Back to Basics: A Skill-Based Approach to Assessing Social Work Students within Directly-Observed Practice

Author(s)
Mark Irwin
Southern Health & Social Care Trust

Abstract:

This article is based on a piece of research completed with final-year social work students and practice teachers (educators/assessors) within Northern Ireland. The work was concerned with the assessment of students via direct observations of "live" practice, and captured the views, perceptions, and experiences of students and practice teachers.

The findings highlighted the complexity of the direct observation process and the need for effective skills in preparation, assessment, planning, communication, evaluation, and intervention/participation. The outcome challenges current thinking, as there was a high level of support for the use of professional discretion to intervene by practice teachers during an observation.

Context

Northern Ireland (NI) has an integrated health and social care system, whereas in other parts of the United Kingdom they are separate entities. This arrangement has advantages in terms of efficiency, governance, and strategic planning. The current qualification to practice as a social worker in NI is The Bachelor of Social Work Degree offered by the University of Ulster and Queens University. This is overseen by the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership, which is a regional body established to plan and optimize social work training arrangements. The Partnership consists of representatives from all academic and employer (public and voluntary sector) organizations involved in delivering the Degree in Social Work. Finally, the workforce is registered and regulated by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), which sets standards for training and practice. The Degree can be completed in 2, 3, or 5 years, depending on the route chosen: Relevant Graduate Route, Undergraduate Route, or Part-Time Route, respectively.

Regardless of the route chosen, each prospective social work student must complete two periods of

field education called a Practice Learning Opportunity (PLO). The first PLO period requires an 85-day employment-based placement, whilst the latter lasts for 100 days. Both PLOs take place in approved voluntary agencies or statutory public agencies and are allocated at a regional level. All social work students are assessed by a qualified practice teacher, who is a social worker employed by the agency that is offering the PLO. Practice teachers obtain their qualification through post-graduate study as part of the NI Post Qualifying Framework for social workers. If the practice teacher is not based in the same team/building as the student, they are assisted by an on-site supervisor who manages and oversees the student's day-to-day workload and issues. The practice teacher is responsible for the student's learning and assessment of practice, consulting with the on-site supervisor to identify and allocate appropriate learning opportunities. The academic university tutor has limited involvement during this period but does meet with the practice teacher, student, and on-site supervisor for two formal meetings to measure PLO progress. The tutor role is to offer the student guidance on the completion of academic work, including two assignments, and to assess these pieces. The academic institutions do not assess the PLO, and their role is limited to the aforementioned associated submissions of academic work.

The practice teacher is solely responsible for recommending a PLO pass or fail in consultation with other relevant professionals and service users/carers based on evidence of the student's practice. This is achieved through formative and summative assessment methods, which includes the use of direct observations of practice. Only a qualified practice teacher is permitted to assess real practice observation scenarios involving service users and carers. A minimum of three observations must be completed to a passing standard, or the PLO will automatically be classed as a fail. This is because observations are considered as core evidence requirements and are therefore essential components of a successful PLO. This assessment process is enhanced by completion, tuning in, and evaluation of the interaction by the student. Within this context, students are also viewed as an important component of the quality assurance process (NIDSWP 2009a).

These arrangements may not reflect training approaches in other parts of the world, but the principles and themes of observing practice (either formal or informal) have value regardless of the setting. Directly observing practice as an assessment method is not unique to social work and is used by other health disciplines. Students of nursing, midwifery, medicine, and allied health professionals are subject to assessment in this manner. These professions understand the important role that this method can play in developing and assessing practice consistently, as advocated by Bannister, Clark, Hanson, and Raszka (2010). Therefore cross-fertilization of ideas and practice development with regard to this subject should be encouraged at a multi-disciplinary level.

It is hoped that this article will promote discussion and debate on the merits of direct observations as an assessment method in other jurisdictions. The intention is to challenge, amplify, and develop current thinking. The primary aim of the research was to involve practice teachers and students

in exploring and evaluating the process of direct observations. Objectives included demystifying this process and making the experience better for both practice teachers and students. This can be achieved through providing clarity and empowering students to be more pro-active in the process. Foucault (1991) describes the link between power/knowledge, and in this case, power can be constituted via accepted forms of knowledge highlighted by the research. Therefore providing students with this knowledge is addressing the inherent power imbalance within direct observations of assessed practice.

Rationale for Research Project

The observation element of the social work student assessment process was introduced by The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) with the advent of the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) following the publication of Paper 30 (CCETSW 1989). A United Kingdom review of the Diploma in Social Work in 1998 was instrumental in influencing and developing the current degree in social work. The observation requirement was retained and transferred to the degree in social work. The basic structure and assessment elements of the observation process have changed little since their inception.

Practice learning standards have been introduced by the NISCC (2009a) and point towards accountability, equity, and transparency within the PLO assessment process, including the area of direct observations. Developments within the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership are therefore demanding greater quality assurance and that the decision to pass or fail a student and the associated assessment should be open to scrutiny (NISCC 2009a).

Exploratory work suggested that disparity exists within practice teacher approaches to the realm of direct observations as discussed by Humphrey (2007). This does not always imply that there is good or poor practice. Lawson (1998) contends that a rich tapestry exists based on the considerable expertise and knowledge of the professionals involved.

The practice of directly observing and assessing social work students has received little research and attention, with the notable exceptions of Le Riche and Tanner (1996, 1998, and 2000), Humphrey (2007), and Kemp (2001). The University of York has also been instrumental in developing a "Collaborative" model (Koprowska, Hicks, McCluskey, Fisher, & Wishart, 1999) of direct observation, but there has been a lack of focus on some of the specifics of the student and practice teacher relationship within this scenario. This model of observation is taught on the NI Practice Teaching Award qualification and seeks to promote a partnership approach between student and practice teacher. However, the model does not guide or specify the content of observational practice and is therefore open to interpretation. The detail and application of the skills involved is not addressed. This can create a sense of mystique for practice teachers as to what actions are deemed acceptable in a variety of practice situations.

The application of skills within the observation arena tends to be generalised within much of the published work with a lack of focus on specific practice scenarios, apart from safeguarding. The current guidelines in the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership practice learning handbook (NIDSWP, 2009b) are limited to covering developmental assessment, the range of work observed, and the content of the observation report.

Therefore, the guidelines lack clarity in relation to the specifics of actual practice, and as a result, approaches can be variable. Issues such as intervention, preparation, choice of observation, and the format of the assessed environment are left to the discretion of the practice teacher. The Practice Learning Handbook (NIDSWP, 2009b) does not advocate or consider the use of alternative frameworks or models that may be utilised in observations.

The assessment process associated with direct observations begins to assume greater prominence when one considers it may be the only time that an off-site practice teacher experiences a student's actual practice. The significance of observations was highlighted recently with regard to failing students at an assessment panel. A pattern emerged (Queens University Belfast, 2014) that showed issues were formally highlighted immediately following the second observation. This may indicate practice teachers facilitate a "period of grace" within the first observation to allow for student anxiety or lack of experience. The second observation was therefore used as the formal "alarm bell" to report significant areas of concern.

What Does the Literature Say?

Embarking on this work, the researcher was interested in why and how individuals practice in a certain way. The issue of assessing the competency of students and practice teachers assessing in a competent manner is central to the observation process. This involves the practice teacher being responsible and accountable in a professional manner and ensuring that the student also follows these criteria. The acquisition, analysis, and application of an appropriate skills base are crucial in this respect. When one examines observations as an assessment method in other disciplines, their potential benefit becomes clear. Increased performance in medical students was noted that corresponded with greater use of observations (Bannister et al., 2010).

The work conducted by Le Riche and Tanner (1996, 1998, and 2000) describes different approaches to assessment via observation with three distinct models cited: the scientific approach, the narrative model, and the equality model. With regard to observations the scientific model would contend that the observer remain detached from the situation to enhance objectivity and is merely there to assess and not to intervene. This can be compared to overt non-participant observation (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe, 2010), which may still be affected by the observer's values and interpretations.

The narrative model is a much more fluid interpretation of the observation, with reality being consid-

ered a personal construct determined by what is seen by the observer. Therefore the observation will be affected by what the practice teacher sees as important (values/interpretation) and what he or she can tolerate. The logical conclusion of this is that different people will see different things, and the influence of these factors on intervention and assessment will be variable depending on the practice teacher's thresholds and experience.

The equality model utilises strands from the scientific and narrative models with shared ownership between the student and practice teacher, similar to the University of York Model. Le Riche and Tanner conclude that the equality model is preferable to the others, as it addresses issues of power and emphasises the need for observers to critically reflect on their abilities including the application of relevant skills. Power is a critical aspect of this process, as Le Riche and Tanner (2000) state, "power differentials are a characteristic of all learning environments, but they are accentuated by the hierarchy of assessment" (p. 115).

Humphrey (2007) offers a range of models to explain the potential roles of practice teachers within observations. However, Humphrey strongly advises that the intervention element is limited to "crisis" situations and does not provide guidance on how other scenarios should be conducted. This indicates a practice focus based on safeguarding issues characterised by risk and neglects areas that may make the assessor uncomfortable, as discussed in the narrative model. Other prominent authors of practice learning (Doel 2008) are similarly lacking in providing additional guidance on this area. Kemp (2001) discusses the potential for the practice teacher to experience "role conflict" due to "combining the role of researcher with that of professional worker" (p. 531). Therefore, the need to "protect" service users or "rescue" the student may take precedence over the assessment role prompting intervention. The skills associated with the intervention phenomenon are not discussed. Kemp does, however, offer some insight into the paucity of research on this topic when she talks about service users. No literature records were found detailing service user views on situations that required practice teacher intervention due to students' poor practice.

The solution to these dilemmas is not straightforward, as demonstrated by Bogo (2007), who studied qualitative data from four research studies. Bogo found that there was an increasing tendency to provide standardised assessment tools within PLOs. The effectiveness of these tools was dependent on the relational and professional context of PLOs, which could negate their value. This situation was partly caused by activities that conflicted with the practice teachers' personal and professional values resonating with some of Kemp's views on intervention as previously detailed.

Research by Urbanowski and Dwyer (1988) in the U.S.A. discovered that practice teachers were considered ideal by students if they were available and accessible. Knight's (1996) research findings concluded that the practice teachers age, gender, race, years of experience, or position within the organisation were not considered significant by students. Their assessment of a practice teacher was

mostly based on the quality of the learning experience and their skills. Therefore, the positive and purposeful application of these skills is an important factor within a highly stressful observation scenario.

The National Organisation of Practice Teachers survey (Kearney 2003) proposes matching the functions of an assessor to their skill base, listing four different levels of expertise. This may be more suited to the current arrangements existing in Great Britain, where individuals who are not qualified practice teachers may be involved in the direct observation assessment of students. Nevertheless, this work does raise interesting questions about quantifying the skills, experience and ability of assessors and allocating their work accordingly.

Research Design and Methodology

The research followed an explorative approach through a dualistic mixed methods study that incorporated qualitative and quantitative data. The primary focus of the work was to examine current practice relating to the direct observation process of final-year social work students. A small-scale survey using semi-structured interviews was undertaken with a small purposive sample of level 3 students (2) and practice teachers (5). Additionally a postal questionnaire was administered to all level 3 students (35) and to a sample of practice teachers (35). Students were asked questions that related to their experiences in both of their PLOs. The use of interviews allowed triangulation (Burns 2000) with the qualitative and quantitative sections of the questionnaire to corroborate data.
The research study received ethical approval in May 2010 from the Office for Research Ethics Committees Northern Ireland (ORECNI) (10/NIR03/16). The Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) system was utilised to aid analysis of the quantitative sections of the questionnaire. Qualitative evidence using thematic analysis was matched to specific objectives and themes to provide a framework for analysing the data. Recurring themes were also coded and linked to qualitative data within the questionnaires.

Findings

The response rate of the questionnaires was lower than anticipated, with 9 practice teachers (26%) and 12 students (34%) responding. The practice teacher respondents were very experienced and on average had been qualified as social workers for 18 years, with 8 of these years as a practice teacher. The findings and discussion have been condensed for the purposes of this article and need to be considered in terms of the observation process and the skills required at each stage. At a simplistic level these stages can be categorised as follows:

- Preparation
- Observed Scenario
- Debriefing

The skills, knowledge and values required at each stage are complex and interweave, as detailed in the discussion section.

Goal Setting and Preparation Prior to Direct Observations (Preparation)

A majority of students in both PLO1 (n = 11) (92%) and PLO2 (n = 10) (83%) recorded that clear goals were set before a direct observation of practice. All of the practice teachers (n = 9) (100%) stated that clear goals were agreed prior to an observation. All of the students (n = 12) (100%) indicated that they felt adequately prepared for their observations.

The students interviewed were very candid about utilising co-operative service users and argued that this may not have demonstrated the full range of their abilities. However, concerns about "passing" or "doing well" in the observation tended to override the risk of choosing a challenging service user or carer. This type of thinking was clear when one student stated, "I see it (observations) more as an obligation towards the course [….] it's one of these things you know, one of the boxes that you have to tick, and it feels very unnatural, I think."

Frequency of Practice Teacher Intervention (Observed Scenario)

Within PLO1, most students (n = 8) (67%) reported that their practice teacher never intervened, and this was also the mode (8). During PLO2, students reported that (n = 3) (25%) of practice teachers intervened "occasionally" and the mode (n = 6) (50%) continued to be "never intervened." Practice teachers were asked how often they had intervened during their practice teaching careers. A large portion (n=8) (89%) of practice teachers had intervened during their careers, the majority only once or twice (n=6) (67%), which was also the mode.

Views on the Ethics or Appropriateness of Practice Teacher Intervention (Observed Scenario)

Students and practice teachers were asked to rank in order of importance the circumstances when it would be ethical or appropriate to intervene during a direct observation. The student results (**Figure 1**) showed child protection or vulnerable adult issues as the more frequently occurring "most important" category at n = 8 (67%). This category also recorded n = 4 (33%) of respondents as ranking this issue as "important." Practice teachers participating to act as a role model was the least important (n = 9) (75%) reason for intervening expressed by most students.

The practice teacher responses to this issue (**Figure 2**) recorded n = 6 (67%) of participants viewing child protection or vulnerable adult issues as the "most important" reason for intervention. The service user becoming distressed was cited by n = 8 (89%) of respondents as being "fairly important." Acting as a role model for the student was listed by n = 7 (78%) of practice teachers as being the "least important" category, as **Figure 2** demonstrates.

Discussion

Qualitative and quantitative findings of the study are presented together to provide a holistic overview of the research.

Preparation for Direct Observations

Goal setting and the approach adopted by the practice teacher are viewed as essential components in understanding the preparation process. The setting of goals was viewed as positive by students and that structure was needed, with the proviso that it was not too rigid. The quantitative findings showed that most students (n=11) (92%) within PLO1 and (n=10) (83%) within PLO2 were aware of goals being set prior to observations. In contrast, all of the practice teachers in the study said that goals were set prior to each observation (n=9) (100%). This apparent disconnect could be due to incomplete communication or the need for more overt goal setting techniques within formal supervision. Comparable research by Freeman (1993) describes how students rate supervision higher when structure was provided. An unexpected finding was that the role of supervision in this process was not emphasised by respondents, as it is often used to prepare for observations.

The study highlighted the plethora and complexity of skills required to prepare for an observation that require a "back to basics" approach by practice teachers. Effective organisational skills, structure, and scheduling were crucial elements in alleviating student anxiety with "ad hoc" approaches poorly evaluated. Therefore a low-key, relaxed approach by the practice teacher may not necessarily calm a student if not underpinned by specific guidance. The University of York (Koprowska et al., 1999) highlight increasing anxiety levels amongst social work students when they are not clear about what is going to happen. Scheduling skills are also necessary in terms of timing observations to support student progression.

Good assessment skills were also required at this stage to gauge the student's level of ability and to evaluating the suitability of the proposed scenario. This assists with decision making skills and informing the level of tuning in required for the individual student. This may require a written and/or verbal discussion depending on the practice teacher's assessment of the student's knowledge/skill/value base. Communicating relevant theory to practice material was central in assisting tuning in to the general service user group and specific service user circumstances.

Negotiating the proposed observation and agreeing clear objectives with assessment criteria were assessed highly by students and practice teachers. Agreement on feedback methods/approaches and the sensitive and timely provision of feedback are areas that greatly concern students. Practice teachers are therefore often expected to offer a supportive role to ensure that the student performs to the best of his or her ability.

Preparation of the service user/carer is perhaps the most important aspect of this phase of the work. Negotiating who will fulfil this role depends on familiarity or convenience, the student's level of ability, and the complexity of the case. In most situations, the student will carry out this task, and in all scenarios obtaining informed and willing consent is essential.

The effectiveness of timely preparation was highlighted by two students, and "the importance of thorough preparation in all aspects of practice learning pays dividends" (Douglas and Byrne, 2005, p. 59). This view complements Knight's (1996) research into students' perceptions of field instructors (Practice Teachers) in the U.S.A. The results indicated that the educational and task orientated aspects of field instruction (PLO) were the most influential variables.

The research findings indicated high satisfaction levels amongst students with regard to preparation. All (n=12) (100%) of the students agreed that they were adequately prepared for their direct observation experiences. Similar results from goal setting indicate effective levels of structured preparation being reported in relation to practice teachers within the sample. However, the potential for intervention/participation was not always discussed at this stage, which meant students were vague about this parameter of the observation.

The Observation

A third of students (n = 4) (33%) and (n = 2) (22%) of practice teachers preferred a one-way mirror as an observation method. Opinions were divided on this method, with some individuals being highly enthusiastic and others overtly critical. Live observation was the most popular observation method. The key point is that live observation, video link, and one-way mirrors are all options within the observation process. Negotiation and assessment skills should be employed between both parties to decide on the most appropriate format for the situation.

The two student participants of the interview process indicated that they often chose cooperative service users to maximise positive outcomes for their assessment. These comments were made whilst acknowledging and advocating the need for challenging situations as a learning experience. Both students also understood and supported the need for a variety of observed scenarios with differing numbers of service users, carers, and professionals. Therefore, the necessity of "passing" the PLO superseded the potential benefit of these situations and became the primary objective. Negotiation and agreements between students and practice teachers assume greater significance within the context of this particular finding.

The quantitative research findings illustrated that the majority of students (n = 8) (67%) in PLO1 and (n = 6) (50%) in PLO2 were unaware of their practice teacher employing a specific model or framework within the observation. This is concerning, as each (n = 9) (100%) practice teacher respondent stated they did use a particular model or framework. These results indicate a lack of communication between practice teachers and students in relation to the existence of these approaches. The findings are not unique, as Ixer (2010) found when 100 % (49) of students surveyed stated that their practice teacher did not explicitly describe their model of reflection.

When students were aware of a particular framework being employed, this was universally (n

= 4 PLO1 and n = 6 PLO2) (100%) viewed as being helpful. Combined with the qualitative data, they indicate a more positive observation experience for students. Students reported that an overt framework or model provided "clear guidelines and a recognised structure," which was viewed as desirable, particularly within their first PLO. Freeman's (1993) work highlights that the existence of structure is a positive response to potential student anxiety levels.

Findings suggest that the type of framework or model used was not considered important by the students. The key issue was that they were aware of the particular approach being employed via effective practice teacher communication skills. When this occurred, it was helpful. The qualitative data also highlighted that this may be explained by the fact that students knew what was expected and exactly what would be assessed.

The University of York (Koprowska et al., 1999) conclude that this lessens anxiety, as high levels of apprehension interfere with learning. Consequently the "outcomes" of this particular area cannot be measured in pass or fail terms but are quantified as a more positive and helpful observation experience. This is interesting, as social work is increasingly relying on standardised tools, but concurs with Bogo's (2007) findings on their effectiveness. The framework or model was largely irrelevant to the students, and the ability of the practice teacher to communicate effectively was the central issue. Assessing the student's learning style would be helpful in this regard and could inform how communication would be achieved (e.g. verbally or written/visually).

Quantitative and qualitative data indicated that the frequency of interventions was relatively low and occurred in what respondents would consider appropriate circumstances. One practice teacher (11%) had intervened more than five times whilst the majority (n = 6) (67%) had intervened once or twice during their careers. This fits with the findings of Humphrey (2007) and Kemp (2001), in that participation and intervention may happen but should be the exception rather than the rule.

Intervention in an observation needs to be considered in terms of approaches, tools, practice teacher experience, and the existence or absence of flexibility. Formal observation aspects are acknowledged in the qualitative data but also highlighted the humanistic nature of the work: "all social work is a human endeavour, so you can't really separate it out" (practice teacher). The basic social work value base was viewed as a legitimate reason for intervention or actions that deviated from the "script," such as "making cupcakes" within developing life skills observations.

Intervention may also happen due to issues of safe practice and addressing risk. This requires the practice teacher to move from the role of educational assessor to that of risk assessor. This is an example of the "back to basics" approach required where skills in risk assessment, risk management, and complex decision making are required. Confidence and competence with one's skills base are essential in these situations with an ability to be flexible and adaptable. The student's level of ability

and performance within the observation will determine when (or if) intervention is required. Prior formative assessment information relating to the student's progress will also inform this process.

Therefore, a previously capable student could remain calm and follow procedures appropriately when unexpectedly presented with a suicidal mother who has a young child. This type of scenario can be a valuable learning experience and would not normally require intervention. Alternatively, a young child stating that his brother had "touched him" in the bedroom would need to be explored further if the student failed to do so. The practice teacher chose not to intervene until the end of the observation to afford the student the chance to return to the topic. Both scenarios are actual practice examples, with the same practice teacher only intervening in the latter situation. This requires confidence in applying professional discretion based on practice experience. The need to follow agency policies/procedures and analyse the cues being presented are also important. Finally, prior knowledge of the student's level of competence will also influence the practice teacher's actions.

Non-safeguarding situations where practice teachers became involved included scenarios where it was deemed to fit with the atmosphere or context of the observation. Examples included clarification and providing accurate information to ensure that the service user was not disadvantaged. Additionally, covering an area not explored to aid learning, professional guidance, and "getting a session back on track" were deemed acceptable. This particular finding conflicts with Le Riche and Tanner's (1998) description of the "scientific model of observation […] influenced by positivist ideas" (p. 39). Cooper, Lewis and Urquhart, (2004) contend that interaction can interfere with the effectiveness of a detailed observation.

This research therefore challenges some of the current theorists' views that a strict set of circumstances should be met for intervention to occur. This is particularly true in the area of clarifying or providing information that was perceived as appropriate. These types of situations also require highly developed skills in assessment and communication, a thorough knowledge base, and a good partnership working relationship with the student to avoid them feeling undermined. Therefore intervention, in certain circumstances, if used sparingly, need not impact negatively on the learning experience. Qualitative practice examples data showed specific and informed intervention was complementary to the observation process.

The research findings indicate that child protection and vulnerable adult issues are the most appropriate and ethical circumstances in which to intervene (student 67% and practice teacher 67%). This reflects the thinking of Le Riche and Tanner (1996) and Dingwall (1980) and highlights the responsibilities of a qualified professional. Qualitative findings emphasise the need to protect both student and service users answering a fundamental question posed by Humphrey (2007) about the purpose of direct observations: namely, "who is the PLA (practice teacher) there for? The student or the service user?" (p. 730).

Debriefing following an Observation

Students stated that their practice teachers always sought service user/carer feedback (n = 9) 75% of the time following an observation. Practice teachers stated that they sought service user feedback immediately (n=7) 77.8% of the time (**Table 1**).

The ability of practice teachers to adapt formal criteria such as handbook guidelines and present them informally met with approval by both students interviewed. This complements current trends within the NI social work arena to minimise the amount of written work, which had become excessive (NISCC 2009b). One student spoke about debriefing conversations in the car after observations when they were travelling back to the office. This was presented as constructive and linked with the practice teacher beliefs that there was a need to be responsive and flexible within the process. Pollard's (2008) research highlights that non-formalised learning processes are crucial to the development of students' collaborative skills within practice placements.

Concerns were raised within the work about the validity and authenticity of service user feedback on the student's performance. This can be due to adversarial scenarios or service users' concerns that they will have services removed if they provide negative responses. Some practice teachers varied feedback times at different stages to provide a more holistic and representative assessment of the student. Immediate verbal feedback to the student following the observation was viewed as desirable and in one of the researcher's practice experiences raised interesting issues. Following an observation that the student felt "had not gone according to plan" the student began to swear in a public place and blamed the service user (not present) for the situation. After informing the student that this was unacceptable and breaching the NISCC (2002) Code of Practice, a formal meeting was set up with the university tutor. The student stated that as the formal aspect of assessment had ended and the service user was not present, she was at liberty to speak freely. The researcher reminded her that during the initial supervision contract she had been informed that assessment of her professional conduct was happening on a continual basis. This highlighted the importance of formal arenas to agree and record clear parameters and criteria on the assessment process.

Useful skills in providing feedback include utilising models or frameworks encouraging reflection and dissecting the student's performance. Questions such as, "what went well?" and "what could have been better?" promote reflection on key learning points. Students reflecting on how it feels being observed can also be a powerful learning tool in creating parallel empathy with service users.

Limitations of Study and Suggestions for Further Research

The main limitation of the study relates to the relatively small size, which means that generalisations are restricted. Although the work raised some issues that were corroborated by prior research findings, one cannot state that this will be the case in other situations or countries. However, it is hoped that this work will encourage a renewed focus on the topic, which clearly has an important

role to play in the assessment of student practice.

The timing of collecting data was dictated by logistical issues but unfortunately coincided with students who were focused on finishing PLOs and completing academic assignments. Practice teachers were also preoccupied with gathering information and finalising their summative assessment reports. Despite sending out reminders and raising the issue at practice teacher and student support groups, the response rate remained low for the aforementioned reasons. The "elephant in the room" throughout all of the research has been the absence of service user views. Future research could focus on the issues raised in this study and report on how they are experienced by — and affect service users. The role of supervision would also benefit from further research in terms of preparation and goal setting.

Conclusions

This piece began and will end with a "back to basics" focus on social work skills. The Preparation for Practice Module run in partnership with health and social care trust's and universities in NI aims to provide student social workers with the skills (University of Ulster 2013; Egan 1998) they will require in practice situations. These include agenda setting, tuning in, assessment, analysing non-verbal behaviour, displaying empathy, recording/report writing, and identifying and challenging "blind spots" whilst setting realistic goals. All of these skills can, and should, be applied by practice teachers when working with students before, during, and following observations.

The study has highlighted the complexity of the direct observation process and the need for effective communication between all parties. Evidence gathered in the research indicates that students and practice teachers believe a widening of Humphrey's (2007) ideas on "legitimate participation" is appropriate (p. 728). There was evidence that practice teacher participation and intervention exceeded the parameters suggested by Humphrey's model. There was limited evidence of this being viewed as negative in actual practice situations. One of the key messages is that what may seem obvious is not always obvious. Practice teachers should clearly articulate to students how they prepare, what they expect, what will be measured, and when they may intervene.

References

Bannister, S. L., Clark, A., Hanson, L. J., & Raszka, W. V. (2010). Oh what can you see: The role of observation in medical student education. *Pediatrics, 126*(5), 843–845. doi:10.1542/peds.2010-2538

Bogo, M. (2007). When values collide: Field instructors' experiences of providing feedback and evaluating competence. *Clinical Supervisor, 26*(1/2), 99–117. [doi:10.1300/J001v26n01_08](doi:10.1300/J001v26n01_08)

Burns, R. (2000). *Introduction to research methods.* London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW). (1989). *Rules and requirements of*

the diploma in Social Work, DipSW, Paper 30. London: Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work.

Cooper, J., Lewis, R., & Urquhart, C. (2004). Using participant or non-participant observations to explain information behaviour. *Information Research, 9*(4), 1–18.

Dingwall, R. (1980). Ethics and ethnography. *Sociological Review, 28*(4), 871–981. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.1980.tb00599.x

Doel, M. (2008). *Teaching social work practice*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Douglas, H., & Byrne, M. (2005). Improvement by degrees: Reflections on developing quality in practice Learning for the new degree in social work. *Journal of Practice Teaching, 6*(3), 43–59. doi:10.1921/17466105.6.3.45

Egan, G. (1998). *The skilled helper* (6th Edition). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and punish: The birth of a prison*. London: Penguin.

Freeman, S. C. (1993). Structure in counselling supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor, 11*(1), 245–252. doi:10.1300/J001v11n01_16

Humphrey, C. (2007). Observing students practice: Through the looking glass and beyond. *Social Work Education, 26*(7), 723–726. doi:10.1080/02615470601129933

Ixer, G. (2010). There's no such thing as reflection. *The British Journal of Social Work, 29*(4), 75–93.

Kearney, P. (2003). *SCIE position paper 2: A framework for supporting and assessing practice learning*. Social Care Institute for Excellence. Retrieved from http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/positionpapers/pp02.pdf

Kemp, E. (2001). Observing practice as participant observation—Linking theory to practice. *Social Work Education, 20*(5), 527–538. doi:10.1080/02615470120072823

Knight, C. (1996). A study of MSW and BSW Students' perceptions of their field instructors. *Journal of Social Work Education, 32*(3), 399–414.

Koprowska, J., Hicks, L., McCluskey, U., Fisher, T., & Wishart, J. (1999). *Facts, feelings and feedback: A collaborative model for direct observations.* York: University of York.

Lawson, H. (1998). *Practice teaching: Changing social work*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Le Riche, P. (2006). Practising observation in shadowing: Curriculum innovation and learning outcomes in the BA social work. *Social Work Education, 25*(8), 771–784. doi:10.1080/02615470600915829

Le Riche, P., & Tanner, K. (1996). The way forward: Developing an equality model of observation for social work education and practice. *Issues in Social Work Education, 16*(2), 3–14.

Le Riche, P., & Tanner, K. (1998). *Observation and its application to social work*. London: Jessica Kingsley

Publishers.

Mills, A. J., Durepos, G., & Wiebe, E. (2010). *Encyclopaedia of case study research—Non-participant observation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP). (2009a). *Practice learning manual*. Belfast: The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership.

The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP). (2009b). *Practice learning handbook*. Belfast: The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership.

Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). (2002). *Code of practice for social care workers and employers of social care workers.* Belfast: Northern Ireland Social Care Council.

Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). (2009a). *The standards for practice learning for the degree in social work*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Social Care Council.

Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). (2009b). *People work not just paperwork*. Belfast: Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety NI.

Pollard, C. (2008). Non-formal learning and interprofessional collaboration in health and social care: The influence of the quality of staff interaction on student learning about collaborative behaviour in practice placements. *Learning in Health and Social Care, 7*(1), 12–26. doi:10.1111/j.1473-6861.2008.00169.x

Queens University Belfast. (2014). *Minutes of practice assessment panel June 2014*. Belfast: Queens University Belfast.

Tanner, K., & Le Riche, P., (2000). Intentional observation: Exploring transfer in action. In V. E. Cree & C. McCauley (Eds.), *Transfer of learning in professional and vocational education* (106–116). New York, NY: Routledge.

University of Ulster. (2013). *Preparation for practice module handbook.* Dungannon: South West College.

Urbanowski, M., & Dwyer, M. (1988). *Learning through field instruction: A guide for teachers and students*. Milwaukee, WI: Family Service America.

Figure 1. Students—Under what circumstances do you feel it is ethical for a Practice Teacher to intervene during a direct observation? Rank in order of importance.
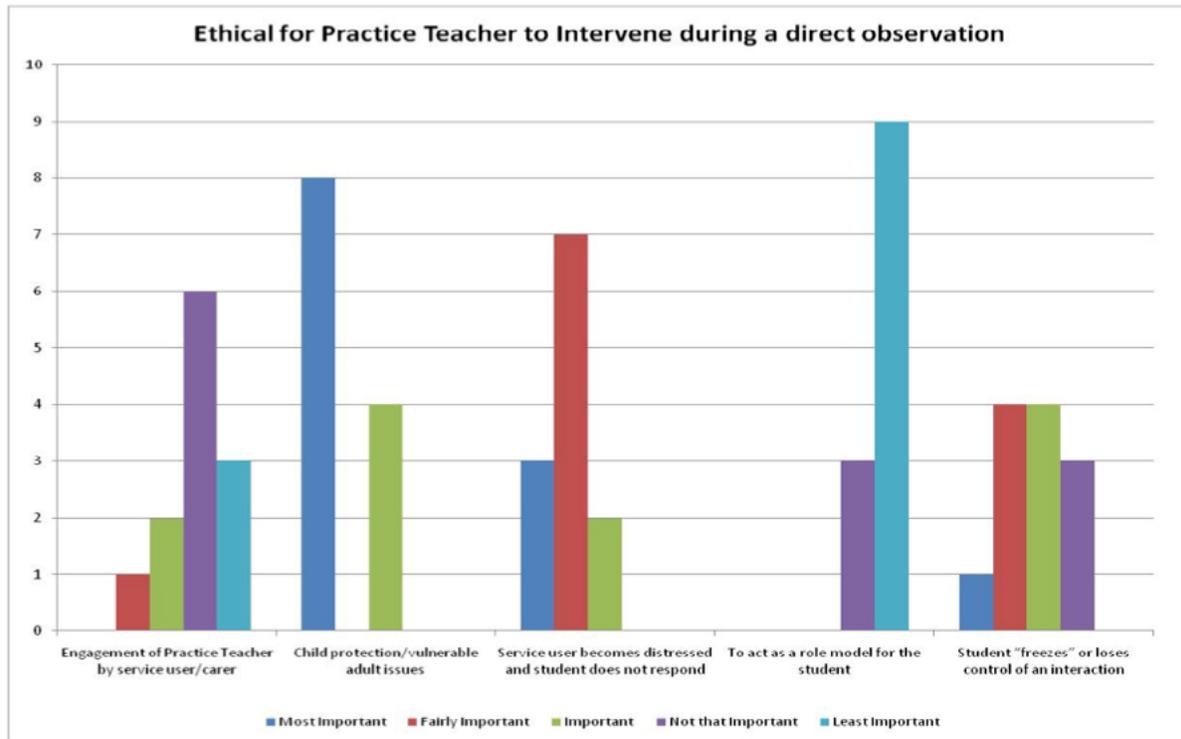
Figure 2. Practice teachers—Under what circumstances do you feel it is appropriate to intervene during a direct observation? Rank in order of importance.
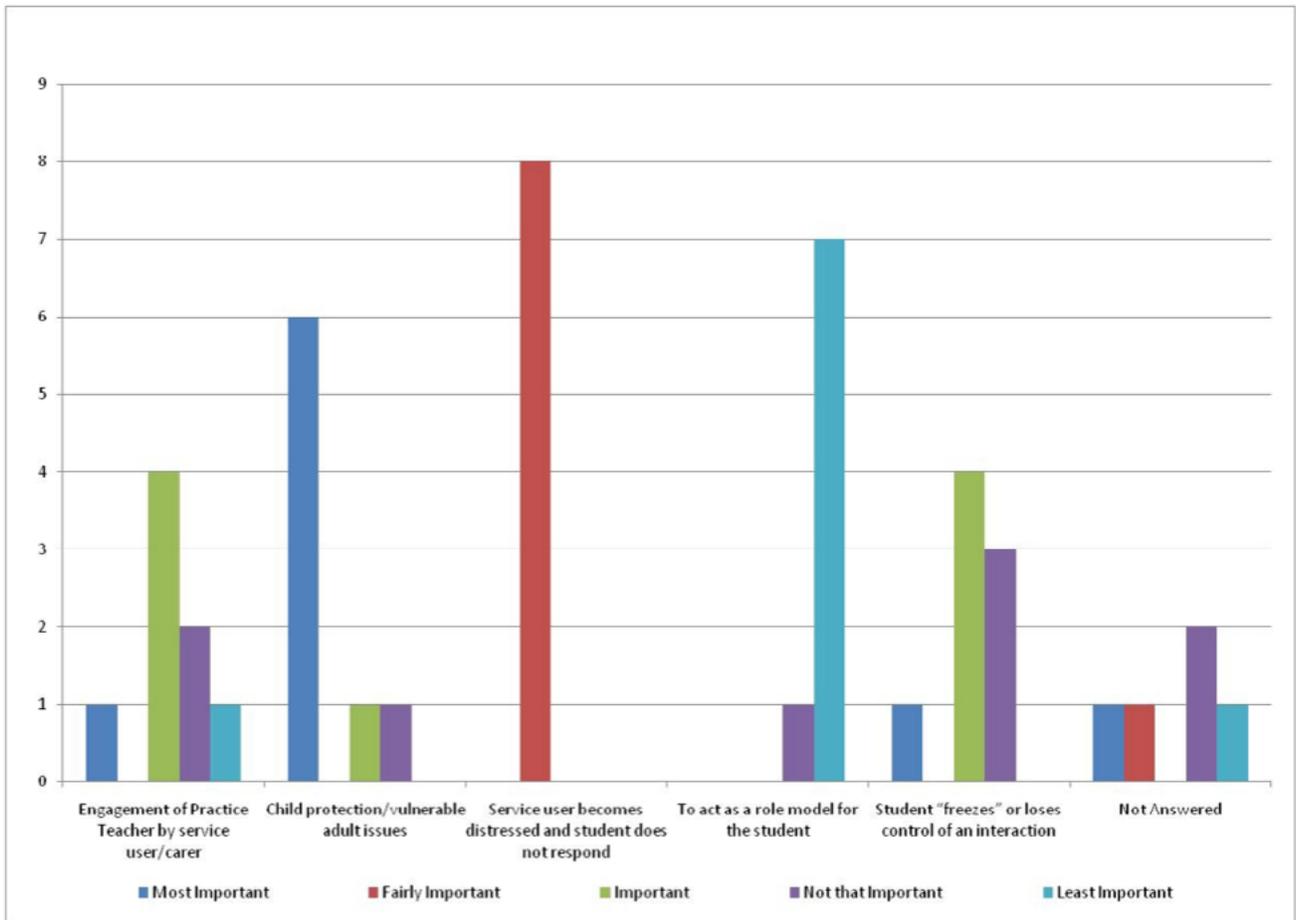
Table 1. Practice teachers — When is service user or carer feedback sought?

	Frequency	Percent
Immediately	7	77.8
Within a few weeks	1	11.1
Not answered	1	11.1
Total	9	100.0