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To fail or not to fail: enhancing our understanding of reasons why social work students failed practice placements (2015–2019)

Audrey Roulston [a], Helen Cleak [b], David Hayes[a], Paula McFadden[c], Erna OConnor[d] and Caroline Shore[e]

[a]Social Work, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland; [b]Department of Community & Clinical Health, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia; [c]Social Work, School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Ulster University, Magee Campusm, L/derry, Northern Ireland; [d]Social Work, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland; [e]College Lecturer and Cirtl Teaching Fellow, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Social Work qualifying programmes teach students the necessary knowledge, skills, and values during a series of taught modules. Formal opportunities to integrate knowledge into practice are provided through practice placements in social work agencies. Each practice placement enables agency and/or academic staff to gate-keep entry into the profession, through assessing student competence against agreed practice learning requirements, readiness to practice, and adherence to professional social work standards. This research study seeks to expand our understanding of the incidence of and reasons why students failed their practice placement whilst studying social work on the island of Ireland. On receipt of ethical approval, Practice Teacher reports and minutes of Practice Assessment Panels were used for data collection. Sixty-three students (19 male, 44 female; mean age 34 years) failed placement 2015–2019, with the majority (58.7%) failing first placement. Reasons for failing were categorised into knowledge, skills, values and personal reasons. The most common reasons for failing were a poor understanding of the professional social work role, poor time management, poor written work, the inability to follow direction, limited application of knowledge to practice, and poor professional conduct. Results suggest most students disclosed mitigating circumstances, which affected engagement and competence.

Introduction

Schools of social work are responsible for ensuring that students not only meet academic standards but also to demonstrate appropriate knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice (Todd et al., 2019). This requires social work programmes to teach and then assess students' readiness to enter the field (Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Finch & Taylor, 2013; Todd et al., 2019; MacDermott & Harkin-MacDermott, 2021).

Placement learning or field placement is widely recognised to be the most significant aspect of student learning to prepare them for the realities of practice (Joubert & Webber, 2020; Parker, 2006) by providing assessed periods of learning in social work settings or agencies. Students are offered opportunities to observe and undertake professional practice, to link theory and practice and to receive regular supervision to think critically about their emerging knowledge and skills (Bogo, 2015; Roulston et al., 2018). The International Federation of Social Work (2020) also encourage social workers to engage in critical analysis and develop as critical and ethical practitioners. Furthermore, formal professional standards outlined by regulatory bodies specific to each country (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020; CORU, 2019; Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2019; Social Work England, 2021), used to assess student social workers during practice learning, highlight the importance of social work students reflecting on practice as a way to develop their professional practice (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2019, p. 25).

There is no doubt that the process of failing is distressing for all involved, including the student, practice teacher, other staff within agency teams and academic staff (Furness & Gilligan, 2004). There are also economic implications for students, who will usually have to pay additional fees, organise a disrupted educational program, and repeat placement the following year (Parker, 2010). Given the centrality of practice placements within the social work curriculum, it is surprising how little research or theorising has been undertaken into the termination of placements from any perspective (Parker, 2010). This paper intends to enhance our understanding of trends across social work programmes with students who failed their practice placement between 2015 and 2019, whilst studying in one of four social work programmes delivered on the island of Ireland.

Background

The actual number of social work students who fail placement is hard to come by, although it is known that placement failure is a rarity (Finch, 2015; Lafrance & Gray, 2004). Finch and Taylor (2013) reported that in England, the failure rate across a social work programme, rather than just the placement stood at 3.2% in 2006/2007, compared to 2.5% in 2008/2009 (GSCC, 2010). National figures of students failing placement are not maintained, but figures held by one university over a three-year period, estimated that approximately 3% of students fail or face severe difficulties within placement each year (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010). However, these figures do not reflect the larger number of students who face significant difficulty on placement, or who will voluntarily or be encouraged to withdraw from programmes before practice teachers recommend a fail.

Although significant student learning is promoted by practice placements, it was been suggested that social work programs should not overly depend on practice to prepare students to address the challenges presented by a changing and complex working environment (Joubert & Webber, 2020). Practice Teachers have frequently expressed concerns about the standard of literacy demonstrated by some students on placement (Furness & Gilligan, 2004) and struggling students not being identified

earlier in their professional training (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Kearney, 2003). Students have also reported concerns about the extent to which their academic learning prepared them for practice (Joubert & Webber, 2020).

The dual role of both supporting and nurturing students, alongside acting as gate-keepers for the profession and service users, presents certain dilemmas for practice teachers, which can affect their judgment of suitability for the profession (Currer & Atherton, 2008). An online survey conducted with trainee Practice Teachers who had to determine what standard of practice was 'good enough' when placements were prematurely terminated after 53/100 days during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the importance of the gatekeeping role and the need for clearer guidance on what is or is not good enough (MacDermott & Harkin-MacDermott, 2021). Finch (2017) suggested that some students pass first placement based on 'benefit of the doubt' because Practice Teachers lack experience or feel guilty due to a lack of appropriate learning opportunities.

The literature suggests that tutors may feel frustrated with Practice Teachers who avoid their gatekeeping role, which they attributed to poor communication, assessment, or supervisory skills (Bogo et al., 2007; Burgess et al., 1998; Finch & Taylor, 2013; Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Parker, 2010).

Reasons for failing placement

On reviewing the literature, a number of authors have highlighted reasons why students fail placement. Brandon and Davis (1979) suggested interactions with service users/others; attitudes and values expressed through direct or indirect contact; ability to communicate with the agency; written communication; application of relevant theory; use of supervision; professional presentation; general conduct and behaviour on placement. Syson and Baginsky (1981) suggested the student's inability to learn or develop; inability to apply theory to practice; personality or personal problems; and rigidity. Williamson et al. (1985) highlighted grounds for failure as personality factors, weakness in and application of skills and knowledge, failure to meet deadlines and inadequate communication and assessment skills. Schaub and Dalrymple (2011) reported on the unpleasant emotional experiences of Practice Teachers' working with struggling or failing students. Their study revealed concerns about students failing due to poor or inappropriate communication as well as lack of professionalism, adherence to social work values and insight. Based on the Foucauldian notion of *Panopticism*, the authors suggest that Practice Teachers struggle to address issues of concern with students, and that the poor communication skills of students mirrored those of their Practice Teacher. At a training event in Scotland, Finch (2015) prompted Practice Teachers to identify common traits and behaviours of struggling or failing students, which included concerns regarding the student's value base, honesty, confidence, boundaries, professionalism, motivation, attendance record and ability to analyse or reflect on practice, follow instructions, integrate theory to practice and engage fully in supervision and the written work required to demon-strate competence. The review of the literature illustrates the importance of practice placements in terms of assessing overall competence, suitability and capability of students.

Aims

This research aims to enhance our understanding of how why 63 students failed a practice placement during the years 2015 until 2019 in the four universities included in this study. It aims to articulate the reasons recorded by Practice Teachers and identify any emerging trends or recommendations for academics, Practice Teachers, students and placement providers.

Methods

The study consisted of two phases: (1) obtaining anonymous data on students who failed placement during January 2015 to January 2019 and (2) qualitative interviews with 11 students who failed a placement and volunteered to participate. This paper will report findings from phase one. Thematic analysis of phase two findings, published in Roulston et al. (in press) highlighted the following: the impact of personal issues; importance of working relationships; use and misuse of power; assessment and decision-making processes; and developing insight and useful feedback. These were published separately due to the richness of the data from both aspects of the study.

University A provides two full-time Bachelor of Social Work degree programmes accredited by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, who regulate the social care workforce. The Department of Health annually commission 112 places, which are normally allocated to 72 students on the Undergraduate Route (UGR) and 40 students on the Relevant Graduate Route (RGR). The UGR programme is taught over 3 years, where students complete four university taught semesters and two semesters on placement. The RGR programme, which is only open to those with a cognate degree (i.e., law, sociology, psychology, social policy, teaching, etc.), is taught over 2 years, and students complete two taught semesters and two semesters on placement. In both courses, the first placement lasts 85 days and the final placement lasts 100 days.

University B provides two full-time Bachelor of Science degree programmes accredited by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council. The Department of Health annually commission 155 places, allocated across the UGR (n = 108) and RGR programmes (n = 40). Programmes are delivered in the same way as University A, but they have 45 UGR students who complete the first 2 years at Further Education colleges, with their final year at University B.

University C provides two social work degree programmes accredited by CORU (Ireland's regulator for health and social care professionals). At undergraduate level the Bachelor in Social Studies (BSS) is a four-year, full-time professional degree in social work with an annual intake of 45 students (both school leavers and mature students aged 23+). The BSS programme includes two pre-professional placements (year 1—residential/day care setting 6/52) and (year 2 – community setting 10/52). In addition, students complete 1,000 professional social work placement hours undertaken in two 14/52 block placements in the first semester of years 3 and 4 of the programme. The Master in Social Work (MSW) degree is a 2-year, full-time, post-graduate degree programme with an intake of a maximum of 25 students per year. The programme attracts EU and international students. Students complete 1,000 professional social work placement hours undertaken in two 14/52 block placements in the second semester of both academic years.

University D offers two CORU accredited social work degree programmes. The Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), a four-year undergraduate route, with an annual intake of 25 students per year, and the MSW, a two-year postgraduate course, with an annual intake of 50 students. No previous formal education is required for application to the BSW, students must be 23 years or older on entry and prior relevant work and life experience is taken into account. BSW programme students complete six taught semesters and two semesters where they are on a field placement for 14 weeks. Applicants to the MSW must hold a minimum of a 2:2 honours undergraduate degree in Social Science or an equivalent subject area, and must have completed a minimum of 420 hours of paid or voluntary work experience in a social work-related area, prior to entry. There are no age requirements for entry. MSW students complete two taught semesters and two semesters where they are a field placement, each lasting 14 weeks.

It is important to note that in Northern Ireland, all social work students must complete one placement in Child and Family services and at least one statutory placement in a Health and Social Care Trust. Similarly, in the Republic of Ireland, the requirements of the Social Workers Registration Board Criteria for Education and Training Programmes are interpreted by programmes as one placement in statutory services and the other in an inter-professional or (less frequently) a community/NGO setting. The vast majority of students undertake a Statutory Child and Family placement (a minority would complete a Probation Placement as their statutory option).

Data collection

All social work students registered with the four participating universities were advised of this research study. Prior to data collection, full ethical approval was obtained from the School Research Ethics Committee (Ref: EC/256) by each of the participating universities. To preserve the anonymity of participants and their data, steps were taken to remove any identifying features.

Nominated staff captured anonymous data from respective academic records (i.e. Practice Teacher reports, progress reports and minutes of Practice Assessment Panels. Based on previous research involving student social workers (Cleak et al., 2015) the following anonymous data was collected: age of student at the time of placement outcome; gender; placement setting; programme of care; service user group; first or final practice placement; initial or repeated attempt at practice placement; reasons for failure using agreed codes, and recommended outcome. Qualitative data collected during face-to-face interviews with a sample of students who failed placement has been published elsewhere (Roulston et al., in press).

Data analysis

Reasons for students failing captured in the practice teaching reports and supporting documentation were extracted by two members of the research team. Categories were identified (skills, knowledge, values, and personal issues). Reasons were aligned to these prior to being agreed and analysed as aggregate data using SPSS (version 27).

Descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions and cross-tabulations, were used to summarise the qualitative data. Inferential statistics were also used to develop the analysis and explore the relationships between various variables. Specifically, the four top reasons for failing placement (i.e., lack of understanding of professional role; poor time management; poor written skills and unable to follow guidance) were cross-tabulated with gender, placement stage, and service user group. This approach to analysis provided a clear way to organise and describe the data set in detail, and to maintain the anonymity of students and their respective institutions, settings and Practice Teachers.

Results

Demographic data

The number of students who failed placement in each participating university during the course of the research project yielded a sample of 63 failing students (2.3%) from 2,696 registered students. Figure 1 shows that 44 females and 19 males failed a placement. The age of students at the time they failed placement ranged from 20 to 55 years old (mean 34 years).

As outlined in Figure 2, there were 30 students who failed a placement in children's services (i.e., family support and intervention, looked after children, 16+, fostering, disability, education authority and youth justice), and 21 in adult's services (i.e., mental health, older people, learning disability, physical disability and criminal justice). Data were missing for 12 participants.

The majority of students who failed were in fieldwork or community-based teams where they visited service users in their own homes (n = 38), with the remainder placed in hospitals (n = 5); residential settings (n = 4); family centres (n = 2) and Day Centres (n = 2), or data were missing (n = 12). The majority were placed in statutory sector agencies (n = 43), with the remainder in voluntary sector social care agencies (n = 8) or information was missing (n = 12).

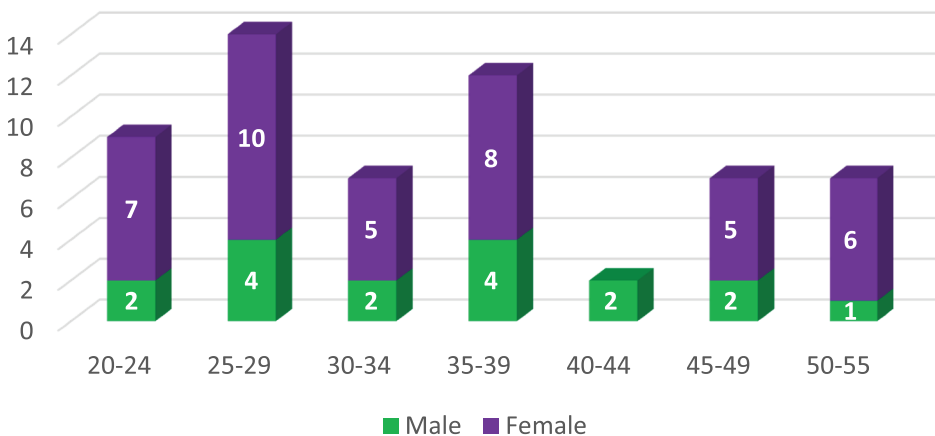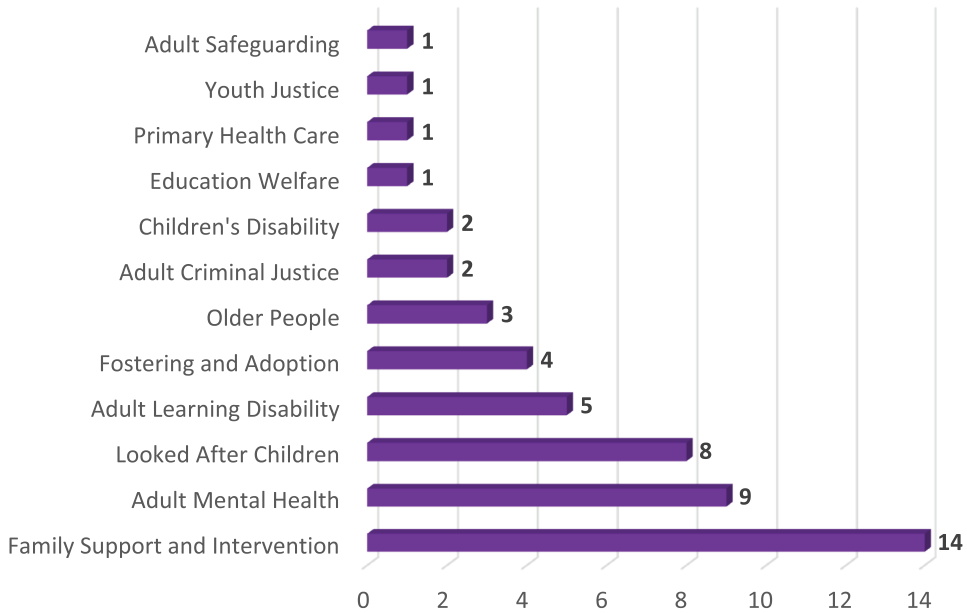**Figure 1.** Distribution of participants by age and gender (n = 63).

Figure 2. Distribution of failing students by programme of care.

Level of placement

Out of the 63 students included in the database, there were 37 on a first placement (32 as a first attempt and 5 as a repeated attempt) and 26 were on a final placement (22 as a first attempt and 4 as a repeated attempt). Of those 37 on first placement, 14 were in adult services (10 as a first attempt and 4 as a repeated attempt) and 16 were in children's services (all as a first attempt). Of the 26 students on final placement, eight were in adult services (7 as a first attempt and 1 as a repeated attempt); and 13 were in children's services (12 as a first attempt and 1 as a repeated attempt).

Reasons for failure

The number of reasons recorded on each student who failed placement ranged from one to eight, with the average being 4.7 reasons. Twenty five percent of failing students were recorded with six reasons, 16% based on five reasons, 17% for four reasons, and 10% for three reasons. Please see Figure 3 for reasons students failed placement.

As illustrated in the methods section, we categorised the reasons for failure into knowledge, skills, values and personal issues.

Knowledge

Knowledge, or difficulty understanding the professional social work role was the most cited reason for why students failed placement (n = 31). Another significant reason which resulted in failure was the student's difficulty in applying academic or procedural knowledge to inform their practice (n = 20).

Figure 3. Reasons for failing placement.

Skills

See Figure 4 for the range of skills associated with failing placement, which are listed in rank order. The most frequently occurring issue was in relation to poor time management (n = 28), followed by poor written work (n = 25), and an inability to follow guidance or direction (n = −22), or poor reflection (n = 19). Professional relationship breakdown (n = 11) and poor interpersonal skills (n = 11) were also noted.

Figure 4. Reasons for failing placement: Skills.

Values

Reasons for students failing placement that related to values included the following: poor professional conduct (n = 18); breach of data protection regulations (n = 6); poor understanding of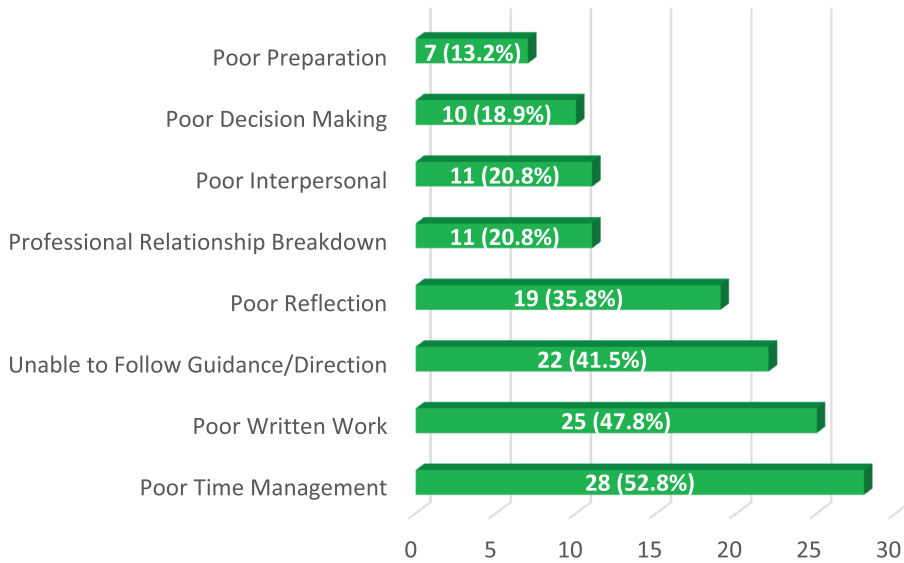 anti-oppressive practice (AOP) (n = 3); and being oppressive in practice towards service users or family carers (n = 2). In some instances, Practice Teachers recorded in their reports that students had been referred for 'Fitness to Practice', but this was not consistent.

Personal reasons

Within the sample, students had experienced former social services involvement, adverse childhood experiences, violent relationships and multiple losses, which may have heightened vulnerability. Seven Practice Teacher reports indicated pre-disposing factors or blocks to learning, which included relationship breakups, disabilities or health issues and medical emergencies involving relatives, which prevented them from fully embracing the practice placement (see Figure 5). The most common reason was the impact of historical or emerging mental health issues (i.e., anxiety and depression n = 16). Other issues included a perceived lack of motivation (n = 5) to complete the work or tasks assigned, which connected to failure to meet deadlines or adequately prepare for supervision or service user meetings. Students diagnosed with dyslexia (n = 4) presented with issues regarding the quality of their written agency or reflective work. Where students had disclosed dyslexia in advance, agencies made reasonable adjustments.

Characteristics of students who were permanently withdrawn from the course

Overall, more than half of students failed their first placement (n = 37) and the remainder failed their final placement (n = 26). In terms of recommended outcomes, 46 were permitted to repeat their placement as a final attempt, three were allowed to repeat
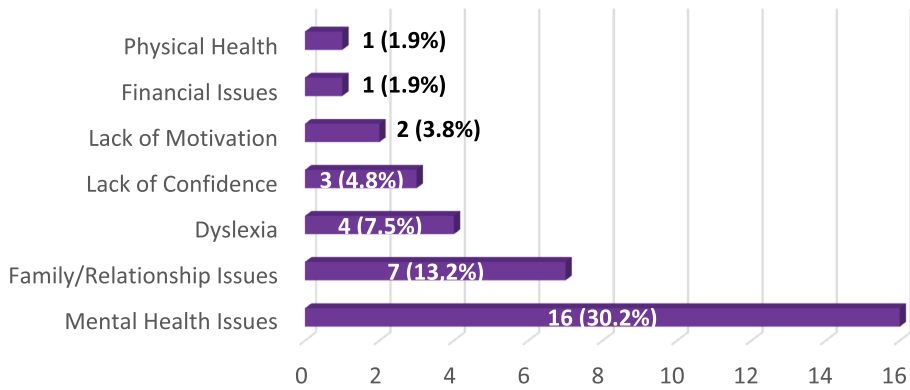
Figure 5. Reasons for failing placement: Personal.

placement as a first attempt due to extenuating circumstances, and 10 were asked to permanently withdraw from the social work course. Of those 10 participants asked to permanently withdraw, five failed their first placement on the first attempt, four failed a repeated attempt of first placement, and one failed a repeated attempt of final placement. As illustrated in Figure 6, the major reasons underpinning permanent withdrawal from the course were different to the reasons for failure, and included problematic professional values that resulted in poor professional conduct, concern around students' understanding of the social work role, and the inability to follow guidance and direction from supervisors or assessors.

Cross tabulations revealed that 'poor written skills' by gender was statistically significant. Results indicated that 13% of males failed placement due to poor written work, compared to 62% of females. Conversely, poor written work was not a reason for failure in 88% of males but only in 38% of females. Therefore, being female appears to be significantly associated with having poor written skills as a reason for failing placement, although the strength of that association is moderate based on the Cramer V value of 0.457.

Discussion

This is the first study of its kind across the island of Ireland, which captures data on 63 social work students who failed practice placement and makes an important contribution to the academic literature. The number of students who failed placement comprised less than 3% of the overall number of students who undertook placements within the five-year study period. Although this appears consistent with Basnett and Sheffield (2010), it does not represent the strong anecdotal evidence that many more students withdraw before a fail is assigned.

Social work programmes recruit a higher proportion of female students (Parker & Ashencaen Crabtree, 2014), so it was expected that the majority of failed students in this study were female, but proportionally there was an over-representation of male students. Although this part of the study did not explore gender differences in detail, it did report that male students' capacity to write appropriately for placement was less likely to be a factor for failure. Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree (2014) study suggested that the

Figure 6. Reasons students asked to permanently withdraw from the social work course.

profession can be an 'unwelcoming and even hostile territory for male practitioners' (p. 325) with male students often facing negative stereotypes and different learning expectations. Two other studies (Furness, 2012; Levinger & Segev, 2016) reported that males are more likely to drop out of social work programmes, that males tend to struggle more than women, and that male students feel they are 'on the margin in the educational context' (Levinger & Segev, 2016, p. 15).

Most research has suggested that Practice Teachers are seemingly reluctant to fail students and give them the 'benefit of the doubt' (Finch, 2015; Finch & Taylor, 2013; Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Regehr et al., 2011). Of the 63 students included, 59% (n = 37) failed their first placement, and 41% failed their final placement, which suggests that Practice Teachers took their gatekeeping responsibility seriously. Although the study did not explore the experience for Practice Teachers, it has been regularly cited in the literature that failing a student can place significant personal and professional stress on the supervisor and the agency and can compromise their willingness to fail (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Bogo et al., 2007; Schaub & Dalrymple, 2013). Of course, this is not just the responsibility of the agency staff, but how preparatory academic teaching in the program as a whole, prepares students for practice learning is also an important area of interest (Bogo et al., 2016; Gelman & Lloyd, 2008; Joubert & Webber, 2020). The literature on student anxiety related to their perceptions that they lacked sufficient experience or competence to work effectively in practice (Bogo et al., 2016; Gelman & Lloyd, 2008).

In this study, the most common reason that students failed placement was due to a lack of understanding of the professional social work role, which echoes similar findings on struggling students in academic literature, spanning the last 30 years (Brandon & Davis, 1979; Croaker et al., 2017; Finch, 2015; Schaub & Dalrymple, 2013). In our study, another factor contributing to failing practice placement was students struggling to apply theoretical or procedural knowledge to social work practice. Before progressing to the first practice

placement, social work students must successfully complete a number of modules, which introduce students to the social work role. One such module is 'preparation for practice learning', which covers skills, knowledge and values underpinning the social work role. It is co-taught by academic and agency social work staff, and involves a number of assessed role-plays, which in some instances; involve service users, peers or drama students. Given the proportion of students who failed placement due to their poor understanding of the role, foundation modules may need to respond to varying levels of experience and understanding of students. It is also important that Practice Teachers build on the academic teaching received prior to placement and are clear about what standard of practice is 'good enough' to successfully complete the placement (MacDermott & Harkin-MacDermott, 2021). Two previous studies (Cleak et al., 2016; Cleak & Smith, 2012) reported that almost 50% of students on placement did not have regular opportunities to link practice to professional social work standards.

In our study, the second most commonly reported reason for student failure was poor time management skills (n = 28; 44%), which included students missing deadlines for submission of written work to the Practice Teacher and for agency-related recording or reports. Our findings mirrored those reported by Finch (2015). In her study, Practice Teachers reported that struggling students did not submit work on time, which can be a serious issue given how agency-related records should be contemporaneous, and how reports inform interventions, service provision or legal matters on behalf of service users. Given the assessment regulations within the university and penalties for late submission, it raises questions about the capacity and readiness of some students for practice.

The third most commonly reported reason in our study was poor written work (n = 25; 40%), which referred to quality of reflective tasks submitted to Practice Teachers, agency recording, court reports and social work assessments. Academic entry requirements for professional social work training, and academic modules completed prior to commencing placement, provide opportunities for students to submit written work. However, teaching around how to write agency records, assessments or reports, to meet professional standards may be required in preparation for first placement. An earlier study of student satisfaction indicated that many students felt stressed and overwhelmed juggling academic assignments alongside written tasks to demonstrate competence during placement (Roulston et al., 2018), which may cause dilemmas for students.

In our study, 22 students (35%) were unable to follow agency policies and procedures, or actions agreed during supervision from Practice Teachers or line management, which impacted on service users and other professionals. Other social work academics (Brandon & Davis, 1979; Finch, 2015) highlighted similar issues in the literature. In relation to professional social work values, a number of published studies highlighted the prevalence of students failing due to poor professional values (Brandon & Davis, 1979; Finch, 2015; Schaub & Dalrymple, 2011). In our findings, 20 students (32%) failed placement due to poor professional conduct. Despite other studies suggesting that Practice Teachers struggle to fail students (Croaker et al., 2017; Schaub & Dalrymple, 2013), Practice Teachers in our study failed students who were unable to demonstrate key values and professional integrity. Although all social work students learn about data protection during academic teaching and mandatory induction at the start of each placement, six students breached data protection legislation and their professional social work standards, which contributed to the failed placement or being asked to permanently withdraw from the programme.

Despite teaching and assessment on anti-oppressive practice (AOP) throughout academic modules, three students demonstrated a poor understanding of AOP and two were oppressive towards service users or family carers on placement, which raises issues regarding their understanding of professional social work values and standards, or their suitability for social work training. Croisdale-Appleby (2014) recommended greater use of value-based selection and assessment centres for recruiting social work students, as he believed it would be beneficial and lead to better outcomes. A social work match psychometric, based on the NI Social Care Council Standards for conduct and practice (2019), has recently been developed and piloted with a sample of social work students from one University (unpublished). Findings confirmed it is robust in quantitative and qualitative terms, valid and reliable (internally consistent) and measured the professional quality of five social work value themes (i.e., professional standards, relationship with service user, character, resilience, and self-care). Usage of the 'social work match psychometric' for admissions or during professional training may help to highlight strengths and concerns in relation to values. Given the low rates of failure once accepted onto the social work degree, suitability should be rigorously assessed prior to admission, rather than expecting academic or agency staff to gather evidence of characteristics that make a student more likely to fail. Furthermore, module convenors need to illustrate AOP issues arising in practice, or through poor conduct on the course, and how to address these based on professional standards.

As illustrated in the findings, 16 students disclosed mental health issues, four had dyslexia and one had physical health issues, which affected progression. Research evidence suggests some practice learning settings may struggle to accommodate social work students with disabilities (Finch, 2010; Kiesel et al., 2018; Zuchowski et al., 2019), with one reporting (Kiesel et al., 2018) students were required to self-manage their situation and either downplay or not claim disability status for fear of stigma and discrimination. Based on disability discrimination legislation, employers are legally required to make reasonable adjustments for students and staff who declare a disability. There was no evidence to suggest that students involved in this study were disadvantaged or discriminated against due to their disability (Roulston et al., in press). Furthermore, given the widening participation agenda encouraging applicants from a diverse range of backgrounds to apply for social work, including former service users and carers, it is important that academics and agency partners feel confident and competent in supporting students with health issues within the parameters of their job role and professional regulations.

Limitations and strengths

Capturing data over a five-year period and focusing demographic data collection on the students who failed placement, prevented meaningful comparisons with those who successfully completed placement. For example, it is unclear how many students completed practice placements in family support or looked after children's teams during the 5 years, and if the number of students who failed these placements was representative or not. It is also unclear if social work students having to complete a children's placement was relevant to the rates of failure. Data was missing for 12 students, in relation to the

placement demographics and reasons for failure, which was unavoidable. Ethnicity of failing students was not captured during data collection, which the authors note as a limitation. The strengths of the current research study include addressing a gap in the literature on failing students on the island of Ireland, and thus making a contribution to the evidence base through critical insights into important areas related to students failing during placement. This includes identifying the over representation of male students who fail placement. Given the under representation of male social work students on qualifying programmes, exploring the experience of males in social work training is an area that will require further research. Our findings may inform curriculum development, which is formally conducted in consultation with the NISCC and CORU, in relation to promoting continuity of teaching and learning between the academic and practice settings and clarifying what standard of practice is 'good enough' to pass placement.

Conclusion

Drawing on anonymised data from four participating universities across the island of Ireland, this study examined the incidence of failed social work placements over a five-year period, together with reasons for 63 students failing. In the majority of cases, multiple reasons for failing were reported, which spanned professional practice, learning and personal issues. Dominant issues were identified, which included knowledge, skills and values. Personal issues often pre-existed the placement, which often underpinned the ability of students to fully embrace the learning opportunities and meet the requirements.

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Disclosure statement

Final remarks

The findings suggest that students who fail placement are frequently experiencing both professional and personal challenges. The impact of interconnected professional and personal demands during placement warrants further research, as does the experience of male students.

Funding

Notes on contributors

Dr Audrey Roulston is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work. In the past 10 years, she had lead responsibility for practice learning and admissions into social work, and is interested in why students do not successfully complete social work training. Her research interests include values-based recruitment, student supervision, professional identity, advance care planning, palliative care and bereavement.

Dr Helen Cleak is an Adjunct Associate Professor in La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia. Her main research interests include practice teaching, student supervision and professional identity.

Professor David Hayes is Programme Director and former Director of Undergraduate Education. His research interests include professional conduct of social care staff, values-based recruitment, service user experiences of child protection and criminal justice systems, practice and experiences of professionals working in the child protection system, social work assessment and decision-making in child welfare.

Dr Paula McFadden is a Senior Lecturer in Ulster University. Her main research interests include workforce well-being, resilience and burnout.

Dr Erna O'Connor is an Assistant Professor in Social Work at Trinity College Dublin. Her main research interests include social work in health care, bereavement, trauma informed practice, reflective practice, relationship based practice, supervision and practice learning.

Caroline Shore is a College Lecturer in University College Cork. Her research and teaching interests include child protection and welfare, skills development for professional practice, values and ethics in social work, cultural competence and the role of teaching and learning in student professional formation.

ORCID

Audrey Roulston http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7446-6116
Helen Cleak http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6899-3297

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