HAVING COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS IN PLACEMENT: FEELINGS, FAILINGS AND FRUSTRATIONS

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SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY 12TH SEPT 2019

The 3 F’s
OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION

• Brief Introductions
• Perennial concerns about practice learning
• Failings, Feelings and lots of frustration
• The Process in Brief
• Courageous Conversations
• Concluding Comment
Brief Introductions

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATOR FOR 17 YEARS

FORMER CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
SOCIAL WORKER, PRACTICE EDUCATOR
AND PLAY THERAPIST

….and I like baking cakes......

Long standing research interest in practice learning and assessment
Long standing research interest in practice learning and assessment

...and I like baking...
PERENNIAL CONCERNS ABOUT PRACTICE LEARNING

- Quantity and quality of placements
- Rarity of placement failure in UK
- An alleged “Fail to Fail” in practice learning settings
- Students being passed inappropriately
• Quantity and quality of placements

Most recently raised in Croisdale-Appleby and Narey reports:
• For example, Narey concerned about non traditional placements not preparing students adequately for statutory social work
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• Rarity of placement failure in UK
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• Students being passed inappropriately

See for example (Coulshed, 1980; Hughes and Heycox, 1996; Raymond, 2000; Basnet and Sheffield, 2010)

• Rarity of placement failure in UK

Failure rate of 2-3% since CQSW, DipSW through to Degree (Finch, 2005)...
....which it is claimed, is evidence of lax standards of assessment
PERENNIAL CONCERNS ABOUT PRACTICE LEARNING

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Dominant in nursing and allied health professions (see for example Duffy, 2004; Shapton, 2006; Rutkowski, 2007; Lawson, 2010; Jervis & Tilki, 2011)…..

• An alleged “Fail to Fail” in practice learning settings

…..And crept into social work (See for example, Shapton, 2006, Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Finch & Taylor, 2013)
Dominant in nursing and allied health professions (see for example, Duffy, 2004; Shapton, 2006; Rutkowski, 2007; Lawson, 2008; Jervis & Tilki, 2011). .....

...And crept into social work (See for example, Shapton, 2006, Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Finch & Taylor, 2013)

Although no empirical evidence this is the case in any profession with assessed practice learning!
“Specific concerns have been raised about the . . . robustness and quality of assessment, with some students passing the social work degree who are not competent or suitable to practise on the frontline”. (SWTF, Interim Report, 2009, p. 24)

• Students being passed inappropriately
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Questions

1) Is practice learning failing?
2) Are practice educators/mentors failing to make difficult decisions about who is not yet capable?
3) Is this reflecting a so-called “failing profession”?
4) But what is capability or competence and is there a defined minimum standard?
FEELINGS ABOUT FAILING: REFLECTIVE EXERCISE

FAIL FAILURE FAILING FAIL FAILING FAILURE

On a piece of paper write down;

1) Something you have failed at in the past (for example, O’level maths, driving test, relationship)
2) How did it make you feel at the time? (use any language you like, or drawings to fully convey the feelings)
3) How do you feel now when you think about it?
4) Pass paper to me (will come back to later – don’t put name on it!)
THE FRUSTRATIONS: WHY IT IS DIFFICULT TO FAIL? (WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS)

- PEs/mentors not using competency model of assessment appropriately
- Procedures for dealing with placement issues, not being followed properly
- PEs/mentors not adequately supported by agency and/or HEI
- Role strain or confusion
- Fear of litigation
- Rule of Optimism
- Hope that things “sort themselves out” without intervention
- Challenging emotional experience
FEELINGS: LIMITED (BUT GROWING INTERNATIONAL AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH BASE ABOUT THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT)


• Gizara and Forest (2004) – “I think that it’s an extremely emotional, gut-wrenching kind of experience...I don’t think it feels good on any level.”

• Basnett and Sheffield (2010) – experience of failing student a negative one

• Schaub and Dalrymple (2013) practice educators reported feeling stressed, isolated and did not feel supported.

• Finch (2010) found the experience caused range of challenging emotions
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  - Guilt
  - Anger
  - Anxiety
  - Shame
  - Isolation
  - Sadness
  - Fear
  - Disappointment
  - Dread
  - Frustration
  - Stress
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GUILT

“…and then the guilt really set in….the sacrifices she’s made…this is her livelihood, her career and its all my fault…I felt like I am a rotten shit.” (Daisy)

“it was the first fail, I felt terribly guilty, I felt really…I had sleepless nights, felt quite sick, I felt incredibly guilty….” (Claire)

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GUILT

Because at that time I made the decision, the guilt, it was unbearable . . . but at the end of the day, it’s her livelihood, it could have been the end of her career, oh my god, what about her children? (Daisy)

Incredibly guilty in . . . (Daisy)
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• Fiving the students to struggle or fail can cause researchers' own negative emotions.
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ANGER

“I was just very angry at times….I was angry with the student.” (Jenny)

“I was really pissed off with him….I felt angry”. (Claire)

“…and I did actually think the next time you shout at me, I might actually shout back at you because who the fuck do you think you are…” (Daisy)
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"…I still feel that I must have done something wrong with that one because I couldn’t enable him or work with him to see why his way of thinking was inappropriate in social work, never mind in society”. (Lily)

"..I think the team just felt helpless in a way. They felt…they couldn’t see what they could do to turn it around.” (Tim)

• Finch (2010) found the experience caused range of challenging emotions
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“…out of my depth…I felt really out of my depth…I was completely out of my depth at that point” (Lily)
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The Possible Impact on Decision Making

1) Mobilisation (acting out the student’s projections)
2) Immobilisation (not being able to reflect, think or make a decision)
3) Defensive behaviours (ie splitting)
4) Hastily terminated placements or dramatic endings
5) Not following the assessment procedures
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Practice Educator/Mentor/supervisor
Shame
Sadness
Guilt
Anger
Helplessness
Not my fault
Persecuted
Projective Identification

I don’t know what to do!!!

I don’t know what to do!!!

Persecuted

Not my fault
COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS
(BEDDOE AND DAVYS, 2016)

• Or “saying it as it is”! (Jo Finch)
• Conversations associated with some sort of emotion
• Participants may feel ashamed, apprehensive, uncomfortable, angry & embarrassed
• Conversations may be conflicted by introducing different ideas, values or behaviours
• Conversations may cause conflict
• Need to think about those obstacles in having such conversations
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List what the obstacles are for you in having courageous conversations and then share with the person sitting next to you
THE PROCESS IN BRIEF

• Recognising (and acknowledging) the student is struggling.
• Identifying the areas, concerns, developmental needs or issues that need to be addressed (and link to the assessment framework in place)
• Making these concerns/issues explicit to the student
• Interacting in creative/different ways to support the student to address those areas of concern/developments.
• Reviewing to what extent the issues have been addressed and how far the changes made meet the required standards.
THE PROCESS IN BRIEF

• Identifying the areas, concerns, developmental needs or issues that need to be addressed (and link to the assessment framework in place)
THINGS TO THINK ABOUT (ADAPTED FROM MACLEAN 2012)

- Are the expected standards set and clearly documented?
- Does the practitioner (in this case the student) understand the standards?
- In what ways are the standards not being met?
- What are the reasons for the standards not being met?
- What should the student do to address the issues?
- What should I do?
THE PROCESS IN BRIEF

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- Reviewing to what extent the issues have been addressed and how far the changes made meet the required standards.

Need to acknowledge and reflect on the emotional climate and think about what is being communicated.
THE PROCESS IN BRIEF

This should be the process for all students.

- Recognising (and acknowledging) the student is struggling.
- Identifying the areas, concerns, developmental needs or issues that need to be addressed (and link to the assessment framework in place).
- Making these concerns/issues explicit to the student.
- Interacting in creative/different ways to support the student to address those areas of concern/developments.
- Reviewing to what extent the issues have been addressed and how far the changes made meet the required standards.

Need to acknowledge and reflect on the emotional climate and think about what is being communicated.
SO........ WHAT IS YOUR ACTION PLAN FOR HAVING COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS?

• Who do I need to have a courageous conversation with and why?
• What do I need to say?
• What might be the emotional response/reaction of the person?
• What might I be feeling?
• What might be the barriers to having that conversation?
• What would happen if I did not have that conversation?

• If time, have that conversation with the person next to you!
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

• Working with a struggling or failing student is an emotionally painful experience.
• Student will be projecting difficult and challenging feelings onto you.
• But I would encourage you to be reflective and consider these feelings as a form of communication.
• Also need to consider dynamics created with the university – often can be splitting or university get blamed.
• Need to document, address concerns in timely and explicit fashion (don’t ignore).
• Seek support (colleagues, university etc)
USEFUL READING?


