Influencing the Future Generation of Social Workers': Field Educator Perspectives on Social Work Field Education

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ABSTRACT

As key stakeholders in social work field education, field educators have specific roles and responsibilities when working with students on placement. These roles often include coach, supervisor, educator, role model and assessor. Field education is recognised as a critical component of social work education with long-lasting impact beyond qualifying. The field educator, therefore, can also significantly influence and impact the development of the beginning social work practitioner. This article seeks to contribute to current discussions on key issues for stakeholders in field education through analysis of a survey conducted with field educators of students from Massey University in New Zealand in 2013. The findings suggest that, while being a field educator can be positive, particularly in respect of rejuvenation, new ideas and reciprocal learning, there are multiple challenges especially around workload pressures, limited managerial support, ensuring appropriate tasks for the student and the availability of resources. Recommendations are outlined in relation to further supporting field educators both within and external to the tertiary institution. adjusting to the requirements of employing new technology, and modifying staff work-loads to reflect different modes of teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Field educators are key stakeholders within the social work field education environment. According to the Massey University *Field Education Handbook* (2015, p. 51):

The primary task of the field educator is to maximise the opportunities for students to learn for themselves, within the context of a particular agency or community. The field educator, therefore, has two roles to perform: that of supervisor and that of field education instructor.

Sometimes referred to as "placement supervisors" (Smith, Cleak, & Vreugdenhil, 2015) or "practice educators" (Hay & Brown, 2015; Giles, Irwin, Lynch, & Waugh, 2010; Higgins, 2014), field educators may wear several "hats" during the placement including that of coach, educator, role model (Barretti, 2007), supervisor (Kadushin, 1991), and assessor (Zuchowski, 2014). The success of a placement may, in large part, be influenced by their relationship with, and support of, the social work student (Maidment, 1997; Zuchowski, 2011) and, as previous research indicates, the professional practice of a social worker is strongly influenced by their experiences during their tertiary training including field education (Davys & Beddoe, 2010; Giles et al., 2010; Moorhouse, 2013; Moorhouse, Hay, & O'Donoghue, 2014). Therefore, the field education experience and the role of the field educator are extremely significant not only during the qualifying period but also post-qualifying.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the perspectives of field educators on their experiences of having social work students on placement. Areas explored included: their level of satisfaction of placement organisation; the performance of the student; the skills and attributes of the student; support from the agency; positive aspects and challenges with taking students on placement; the assessment process; and the overall placement experience and factors that could further improve current field education practices at Massey University. This article reports on the findings from this study.

BACKGROUND

In New Zealand placement regulations are primarily governed by the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) and are explicated within the document Practicum within a Recognised Social Work Qualification (SWRB, 2015). Students are required to "undertake a minimum of 120 days of field placement" (SWRB, 2015, p. 1) over at least two placements. One of these placements must be a minimum of 50 days. The placements are to occur in "differently structured settings, preferably in different organisations" so that students can be exposed to two different fields of practice (SWRB, 2015, p. 1). There is no requirement for any of the placements to be within a statutory context (Hay, Ballantyne, & Brown, 2014). Social work placements are fiscally neutral in New Zealand with programs receiving no allocated placement funding. This is in contrast to other applied programs (such as nursing, occupational therapy and teaching) which are categorised by the Tertiary Education Commission (a Crown entity) so as to receive funding for the agencies supporting their students on placement.

Students must have supervision by a fully registered social worker (RSW) although in one of the placements this supervision may be provided by an external supervisor off-site. With

voluntary registration the current norm in New Zealand, this requirement places pressure on the tertiary educational institutions (TEIs) to find enough placement sites whereby internally provided supervision from a RSW for at least one placement is possible (Hay et al., 2014). Field educators therefore may or may not be RSWs; however, those who are not will generally be skilled professionals employed as community, youth or social service workers or at times, qualified social workers who are not registered. The views of both registered and unregistered field educators were sought and included in this study.

In 2012, SWRB data indicated that 1374 placements were required across New Zealand (Hay et al., 2014). In 2014, the number of placements increased to 1865 (J. Duke, personal communication, September 11, 2015). These are significant numbers given the population of New Zealand and with 17 TEIs providing recognised social work programs there is considerable competition for quality placements (Chilvers & Hay, 2011). This may in turn place pressure on agency managers and field educators to agree to accepting students on placement (Hay et al., 2014; Hay & Brown, 2015).

Field educators are noted as important stakeholders within social work field education as they contribute to the personal and professional development of students (Maidment, 2001a; Zuchowski, 2014). For no financial compensation, and often with limited tangible support from their managers, they are usually the first point of contact for the nurturing and supervising of students (Hay & Brown, 2015). As role models and coaches, field educators assist with students' development of practice skills, the transmission of professional values and ethics, and socialisation to the profession (Abram, Hartung, & Wernet, 2000; Barretti, 2007; Bates, Bates, & Bates, 2007; Elpers & FitzGerald, 2013; Maidment, 2001b). Historically, learning on placement has occurred through the "imitation, identification and incorporating [of] behaviours and attitudes" (Bogo & Vayda, 1991, p. 89) that stem from the field educator–student relationship. A more collaborative and active teaching focus is now commonplace with students not only completing a range of learning activities but also (ideally) being in a learning environment that motivates them to learn and where they can receive feedback (Smith et al., 2015).

As the name suggests, the field educator role incorporates a strong emphasis on an educative function (Noble, 2011). In part this should occur during supervision (Moorhouse et al., 2014), although daily interactions will also feature teaching moments. As Maidment (2001a) outlines, the field educator has a responsibility to provide "a measure of support and advocacy, facilitating learning opportunities that address student learning needs, evaluating practice development, and assessing work performance" (p. 284). Similarly, Moorhouse's (2013) study on the perspectives of seven tertiary students' experiences of field education supervision highlights that field educators need to understand their responsibilities and abilities in assisting student learning and have adequate skills for the role of supervisor. Further, she suggests field educators must understand how to manage power and conflict and be skilled at developing and maintaining relationships with students. This implies the importance of a range of interpersonal skills as well as agency/practice-specific skills and knowledge.

As assessment is involved, the field educator–student relationship is complex and it is essential the inherent power dynamics are acknowledged (Zuchowski, 2011). This resonates with a recommendation by Ornstein and Moses (2010) that the relationship is optimal if it is based on mutuality, shared power and co-constructed knowledge. This may occur, for example, through the observation of both the field educator's and the student's practice and a clear, structured feedback process for them both (Barretti, 2007).

The importance of the field educator's role has been highlighted in the literature as described above; however, in New Zealand, little attention has been given to their perspectives on the positive aspects and challenges of their role, the desirable capabilities of the student, levels of agency support, and how their experiences could be improved. Furthermore, while the field educator takes on specific roles associated with educating, supervising and assessing the student (Barretti, 2007; Noble, 2011), learning may also be reciprocal. This implies that respect within an inherently unequal relationship, mutual support, cooperation and active learning may be possible within the student–field educator relationship rather than this being based on domination and control (Fleming, 2012; Hemara, 2000, Teater, 2011). "Ako" is a Māori term that, in its simplest explanation, refers to a reciprocal notion that even though the roles of the teacher and the learner are different, active learning may occur for both within their relationship (Hemara, 2000). This concept sits comfortably alongside the idea of life-long learning which is emphasised within the social work domain through the requirement of continuing professional development. To date however, the concept of ako within social work field education, and for field educators in particular, has not yet been extensively explored in the literature.

METHOD

This study employed a cross-sectional design with a self-administered questionnaire to explore field educators' perspectives on their experiences and satisfaction with aspects of their role. Upon receiving ethical approval (low risk) from Massey University, postal questionnaires containing scales and opened-ended questions were sent out to 185 field educators who had taken students from Massey University Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and/or Master of Applied Social Work (MAppSW) programs on placement between February 2013 and December 2013. The questionnaire indicated the use of the survey for evaluative work or publications and thus consent was agreed upon through completion of the document. The questionnaires were distributed by an administrator and returned to her anonymously. Any identifying information was removed by the administrator prior to the analysis process undertaken by the authors.

Of the 185 questionnaires sent out, a total of 64 were returned (35% response rate). A total of 56% of respondents reported being field educators for BSW students while 38% had MAppSW students. Three respondents (5%) reported that they were field educators for both BSW and MAppSW students during the 2013 period. The majority of the field educators were based in community organisations (58%), followed by the health sector (27%) and Child Youth and Family (8%). The remainder were located in schools (2%), Iwi/Māori organisations (2%) and other (3%).

Instruments

The questionnaire included both open-ended questions and two Likert-like scales. The questions were developed by members of the university field education team with the purpose of enabling them to evaluate and potentially improve current field education practices at the university.

Placement process and student performance

The first scale consisted of 12 items. Field educators were asked to rate their satisfaction in the following items using a 4-point Likert-like scale ranging from "1 = strongly dissatisfied to 4 = very satisfied": (1) the setting up and confirming of the placement; (2) support from Massey University staff; (3) contact with Massey University staff; (4) student's attitude to the placement; (5) the standard of work completed by the student; (6) student readiness and suitability for the placement; (7) student's performance by the end of the placement; (8) the mid-placement visit with Massey staff; (9) the administrative processes by Massey staff; (10) the contribution of the student to the work of the agency; (11) the integration of the student to the agency; and (12) the overall learning and development of the student. The scale, in this study, was reported to have good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .89).

Value of the student

This scale was developed to elicit the skills and attributes the agency would most value in a student during a placement. The scale consisted of 10 items asking field educators to rate the extent of the values using a 4-point Likert-like scale ranging from "1 = least value to 4 = highly value" on the following items: (1) knowledge of social work theory and practice; (2) the ability to work independently; (3) effective oral and written skills; (4) understanding and application of ethical conduct; (5) ability to build effective relationships with clients; (6) ability to build effective relationships with colleagues; (7) commitment to bicultural practice; (8) behaves in a professional and appropriate way; (9) is able to effectively utilise supervision; and (10) is proactive about addressing and challenging organisational systems. This scale also demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .82). Two single questions were asked for the field educators to indicate: (1) their satisfaction of the overall placement experience (1 = strongly dissatisfied; 2 = dissatisfied; 3 = neutral; 4 = satisfied; 5 = very satisfied); and (2) whether they would be prepared to take a student again (1 = definitely yes; 2 = definitely no; 3 = maybe).

Open-ended questions

The questionnaire also consisted of eight qualitative open-ended questions to explore the following areas: (1) positive aspects of taking a student on placement; (2) difficulties/challenges of taking a student on placement; (3) estimated time involved in taking a student on placement; (4) support received from their own agency when taking on a student; (5) views on the tools used to assess student performance; (6) advice to others if considering taking a student on placement; (7) how the institution could improve the placement experiences for the field educator; and (8) further comments.

Data analysis

All quantitative data were analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistical package (version 22.0, IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Released 2013, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). Descriptive

statistics were used to describe the rate of satisfaction of placement process and student performance, value perceived by field educators on students on placement, overall satisfaction and preparedness to take a student again.

Following qualitative analysis processes outlined by Babbie (2013) and the Framework Approach (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000), the responses to the open-ended questions were transcribed and collated under the question headings. Next a thematic index was developed for each question that was then applied to the transcript and associated charts. The charts mapped the range and nature of the data to create typologies and draw associations between themes. Finally, the qualitative responses were grouped under six substantive themes: (1) positive aspects of placements; (2) student assessment; (3) challenges encountered; (4) advice regarding supervising a student; (5) the level of agency support; and (6) improving the placement experience for the field educator. These are further discussed below.

RESULTS

Scales

Analysis of the first scale indicated that respondents scored between 94% and 99% (sum of satisfied and very satisfied) in this area (see Table 1). The highest score was "the setting up and confirming of the placement" (98.5%), followed by "the mid-placement visit with Massey staff" (96.9%), "support from Massey University staff" (96.8%), "contact with Massey University staff" (95.4%) and "the administrative processes by Massey staff" (93.8%). Four of the student performance indicators scored 100% on satisfaction: "the standard of work completed by the student"; "student readiness and suitability for the placement"; "the contribution of the student to the work of the agency"; and "the overall learning and development of the student". Other aspects also reported scores over 95% on satisfaction: "student's performance by the end of the placement" (98.5%); "student's attitude to the placement" (98.4%); and "the integration of the student to the agency" (96.9%).

Table 1. Prevalence on placement process and student performance

	N	% (SATISFIED + VERY SATISFIED)
The setting up and confirming of the placement	63	98.5
The mid-placement visit with Massey staff	62	96.9
Support from Massey University staff	62	96.8
Contact with Massey University staff	61	95.4
The administrative processes by Massey staff	60	93.8
The standard of work completed by the student	64	100
Student readiness and suitability for the placement	64	100
The contribution of the student to the work of the agency	64	100
The overall learning and development of the student	64	100
Student's performance by the end of the placement	63	98.5
Student's attitude to the placement	63	98.4
The integration of the student to the agency	62	96.9

*Note: *N*s will vary due to missing data

The second scale focused on the valued skills and attributes of a placement student. Respondents scored highly (sum of mostly value and highly value) on the following indicators (see Table 2): "behaves in a professional and appropriate way" (96.9%); "ability to build effective relationships with colleagues" (95.3%); "ability to build effective relationships with clients" (93.8%); "understanding and application of ethical conduct" (93.8%); "commit-ment to bicultural practice" (93.8%); and "is able to effectively utilise supervision" (92.2%). They also scored fairly highly in the interpersonal items: "effective oral and written skills" (92.2%); "the ability to work independently" (87.5%); "is proactive about addressing and challenging organisational systems" (85.9%). Somewhat in contrast, "knowledge of social work theory and practice" was scored at 75% as a mostly to highly valuable skill or attribute of a student during placement.

Table 2. Prevalence on skills and attributes valued

	N	% (SATISFIED + VERY SATISFIED)
Behaves in a professional and appropriate way	62	95.9
Ability to build effective relationships with colleagues	61	95.3
Ability to build effective relationships with clients	60	93.8
Understanding and application of ethical conduct	60	93.8
Commitment to bicultural practice	60	93.8
Is able to effectively utilise supervision	59	92.2
Effective oral and written skills	59	92.2
The ability to work independently	56	87.5
Is proactive about addressing and challenging organisational systems	55	85.9
Knowledge of social work theory and practice	48	75.0

*Note: *N*s will vary due to missing data

Most (95.5%) respondents rated their overall placement experience as satisfied or very satisfied. A total of 78% of them would be prepared to take a Massey University student again while 18.8% reported as "maybe". No further information was available to assess the reasons for this significant result. In general, the quantitative results reflect a high level of satisfaction with the placement process, student performance, skills and attributes of the student, and overall placement experience

Open-ended questions
The qualitative responses provide amplification of the scales and also introduce additional information. Responses to the open-ended questions have been grouped under six headings that reflect the questions asked: (1) positive aspects of placements; (2) student assessment; (3) challenges encountered; (4) advice regarding taking a student; (5) the level of agency support; and (6) improving the placement experience for the field educator. In the interests of transparency, the number of respondents commenting on particular matters will be provided.

Positive aspects of placements
All of the field educators identified positive aspects associated with the student placement, with a total of 111 responses. Students were thought to bring fresh ideas, perspectives, energy and enthusiasm to the workplace. Field educators regarded the current theoretical knowledge the student brings to the student–field educator relationship positively. Hosting a student reminded a field educator of the social work approaches that underpin their practice and they were encouraged to explicate how theories, models and tools were being utilised. A student placement was described by one field educator as an opportunity to "hear about latest trends, models, theories; focus again on connecting theory to practice".

Nineteen field educators found that working with a student consolidated and enhanced their own practice and helped to develop supervision knowledge and skills. Students raised questions and provided feedback and critique regarding the practice that they observed and this challenged field educators and other staff to engage the theory/practice link, reflect on their own practice and also the processes in their organisations. For example, one field educator observed that opening their own and the agency's daily work to a student's "fresh eyes and questioning mind…challenges [my] own practice, makes me think more of what I'm doing and why I'm doing it – hopefully improves my practice".

Fourteen field educators noted workload relief as a student could make a positive contribution to the work of the agency. Students could be useful with client, research, administrative and technology work. They could also support staff during meetings and assessments. Two of the respondents also highlighted that placement was an opportunity for students to gain future employment at their organisation.

Seventeen field educators enjoyed the personal satisfaction of watching students gain confidence and assisting their growth into competent social workers. Being able to teach future social workers good social work practice was considered to be both stimulating and rewarding. This was expressed by one field educator as follows: "Thank you for the opportunity. I consider it a privilege to influence the future generation of social workers," while another commented, "It's a very positive experience being part of another professional career journey, encouraging and mentoring the student placement as well as introducing them to social work in action and reflection on practice and decision making."

Ten respondents signalled placement was a joint and reciprocal learning experience. The placement provides the students with the opportunity to test their theoretical or classroom knowledge in real-world environments. On the other hand, the student enables an opportunity for the field educator to teach and supervise. Sharing experiences and reviewing practice models and techniques is an opportunity for both the student and the field educator to learn: "The student brings their own knowledge and expertise to the placement and shares their models or practice and modes of working – 'ako' in practice."

Student assessment
Field educators were invited to comment on the tools used to assess student performance (in particular the structured observation worksheet and practice case study worksheet that were introduced for the first time in 2013), and the updated final assessment document; 45 positive and 12 negative responses were made. The positive comments related to the new worksheets, and in particular, the structured observation, providing greater clarity and utility for student learning and development in comparison with the previous format (no structured observation and several mini-worksheets). One field educator commented that the "structured observation worksheets assist the student [to] begin to have a best practice and ethical approach to what they do". Another field educator indicated the structured observation was useful to "make an accurate assessment of the student". In contrast, one respondent found the structured observation process to be both "repetitive" and "labour intensive". Other comments related to the need for training around the new assessment requirements and ensuring accessibility of the documentation online.

Challenges encountered

All 64 field educators replied to this question, with three key themes emerging: time demands affecting field educators; designing a program for the student; and space and resource requirements.

Some (25) field educators commented on the effect a placement has on their own work. They have to work under significant time constraints and many are also managing their own client allocation. Making dedicated time to induct, debrief, supervise, inform, and find enough suitable experiences to ensure a well-rounded placement impacted significantly on their own workload. One field educator noted they needed upskilling to be a competent supervisor: "As I am not a tutor and have been out of school in practice it was challenging at times to feel competent. I did extra reading to bring myself into the learning environment." In contrast, nine field educators did not consider the extra work and time required to be an issue.

Seventeen field educators found designing a program for the student, allocating appropriate work tasks "to ensure a range of social work experiences" challenging, including providing enough day-to-day structure and support in a busy practice environment. It was noted that some students are considered to be not ready for a placement, others require more guidance and training, and some are not motivated. Further, the life experience of students influences the student's ability to handle difference and risk situations. Having more than one student on placement at a time, all vying for stimulating learning experiences, was highlighted as particularly challenging. A final point concerned students having too high an expectation of the placement and the challenge associated with "having the right staff and programs to support appropriate tasks and learning for students".

An additional challenge for some agencies involved the resource and space requirements required to support a student placement and the associated financial pressure that may be incurred. Examples included having available desks, computers and space for the student to be situated.

Advice provided regarding taking a student

Field educators (20) recommended that students be formally interviewed and their curriculum vitae considered before accepting a student for placement. It was noted that the student should have a clear understanding of the field educator's expectations and the range of practice experience that will be available. For one field educator the interview provided an opportunity "for the student to ask questions about the organisation and it is important for the supervisor to be honest with the student and build a good relationship".

The importance of the field education contract completed by the student and the field educator at the beginning of the placement and the relationship between the agency and university was highlighted by 20 field educators. Also the need for clear communication regarding placement process was noted. Pre-placement preparation by the field educator was identified as important, for example reading documentation and attending a super-vision or field education training workshop. It was also thought that the field educator should have a realistic understanding of the likely time commitment involved in supervising and supporting a student; this appreciation included the impact upon other staff/team members.

Level of agency support

A number of field educators (53) reported enjoying support from their team regarding student placements. This support included students shadowing co-workers in their work day, taking students on home visits, to meetings and training events. This collegial support allowed the field educators more time to manage their own workload. However, 10 field educators noted that assistance from their teams was fragmented and not as much as they hoped for and needed; in particular they identified a lack of support from management.

Five field educators reported that they had no support during a placement. The following comments are illustrative: "Limited recognition for time and resources but always encouraged to have students"; "I am given the mandate to have a student, but there is no recognised support". Other field educators (9) indicated that this issue was "Not applicable" for various reasons, such as being self-employed or being in a small agency.

Improving the placement experience for the field educator

Some (28) field educators were totally satisfied with the current field education processes at the university. The following comment is indicative: "I felt that if I required further guidance I could approach Massey University but I didn't have any issues or concerns". Respondents found "Massey to be a very professional organisation that was well organised and planned" with "good communication". Adjectives such as "satisfying", "enjoyable", "a privilege", "good", and "pleasurable" were used to describe the field educators' experiences. Positive comments regarding Massey students were that they were "highly motivated", "well prepared", "enjoyable to work with", an "asset to the team", "earnest", and "keen to learn and contribute".

There were a number of suggestions by other field educators regarding enhancing the placement process. The following comments were made about setting up the placement: "longer lead time between request for placement and actual placement"; "A meeting prior to or early in the placement to help supervisors understand what is required from them". The similar appearance of the university course materials was noted: "I wasn't sent the correct Field Education booklet. I also don't like how they all look the same."

Some respondents (9) were frustrated with the university Moodle online environment, as indicated in the following quote, "I got frustrated with the Learning Stream and even after contacting the help desk I still couldn't work it out. In the end, rather than continuing, I left it. So if you want field educators to go on line, it needs to be for dummies." For three field educators this difficulty could be bridged by having a "bit more communication with the Field Educator [coordinator] and that some information could be sent via e-mail or [via] hard copy".

DISCUSSION

The quantitative results reflect a high level of satisfaction with the placement process, student performance, skills and attributes and the value of the student placement.
The qualitative responses provide amplification of the scales and also introduce further information on aspects of field education. The discussion focuses upon four substantive

issues: levels of satisfaction with placement processes; capabilities of students; the benefits of having students on placement; and challenges and recommendations for improving current field education practices.

Levels of satisfaction with placement processes

In terms of the placement process (items relating to interaction with Massey staff) the scales indicate a high level of respondent satisfaction – between 94% and 99% (sum of satisfied and very satisfied); this result was supported by the responses to the open-ended questions. Undertaking a pre-placement interview, pre-placement preparation by the field educator and ongoing contact and communication between the field educator and university staff have been noted as essential for establishing a strong foundation for a placement (Cleak & Wilson, 2013; Simpson, Mathews, & Crawford, 2014). Field educators in this study emphasised the importance of these aspects of field education. Further, they were generally positive regarding the new student performance tools. These included a structured observation which required field educators to directly observe and assess student practice. The observation was to occur approximately half-way through the placement so that the constructive feedback from the field educator to the student could then be incorporated into the student's practice during the remainder of the placement. Since 2010 some TEIs in New Zealand have adopted this approach to structured feedback as part of the broader assessment processes to ensure students' readiness to practise as beginning social workers. Although limited research into this form of assessment tool has been undertaken in New Zealand, one study from the University of Auckland acknowledged some resistance from field educators to undertake this activity, with particular concerns around time and confidentiality (Beddoe, Ackroyd, Chinnery, & Appleton, 2011). These concerns were not apparent from the surveyed field educators. Overall, these results suggest that current placement processes are meeting the expectations of field educators; however, suggestions for enhancement were also made (these are traversed in a later section).

Capabilities of students

The scale items relating to student capabilities also revealed high levels of field educator satisfaction especially around the standard of the work that contributed to the agency, their readiness and suitability and how they learned and developed on placement. Of particular interest were items relating to students' personal and interpersonal capabilities: professional behaviour; relational skills; ethical understanding and conduct; and ability to engage with colleagues and in supervision. This emphasis upon the developing practitioner was also evident in the additional responses made by the field educators. In particular, they derived satisfaction from observing and being part of the personal and professional growth demonstrated by students. In contrast was the lower value placed on students coming into placement with knowledge of social work theory and practice. These findings resonate with recent research conducted with agency managers who also stressed that they were "seeking students who have well-developed personal and interpersonal capabilities not only a beginning level of social work knowledge and skills" (Hay & Brown, 2015, p. 710). This then raises questions for TEIs who have traditionally emphasised the teaching of social work approaches rather than taking a deliberate approach to developing student character. Lessons could be learned from international schools of social work that utilise competency-based evaluation tools to assess and screen students' professional suitability prior to

admission, throughout their studies including in field education and prior to graduation (Bogo et al., 2004; Tam & Coleman, 2009). More recent research on employability of tertiary students has also emphasised the importance of strengthening, not only cognitive abilities, but also the personal and interpersonal capabilities of students (Fullan & Scott, 2014).

The benefits of having students on placement

The field educators noted ways in which students contribute to the agency, in particular, by bringing fresh ideas, energy and enthusiasm. This rejuvenating effect was also noted by agency managers in Hay and Brown's recent (2015) work. Students were seen to encourage field educators to reflect on own practice, and to challenge them to engage the theory/practice link. This was viewed positively by many of the field educators, in contrast to research by Higgins (2014) which suggested that field educators in his study were "frightened" of the task of connecting theory to practice (p. 70). An awareness of the importance of the need to upskill was acknowledged by the field educators. The reciprocal, but not equal, nature of field education was highlighted and connects with the ako concept of not only sharing knowledge but also receiving new ideas and understandings, being inspired and encouraged (Hemara, 2000). Agency managers have also noted the "contribution students make to the work of the agency and therefore placements were valued as reciprocal learning opportunities" (Hay & Brown, 2015, p. 709). Fleming (2012), in her work with sport exercise students, also highlights the opportunity for reciprocity within the cooperative education partnership. There is space however, within the current field education environment for a greater emphasis on this reciprocity and consequently the advantages of taking a team approach to supporting students so that all team members and the organisation as a whole can benefit from having a student.

Challenges faced and recommendations for improving current field education practices

Field educators face particular challenges when supporting student placements. Additional workloads, no financial compensation and juggling both employee and field educator roles within a pressured practice environment are of particular concern (Cleak & Wilson, 2013; Hanlen, 2011; Maidment, 2001a). Lack of support by management for undertaking these roles are also critical (Hanlen, 2011). The field educator views within this study on limited management support conflicts with those of agency managers interviewed by Hay and Brown (2015). In that study the managers celebrated students as contributing to staff development and agency practice and potential recruitment and workforce development and suggested that they did support staff to take on students (Hay & Brown, 2015).

Field educators are cognisant of the responsibilities involved in ensuring that the student received a well-rounded placement. Providing students with tasks that are achievable and enable learning but are of benefit to the organisation assist a student to develop professional skills and identity (Bates et al., 2007). In this way they demonstrate a high level of commitment to providing learning opportunities for students who will soon be entering the social work profession and transitioning from student to colleague status (Hay, Franklin Hardyment, 2012). Meeting physical and other types of resourcing needs is also imperative for positive placement experiences. Whilst having no space to sit or the equipment needed to fulfil placements tasks undermines the student and their potential capabilities, students who

are well supported during the placement are more likely to apply for positions at the organisation after qualifying (Agllias, 2010; Davis, Gordon, & Walker, 2011; Hay et al., 2012).

These challenges are, to some extent, broader industry-wide issues that should be addressed by government and regulatory bodies including those responsible for accreditation of social work programs. As noted previously, the current TEC category for social work programs does not allow for specific funding for placements. This means social work programs are reliant on the benevolence of social service agencies (Cleak & Wilson, 2013) to take students on placement and money is not available for them to properly resource student needs (Hay & Brown, 2015). Furthermore, high workloads across the social service sectors place pressure on agency managers and individual staff when considering whether to take a student and then while they are in the agency (Hanlen, 2011; Moorhouse, 2013). The commitment to a "learning culture" as espoused in recent times in the Munro report in the UK is also valid in the New Zealand context (Higgins, 2014, p. 64). Having a sector-wide workforce strategy that endorses the importance of students for development of the profession and recruitment would provide leverage for negotiations around workload and space to support and supervise the next generation of social workers.

The field educators also noted some practical issues that can be addressed by university staff: the level of preparation for the Massey staff visit mid-way through the placement; enhancement of the Stream site; and the provision of additional training for field educators regarding changes to institutional requirements.

CONCLUSION

Although this study was institution-specific, it is likely that the results largely reflect field educator perspectives throughout New Zealand especially in relation to the positive and challenging aspects of placement, desirable student characteristics and capabilities and broader recommendations for improvements. The refreshing effect of student placements, the reciprocal nature of the experience and the contribution students can make to the work of an agency all endorse the known importance of field education. Contributing to the next generation of social workers and thereby supporting workforce development are also important facets of the student–field educator relationship.

There are, however, considerable challenges for field educators in the New Zealand environment including taking on another significant role alongside their employment responsibilities, limited support from management, ensuring excellent learning opportunities for students and having suitable infrastructure within the agency. These challenges are not unsurpassable but do require considerable developments in managerial expectations and resourcing. In particular, changing the TEC funding categories would assist in large part to address these challenges. For instance, managers could then use placement monies to enable workload flexibility for field educators and ensure adequate physical and other resources that would best support student placements.

In the meantime, the important role of the field educator can continue to be supported, the identified positive aspects of field education endorsed, and the recommendations

from this study implemented at a local institutional level. Further exploration of how the university is supporting the personal capabilities of students and the hesitation of many field educators to commit to taking another student on placement is especially important.

Acknowledgement

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[i] In 2013 the population of New Zealand was 4.471 million people (https://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9_&met_y=sp_pop_totl&idim=country:NZL:IRL&hl=en&dl=en accessed 11/9/15) World Bank data

[ii] Child Youth and Family is a statutory unit of the Ministry of Social Development. It has legal powers to intervene to protect and support children and young people who have been abused, neglected or have problem behaviour (Hay & Brown, 2015).

[iii] Iwi/Māori social service providers include organisations that are run by iwi (Māori tribes) or Māori (the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand) and usually specialise in culturally based intervention and support strategies (Hay & Brown, 2015).