

Planting the seeds for someone else's discussion: Experiences of task supervisors supporting social work placements

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Abstract: Field Education is pivotal to social work education and requires supervision by a qualified social worker. Student placements with external social work supervision are becoming more prominent, but are generally considered outside the norm and have attracted limited research attention. This paper presents the experiences of task supervisors who supported social work placements, a subset of data from a larger research exploring the experiences of key stakeholders in placements with external or off-site social work supervision in Australia. Task supervisors' perspectives have rarely been considered in research, leaving their contributions to social work education underexplored. The thematic analysis highlighted three dominant themes: the roles between task supervisors and external supervisors were not always clarified; task supervisors were actively engaged in the supervision of students, but did not necessarily have a relationship with the external or off-site supervisor; and task supervisors were not always involved in the student placement assessment. Participants emphasised the positives of placements with external supervision, but also raised a number of challenges.

Keywords: Social Work; Field Placement; External Supervision; Off-site Supervision; Student Supervision; Task Supervision

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Introduction

Field placements in social work education are integral to the professional development and growth of students (Patford, 2000). Practice learning can facilitate students to develop a sense of self-efficacy, necessary for the development of competent practitioners (Parker, 2005). An increasing number of students undertake their field education in organisations where their day-to-day work is supervised by a task supervisor and their professional learning and development is the responsibility of a social work field educator, also known as practice educator, external to the placement organisation. This paper examines the experiences of the 'task supervisors' who mentor and guide students through their daily encounter with human service practice and highlights concerns about the way in which these non-traditional arrangements are designed and structured.

The descriptor 'task supervisor' in social work placements refers to an employee of the placement agency who accepts responsibility for the day-to-day direction and support of a social work student but who does not meet the criteria set by the Australian Association of Social Workers to perform the professional supervision role. Internal practice educators or task supervisors are not remunerated for supervising social work students in Australia. When an off-site practice educator is supervisor is supporting a social work placement in Australia, the social work education program pays for the supervision (AASW, 2012a). Social work placements need to be supervised by a qualified social worker in Australia (AASW, 2012a) and England (The College of Social Work, 2014). Task supervisors often have an occupational background other than social work. While task supervisors regularly participate in social work placements by taking responsibility for specific tasks or skill acquisitions in a specific project or program (Cleak & Wilson, 2013), this research is interested in the experience of task supervisors who accompany social work students throughout their placement and where an external supervisor is appointed to provide social work supervision. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2010, 2012a) describe task supervisors as 'co-field educators' suggesting that the task supervisor and the external supervisor are a team who work together to promote the student learning. The experiences shared in this study highlight that this may not always be the reality.

Background information

Conceptual framework

In social work, field education or practicum social work supervisors, also referred to as practice educators or practice assessors, support students in learning through supervision, guidance and assessment (AASW, 2012a; Curtis, Moriarty, & Netten, 2011; The College of Social Work, 2014). It is generally assumed that socialising students into the profession involves the transmission of professional knowledge, values and skills ideally via field education arrangements that include an onsite qualified social work supervisor (Abram, Hartung, & Wernet, 2000). The principle of practicum is that student by doing and engaging with social work supervisors who act as role models (Camilleri, 2001; Cleak & Smith, 2012). Practice educators are core to the field education learning experience and students feel supported when their field educator is available to them (Parker, 2008). In field education, students are expected to demonstrate that they are able to meet social work standards and have integrated the profession's knowledge, values and skill (AASW, 2012a). In Australia assessment for placement is centred around the Social Work Practice standard and in England it is aimed at students meeting around the Professional Capabilities Framework (AASW, 2012a; The College of Social Work, 2014). Two key aspects of learning in social work field education are the participation in practice in an organisation and associated organisational, policy, theory, knowledge and practice contexts, and the active engagement in the learning process through critical reflection on the experience.

The nature of social work practice requires practitioners to respond to constantly changing contexts and demands. Preparation for practice thus is aimed at developing students' ability for reflective and reflexive practice, critical thinking, structural analysis and ethical professional conduct (AASW, 2012a). Bellinger (2010) highlights the importance of quality practice learning environment that facilitate students to be responsive to social change and current social work practices. Assisting students to develop critical reflection and reflexivity skills is central to social work education as these are core to social work effectiveness and identity (Adamson, 2011). Field Education can enable students to explore and engage in active and reflective learning that is personally relevant and

goal oriented (Segrave & Holt, 2002 in Maidment, 2006).

Supervision in field education is aiming to prepare students for practice as social workers; assisting, assessing and facilitating students' development of a social work identity (Maidment & Woodward, 2002).. Field educators are required to observe the engagement and work of the student (AASW, 2012a; The College of Social Work, 2014) and make the students' work visible in supervision, because "self-reporting is vulnerable to errors" as it is filtered through the student's experience, values and theoretical orientation (Maidment, 2000, p. 206). Little is known about task supervisors' contribution to social work students' supervision and to students' transition to professional social work practice, yet students are supported and supervised by them. In placements with off-site supervision, students learn with and from task supervisors about practice in the organisation and the associated organisational, policy, theory, knowledge and practice contexts. Hearing the voices of task supervisors will therefore provide valuable insights for social work education.

Field education with external supervision

The Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) allows student placements with external social work supervision '... where the host organisation has no suitable social work educator...' providing that arrangements are made that students receive weekly supervision by a qualified and experienced social work field educator (2010, p. 16). In England many practice assessors were non-social work qualified (Moriarty et al., 2009), however new standards will require all practice educators to be qualified and registered social workers in the future (The College of Social Work, 2014). Non-social work supervisors can continue to contribute to social work practice learning, but the final assessment of the practicum will need to be undertaken by a qualified social worker (Department of Education, 2010). Anecdotally and in some of the literature field education with off-site supervision is increasing, and it is generally seen as an outcome of an area of interlinked issues. Factors identified include fierce competition placements (Hanlen, 2011), increased student numbers (Lefevre, 2005), lack of support for field educators (Torry, et al., 2005), workload issues (Moriarty, et al., 2009) and the lack of social workers in certain areas, i.e. rural areas (Unger, 2003).

It is unclear what percentage of placements are supported by external

supervision, however, 14% of respondents in Cleak and Smith's (2012) Australian study had placements with external supervision, whereas 27% of placements in England utilised this model (Curtis, et al., 2011). These are significant numbers highlighting the importance of further exploration of what happens in field education with external supervision, how learning occurs and how it is supported.

The very limited literature available highlights concerns and potentials of social work field education with external supervision. There are questions about students' experiences, learning and assessment and whether the lack of clearly defined social work roles adversely affects the development of social work identity (Plath, 2003). Students in placements with external supervision at times experienced an uncertainty about whether they were able to develop social work competence (Zuchowski, 2013). The complexity of a four way process of assessment and reporting and the off-site supervisor's lack of connection with the every-day practice are a further concerns about placements with external supervision (Plath, 2003; Ung, 2002). Furthermore, while task supervisors are the main support to students on placement and take on responsibility for supervising students on a day to day basis, it can be argued that the recognition, status and reward is given to the off-site supervisors (Henderson, 2010).

Social work placements without qualified social workers in the placement organisation can have advantages for both students and organisations (Parker, et al., 2003). Students can partake in a broad range of experiences in emerging community organisations, multi-disciplinary work, and find job opportunities (Abram, et al., 2000). Abram et al. identify that placements with external supervision potentially allow sharing the responsibilities '... that a single ... social worker has shouldered alone in the past' (2000, p. 183), an assumption worth examining as joint approaches may be required in light of increasing pressures on practitioners and organisations (Chiller & Crisp, 2012). Moreover, social work placements in organisations without social workers could potentially facilitate professional growth for non-social work staff and/ or create willingness in agencies to employ social workers (Zuchowski, 2011). This is a social work centric view and it would be useful to explore these issues with task supervisors to identify their experiences and views.

Information sharing, professionalism, authenticity, rapport building and cooperation are particularly important in placements with off-site supervision (Karban, 1999). As the off-site supervisor does not have an insider view of student learning, accessing feedback from others to

supplement the external supervisor's own supervision engagement and observations becomes vital (Maidment & Woodward, 2002). For off-site field educators the contextual understanding of the organisation, the task supervisor, student and practice is necessary for external supervision, feedback and assessment (Zuchowski, 2014a). External supervisors discuss that they build relationships and clarify roles to comprehend the context of the student placement (Zuchowski, 2014a). Preparation of all key players for the work and effective communication and support networks are important (Parker, et al., 2003). Social work education programs in Australia need to offer training to supervisors, and social work field education need to attend this training, however, this is not prescribed for task supervisors (AASW, 2012a). The relationship between the supervisors is a key factor in a successful student placement with external supervision (Abram, et al., 2000), yet we know little about these relationships and people's experiences in them, and how they contribute to social work field education.

Role clarification, looking at the differing responsibilities of the supervisors is important for successful placements with external supervision (Karbon, 1999). Abram et al. (2000) suggest that task supervisors take the administrative role of supervision, whereas the external supervisor takes responsibility of supervising students without the administrative function. The question is, how does such role clarification occur in practice? A better understanding of the roles task supervisors assume would further expose practice and learning opportunities, insights and reflections presented in social work field education.

Methodology

This paper draws on data collected in a larger PhD study, a qualitative research framed by phenomenology (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) and social constructivism (Schwandt, 1994). Relevant to phenomenology, the researcher aimed to gain the experiences and attributed meanings of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994), with this article placing the meaning-making and views of the task supervisors at the centre of attention as little is known about their experience and views.

Method

The research question addressed in the large research project is ‘What are the experiences of all key stakeholders in field education with external supervision?’. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 32 participants exploring their experience as students, field educators, task supervisors and/or liaison persons involved in social work placements with external supervision. There was no relationship between these participants, with all participants exploring unrelated experiences within field education. The interviews were conducted in 2011/ 2012. The study was approved by the University Ethics Committee.

Participants

A purposive method of sampling was applied (Creswell, 2007). Participants in this research were associated with social work programs in universities across Australia. Nine participants identified as having supported social work student placements as task supervisors. These participants held a range of qualifications relevant to work in the social welfare sector. All task supervisors were female. The participants’ work experience in the social welfare sector ranged between 5 and 27 years. In the process of creating pseudonyms for participants the gender of the participant, their experience, background information and their role has remained unaltered.

Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants’ experiences as task supervisors and their views about placements with external supervision. Open questions directed participants to reflect on their experience in placements with external supervision, the relationships with the student, liaison person and the off-site supervisor, and their vision of the ideal placement. A recursive approach to interviewing was applied; this involved the use of interview guide around the topics listed above, but following the lead of the participants in the interview, enabled the gathering of rich data (Minichiello, et al., 2008). Data analysis involved a process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Neuman, 2006), utilising the function of ‘memos’ in NVivo to explore themes and

their links. Data analysis in line with phenomenology was undertaken with the goal of ‘...reducing the information to significant statements or quotes...’ combining the statements into themes and developing textual and structural descriptions (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

Limitations

This study is based on a small number of participants who have self-selected into the study and it is acknowledged that their self-selection may be based on a special interest in and awareness of social work placements. The data presented here is only one aspect of the range of experiences discussed in the interviews as part of the larger research project, and limits the discussion to the task supervisors’ experiences rather than looking at external or off-site supervision more holistically. This is nevertheless an important angle; task supervisors’ views are underexplored, yet vital for the development of practice in and research about placements with external supervision.

Findings and discussion

The findings are reported around the themes identified in the interviews with the task supervisors. Overall, participants highlighted positive experiences as task supervisors, but also identified a number of challenges within that role. Task supervisors provided informal and formal supervision to students, but not all task supervisors were involved in placement assessment. The task supervisors’ roles and responsibilities were explored. While some participants described a strong relationship with the other supervisor, many had no direct relationship with the external supervisor.

Task supervisor’s experiences: Rewards and responsibilities

Task supervisors’ responses were overwhelmingly positive about supporting social work student placements, identifying rewards and expressing appreciation for the added responsibility. Participants used expressions such as ‘enjoyable’, ‘gratifying’, ‘rewarding’ and ‘exciting’ to describe their

experiences as task supervisors. Participants talked about opportunities to build their own strengths and to further develop their professional practice, to grow new workers in the field, to get strong staff out of student placements and to advocate for their field of practice. This is consistent with literature about the benefits of taking on students on placement, for example, the ability to reflect on your own practice (Barton, et al., 2005, but also the advantages of placement with external supervision, such as professionalising the field (Unger, 2003) and getting quality graduates (Plath, 2003).

... it actually makes us better workers through having students there asking difficult questions, challenging us, making us stop and think about why we do things in certain ways. Monica

Although participants highlighted the many positives of supporting social work students, a number of participants also described their experiences as 'challenging', 'complex', 'tricky' and an 'extra workload'. The challenges participants identified were about different practice frameworks between supervisors, the busyness of the organisation as well as not knowing what a good experience was for social work student.

Because sometimes ... I am wandering around in the dark and guessing what they need. .. I have never had the experience of being on prac, ... I never did social work, none of our people in the work place are social workers, like they are from various professional background... so sometimes I am not sure that I am actually giving what the student needs. Monica

The lack of direction described here may be an important issue to address, considering that field education requires students to meet the Australian Social Work Attributes about professional social work practice (AASW, 2012b). If the task supervisor is unsure whether they are meeting the social work professional requirements, how can conclusions be drawn that the student has attained these? Similarly, different practice frameworks of supervisors may create confusion for student, but would also raise questions about which framework is valued and seen as appropriate to the formation of social work practice and how this is negotiated or explored.

A number of task supervisors raised that student take extra time, but each time this was qualified with the parallel benefits the task supervisor or the agency received. Some participants highlighted the challenges of having

responsibility to the agency as well as supervising the student. Regina was referring to her role as agency coordinator when she outlines that:

I do have that added strain of responsibility that the student fits in well here with rest of the organisation, ... everyone else has to jostle aside and make room for them Regina

The challenges that some task supervisors explored in terms of impact of the student on the organisation, their workload, the agency's standing and the team are worth noting. Task supervisors were generally balancing many factors, reflecting the current complex realities of social work practice (Chinnery & Beddoe, 2011; Kalliath, et al., 2012). There is a danger then that task supervisors, similarly to social work trained supervisors (Barretti, 2009) may be inaccessible to students because of these realities. Task supervisors participating in this study were concerned about the student learning and growing, but also about the impact of the student placement on the organisation and staff team. These challenges could be recognised and acknowledged in placement planning, and if this is done well and leads to collaborative, mutually supportive arrangements, may allow for the sharing of responsibilities and lightening of the load of student placements (Abram, et al., 2000).

Purposeful supervision: Theories, values and being job ready

Task supervisors talked about informal and formal supervision and a number of them provided both types of supervision to social work students on placement. Informal supervision was seen as opportunistic responses to what just happened, generally an immediate response to an occurrence. Informal supervision at times was about allocating tasks, but more often about exploring something the student might be struggling with. Some task supervisors talked about having an open door policy to ensure that they were accessible for immediate and timely debriefing and supervision.

I have an open door process, whereas if they want to come to me and discuss something, what do I think about that? Can I try this? Loretta

The majority of task supervisors also outlined regular, more formal supervision sessions they conducted with students. The focus of these

sessions included theory discussions and linking practice to theory, organisational practice, personal practice models and preparing students to be ready for practice. Task supervisors discussed that their supervision needed to be student focused, integrate practical aspects of teaching and shadowing, explore learning with students and getting them job ready.

I think one of the qualities I did bring was linking tasks to different theoretical paradigms, and I know that's probably not a role of a task supervisor, but...I think that has been actually one of my strengths... Lucy

I try to link it in with (the) theoretical, because it is social work, ... what theory do they relate it to, ... and how do they relate to it. So I try to give them work related tasks ... that they can critique. Loretta

Some task supervisors saw their role as providing opportunities for learning and reflection to students so that they can then take these experiences and reflections to external supervision.

I just plant little seeds ... asking them what they think and they have to walk out and think well when I see [name of external supervisor], this is what I am going to explain to him. Loretta

Participants outlined a purposeful engagement in supervision, and filled the need for informal, immediate debriefing and feedback to students. They also provided supervision that reflected on practice, aiming at developing students' practice and learning. There was a clear sense, though, that this would be supported by the external social work supervisors, who would then engage in critical reflection with the student about what the student had experienced in practice. The development of reflexive practice in placements with external supervision could thus be a split affair, the practice and potential dilemmas experienced in the organisation, but then explored with an external supervisor, potentially already informed by discussions with the task supervisor.

Supervisors' roles

Literature identifies the importance of clarifying the roles between the task and the external supervisors (Abram, et al., 2000) and the AASW

(2012a) requires that these roles are specifically outlined. A number of participants highlighted the importance of making role expectations clear. They suggested that everyone needs to know ‘their place’ and have an understanding of each other’s role. However, clear role expectations were not always in place for some participants. Louise, for instance, stressed that clarifying role expectations might be useful:

...making ... the roles very clear, the supervisor and the task supervisor, they need to sit down separately at the beginning and establish and fitting in when we can have these conversations and sticking to it and that’s through commitment. Louise

When discussing the roles of task supervisors and external supervisors in supporting social work student placements, participants generally described the task supervisor’s role in terms of allocating tasks, offering learning opportunities, providing guidance, role modelling, assisting the student to fit into the organisation and keeping an eye on the placement. These actions do appear relevant to social work placement supervision. However, task supervisors recognised that with another supervisor involved in the placement these responsibilities became complex. Thus, placement roles and responsibilities need to be allocated as they could otherwise become potentially confused, a point of importance recognised by external social work supervisors (Zuchowski, 2014b) and a dilemma experienced by students in placements with external supervision who at times felt ‘caught in the middle of a war’ between two supervisors (Zuchowski, 2013).

A few of the task supervisors expressed their appreciation of the external supervisor being involved in the placement. Some task supervisors identified the ability to learn from the external supervisor as valuable. Other participants valued the opportunities of receiving and giving updates on the student’s progress. Appreciation was expressed about sharing responsibility, echoing the idea of ‘co-field educators’ (AASW, 2012a) and shouldering the responsibility together (Abram, et al., 2000).

He [external supervisor] has rung me quite a few times and discussed things with me and discussed progress with me and I find that very helpful. If he says to me this isn’t happening... we have got work together to make it happen. I think we are part of a, the team Loretta.

Tanya outlined that it was reassuring

...that the student did have somewhere to go,that I didn't have the sole responsibility ... of influencing it Tanya

Participants suggested that the external supervisor's role was to provide the social work supervision around theoretical approaches, to monitor and assess, and to exchange information regarding the student's progress. This exchange did however not always take place and three participants stated that they were not involved in the students' assessment. Louise expressed being frustrated by the lack of opportunity to input into the assessment of students performance and explained that her frustration was that not seeking her feedback was poor practice. She went on to say that as task supervisor she could accurately report or reflect on

... areas of improvement, things that they are doing really, really well, things that they are contributing, ... I think that needs to be acknowledged, we have had a lot of students here develop certain things, you know, I have never had the opportunity to write that down. Louise

Not seeking the task supervisor's feedback for assessment would leave the task supervisor's work and observations unacknowledged and the students' work incompletely assessed.

The remaining six participants described how they were engaged in discussions of the placement progress to varying degrees. It seems that there was not always clarity around what feedback should be sought from the task supervisor and whether the feedback from the task supervisor was valued. Monica, for example, who had a number of experiences in being the task supervisor of social workers, when asked whether her feedback is sought at the meetings, responded:

Um? I guess at the check-in points it's... maybe not so much actually. (laughs). It's more, do you have any problems? Are we on the right track? Are you happy with what's been learnt? ... not so much my feedback on what, how they are doing, whether I think they are learning or whatever. Monica

The lack of clear understanding of how task supervisors' observations and feedback are recognised in assessment is a concern. It might be difficult for some task supervisors to discern whether their preparation, supervision input and guidance is taken up in the overall placement assessment and whether their work is recognised and valued. The success of field education with external supervision depends on collaborative relationships (Clare,

2001), clearly defined roles and an understanding and valuing what each party brings to the placement (Maidment & Woodward, 2002). Moreover, social work student assessment needs input from all those who are party to the placement (AASW, 2012a). These contributions can assist in making student's work visible in assessment, which in turn can be useful for performance assessment, the integration of theory into practice and facilitating critical reflection (Maidment, 2000). Strong relationships and guidance of what needs to be assessed are needed to facilitate the input from all parties (Maidment & Woodward, 2002).

Supervisors' relationships

The potential for unequal relationships between task and external supervisors has been recognised (Henderson, 2010) and the importance of collaborative relationships and effective communication stressed (Abram, et al., 2000; Parker, et al., 2003). In this research the relationship between the task supervisor and external supervisor was described as strong by four participants and some of these task supervisors referred to the work they did with students from a joint perspective

We will say, no, we are not going to tell you, in your role as the student it's about you Lucy

However, five participants said that they had no relationship with the external supervisor, with two participants identifying their links to the external supervisor was only via the student or the liaison person. Relationships are core to field education and learning (Lefevre, 2005; Ornstein & Moses, 2010), and the relationship between task and external supervisor is crucial to success of the placement (Abram, et al., 2000). The relationship of the 'co-field educators' would be core to negotiating roles, expectations and assessment. It seems important that mutual relationships are affirmed and supported for the benefit of students and their supervisors. Respectful inclusive relationships are the foundation of social work.

The significant number of task supervisors who had limited relationships with external supervisors and who seemed to infer that their role was an unacknowledged factor in placements are concerning. This practice highlights questions about the positioning of task supervisors, power relationships and how their input is sought for assessment triangulation.

Therefore, while task supervisors might be ‘planting seeds’, how these seeds or ideas were tended by the external supervisor was unknown to some participants. What is needed, is a more transparent process of joint discussions, carefully planning and supporting a valuable triad relationship (Clare, 2001; Henderson, 2010; Parker, et al., 2003). Further discussion about differing perspectives between stakeholders in student placements would need to be encouraged in placement preparation and role expectations explored (AASW, 2012a; Maidment & Woodward, 2002). This can then form a solid basis for student engagement in critical reflection to advance their professional practice frameworks.

Conclusion

The task supervisors who participated in this research identified the value and enjoyment of supporting placements with external supervision. Participants recognised being involved in social work placements as an opportunity to build their own practice through reflection, engaging with theory and exploring the work they do with students. Thus supporting social work placements can further strengthening human services workers and the field (Parker, et al., 2003; Rambally, 1999; Unger, 2003).

Importantly, task supervisors’ input into supervision, assessment and learning for students on placement should be sought and valued, befitting their role as ‘co-field educators’ (AASW, 2010) so they ‘... are no longer ignored and are provided with the training, support, recognition and reward that they deserve’ (Henderson, 2010, p. 13). This is important in terms of recognition and appreciation of their input, but also to ensure that student learning occurs and assessment is not disjointed. Here were motivated task supervisors, with many years of experience in the field, keen, knowledgeable and ready to support social student placements in the field and get them ‘job ready’. Yet, it appears that not all of them were seen as valued partners or contributors to social work placements. Task supervisors spend considerable time with social work students, they impact the formation of emerging social work practitioners; it is important that we value their contributions and explore how they add to student learning.

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