity of supervision ensures that the students are receiving a reasonable amount of supervision, and an opportunity to receive feedback from their supervisors whilst on placement.

The contract should also include an agreement that the supervisors and the students plan and prepare for their regular supervision (Respondent 20, male, 4 years as a community resource worker; Respondent 21, female, inexperienced). This expectation that both parties will be prepared for supervision makes certain that the students will have good supervision, and the supervisor’s time will not be wasted. Having a contract drawn up between the both parties, outlining what is to be expected and the regularity of supervision was commonly identified amongst the students in this sample. Students with experience in the field and those without both identified this as an expectation of supervision. This suggests that having a contract that clearly clarifies the expectations of field placement and supervision is equally valued by, and beneficial to, inexperienced and experienced students.

Reflection

Another expectation from the students of this sample is that supervision is an opportunity for them to reflect on the experiences they have had in placement. At times, students may not be aware, or unclear, of what needs to be done in the placement setting (Respondent 5, male, inexperienced) and supervision provides the opportunity for the supervisor to outline guidelines and clarify different approaches to practice, or offer suggestions to improve the students practice (Respondent 6, female, inexperienced). Also, students can utilize supervision to reflect on their experiences and explore their use of self in practice (Respondent 16, female, 4 years working in a bail hostel). An expectation of the supervisor’s role is to encourage this reflective practice and to provide feedback to assist the student to examine their experiences further (Respondent 23, female, inexperienced). By having a reflective element in supervision it also allows the student to discuss their progress (Respondent 20, male, 4 years as a community resource worker) and assess what areas they should be concentrating on. In

this sense, reflective supervision provides the student and supervisor a direction and can facilitate more effective learning during a practice placement.

The students that identified the need for a reflection process in supervision were again both experienced and inexperienced. Similarly to having a contract, these results suggest that students who have had experience and those who are inexperienced equally appreciate the need for reflection in supervision. Interestingly, three out of four of the male students in this sample identified reflection as an important expectation in supervision. Having the opportunity to reflect on work done is valued by both male and female students, and proves to be a beneficial part of supervision for all students. This reflective element in supervision would allow both the supervisor and the student to gain an understanding of the direction of placement, the progress made, and areas for improvement.

Safe place / confidentiality

The importance of supervision being a 'safe place' was another expectation expressed by the students in this sample. A safe environment would allow the students to 'voice anxieties and air ideas' (Respondent 6, female, inexperienced) without being judged by the supervisor (Respondent 9, female, 5 years as a treatment manager; Respondent 23, female, inexperienced). The supervision environment should also be confidential in nature where the student can exchange their concerns or anxieties openly (Respondent 7, female, working in alcohol counselling for 18 months) without the fear of jeopardizing their placement (Respondent 12, female, inexperienced) by their actions or words. If the supervision becomes an awkward affair where both the student and the supervisor feel uneasy about voicing their concerns, then the supervision process will be unproductive. On the one hand, if the student feels uncomfortable during placement and is never heard in supervision, then their placement experience will be detrimental to their professional knowledge and skill base. On the other hand, if the supervisor is unable to give an honest feedback, then their guidance is limited.

All of the students who identified the importance of having a safe and confidential environment for supervision were female, which suggests that this expectation may be gender biased. The majority of these female respondents were experienced, and may have understood the need for a safe and confidential place for supervision, in order to

speak freely on any areas of difficulties or concerns, and also to develop their knowledge and skills.

Dilemmas

A common expectation expressed by the students in this study was that of supervision to be an outlet to discuss personal and professional dilemmas. This expectation relates to supervision being a 'safe place'. At times a field placement can be quite a confronting experience and supervision should provide an opportunity for the supervisor and student to discuss difficulties (Respondent 9, female, 5 years as a treatment manager). 'Difficulties' can include professional and personal issues that may arise from practice in placement (Respondent 4, female, 1 year as a resettlement caseworker; Respondent 8, female, inexperienced). Several examples include the intricate aspects of the environment within an organization such as legislation and the difficult clientele, or possibly conflict between co-workers. Both types of difficulties may impinge on the student's placement experience, so the discussion of any issue arising in supervision is very important. By having an outlet to share these difficult experiences, the student would not have to bear the full weight of any negative emotional baggage or professional issues alone (Respondent 13, female, 15 years as a part-time welfare worker). Therefore the role of the supervisor is to provide feedback, and be supportive of the concerns of the student, and also to provide a safer, more enjoyable and productive placement experience.

The students who expected supervision to be an opportunity to discuss personal and professional dilemmas were the same students that highlighted the need for supervision to be a safe place. Their past experience allowed them to recognize the need for supervision to be a safe place, so as to discuss with their supervisor any dilemmas they may be facing.

Anticipated difficulties

Just as the students identified many expectations of field supervision, they also highlighted many anticipated difficulties associated with supervision. The following are the main difficulties that students may encounter during supervision on placement.

Time constraints

The most common challenge that students faced in supervision is the constraint of time. Students were worried that if there was no specific time allocated for supervision, they felt that they may have 'received less supervision' (Respondent 3, female, inexperienced) because of the hectic day-to-day schedule that occurs on placement. Unintended circumstances such as conflicts with clients and a heavy workload will undermine the student's learning experience. However, the unavailability of the supervisor is the major concern, which supersedes all other circumstances, especially in field placement supervision (Respondent 6, female, inexperienced; Respondent 15, female, inexperienced). The difficulty of time constraints also extends to when supervision does actually occur. Students in this study anticipated that they might encounter difficult situations that will require some sort of supervision or debriefing straight away. The students highlighted the need to have supervision in these situations when it is required the most (for example, Respondent 23, female, inexperienced) to discuss any problems and concerns that may arise. This also relates to time restrictions regarding pieces of work or assessment that are required for field supervision. Students identified the difficulty of not having sufficient time (Respondent 19, male, 2 years as a manager of a Children's home; Respondent 21, female, inexperienced) to adequately prepare for supervision, or to complete the required work on placement.

Poor relationship with the supervisor

Having a poor relationship with the supervisor was another common response from students regarding anticipated difficulties in supervision. The placement experience can be affected if the relationship between the supervisor and student is not positive as reported by four female respondents (Respondents 1, 3, 6 and 8). A difficult relationship may compel the supervisor to provide less support or encouragement, and the student may never develop the skills and knowledge that the placement experience can offer. Poor relationships with the supervisor may result from, as the students identified, different personalities or value systems, or having a different stance on various issues. Many inexperienced students in the sample identified that having a difficult relationship could arise during supervision. This suggests that their inexperience in the workplace makes them hesitant in establishing a positive relationship with co-workers and their supervisor, because

of the fear of possible conflicts in the future. In contrast, Yeung et al. (1998) found that social work students from Hong Kong favoured 'supportive, trusting and respectful relationships with their supervisors', thus bringing about a high level of satisfaction in fieldwork placement.

Anxiety

'Anxiety' can arise from not knowing how they should behave in supervision (Respondents 3 and 6, females, inexperienced). The students may be anxious about their own abilities and performance in practice areas that they find difficult (Respondent 8, female, inexperienced). On one hand, the students may feel inferior or incompetent if they were to expose their weaker areas in detail to their supervisors. On the other hand, if the students do not remedy their weaknesses, they will miss the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, and the supervisor will never have the chance to learn from them as well. Furthermore, the students may be anxious about the approaches to practice during supervision in the sense that may be very different. If both the supervisor and the student have drastically different practice methods from each other, difficulties in supervision are unavoidable.

Power imbalance

Experiencing a power imbalance between the supervisor and the student was a difficulty identified by many respondents in this sample. This power imbalance may entail the supervisor having a 'hidden agenda' (Respondent 5, male, inexperienced) and using supervision as means of controlling the students' practice in placement (Respondent 24, female, inexperienced). The students in this study recognized the need for supervision to be a mutual process (Respondent 5, male, inexperienced), with the supervisor and the student sharing experiences and knowledge, and learning from each other. The supervisor exerting their authority over the student by micro-managing the performance of the student would create undue stress in the supervision process (Respondents 3 and 25, females, inexperienced). Supervision should be an opportunity to explore new ideas and learn from the experiences of both the supervisor and the student.

Critical supervisor

Many students anticipated that critical supervision is an area of difficulty as well. A supervisor who only provides negative feedback (Respondent

10, female, inexperienced) rather than seeking to encourage and develop the students skills whilst on placement is unproductive. The students in this sample acknowledged the need to have a supervisor who could identify areas of weakness in practice, but an 'overly critical' supervisor would not be beneficial to their learning, and would only serve to make the supervision and placement an unmemorable experience (Respondents 6 and 10, females, inexperienced). All of the students that anticipated having a critical supervisor as a difficulty in supervision were female, and had no experience in the field before going on placement. One plausible explanation of this finding can be referred to Granello's (1996) analysis of gender and power in the supervisory dyad. In general, female supervisees prefer a more democratic or participative leadership style, and expect their supervisors to provide them with emotional and social support whenever necessary.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the findings from a survey of social work students' undertaking their first field placement. Similar studies by Rompf, Royse and Dhooper (1993), Sun (1999), and Gelman (2004) have been conducted to examine the foundation-year master's level social work students' anxiety about beginning their field placements in the American context. However, it is worth noting that my study in addition to investigating the anxiety of the student it also attempts to seek their view on the expectations of supervision.

Based on the students' responses in this study, the argument is developed for supervisory processes that model participation, reciprocity, responsibility and respect, which in turn engender similar qualities in the relationships that students seek to forge with individuals and communities. In this respect, both supervisors and supervisees should be sensitive to the parallel processes in supervision and social work intervention when they are observed, and attempt to resolve them by discussing the parallel process openly in supervision. Supervision is not only a teaching process which emphasizes theories and skills but also provides students an opportunity to learn how oneself is involved in the worker-client and supervisory relationships (Doehrman, 1976). Students' expectations of supervision were multidimensional, and

similar findings have been reported by Kissman and Van Tran (1990) and Knight (2001). For instance, the respondents, especially those who lacked work experience expressed the importance of a partnership with their supervisors who were able to allow them to disclose their weaknesses or perhaps mistakes made during the placement. Feltham (2002) stresses that an effective supervisory relationship will allow the supervisor to know their student well and vice versa, and enable them to work in 'an atmosphere of trust and [mutual] respect in which optimal conditions for exploration exist' (p. 26). Nevertheless, Torry, Furness and Wilkinson (2005) draw to our attention that the lack of government funding to pay agencies adversely affected the availability of good quality placements, and the resources available for administrators to match students with practice teachers according to their preferences and needs such as sexuality, gender and ethnicity. They opine that the bank of well-trained and competent practice teachers will disappear if there is the lack of agency culture and support in recruiting and retaining social workers to supervise students. In order to secure more placements, the daily placement fee has been introduced to pay those statutory sector and non-governmental organizations providing practice learning opportunities. It is currently funded by the General Social Care Council (Practice Learning Taskforce, 2006).

In this study, the respondents expected their supervisors to facilitate their critical reflection by challenging their unintended discriminatory practice or bias and giving them a different perspective of analyzing their practice experience. This finding, in one way or another, suggests that the respondents recognized the importance of anti-oppressive or anti-discriminatory social work practice to assist marginalized client populations or a diverse range of people in society (Dominelli, 2002; Thompson, 2006). Maidment and Cooper (2002) argue that practice teachers are expected to facilitate students to acknowledge diversity and oppression in supervision by raising the student's awareness of personal bias and subjectivity, using questioning and student biography to facilitate their learning on 'difference', and making use of self-disclosure during discussions on client diversity and oppression. As suggested by Boe (1996) and Goldstein and Harris (1996), social work students identified the practice teacher's or supervisor's position as a role model as well as a guide which in many respects impacted on their learning. In this respect, Boe's study indicated that students would like to see their supervisors 'teach them what respect and open-mindedness mean in

practice' (1996, p.121) by action. Maidment (2000) has suggested that in New Zealand field educators are expected to develop more diverse and inclusive teaching and learning strategies in order to promote social work education on the principles central to anti-oppressive practice (p. 152).

In line with the findings of previous studies such as Gray et al. (1990) and Pepper (1996) my study shows that effective learning relies heavily on the shared, realistic expectations about the learning objectives and performance prior to the start of the placement. A learning contract or agreement has been found as a useful tool in this respect, and it outlines details such as the frequency and duration of the supervisory session (Rogers and Langevin, 2000; Munson, 2002). There was a clear message that students would like to be empowered to learn and practise by learning from the constructive feedback on what they were doing well and the areas for further improvement. According to the adult learning theory, while adults are responsible for their own learning they need to receive structured and constructive feedback in order to reflect and generalize their learning experiences (Speck, 1996).

When comparing the responses between those who had no prior related work experience in the social work setting and those who had, the level of anxiety brought by the upcoming field placement varied. It is indeed not surprising to find that in general both expectations for supervision and level of anxiety were higher amongst those who had no prior work experience than those who had some form of related experiences in the human services. This echoes Fisher's (1989) findings, and more specifically Fisher believes that 'supervision should vary according to the trainee's level of experience and expertise' (p. 57). While the inexperienced group expected a more structured and directive style of supervision, the experienced one preferred a less domineering supervisor who emphasized professionalism and decreased supervisory control. A number of researchers such as Freeman (1993), Henderson et al. (1999), and Smith (2000) found that providing structure with supervisees can reduce their anxiety and fear. These studies acknowledge that while anxiety is recognized as a part of developmental sequence in the professional growth, it can affect adversely a person's capacity and motivation to learn. The sources of anxiety are many but one important source is associated with the student's sense of incompetence. In this respect, it is the responsibility of the educators, practice teachers and supervisors to make sure that

proper orientation programmes were arranged to provide students with adequate information about their placement but also to give them encouragement to 'learn by doing' while on placement. According to various learning theories, students learn better if they feel safe and are willing to take risks, thereby increasing their motivation and satisfaction in the learning process (Knowles, 1971; Fernandez, 1998).

There are two limitations of the present study. Firstly, the sample consists of a small number of students within a single educational institution. The findings are simply based upon the student's written response to the short questionnaire instead of in-depth interviewing which allows for probing and elaboration of their views in greater detail (Goodman, 2001). There is a need to replicate the findings of this small-scale study and investigate whether generalizations of the observation can be made. Secondly, the study relies extensively on beginning social work students to share their expectations of effective supervisory arrangements and practice teaching in general. Other key players of the social work practice provision including practice teachers, liaison tutors and managers of placement agencies should have been involved in the research, and their ideas and views regarding how to promote the experience of practice teaching should be incorporated alongside the student's perspective. A number of commentators such as Maidment (2000) and Torry et al. (2005) find their research involving practice assessors and field educators useful in a way that these research participants provide us with another perspective of articulating good practice and promoting student learning. According to Doel and Shardlow (1996, p.3), social work educators should constantly review whether the training at the institution equips the student with necessary skills to work with clients in their placement. Listening to the students' views is one way of evaluating how successful a social work programme is and what a high quality practice teaching is. Future research can use a more inclusive approach to examining both the students' and practice teachers' view on the placement process and outcomes (see, for example, Maidment, 2000). The supervisor's view should be included as well if there is an off-site practice teacher/on-site supervisor arrangement.

Notes

1. For detail, please refer to the analysis of the function of supervision by Pritchard (1995), Brown and Bourne (1996), Doel and Shardlow (1996) and Hawkins and Shohet (2006).
2. The term, field instructor, in this American study refers to the practice teacher who is the staff member from the organization that provides placement, and is responsible for monitoring and assessing the student performance. Field instructors usually are asked to recommend a grade for the student's overall learning and performance. The grade recommendations available are either 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory'. The recommendation will be reviewed and recommended to the Director of Field Education before a grade is assigned by the field faculty. In the British context, the terms used in social work placements are different from those used in the schools of social work in North America. For instance, 'practice teacher' is used instead of 'field instructor'. In England, practice teachers (or practice assessors) are responsible for the student's learning and assessment. Off-site practice assessors (or long-arm practice assessor or long arm/off-site practice teacher) will be used to take overall responsibility for the teaching and assessment of the student if the agency who provides the placement opportunity decides to do so. In this case, work-base supervisors (also known as link worker or link person) will be appointed to manage the student's work on a day-to-day basis and are not responsible for the student's learning and assessment.

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