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Field Manuals: A road map to student learning?

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Abstract

Twenty baccalaureate social work field education manuals from New York State were examined for the content they contained related to student assessment, how they linked theory and practice, and student responsibility in their learning and behavior. Data are examined in the context of the Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE EPAS) and current literature. Findings highlight the range of content both in areas covered and depth of detail. Results provide a foundation for field programs to compare their manuals as they make revisions for EPAS 2015 and build on recommendations made in the 2014 CSWE Field Education Summit.

Keywords: Wellness Initiative; Scholarship of Teaching-Learning (SoTL); Agency and University Partnership; Field placement model; Competencies

Introduction

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) identified field education as social work education's signature pedagogy in the 2008, which continues in the 2015, Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (CSWE, 2008, 2015). These standards outline social work program requirements and expectations in broad language, providing flexibility and individuality on how policies are implemented. Social work educators are examining literature, consulting colleagues, and returning to program and college/university mission statements for guidance and clarity in structuring program policies and procedures. However, academics argue that signature pedagogies require consistency and equity to measure student outcomes across programs (Hay & O'Donoghue, 2009).

Producing independent and ethical social work candidates for graduation is the prime goal as set forth by CSWE EPAS for social work programs. Field education often acts as the proving ground for social work majors, providing valuable experience for students to demonstrate the knowledge, values, and skills they have learned in the classroom (Brunhofer, Weisz, Black, & Bowers, 2009; Goldstein, 1994). It is important that social work programs clearly articulate the process of student learning and assessment as well as expectations for students' professionalism and behaviors in field.

Field education manuals (hereafter referred to as manuals) have been identified with the potential to be a "repository of information that guides field education, establishes clear standards for those involved in field, incorporates CSWE standards, sets forth the program's mission and reflects current research" (Martin & Ciarfella, 2015, p. 1-2). An initial study was conducted on field manuals to examine what they contained and how the content related to CSWE EPAS and field education research. Martin and Ciarfella (2015) examined the topics of gatekeeping, faculty liaisons, agency field supervisors, and incorporation of 2008 EPAS competencies. Findings showed that manuals have a strong potential for illustrating the expectations of programs for those associated with field education and making links to CSWE educational expectations. This article is based on a recommendation from the initial study to focus more specifically on student variables, such as how programs assess student progress and clarify educational expectations. This resulted in the following research questions: 1) What content do manuals contain related to student assessment, linking classroom content/theory to field experience, and student responsibilities? and 2) How does the content align with EPAS expectations?

Literature Review

While literature on field education is prolific, there are areas linked to this research that are limited. This literature review will touch on areas related to student assessment, how theory is linked to field practice, and various responsibilities and expectations of students during their time in field practice.

Student Assessment

Among the expectations set forth in EPAS are that programs evaluate students based on predetermined competencies and publicize this data on program websites (CSWE, 2008, 2015). Field is one prominent area that programs use to assess students' mastery of these competencies and practice behaviors. The 2015 EPAS added additional clarification that "one of the assessment measures is based on demonstration of the competency in real or simulated practice situations" (CSWE, 2015, p. 19). Field then becomes a natural fit of this assessment expectation.

Literature on student assessment is abundant examining areas such as student self-assessment (Bogo, Regehr, Katz, Logie, & Mylopoulos, 2011a; Miller, Kovacs, Wright, Corcoran, & Rosenblum, 2005), satisfaction (Grady, Powers, Despard, & Naylor, 2011; Kaye & Fortune, 2004), and agency field supervisor assessment (Sowbel, 2012; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). There are several studies in the literature that explored how programs could implement the 2008 EPAS (Bogo et al., 2011a; Bogo et al., 2011b; Wayne et al., 2010; Williamson, Hostetter, Byers, & Huggins, 2010), each proposing multiple measures, in addition to the model presented in their article, to assess student competence in field education. These authors were consistent in their recommendations that further work needed to be done to create a valid standardized instrument to measure students' practice ability. This is especially relevant given that EPAS does not incorporate how programs are to evaluate students' behavioral mastery of the competencies via their field performance (Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, & Ferrell, 2011; Wayne et al., 2010), only that two measures per competency need to be developed and used by programs (CSWE, 2015)

Link between theory and field

CSWE is clear that theory must be linked to field, and this link must be explained by programs (CSWE 2008, 2015). Bogo (2010) developed the Integration of Theory and Practice Loop Model to detail the process of students transforming their learning into professional practice. Key in the application of this model is its repeated approach of "engaging in practice, thinking, feeling and doing, or taking some action again and again" (Bogo, 2010, p. 126). The role of facilitating students' learning through this cyclical process is shared by agency field supervisors, faculty liaisons, and program curriculum (Moen, Liley, & Dennis, 2015). Faculty field liaisons have been identified "as the bridge between agency field placements and classroom instruction" (Armenta & Linseisen, 2015, p. 1). The agency field supervisor has a primary role in facilitating students' application of knowledge, values, and skills discussed in the classroom (Moen et al., 2015). One of the methods to articulate learning and practice expectations is the learning agreement/contract. This tool has been identified as a way for students to be self-directed in their learning of the program curriculum by collaborating with program faculty and agency field supervisors (Boyer, 2003; Knowles, 1975), and enhance communication between students, programs, and field agencies.

Student responsibilities/expectations

While the responsibilities and expectations of students in field can be far ranging, for this article, the focus is on two broad categories: student as an active learner, and professional behavior. These are key skill areas to meet the CSWE EPAS expectation for developing independent and ethical social work candidates at graduation. The literature in these topics is sparse, and primarily focuses on values. Brunhofer et al. (2009) highlight the lack of literature on professional socialization and how this responsibility has been primarily left to agency field supervisors. Brunhofer et al. (2009) identified how this has become more problematic as “many students seem to enter at professional school with norms and behaviors that differ dramatically from the social work profession” (p. 387). Educating students on professional behavior is an important aspect of developing their professional identities as ethical practitioners. In addition, Bogo and colleagues have examined the variability of agency field supervisors’ willingness to identify characteristics that constitute an exemplary versus problematic student in their agency. The student often is seen more as a client than future colleague, and the agency field educator treats them as such (Bogo et al., 2006; Bogo, Regehr, Power, & Regehr, 2007).

CSWE EPAS has included expectations related to students as part of the core competencies. 2015 Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior (CSWE, 2015, p. 7), which is an amalgam of EPAS 2008 competencies 1 & 2, highlights various expectations regarding student professionalism. This competency identifies three behaviors that link to this research: “1) demonstrating ethical behavior through the application of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW)’s Code of Ethics, 2) conducting themselves in a professional manner, 3) and using supervision and consultation” (CSWE, 2015, p. 7). Competency 2 (formerly competency 4 in 2008) discusses students’ need to be self-reflective and corrective as active learners (CSWE, 2015). It is here in supervision one would reasonably expect students to be exploring the application of theories in their practice and discuss this with their agency field supervisor.

Methods

This is the second part of a content analysis of twenty (20) undergraduate social work field education manuals from New York State, conducted by the authors who are experienced social work educators. Content analysis allows for both deductive and inductive analysis and is useful for examining documents (Cho & Lee, 2014). The intent of the second part of this research was to look at how manuals make visible the needs and expectations of students related to their learning and outcomes. The goal of this research was to determine what information was provided that relates directly to students regarding expectations about learning and their roles and responsibilities in field.

Per CSWE, New York State has 32 accredited undergraduate social work programs. Manuals were obtained during April and May 2013 in two ways. The majority (n=16) were downloaded from BSW program websites. Two emails were sent, four weeks apart, to BSW program directors and/or field coordinators of the 16 accredited programs that did not have manuals available online. Four additional manuals were received from this effort. A total of 20 field manuals were obtained representing 62% of the potential sample.

All manuals were either in or transformed into MS Word then uploaded into NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software. Initial coding identified content being linked to broad categories such as student assignment and student responsibilities. As coding continued, subcategories were created using an inductive approach (Creswell, 2009; Thomas, 2006). The authors' experience as field coordinators was drawn upon while coding. The authors conferred during the coding process, reviewing themes and code content for agreement. Any disagreements were discussed until consensus was achieved.

The Carnegie Classification was used to provide details of the intuitions where programs in the sample resided. Fourteen programs were based in private-nonprofit schools, and six were in public institutions. The size of the schools ranged from very small to large, with one only being an undergraduate institution, 14 offered undergraduate and graduate degrees, and five were identified as research universities.

Results

Student assessment

EPAS 2008 and 2015 have accreditation standards that outline expectations of professional behaviors in the competencies which students are required to be assessed. This assessment is done both formally and informally throughout their field experience and seminar. A range of assessment tools, including process recordings, competency-based field assessments, and student journals, have been recommended to capture the full understanding of student knowledge and practice ability (Wertheimer & Sodhi, 2014). Five areas of assessment were prominent in the field manuals: evaluation, learning agreement/contract, field seminar, process recording, and other assignments (Table 1). The manuals ranged from two to five assessment areas. One program identified two areas of student assessment: evaluation and process recording. Three other programs had three assessment areas, 10 had four, and six had information in all five assessment areas. It is important to note that six field manuals included syllabi for field practicum and/or field seminar. These were examined as part of the manuals' content making it easier to identify various assessment tools, however programs that did not include syllabi may use additional assessment tools that were not incorporated in this analysis.

Table 1

<i>Student Assessments</i>				
Evaluation	Learning Agreement/Contract	Field Seminar	Process Recording	Other Assignments
20	18	18	18	7

All 20 manuals reflect the importance of student assessment by having at least one reference to formal student evaluations that were completed at minimum once per semester. Ten of the 20 evaluations align with the 2008 competencies and practice behaviors.

Learning agreements/contracts are designed to provide a written plan for expectations of students' learning during the field experience. The level of specificity required for these documents vary. Two programs made no mention of a learning agreement/contract in their manuals, three others mentioned that a learning agreement/contract would be created, and 15 provided some level of guidance, such as an outline, example, or specific form. Of those, 11 conformed to 2008 EPAS by expecting learning outcomes to be linked to competencies and practice behaviors.

Field seminar was identified by 18 programs as both a class and venue for ongoing student assessment. Linked to seminars were other assignments identified to assess students' progress toward practice competency, such as process recordings. Process recordings are used as a learning and assessment tool in 18 programs, with seven other programs identifying some other assignment(s) to assist with student assessment. Other assignments identified in seven programs included: reflective journals, academic papers, case studies, competency portfolio, change project, and/or macro projects. Six of these programs had these other assignments in addition to the process recording.

Link between theory and field

CSWE (2008, 2015) is clear with expectations that classroom knowledge needs to be linked with practice opportunities. All manuals included some reference to this expectation, with at least one manual citing CSWE directly. Other manuals had variations of the same information identified in this example:

The primary purpose of field instruction is to link classroom learning with practice experiences so the student can effectively utilize social work knowledge, values, and skills in the practice setting. Thus, the student can be prepared to conduct competent professional practice.

Several schools provided a little more detail identifying who is responsible for making this link. Three identified it as a role of the field liaison, six placed the responsibility on the agency field supervisor, and five linked it to student learning outcomes. One manual identified all three as responsible, and one school identified both the student and field supervisor (Table 2).

Table 2

<i>Link Between Theory and Field</i>			
In General	Field Liaison	Agency Field Supervisor	Student
20	3	6	5

The manual is the opportunity or tool for the field director to communicate expected student learning outcomes of the school's explicit curriculum while simultaneously optimizing the placement communities' implicit learning environment with the agency field supervisor as well as the student (Wertheimer & Sodhi, 2014). The authors believe a well structured manual has the potential to facilitate open communication between the school, agency, and student on how course content and field experience can strengthen student learning and outcomes.

Student responsibilities/expectations

Establishing expectations and responsibilities for students while they are in field helps programs be clear about how students should behave and what they will be doing while in field. While overall the literature is minimal regarding student responsibilities, EPAS 2008 and 2015 have competencies linked to professional behavior and engaged student learners (CSWE, 2008, 2015). Nine areas were identified in this research: active learner, preparing and use of supervision, identifying as a student while in field, attending seminar, engaging in professional behavior, adherence to the NASW code of ethics, adherence to program/school policies, communication with field liaison/field director/office (Table 3), and number of field hours required (Table 4).

The coverage of these nine areas varied greatly by program. All manuals identified the number of field hours students were expected to complete. Of the eight other areas (Table 3), one school only made reference to one (identifying as a student), four programs touched on two areas, three included information related to three categories, another three had four and yet another three had content in five areas. Four manuals touched on six and two programs were the most thorough with seven areas.

Table 3

<i>Students Responsibilities</i>			
Active Learner	Prepare & Use Supervision	Identify as a Student at Field	Attend Seminar
16	10	6	4
Professional Behavior	Adhere to Code of Ethics	Adhere to Program/School Policies	Communication with Liaison and/or Field Office/Director
16	15	6	10

The category of active learner was coded in 16 manuals. This code defined or outlined student responsibility to be proactive in their learning experience, from the development of learning goals, engaging in self-reflection/correction, and participating in the evaluation process. Some programs make statements that clearly

affirm that learning is the student's responsibility, such as "The student has primary responsibility for his/her own learning and is expected to actively participate in the formulation and implementation of the field instruction experience." Another example demonstrates the expectation that students are taking initiative and stepping outside of their comfort zone: "Tries new ways of thinking, behaving, learning, practicing (takes risks associated with professional growth)."

Students' responsibility to prepare and use supervision in field came up in half (n=10) of the manuals which also supports their responsibility to explore the link between theory and practice. This is interesting in the context of prior research showing all 20 manuals identified supervision as a responsibility of the agency field supervisor (Martin & Ciarfella, 2015). Given the reciprocal nature of supervision (Beddoe, Ackroyd, Chinnery, & Appleton, 2011) one would expect it is as much the students' responsibility as that of their supervisors. The programs that identified this as a student responsibility reflect this expectation, however the language ranged from vague, such as, "Prepare for weekly supervisory conferences and use supervision constructively," to more explicit instructions

- Meet with the field instructor at least once each week for a minimum of one hour of supervision.
- Be responsible for the content of the supervisory sessions and attend sessions with a prepared agenda.
- Make an initial appointment with their supervisor for the first week of field education.

The NASW ethical principle of students identifying themselves as interns was highlighted in six of the program manuals, separate from the reference to the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008). Eighteen of the programs identified having a field seminar, however, only four made a point to add additional language directed at students that attendance was expected.

Professional behavior, addressing students' behavior at the field site, was included as an expectation for students in 16 of the manuals. Descriptions in manuals cover a range of areas from keeping track of hours, notifying the field site in the event of an expected absence, how to dress, and following agency policies and procedures. The level of expectation varies from something that could be considered vague, "Represent themselves as social work professionals by maintaining appropriate standards of dress and behavior," to something a little more specific: "Students are expected to treat their field placement like a job. Their field instructor is to be considered their boss, and students are to abide by all the rules of the agency as if they were a paid employee."

Adhering to the NASW Code of Ethics was also identified as a responsibility of students while in field and was identified in 15 manuals. The action words of "adhere," "implement," "abide," and "maintain" were commonly used in front of the Code of Ethics, such as this simple statement, "Adhere to the NASW Social Work Code of Ethics." Interesting to note is all but two programs had at least professional behavior or adhering to the Code of Ethics in their manuals.

Another area six schools identified was students' expectations to adhere to school and/or program policies. All of these programs also identified professional behavior and adhering to the Code of Ethics as student responsibilities.

Communication with liaison and/or field office was identified as a student role in 10 manuals. This expectation was most commonly linked to students experiencing difficulties in field, or having issues or concerns that related to field. One program made a point to include positive as well as negative field experience by writing this: "Report regularly to field faculty liaison both successful learning experiences and problems arising out of field education."

Finally, the number of field hours students were expected to complete was identified in all manuals. Eight schools had the minimum 400 hours required by CSWE. Seven programs had between 401 and 499 hours, and five programs had between 500 and 600 hours. It is interesting that more than half of the manuals exceed CSWE standards.

Table 4

<i>Student Responsibilities: Total Field Hours Required</i>		
<u>400 hrs</u>	<u>401 – 499 hrs</u>	<u>500 – 600 hrs</u>
8	7	5

Discussion

Pierce (2015) discusses the importance of continued research on field education as a way to further clarify and unify the implementation of social work's signature pedagogy. Students as well as the professional (NASW) and practice community (agencies) are the primary consumers of social work education, and it is important that the expectations social work programs have for students related to their field experience are clear and explicit. The authors looked at BSW field manuals related to student learning and expectations about their behavior and performance in field. The content of manuals spans a wide range from ones that provide very specific guidance, some vague details, and others not covering a content area at all. Overall, manuals were strong in identifying how students will be assessed and all included language about the link between theory and field. However, many were weak in identifying who was responsible for making that connection. In addition, while all included the number of required field hours, other student responsibilities were quite varied by program.

Research recommends the use of multiple forms of assessment to evaluate student learning which aligns with CSWE accreditation standards (CSWE, 2015). This expectation was demonstrated in data with all programs having two or more methods of assessment identified in their manuals. That said, only six

programs included syllabi as part of their manual leaving the possibility open that programs have more assessment tools in use. This leads to an interesting debate on whether manuals should include syllabi to further communicate assessment expectations to students prior to entrance into the major or start of class. Conforming to CSWE expectation that “field education program connects the theoretical and conceptual content of the classroom and field settings” (CSWE, 2015, p. 13) all manuals make at least a general statement about the link between theory and field practice, with some providing more description. Half of the manuals identified the student, field liaison, and/or agency field supervisor as the responsible party for making this link. Drilling down further, this was primarily identified as an agency field supervisor (6) or student (5) responsibility, with field liaisons identified in only three manuals. Identifying methods used to facilitate students’ internalization and application of course content in field has been identified as an important component in field pedagogy (Pierce, 2015) and is an expectation in the 2015 EPAS. Manuals could do more to explicate this process.

Student responsibilities was surprisingly the weakest area given that CSWE EPAS (2008 and 2015) outline many of categories identified in this research in the core competences. While initial viewing shows 80% of programs having a reference to students being active learners, only half make a point of identifying students’ role in supervision. Similarly, 80% of programs discuss students’ expectation to act in a professional manner, but guidance on what would be considered professional was limited. In addition, one would argue that communication would be key in professional behavior, however this was only identified in half of the manuals, and adhering to school/program policies was only identified in six. The need to be explicit in expectations around student learning and professional behavior is important, especially given that students often enter social work programs with personal beliefs that do not align with the profession (Brunhofer et al., 2009).

Limitations and Future Research

As with any research this study had limitations. First, manuals were collected in spring 2013 during the time when 2008 EPAS were in effect. The majority of manuals were obtained through program websites, which may not be the most up to date manual in use. If support documents were not included in manuals they were not included in the research (i.e. appendices, syllabi). EPAS 2008 was in effect for five years at the time of data collection, and it is likely not all programs had gone through reaccreditation under the new standards and had yet to update their manuals to align with EPAS expectations.

It is puzzling to the authors why the twelve programs not included in the study did not provide their manual to the email request or have it posted on their website. It is possible not all programs have field manuals since it is not an explicit expectation in CSWE EPAS.

Future research could examine how manuals are used by programs. Are manuals actively used by field directors, agency field supervisors, and students as a reference and guidebook in preparation for and throughout the field experience? Or are they written as a program requirement, distributed and forgotten

until next year when they need to be updated or a problem arises? CSWE (2014) Field Summit recommendations included collaborating with other social work programs through sharing resources. Manuals could be examined for their usefulness in communicating policies and resources across programs. Finally, manuals could be examined for their potential to define the implementation and assessment of the field experience in a way that can clarify and unify how field is delivered so it aligns with expectations of signature pedagogies.

Conclusion

This article builds on the discussion about whether field education manuals can be integral in how social work programs educate students, agency field supervisors, field liaisons, field directors, and CSWE on how field implements social work curriculum (Martin & Ciarfella, 2015). It also opens the door to moving the recommendations from the 2014 CSWE Field Summit in to action. Students are expected to enter field acting in a professional manner and applying the knowledge gained in the classroom. How this expectation is articulated to students through the field manual varies in what and how much is written. While CSWE does not explicitly require that manuals provide details related to EPAS requirements, manuals can be a valuable tool for this purpose. In addition, a well written manual can be both a contract and road map of how students and field agencies will be implementing learning through field practice and professional behavior for all involved with field education. A manual could then also build on the recommendations from the 2014 CSWE Field Summit such as enhancing communication; set forth readiness expectation between the field, the program, and the agencies; and to have a manual that is a central point of discussion with students for productive feedback (CSWE, 2014).

Enhancing manual content without going into excessive detail is a challenge that needs to be navigated. Having syllabi available in the manual is one way to add curriculum that clearly conveys information on what content is being covered through the semester, how students are going to be applying their learning, and how they will be assessed. Additionally, syllabi can clarify expectations and foster the development of quality field placements and supervisors.

Finally, we believe that field manuals, especially those that are readily available on program websites, are valuable in addressing the 2014 CSWE Field Summit theme of collaboration within and among social work programs. Field manuals can be a repository for field education policies, forms, and creative ideas to help unify this area of social work education. Having field manuals available on program websites for students and their families provides them with the ability to compare programs and develop an appreciation for the rigor in the preparation for this profession.

Field manuals are a repository of information that ranges in coverage and depth of detail from program to program. There are universal themes that are addressed in all manuals, but no consistency exists. Field manuals have many readers, such as field directors, agency field supervisors, field liaisons, students, and CSWE. Given the broad audience, it can be challenging to have one document service many interests. However, given the importance of field education and its role as the signature pedagogy, clear communica-

tion of expectations, especially around student learning, responsibilities and assessment, can be viewed as a key element of this document. That said, programs should examine their manuals' content to determine what changes could be made to further explicate the students' journey through field process.

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