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Hill, Nicole, Egan, Ronnie, Cleak, Helen, and Zuchowski, Ines (2021) *Thinking outside the square: the quality and sustainability of placement models.* **In: Egan, Ronnie, Hill, Nichole, and Rollins, Wendy, (eds.) Challenges, Opportunities and Innovations in Social Work Field Education. Routledge, London, UK. pp. 151-162.**

Chapter Thirteen

Thinking Outside the Square: The Quality and Sustainability of Placement Models

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Abstract

The use of alternative models of social work field education and supervision has become more prominent in recent times in response to the changes occurring in the university and industry sector. An emerging challenge for field education teams is to continue to source a sufficient supply of placements, and simultaneously ensure the integrity of these models in terms of the quality of student learning and sustainability of these alternative placement models into the future. This chapter examines best practice principles in providing quality learning experiences for students on placement. We provide a framework for thinking holistically about quality and sustainability in placement arrangements and consider one Australian and one international example of alternative placement models, in relation to this framework. The framework proposes internal and external factors that can protect or potentially compromise the student learning experience.

Introduction

The context of field education has changed significantly in the last decade in Australia as well as globally and has resulted in the need to develop a range of innovative and creative placement supervision models to respond to placement shortages. In the current resource-constrained environment, some of the alternative supervision models have recently gained attention as universities look for alternative teaching and learning strategies include external supervision (Scholar, McLaughlin, McCaughan & Coleman, 2014; Zuchowski, 2015); rotation (Gough & Wilks, 2012; Hosken et al., 2016; Vassos & Connolly, 2014), simulation (Bogo, Rawlings, Katz & Logie, 2014), digitally enhanced assessment and documentation of learning (Venville, Cleak & Bould, 2017), and action research placements (Crisp & Hosken, 2016).

Traditional or one-on-one supervision, with the student supervised by a qualified social worker located within the agency setting, has been the most common model used in the past due to the widely held view of it as an effective model to meet the unique learning needs of

students providing opportunities where role modelling, coaching, and experiential learning can occur (Cleak & Smith. 2012; Cleak & Wilson, 2018; Hicks & Maidment, 2009; Hosken et al., 2016). However, in Australia, the pressure to find enough social work placements has seen the development of placement models where the supervision arrangements are structured differently to the 'traditional' one-on-one supervisor-student focus. External supervision has become the most common alternative model and occurs when a student is located within an organisation with a task supervisor, while a suitably qualified social work field educator, generally located outside the organisation provides off-site supervision. A national survey of field education programs reported that programs have up to 50% of their students receiving external supervision or a combination of external and group supervision (Zuchowski, Cleak, Nickson & Spencer, 2019).

Although it can be challenging for students to identify the role of social work in these non-traditional settings, there is growing evidence that alternative placement models can make a significant and relevant contribution to student learning (Scholar et al., 2014; Zuchowski, 2013, 2015). Moreover, using non-traditional placements opens new fields of practice and learning opportunities such as working with marginalised communities in ways that reflect these diverse communities and their concerns (Todd & Schwartz, 2009). The overall sustainability of these models remains problematic for many reasons, including the financial impost on programs to pay external supervisors.

Neden, Townsend and Zuchowski (2018), highlight sustainability of field education as central to current dialogue in social work field education and argue for "…sustainable adaptation to new conditions as ethical, systemic, and future focused educational practice" (p. 354). To advance these discussions, we need to examine what constitutes a quality learning experience to evaluate how well alternative placement models can meet these requirements.

Quality of Learning Experience

The unique learning opportunities presented in the agency, as well as the structure and support of the supervisory relationship, shape field placements (Bogo, 2015). Irrespective of where a student's placement occurs, the organisation has a critical responsibility to offer students relevant learning experience (Cleak & Wilson, 2018) and support the student's learning. While the evidence suggests that the mode of supervision makes a difference to the learning experience of the student, the structures and supports available to sustain student

learning and growth as a professional social worker are central to the learning experience (Zuchowski, 2016, 2015; Roulston, Cleak & Vreugdenhil, 2018). The following section examines the current literature that highlights the essential factors that contribute to quality learning in field education.

Bogo (2015) reviewed publications in a range of leading social work education journals and suggests that five key elements were consistently associated with a positive learning experience for students. Firstly, students value a positive learning environment that welcomes students and views teaching and learning as beneficial to both parties. Second, is the presence of collaborative relationships with field educators that provide strong support and encourage students to be actively involved in their own learning. In the social work literature, student satisfaction with their supervision, agency characteristics and their learning goals and activities primarily define quality field education (Coohey et al., 2017; Regehr et al., 2007; Todd & Schwartz, 2009). One of the most critical challenges in cultivating a successful field placement for students relates to establishment and maintenance of a successful supervisory relationship.

The third element is the ability of the agency to provide opportunities for students to observe and debrief with experienced practitioners to gain insight into the use of self and to make links between theory and practice. Bogo (2015) advises that learning through experience is the "cornerstone of practicum education" where there are multiple opportunities to actually practice with clients (p. 319), which forms the fourth element. Finally, both the supervisor and student should participate in a range of learning processes in order to access student–client interactions, including direct observation, review of audio or video recordings, written records and verbal reports.

Bogo's (2015) review mirrors earlier outcomes by Todd and Schwartz (2009). They undertook a small pilot study involving 11 students and 7 field supervisors located in both traditional and alternative placement settings. Like Bogo (2015) and Roulston et al. (2018), they identified that students valued the quality of the learning environment, quality supervision, linking theory and practice, and especially a critical analysis. Of more interest, congruence between the field educator's supervision style and the students learning style, diversity of placement opportunities and the relationship between the university and the field setting contribute positively to a quality placement (Todd & Schwartz, 2009).

Some work has already moved towards applying Bogo's (2015) elements across alternative placement supervision models (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2018). This analysis highlights that a co-supervision model can provide a quality learning environment, and involves two or more social workers sharing the supervision of the student collaboratively and allowing students increased access to learning through a more diverse role-modelling approach (Cleak & Smith 2012; Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019). However, they also note that several considerations need to be taken into account when establishing placements with external supervision. The authors point to the need to ensure purposeful and targeted external supervision to ensure that students can explore their practice in a social work context, observing the student sharing insights about their practice through strong triad relationships with the supervisor. They, along with other authors (Jasper et al., 2013; Maidment & Woodward, 2002; Zuchowski, 2013) also highlight the importance of the external supervisor having contextual knowledge of the agency arranged for the placement. Cleak & Zuchowski (2018) stress the importance of establishing and maintaining close and positive working relationships between all key players in field education. In addition, the authors highlight that alternative placements models need to be planned carefully, rather than retrofitting to meet a last-minute need.

The literature above highlights the evidence which identifies five primary factors required for positive student learning experiences. However, to implement these, while ensuring the sustainability of arrangements, external factors must be addressed that occur outside the supervisory relationship. We have identified four external factors from the literature about quality of placement learning. These include the involvement of all stakeholders in the process of developing new ways of placing students, the regulatory context in which the placement occurs, resources available to the university and field to develop sustainable models and the nature of the pedagogical frame informing alternative models.

Firstly, Todd & Schwartz (2009) note the importance of the relationships between the university and the field acknowledging the importance of stakeholder involvement, beyond the collaborative relationship between student and field educator. Other researchers also acknowledged the close connections between all stakeholders in the field education process (Henderson, 2010; Zuchowski, 2013, 2015, 2016). The stakeholders include the student, university, field, the professional association and the related individuals in each of these groups. A lack of stakeholder involvement potentially compromises placement sustainability,

Secondly, research highlights the importance of regulation and standards. All placements must satisfy professional and university accreditation standards. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) sets the accreditation guidelines for all social work programs through a set of prescribed standards (AASW, 2019) highlighting the centrality of field education in the social work curriculum. Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (2017), regulates the Australian, quality standards for teaching and learning of Higher Education providers and the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) forms the national policy for regulated qualifications in Australian education (https://www.aqf.edu.au/). Apart from demanding adherence to teaching and learning requirements, they also use quality indicators for teaching standards, student retention and graduate employment outcomes (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2017).

The third factor relates to the need for a pedagogical underpinning of field education. The AASW (2012) requires that placement models use contemporary pedagogical knowledge and processes to develop "core attributes and for building students' commitment to, and an identity with, professional social work" (p. 9). A pedagogical rather than an administrative framework is central to placement processes. Bellinger (2010) highlights the importance of a pedagogical culture cocooning the placement as a factor in assessing the quality, arguing that a quality pedagogical learning culture on placement involves students as active contributors and learners. Learning on placement requires a generative process in which practice is constructed rather than prescribed (Bellinger, 2010). Workplace culture that is contrary to professional aims and values can undermine students' learning, and current practice contexts can result in the student not receiving the required supervision by on-site supervisors (Bellinger, 2010).

The final external factor we identify from the literature relates to issues of resourcing. A recent Australian survey (Zuchowski et al., 2019) identified lack of resources as a key consideration in field education. Resources are all-encompassing including economic, staffing, workload relief and training combined with the context of changing university funding priorities, in some instances marginalising social work field education with decreasing resources, power, status, promotion opportunities and a lack of authority (Lyter, 2012). This lack of resources coupled with the trend of staffing field education units with non-academic staff (Zuchowski et al., 2019) could put the educational focus of the learning

experience as secondary in placement finding processes in times where it is difficult to field the demands for placements.

To understand the factors promoting the integrity and sustainability of quality placement teaching, we have positioned the internal five factors in relation to the external ones previously outlined. Figure 13.1 depicts our framework. While we do not suppose that these four external factors cover all factors that might impact on placement sustainability and integrity, we believe that they form a foundation for a framework to consider quality field education opportunities.

<INSERT FIGURE 13.1 HERE>

In the next part of the chapter, we illustrate how this model might be used by considering two different placement models. We have deliberately chosen two very different models, both contentious for different reasons: an Australian model involving off-site supervision, and the English Fasttrack model, which is an accelerated and paid workplace-based model of social work education.

Applying the Framework to Discuss Two Alternative Placement Models

Model One: The Off-Site Supervision Model (OSSM).

The OSSM was developed by a Victorian university in response to decreased placement numbers and suitably qualified social workers to undertake the required supervision. The OSSM is similar to other off-site supervision models described in the literature (Abram et al., 2000; Zuchowski, 2013; Perlstein & Sienkiewicz, 2013; Maynard et al., 2015; Jones-Mutton et al., 2015). The university initially established the OSSM to support placements in schools, where there are limited numbers of on-site social work supervisors. The OSSM is now used across different fields of practice and constitutes about 30 % of the university's placement pool. The University established a range of partnerships with diverse placement organisations who commit to the provision of at least ten placements annually using this model. One of the unique features of this model is that it combines the roles of off-site supervisor and liaison. Students receive seven one-hour individual supervision sessions, seven two-hour group supervision sessions with an off-site supervisor and three on-site liaison visits.

Analysis of Internal and External Factors Using the Framework in Figure 13.1

Internal factors (inner circle)

An analysis of the inner circle indicates that it meets most elements of the Framework. The OSSM ensures more control over the offsite supervision session content than traditional on-site placements with the content, process and context of the delivery responsive ensuring a positive learning environment. The collaborative relationships and commitment to the placement model ensure multiple practice opportunities and participation in a range of learning processes supplemented by the ongoing training provided to students by organisations. The ongoing collaborative relationships between task supervisors, off-site supervisors, organisation and university provide genuine reciprocal benefits. All stakeholders identified these benefits in informal and formal research (Egan, Williams, & Hawkins, 2019) about the OSSM. Despite the benefits, there remain ongoing challenges to ensure the direct observation of students on placements because of the external location of the off-site supervisors. Some student observation opportunities are easier than others so off-site supervisors work closely with task supervisors to capture their observations in meaningful and demonstrable ways including recordings and student self-reporting.

There is a further element which is central to the success of the OSSM which relates to communication across all parties, consistent with findings elsewhere about off-site supervision models (Jones-Mutton et al., 2015; Zuchowski, 2019). Communication is identified as central to the effectiveness of the OSSM from all stakeholder perspectives, and where this was inconsistent, complaints from students increased (Egan et al., 2019). A further key difference in the OSSM is the combination of the OSS and liaison roles. While potentially creating a conflict of interest, the research (Egan et al., 2019) indicated that the dual role avoided duplication and unnecessary complexity, enhanced communication, and strengthened relationships.

External factors (outer circle)

The OSSM meets all the elements in the outer circle. The OSSM requires more resources than a traditional on-site placement. The off-site supervisor is employed by the university to provide the social work supervision and somewhat controversially, the liaison role as well. The arrangement satisfies the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2019) in terms of supervision, appropriate learning and the building of strong social work identity.

A strength of the model is the embedded stakeholder involvement. The Field education team supports and trains a team of very experienced staff to provide off-site supervision and liaison. One key strategy is to permanently attach staff to specific placement partner agencies which ensures all organisations understand their role and relationship and commit to appropriate learning through practice opportunities (Egan et al., 2019) facilitating the development of deep relationships with all stakeholders with off-site supervisors collaboratively contributing to training for task supervisors in their agency. These findings are consistent with the literature that highlights the importance of clarity of stakeholder roles in off-site supervision arrangements (Zuchowski, 2013; Maynard et al., 2015; Jones-Mutton et al., 2015).

The pedagogical framework informing the model is clear to all stakeholders before placement begins. The research raised the additional value that external supervision provided for the development of student professional socialisation and praxis in an independent (Egan et al., 2019) which builds on similar themes identified in the literature (Bellinger, 2010; Zuchowski, 2013). Nearly all student participants reported good to excellent offsite supervision, saw the merits in external group supervision, and reported having a good placement experience (Egan et al., 2019). All stakeholders noted the value of off-site supervisors as student advocates bringing independence and objectivity as well as an increased linking of placement experiences to academic and social work theories through reflective practice.

Fast–Track Social Work Programs

The social work profession, and thus social work education, in England has experienced challenges in recent years, due to recruitment and retention issues as well as a persistent negative public status, particularly as a result of repeated failures within the child protection system partly due to the relatively low calibre of entrants to the profession (Cartney, 2018; Scourfield et al., 2019; Murphy, 2016; MacAlister, Crehan, & Olsen, 2012). The government responded to rectify these concerns within the sector by funding an accelerated, intensive fast-track employment-based training schemes linked with sponsoring local authorities or services sponsors (Maxwell et al., 2018). This scheme allowed selected social work students to engage within an agency to learn social work practice on the job after a short period of study. While these fast-track programs attract some support, concerns arose as to whether these short intensive courses genuinely address the training needs for complex and demanding professional roles (MacAlister et al., 2012).

Frontline was established in 2014 and is an example of a number of fast-track training schemes designed for graduates working with children and families. It is a social work qualifying pathway offering an expedited curriculum design and delivery. After a five-week academic introduction 'summer school', students or participants are placed into a group or hub of four in a local authority to be managed by a full-time social work consultant on an enhanced salary, paid for by each local authority. Academic practice tutors support the hubs at a ratio of 16 participants per tutor. Students qualify after one year and then undertake a second year of practice in the same local authority if they wish to attain a Master's in Social Work Leadership (Domakin & Curry, 2018).

As well as Frontline, there is Step Up to Social Work which is a 14-month program where students are based in local authorities while engaging in training for child and family social work role (Cartney, 2018). Graduates from these programs are eligible for professional registration after one year and a master's qualification in social work after two years (Murphy, 2016). Finally, a third fast-track program was developed called *Think Ahead*, where the training is directed for adult mental health specialists. The model is similar in that the Think Ahead student cohort commences with an intensive residential learning experience for six weeks over the summer, before commencing practice-based learning. Altogether, about one in four newly qualified social workers will graduate via a fast-track route in England (Brindle, 2018).

The Frontline program aims to achieve the vision of the Government for job-ready graduates in several ways, by recruiting graduates with high academic ability as well as a process of screening for attributes, skills and values, with qualities such as emotional resilience, respect, advanced interpersonal skills and humility being highly desired (Murphy, 2016). Finally, Frontline is overt with its aim to instil leadership qualities in its graduates (Murphy, 2016).

Unlike Think Ahead and Step Up's fast-track routes into social work, a private company, not a university, delivers Frontline's academic component, with the aid of philanthropic funding. Frontline developed a restricted curriculum organised around systemic theory, motivational interviewing, and social learning theory (Murphy, 2016). Despite some evaluation of this program, there has been no evaluation of how well Frontline prepares practitioners with a broader social science-based knowledge and their understanding about their role and how they practise and this model of social work education does not appear to have been replicated to date (Cartney, 2018).

Analysis of Internal and External Factors Using the Framework in Figure 13.1.

Internal factors (inner circle)

These fast track programs appear to deliver well on the elements in the inner circle and replicate the traditional approach to providing a positive learning environment. The programs run over two years placing the student with a consultant social worker in a small group unit based within the same local authority to promote familiarity and skill consolidation. In particular, through a 12-month intensive, on-the-job training and education program, students are actively observed and observe others in the team. A study comparing frontline trainees with students from regular social work programs showed that they were rated significantly higher than the comparison groups for the quality of their interviewing and written reflection (Scourfield et al., 2019; Maxwell et al., 2016).

External Factors (outer circle)

These resource intensive fast track programs receive philanthropic start-up funding and ministerial support. Students are paid for the duration of the program, with no fees payable. Recent evaluations of Frontline revealed that the program is favoured with resources to the detriment of university-based courses (Maxwell et al., 2016; Murphy, 2016).

The recent emergence of fast-track pre-qualifying social work programs in England raised concern that social work pedagogy might be moving to an overly narrow conception of theory that may be ignoring the process of learning that needs time to gain a deeper and more critical understanding (Scourfield et al., 2019) and does not reflect the complexities of social work practice (Cartney, 2018). Regulators of European Schools of Social Work (EASSW) argued that the narrow curriculum of the Frontline program could place England outside agreed international educational standards; however, these concerns were simply ignored (Cartney, 2018; Murphy, 2016).

Interest in adopting fast-track social work education is limited. Social work regulators in Scotland and Northern Ireland do not recognise Frontline as an entirely generic qualification for social work due to its restricted focus on child and family work (Cartney, 2018). Indeed, other regions contend that Frontline is perhaps positioned better as a post-qualifying course for social workers desiring a specialty in child protection and systemic practice (Maxwell et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In applying this framework to consider quality field education opportunities in two different placement models, we have demonstrated ways to appraise principles of integrity and sustainability. Both examples have merit as alternatives to traditional onsite models of social work field education. In doing so, we were able to identify the importance of internal and external factors in highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of both. For the off-site model, we observed that the internal factors needed to be strengthened, whereas for the fast track models, it is the external factors that require attention.

Having scanned the literature on quality placement learning, we propose this framework to understand better the factors that inform the integrity and sustainability of quality placement learning. We offer this framework in the absence of any such explicit expectations or guiding principles that define quality field education experiences. It is not the intention of the framework to evaluate or differentiate the overall quality of placement models. Rather we intend the framework for holistic use to appraise the viability of placement models and as a basis for advocacy.

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