



Field Instructor Perspectives on Challenging Behaviors in Social Work Practicum

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Abstract

Students sometimes struggle in practicum, failing to demonstrate acceptable application of social work values and skills learned in the classroom. When students are unprepared and unskilled in field, responsibility for professional gatekeeping often falls to field instructors. In this exploratory qualitative study, 13 field instructors identified student characteristics that were most challenging during field supervision: little openness to feedback, direction, or supervision; poor personal and professional boundaries; incongruence with social work values; and disengagement from practicum and the social work profession. In addition, field instructors shared their views for improving student screening and gatekeeping throughout the social work curriculum.

Keywords: field education, social work practicum, social work education, student supervision, poorly performing students, qualitative research

Introduction

Field education, as social work's signature pedagogy, is integral to developing competent and ethical practitioners. Social workers must demonstrate fundamental theoretical knowledge, along with practice skills such as the ability to form relationships, show empathy, and demonstrate ethical conduct. Competent practice skills are best demonstrated in the field setting with actual clients and client systems. However, poorly performing graduates and practicum students harm the reputations of social work programs and the profession (Tam & Kwok, 2007).

Gatekeeping in social work education falls mostly to the field component (Robertson, 2013). When students struggle during their field training, it is a difficult and challenging situation for all parties involved: students, field instructors, and faculty. Social work education faces increased numbers of students and programs (Kindle & Colby, 2008; Knight, 2015; Nordstrand, 2017; Sowbel, 2012), while social service agencies face decreased funding and increased client loads (Bogo, 2006). University resources to support students in field have not increased proportionately, resulting in greater stress and demands on social work faculty and staff to offer field instructors necessary support (Bogo, 2015; Holosko & Skinner, 2015; Nordstrand, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to learn more about field instructor experiences supervising social work students with problematic behaviors and their recommendations for improving student preparation for practicum. This knowledge is valuable for social work educators and field personnel as they conduct field orientations, train and support field instructors, and monitor student placements. In addition, learning more about challenging student behaviors in field can provide educators with insight into classroom behaviors and personal indicators that require attention prior to practicum placement.

Practicum Supervision

Social work faculty entrust a great deal of responsibility to field instructors for supervising and evaluating practicum students. Here, the term “field instructor” refers to experienced, practicing social workers who supervise social work interns during their practicum experiences at agency-based settings. Field instruction with high-quality student supervision requires extra work, yet practitioners serve as field instructors typically without remuneration or adjustments to their caseloads. While accepting extra responsibilities and workload to supervise and mentor students, field instructors have reported personal and professional satisfaction from teaching new practitioners and contributing to the social work profession (Everett, Miehl, DuBois, & Garran, 2011; Ketner, Cooper-Bolinskey, & VanCleave, 2017). Supervisors felt energized by students’ enthusiasm and intellectually stimulated by students’ inquisitiveness about practice (Bogo et al., 2006; Everett et al., 2011). Field instructors have also reported value in developing personal leadership and managerial skills when they proctored students (Ketner et al., 2017).

Social work students have described supervisor feedback as both valuable and valued (Ketner et al., 2017; Marlowe, Appleton, Chinnery, & Van Stratum, 2015; Miehl,

Everett, Segal, & DuBois, 2013). Feedback is most effective when critical and positive assessments are balanced within a supportive student-supervisor relationship. However, conflict may develop when the feedback is of a corrective nature or students are unreceptive and fail to integrate changes into their work (Bogo, Regehr, Power, & Regehr, 2007). When they supervised struggling students, field instructors have reported dissatisfaction spending extra time redoing interns' work and providing extra close oversight for fear of client harm and unprofessional conduct (Bogo et al., 2006; Homonoff, 2008). Field instructors were frustrated when the supervisory relationship felt contentious as students responded hostilely to corrective feedback and failed to make successful changes in their behaviors, skills, or knowledge (Bogo et al., 2007; Nordstrand, 2017). At some point, field instructors are likely to encounter an intern with challenging behaviors. For example, Robertson (2013) found that 67% of field coordinators ($n=38$) had placed a student with questionable professional suitability into practicum. Nevertheless, practitioners have continued in the field instructor role based on the social work program's quality of students, relationship with faculty, and overall relationship with the program (Zuckerman, Levine, & Frey, 2017).

Professional Suitability

In practicum, not only is theoretical knowledge expected but also professional and ethical behaviors consistent with social work values. Successful students will demonstrate social work knowledge, skills in building and sustaining interpersonal relationships, application of professional values, and compliance with professional ethics (Tam & Coleman, 2009). Professional suitability, while a somewhat elusive concept, refers to one's personal fit with social work's professional values and the ability to act as a social worker (Coyle, Carter, & Leslie, 2011). In essence, suitability embodies the desired skills, personal traits, and behaviors of professional social workers. Substantial social work literature endorses the concept of professional suitability and the need to assess students' fit with social work's professional values and behaviors (Curren & Atherton, 2008; Robertson, 2013; Sowbel & Miller, 2015; Tam & Coleman, 2009).

Tam and Coleman (2009) conceptualized suitability as encompassing personal awareness of one's strengths/weaknesses, commitment to professional growth, empathy, genuine caring toward others, self-management of personal issues, passion for the social work profession, and openness/receptivity to feedback. In other studies, field instructors have identified initiative, motivation, energy, and openness along with maturity, honesty, integrity, empathy, and respect as desirable traits among social work students and practitioners (Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Miller, Kovacs, Wright, Corcoran,

& Rosenblum, 2005; Nordstrand, 2017; Sussman, Bailey, Richardson, & Granner, 2014). Also necessary are the capacity for building self-awareness, resolving personal issues, and gaining insight into one's choice of social work as a career (Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Sussman et al., 2014).

Among field instructors, the highest-rated single criterion for professional suitability was adherence to social work values and ethics (Tam & Coleman, 2009). BSW program directors ranked ethical behavior, respect and acceptance of human diversity, and congruence of personal and professional social work values as the three most important factors ensuring graduates' competence (Gibbs, 1994). Field instructors have expected students to demonstrate motivation and continual improvement in critical thinking, self-reflection, and appreciation of the beliefs and values of others with ethical practices respecting all peoples and their rights to self-determination (Sussman et al., 2014). Accordingly, Holmström (2014) has advocated for renewed focus on candidates' personal character in social work education, arguing that personal suitability and intellectual capacity are equally important. Because students' personal characteristics were so highly regarded by field instructors, practitioners, and faculty (Gibbs, 2000; Holmström, 2014; Robertson, 2013; Seipel, Johnson, & Walton, 2011; Tam & Coleman, 2009), it would seem that social work educators should evaluate students' personal skills and values throughout the social work curriculum.

Conceptual Framework: Stakeholder Theory

For this study, the conceptual framework is Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory. Stakeholders are "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Social work education is comprised of a wide system of stakeholders: faculty, administrators, field instructors, students, alumni, social service employers, and clients (Street, MacGregor, & Cornelius-White, 2019).

According to stakeholder theory, organizational success depends on multiple forces and the development of cooperation, interconnectedness, and interdependence with others (Freeman, 1984). As such, successful organizations will implement operational processes sensitive to stakeholder concerns. In field education, social work programs work interdependently with the practice community, the agencies that host students, and the practitioners who supervise them. Therefore, stakeholder theory has meaningful application for seeking input from field instructors as social work educators enact educational policies and oversee field education.

Research Questions

The study's research questions are:

1. What characteristics do field instructors identify as most challenging when supervising social work students?
2. From field instructors' perspective, how should social work faculty screen students throughout the curriculum prior to practicum placement?

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative stakeholder analysis in a case study of social work admission at a small, Midwestern liberal arts university (Street et al., 2019). The social work program under study had baccalaureate enrollment of over 60 students, including pre-admitted freshmen to seniors in practicum. A stakeholder analysis sought stakeholders' perspectives on admission and gatekeeping practices in social work education. This paper presents new findings specific to field instructors' personal experiences with supervising practicum students and their recommendations how social work faculty can better screen students for field placements throughout the educational process.

Data Collection

The author used purposeful sampling to select participants who were "information rich" (Patton, 2015, p. 46) to offer insight on the topic of field supervision. Selection criteria were field instructors with a BSW or MSW degree that have supervised students for at least three years in order to ensure that participants had adequate proctoring experience to form opinions on student supervision. In addition, field instructors were recruited from a variety of social work settings to gain general perspectives not attributed to specialized practice areas. As a social work faculty member and field education coordinator, the author had contacts with prospective participants.

In total, 13 social work field instructors participated in this exploratory study. With institutional review board approval, the author conducted eight individual interviews and two focus groups ($n=2$ and $n=3$) using a semistructured questioning format. Participants had served as field instructors for multiple social work programs at both private and public universities. The sample averaged just over 10 years of experience

in supervising both baccalaureate and graduate practicum students; total years of student supervision ranged from 3 to 28. Nine of the field instructors held MSW degrees and four held BSW degrees. Field instructors represented a wide variety of social work practice settings including: youth services ($n=3$), addictions ($n=2$), community development ($n=2$), schools ($n=2$), mental health ($n=2$), hospice ($n=1$), and juvenile justice ($n=1$).

Data Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Using extensive memoing, the author prepared written summaries after each interview and focus group. As data collection and analysis were simultaneous in this study (Merriam, 2009), memoing was a process of reflecting on topic development, questions for future interviews, and emerging themes as the research progressed (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). A constant comparative method of data analysis was used to identify themes. The author first read through each transcript in its entirety. In the next readings, the author began open coding of each individual transcript, a process of “jot[ing] down notes, comments, observations, and queries in the margins [...] Notations are next to bits of data that [are] potentially relevant or important to [the] study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). Using axial coding, open codes were then grouped into categories as relationships among concepts were identified (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Each transcript was reviewed again and categories in the data were considered and assessed if groupings were present. As the author progressed in axial coding, a separate running list of themes was created by merging categories from each transcript into one master list and “constructing categories or themes that capture[d] [...] recurring pattern[s] that cuts across [...] data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 181). Themes from the interviews emerged from consistency in participants’ responses during the reiterative coding process. In addition, the author maintained a detailed audit trail documenting decision-making and data analysis (Merriam, 2009). Member checks were used, in which initial interpretations were shared with participants to generate feedback and trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009). Quotations presented are used to illustrate the study’s themes and findings using participants’ own words (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Findings

As partners in social work education, field instructors have valuable insights about student development and preparation. Field instructors shared experiences of supervising social work practicum students, emphasizing topics important to educators: (a) student characteristics that proved most challenging during field

supervision and (b) field instructor views for improving student screening and gatekeeping throughout social work studies.

Challenging Characteristics of Practicum Students

When field instructors described their most challenging social work interns, four characteristics emerged prominently: (1) little openness to feedback, direction, or supervision; (2) poor personal and professional boundaries; (3) incongruence with social work values; and (4) disengagement from practicum and the social work profession. Notably, participants did not require extra time to pause and reflect, neither to recall their most challenging students in field supervision, nor to describe the troublesome behaviors and attitudes. Participant responses were immediate and strongly felt.

Little openness to feedback, direction, or supervision. The most-identified characteristic field instructors found challenging was social work students who displayed little openness to feedback, direction, or supervision. These students did not respond to correction or accept feedback from their field instructors. Students presented in different ways, such as being rigid or refusing to listen to guidance and suggestions. One field instructor shared, “[The student] couldn’t accept feedback. She wouldn’t listen.. [...] Whatever she was going to do, she was going to do. And it became problematic for us with patients.”

Challenging students were also viewed as “inflexible.” The field instructor continued, “[The student did] not have any room for anybody else’s opinions or thoughts [...] She was rigid [...] There was no movement with her in any way, shape, or form.” Other challenging students acted as know-it-alls who already knew all about social work practice and did not need further supervision or instruction. Rather than merely being personality conflicts between students and proctors, the lack of openness to feedback and supervision impeded students’ learning during the field experience. One participant stated, “It was like talking to the wall a lot of times. [The student] wasn’t really using [practicum] as a learning experience and [...] acted as if they already knew the information, so it was hard to teach.” Another field instructor concurred, sharing she was challenged by a student who was “very closed off to new ideas, so that made new learning really difficult.” Field instructors expressed the desire for interns to be “open to learning and discovering themselves” during their field experiences.

Poor personal and professional boundaries. Field instructors also supervised students who struggled to maintain personal and professional boundaries in

the field setting and did not respond well to correction. Students' problems with boundaries manifested as an inability to maintain separation between the personal and professional. Poor boundaries were characterized by over-sharing of self-disclosures and personal information, displaying personal neediness, and becoming overly involved with clients. A field instructor stated, "They would go from stranger to over[ly] personal really quick, and there was no middle filter [...] Everything always went back to their needs [...] Everything was always: them, them, them" to the point of the student failing to complete basic assessments with clients. The field instructor described the student's approach, "[...] It was 'Hi, my name is--. Let me tell you about me.' [...] almost missing the complete reason why we were there [to help clients]."

Likely underlying the overuse of self and over-involvement with clients were students' own unmet needs. Field instructors were challenged by students seeking satisfaction of their own personal needs within client relationships. A field instructor shared, "[The student] needed more from the client than she could give [to] the client [...] I had to watch her constantly because she struggled with boundaries." One field instructor had to redirect a student from sharing her personal telephone number with clients and granting "extra favors" (such as privileges) to clients in order to be liked. Another field instructor described a student as a "take-home-her-clients type."

These field instructors tried to help students set limits with clients and recognize the negative consequences of poor boundaries for social worker and client alike. Interns who struggled with maintaining professional boundaries required extra supervision and monitoring to ensure the emotional and personal safety of clients and the students themselves.

Incongruence with social work values. Supervisors were further challenged when students' attitudes seemed incongruent with professional social work values. These supervision challenges included interns failing to act in accordance with prevailing social work perspectives and values that distinguish social work as a helping profession. Within this category, students were commonly described as "judgmental." For example, one field instructor noted, "the mindset of how [the student] wanted to do social work [was] judgmental."

While all social workers bring personal biases to their helping relationships, field instructors were greatly challenged when students' perspectives did not change or soften over the course of their practicum experiences. Field instructors described students who failed to connect with clients because of feelings of superiority and appeared "snobby" and "snooty" and "a little too upscale." One field instructor

described a student's "lack of ability to understand social work values in general [...] [The student made] a lot of statements like: 'I don't like dirty homes. I don't like dirty people.'"

Client self-determination is a key social work value. When students failed to respect or promote a client's self-determination, supervisors struggled to help them gain self-awareness about their actions. In these instances, field instructors encountered students who were "closed to the client's point of view" and "really believed they knew what's best for the client." The students were "unable to accept clients where they are" and, at times, appeared to be motivated by "doing good works as opposed to what's best for the client."

Disengagement from practicum and the social work profession. Field instructors were also tested when interns appeared disengaged from practicum and the social work profession. Disengaged students demonstrated lack of investment and enthusiasm and little self-motivation during practicum. When students presented with seemingly little interest in the practicum agency or, on a grander scale, the social work profession, field instructors felt unsuccessful in generating greater enthusiasm.

"Lack of investment" manifested itself in students' interactions with clients and their interest in learning. When prompted to complete social work duties, these students responded with resistance and indifference. A field instructor shared, "When she was given tasks, [the student would respond]: 'I don't see the point in this. This is not what I'm going to be doing later. This just feels like busy work to me. This is not something I need to do for my degree.'" The field instructor added, "[The student] saw her degree as a means to an end" for future employment and monetary gain. Furthermore, disinterested students failed to display genuine personal interest in clients and a "lack of ability to connect with [...] clients which [...] came from the disengagement."

When students appeared disengaged from practicum, they demonstrated little self-motivation. One field instructor described a student with "no initiation [who] had to be directed" for the duration of the practicum placement. In some instances, students demonstrated little motivation to be a social worker. "One of the challenging students I had, I'm not even sure she wanted to do social work [...] She talked about multiple other things she wanted to pursue. I don't even know where she ended up, but it wasn't social work." Field instructors struggled when students presented with little interest and engagement in practicum learning, as personal investment is not something to be taught like conducting assessments or interventions. The field instructors expected students to feel a "connection to the profession." One field

instructor added, “You can’t teach somebody to find that passion to really want to [...] pursue this field.”

Screening Students Prior to Practicum

Next, field instructors were asked how social work faculty could have screened or intervened with students to help prevent or mitigate problems during field practicum, particularly areas for improvement. Recommendations centered on five areas: (1) screening applicants at social work admission, (2) expecting professionalism in social work classes, (3) exposing students to social work practice prior to practicum, (4) conducting formal admission to practicum, and (5) providing attentive university oversight of students in the field.

Screen applicants for professional suitability at admission. Field instructors appreciated the difficulties social work programs face when conducting admissions. As one field instructor noted, “You’re trying [...] to look in a crystal ball and say, ‘Would they be a good social worker?’” Field instructors recognized the problems of prediction when admitting applicants to social work programs. Nevertheless, they felt strongly that students should be screened for professional suitability at admission. Field instructors suggested admission should focus on applicants’ openness for growth, eagerness to learn, and their motives and goals for a career in social work. Additionally, students should have belief systems congruent with professional social work values.

Expect professionalism in social work classes. Supervisors believed faculty should expect greater professionalism (such as time management and proper attire) from students so those behaviors would better translate into the field setting. In the classroom and during academic advising, faculty should provide students with frank feedback in response to student concerns and observe how students react to correction and direction. Field instructors supported faculty setting high expectations in the classroom and intervening if students fail to meet standards. A field instructor reflected, “If we had done something earlier, maybe there would have been a better chance for more coaching and education, and [the student] would have been in a better place when she got to practicum.”

Expose students to real-life social work prior to practicum. Field instructors also endorsed educational practices that place students in real-life practice settings long before they begin a field placement. Students should expand their learning beyond the classroom and gain exposure to social work through extensive volunteer experiences,

job-shadowing with practitioners, and attendance at community and social justice events. Exposure to actual social work practice may clarify students' career goals or prompt self-selection out of a social work career. "Sometimes I think [...] people come into social work with just no idea. [Students] really should be exposed in some way [to practice] to really know what true social work is." After students observe social workers in action, they should discuss their experiences in class: "What did you learn? What did you like and what didn't you like? Is this the true direction that you want to go? Some of them will go that direction, and some won't."

Conduct formal admission to practicum. Participants felt some challenging situations in field supervision could be prevented with formalized steps in the placement process. Field instructors believed strongly that students should be carefully matched to specific practicum settings and assigned supervisors. Also, faculty should alert field instructors to potential and past concerns with students, not to bias supervisors against the students but to prevent problems and help supervisors intervene early if issues begin to develop. Based on negative supervision experiences, field instructors changed their screening processes for selecting social work interns. Several now pose scenario-based questions to prospective practicum students to assess openness to various clients and tasks, ideas about boundaries, and motives for pursuing a social work career. One respondent reported, "My interview technique has changed [with prospective students] [...] We look at what kinds of clients they like to work with. We look at what kind of salaries they [expect] [...] and then where they think values really play into [social work]."

Provide attentive university oversight of practicum. When students are in practicum, field instructors expected social work faculty to continue gatekeeping efforts while actively overseeing students in the field. Field instructors believed if students were allowed to progress to practicum, then faculty should be active in supporting interns and assisting supervisors when problems arose. Faculty's "responsiveness" to field instructor concerns was very important, along with faculty's willingness to help supervisors work through problematic student behaviors. Field instructors also expected faculty to be available for students, feeling disappointed when considering, "I don't know that there was enough energy from the school [...] to assist them." Field instructors were frustrated when the program was inconsistent with communication, expectations for student conduct, curriculum, and faculty's level of participation. A social work program's reputation and credibility were impacted by students' behaviors and faculty's responses and when field instructors felt unsupported in their role.

Discussion

The most challenging student behaviors in social work practicum were little openness to feedback, direction or supervision; poor personal and professional boundaries; incongruence with social work values; and disengagement from practicum and the social work profession. Supervisors' concerns focused more on personal traits and abilities than classroom-based social work knowledge, consistent with prior research that students' personality traits impacted practicum learning and were central to their success (Bogo et al., 2006; Bogo et al., 2007; Lafrance & Gray, 2004). Findings here are consistent with prior research on problematic traits among social work students: intolerant, judgmental, and rigid; uninterested and unenthusiastic about learning; resistant to feedback and suggestions for improvements; personally needy and demanding; and poor boundaries and enmeshment (Bogo et al., 2006).

When students are unable to receive corrective feedback, they are behaving in stark contrast to social work's focus on lifelong learning. Similarly, Bogo et al. (2007) found students who resisted feedback struggled to understand a social work role and presented with personality styles that interfered with interpersonal relationships. When students are unable or unwilling to accept corrective feedback, other problem behaviors go unchecked and without improvement, resulting in conflictual supervisory relationships, risk of client harm, and possible failure or termination.

Practicum is the learning environment for students to apply and practice the social work knowledge, values, and skills from their classroom studies. As such, learning healthy and appropriate professional use of self is expected. Problematic students are less able to remove focus from themselves to others (Regehr, Stalker, Jacobs, & Pelech, 2001). In this study, challenging students were self-absorbed, overly sharing personal information and seeking fulfillment of personal needs within helping relationships. Consistent with Marlowe et al. (2015), "Learning to balance one's professional and personal life in social work practice is a critical part of field education" (p. 68).

Social work students spend significant time in practicum, at least 400 hours for BSW students and 900 hours for MSWs (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015, Standard 2.2.5). Field instructors, too, are investing considerable time and energy as they fulfill supervisory functions with students, so it is reasonable to expect interns to demonstrate interest and investment in their practicum placement. A strong motivator for supervising students is inspiring and shaping the next generation of social workers (Ketner et al., 2017). Therefore, it is unsurprising that participants were frustrated by students described as "disengaged" from practicum and the social work profession.

From the early years of social work education, faculty have identified the need to evaluate and ensure that students exemplify social work values and principles and maintain professional conduct (Coyle et al., 2011; Moore & Jenkins, 2000). “The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values [...] service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence” (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, Preamble). These cardinal values are central to the professional identity of social work. During practicum, students are allowed opportunities to try their social work skills with an understanding that mistakes are inevitable. It is hoped that students’ judgment, intolerance, and rigidity will change or soften as they interact with clients and are exposed to social work practice. When students’ attitudes and behaviors continue to contradict social work values and negatively impact clients, field instructors confront their own ethical responsibilities to clients, colleagues, the practicum agency, and the profession.

To prevent student problems during field placements, field instructors recommended screening applicants for professional suitability at social work admission; expecting professionalism from students in social work classes; exposing students to real-life social work practice prior to practicum; conducting a formal admission process to practicum; and providing attentive university oversight of students in the field. Suggestions targeted common steps in the process of social work education that faculty and administrators regularly complete.

When students present with problematic behaviors, pressures for effective selection and gatekeeping procedures are increased. Participants questioned admission decisions and criticized low coursework standards in modern social work education (Bogo et al., 2007; Nordstrand, 2017; Street et al., 2019). Educators might consider including external stakeholders such as field instructors in the admissions process (Street et al., 2019). If field instructors participate in admission interviews, they can simulate future practicum and employment interviews and offer feedback based on current practice trends (Hagar, 2000).

Screening for the profession should not stop with admission to a social work program. Expecting excellence in the classroom better prepares students for a demanding social work career by developing professional habits in attendance and punctuality, with strong interpersonal and writing skills, time management, and conflict mediation. To develop students’ professional suitability, coursework should involve character development, with adequate resources for faculty and staff to provide supports such

as intensive advising and ongoing student reviews (Holmström, 2014). Programs might consider student reviews that address academic performance, personal factors, and characterological concerns such as professional commitment and presence, self-awareness, capacity for relationships, emotional and mental capacities, and stress management (Curren & Atherton, 2008; Holmström, 2014; Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Urwin, Van Soest, & Kretzschmar, 2006).

In addition, participants believed strongly that students should be exposed to real-life social work practice as much as possible, such as job shadowing, volunteering, and touring social service agencies, prior to practicum. Nordstrand (2017) reported field instructors observed students as unprepared for real-life practice and client conditions. Social work educators can pay greater attention to presenting theoretical knowledge with real-life exposure to social work practice through service learning, community-based assignments, and volunteerism.

Participants in this study are not alone in expecting and desiring attentive oversight of practicum by social work programs (Homonoff, 2008). Supervisors appreciated and preferred the field director notifying them of concerns previously noted with students. Field instructors suggested closer attention to matching students with practicum settings and supervisors, also found by Nordstrand (2017), with a feeling that social work programs spent less time in this endeavor. In Robertson's (2013) study of field directors, 79% reported they matched students with specific field instructors while 71% shared student information with supervisors as part of pre-placement, suggesting room for improvement in practicum-matching.

Hylton, Manit, and Messick-Svare (2017) have suggested that social work's shift to competency-based education should eliminate focus on professional suitability as students' problematic behaviors will be operationalized as failure to achieve stated competencies. If professional suitability seems an imprecise measure of students' ability, then educators may articulate problem behaviors and attitudes in terms of the Social Work Competencies (CSWE, 2015). For example, the behaviors identified by field instructors in this study could be interpreted as students' failure to achieve Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior (failure to use supervision and consultation with focus on lifelong learning and the profession's historic mission) and Competency 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice (self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases).

Implications for Social Work Educators

Even with gatekeeping efforts and pre-practicum screenings, there is no substitute for field as the setting for students to demonstrate competent, ethical social work skills. It is, therefore, imperative to prepare, train, and support field instructors as supervisors. Based on findings, field faculty may wish to provide initial and ongoing supervisor trainings on providing effective feedback (Bogo, 2015; Cantillon & Sargeant, 2008), performing formal evaluations of students' performance in practicum (Bogo et al., 2007), employing supervision techniques, and responding to student problems. Findings also highlight the importance of field faculty's role in monitoring, supporting, and evaluating practicum placements. Field faculty should be carefully selected to exemplify social work values and behaviors; use strong collaboration, communication, and conflict management skills; and speak candidly with students and supervisors while simultaneously demonstrating support. Field faculty should also participate in trainings on supervision techniques, feedback, and student evaluation, with the expectation of responding promptly to supervisor and student concerns. Social work faculty must command a strong presence in field education programs. Field instructors should not feel isolated and alone in their roles.

Limitations

To improve trustworthiness of the study, the author engaged member checking, prolonged engagement, audit trail, negative cases, and reflexivity (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006). Nevertheless, limitations remain in the design. There is bias in the author's dual roles as researcher and employee in the study's setting; researcher positioning will influence sampling and analysis. With single-investigator design, triangulation of coding and data analysis is missing. As an exploratory study, greater representation in the sample would have strengthened the research. The study's setting is a small social work program at a private university. Although participants had experience supervising students from other social work programs (including large public universities and other private institutions), a case study is rich in investigation but small in scope and transferability. Detailed descriptions are provided for readers to determine how findings may apply to their settings (Merriam, 2009). Additional research might evaluate field instructors' experiences when students are terminated from practicum. How does a student termination impact their approach to field supervision?

Conclusion

It is vital that social work programs cultivate and maintain strong partnerships with field instructors and host agencies. As important stakeholders in social work education, field instructor experiences and perspectives should be evaluated. Field instructors identified student traits that were problematic in the field: little openness to feedback, poor boundaries, incongruence with social work values, and disengagement from practicum and the social work profession. Often, field instructors have felt isolated and unsupported when addressing the problematic behaviors of difficult practicum students. Faculty should be involved in gatekeeping and screening prior to and during field education. It is both unrealistic and unfair to expect field instructors, practitioners who are otherwise employed and already burdened with high caseloads and client responsibilities, to assume the bulk of gatekeeping responsibilities. Therefore, it is incumbent upon social work educators to address problematic behaviors, as much as possible, prior to practicum. The heavy responsibility of professional gatekeeping should not fall to field personnel alone.

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analysis will be available in the Winter 2019 issue of the *Journal of Social Work Education*; this article presents new findings specific to field instructors' personal experiences with supervising practicum students and their insights into how social work faculty can better screen students prior to field placements. No results or data are duplicated in the two manuscripts.