Failure to fail or fast tracking to failure: a critical exploration of social work placements

Jo Finch & Prospera Tedam

Published online: 18 Jul 2023.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

Article views: 436

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

🔓 OPEN ACCESS | Check for updates

Failure to fail or fast tracking to failure: a critical exploration of social work placements

Jo Finch[a] and Prospera Tedam[b]

[a]School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Suffolk School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ipswich, UK; [b]Department of Social Wellbeing, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, United Arab Emirates

ABSTRACT

Failure to Fail" has emerged as a popular soundbite in professions with assessed practice learning requirements and implies that practice educators and mentors are routinely failing to fail students, who do not meet the required placement standards. This suggests there may be people in a number of professions, who are not competent, and may pose potential risks to service users or patients. This position has been particularly vociferous in nursing but has also emerged in social work, albeit more subtly. Given the current dominance of fast track social work programmes in England, (Frontline, Think Ahead and Step-Up) alongside claims that traditional social work education is failing, critically exploring this claim, and in particular the extent of fail to fail in practice placements is timely. The discussion concludes that there is limited empirical evidence of a "failure to fail" in social work education and placements but evidence is stronger in terms of some students being fast tracked to failure. We argue that understanding the reasons why it "might" or "could" be challenging to fail, and why some students are at risk of being fast tracked to failure, is more helpful in strengthening practice education.

Introduction

This article examines two perceptions about social work practice placements, which are diametrically opposed to each other – 'failure to fail' and 'fast tracking to failure', as whilst earlier literature made some claims of a potential failure to fail among social work practice educators (Finch & Taylor, 2013), more recent research suggests that some students are fast tracked to failure (Tedam & Mano, 2022). We set about here, therefore, to firstly explore the evidence based upon which these claims are made, and secondly trying to make a connection between two issues that initially present as diametrically opposed, but are in fact related. We argue in this theoretical paper that whilst there is a failure to fail discourse in a wide range of professions, albeit it is not as strong within social work, such narratives do not necessarily capture the realities of racially minoritized students, who do not, experience 'the benefit of the doubt' in placement situation, as well as on the taught

elements of social work programs. This paper, therefore, explores both social work education in England more generally, as well as the placement element.

In terms of 'failure to fail', we initially utilized research from social work, which we acknowledge remains limited, so we also explored research from other professions with assessed practice learning requirements. Whilst not ideal, it is useful to draw on professions that have explored this issue more extensively. Additionally, we maintain that practice learning across professions shares many of the same complexities, with similar issues and concerns arising.

'Failure to Fail', implies that practice educators, also known as field educators, field instructors, practice assessors or mentors in other countries and professions, are routinely failing to fail students on placement, despite evidence to the contrary. 'Failure to fail" appears to be a somewhat compelling notion; and is often, though not always, associated with assessing students in practice learning settings. Indeed, 'failure to fail' has been a phrase used extensively in nursing education (see for example Bachmann et al., 2019; Duffy, 2004; Jervis & Tilki, 2011; Larocque & Loyce, 2013), and has also emerged into other professions, namely occupational health (Illot & Murphy, 1997), osteopathy (Guerrasio et al., 2014), physiotherapy (Cleland & Roberts, 2013), medical education (Cleland et al., 2005, 2008; Dudek et al., 2005) and teaching (Danyluk et al., 2015).

Whilst the focus of this paper is around practice learning, it is important to situate this within the wider discourse of 'failing' more broadly within the social work profession. There has been a plethora of reform in England in terms of social work and social education (Finch & Taylor, 2013). Significant reforms included: The change of qualification from a diploma to the degree in social work in 2003, social work becoming a protected title with regulatory bodies set up in the four countries of the UK, the setting up of the Social Work Taskforce in 2009, subsequently replaced by the Social Work Reform Board, changes to social work post qualifying frameworks which were introduced (now abandoned) in 2007. There are therefore persistent concerns about social work education failing to produce appropriately skilled social workers. For example, in 2014, Alan Woods (at the time Director of Social Work at a London Borough), at an annual Association of Directors of Social Conference, claimed that universities were 'churning out crap social workers' (Schraer, 2014). In the same year, two reports were commissioned into social work education in England (Neary, 2014, and Croisdale-Applbey). Martin Neary, an author of the aforementioned report, a former prison governor and then head of a large childrens charity, made the following comments to a social work magazine

> in some areas social work degrees are too easy to get onto and then too difficult to fail. (Cooper, 2015, date unknown)

Whilst it may appear unusual to quote individuals, rather than rely on purely academic sources in this article, we do so to illustrate how because of their perceived positions of 'authority' to speak critically of social work education and practice, in public forums and in the media. Such unquestioned authority has also been seen in relation to the fast track programs, which we go on to discuss later on.

There have therefore been long standing and persistent concerns about social work practice placements which we explore later on in this article, which add a further impetus to explore this issue. The current climate of social work and social work education in

England is one with an increasing neo-liberal agenda (Hyslop, 2018) and the persistent noise that traditional university-based social work education is failing, as well as concerns about placements, continues to be used to undermine university based routes into social work (Hanley, 2021b).

In addition, we argue, that based on our albeit anecdotal but extensive experience of training and mentoring practice educators, there continue to be ongoing concerns about failing students, with some social work academics, workforce development personnel and practice educators, raising persistent concerns about the tendency to err on the side of caution, resulting in signing off marginal students who in other circumstances would be deemed as failing. We were therefore curious to explore the evidence base, to see if we could determine the legitimacy of these concerns

We argue that the failure to fail contention appears to have been adopted uncritically, and has become a popular soundbite or 'catchphrase' (Hughes et al., 2016) to explain what *might* or *could* be happening in practice education settings. Further, it is a very blaming notion, focusing on one individual, the practice educator/assessor or mentor, and so does not take account of other actors and the wider structures, constraints and peculiarities of professional training within university settings.

We would argue that there is a need, instead, to understand the emotional and psychological dynamics inherent in all teaching and learning relationships, particularly those that come to the fore in practice education scenarios. Indeed, it is precisely when students are struggling or failing in placements, that emotional processes, including intense emotional states, come sharply into view (Finch et al., 2021). We argue that the 'failure to fail' explanation is potentially damaging to social work as well as other professions and serves to obscure important evidence about, *why* it might be a challenging or difficult experience to assess a struggling or failing student, *who* is failed on placement and *who* might be given, what Brandon and Davis (1979) argued was, the 'benefit of the doubt'. This discussion examines the extent to which the empirical evidence supports the claim that there is a failure to fail in placement settings, if so, what is the extent of this, and are some groups more likely to be failed on placement than others. The discussion begins with an account of the current context of social work education in England.

Current context

The current dominance in the UK and other Western democracies of neoliberal politics is increasingly hostile to traditional models of social work delivery, namely state provision of statutory services (Jones, 2015; McGimpsey, 2017). Additionally, government enmity to the academy continues to grow, particularly in England (Taylor & Bogo, 2013). This enmity has arguably been operationalized in the development of several post graduate fast-track social work training schemes in England, namely 'Step Up', 'Front Line' and 'Think Ahead' (Murphy, 2016). This follows similar developments in teacher education in England, i.e. Teach First, as well as other routes to qualified teacher status, a number of which are delivered outside of the academy (Elliott, 2018).

Social work fast track schemes have raised several concerns. Hanley (2021a), for example, argues that fast track training programs serve to create inequality, which is

at odds with social work values and undermines previous successes at widening participation and access to social work training. The Frontline scheme, for example, argued that there was a need for higher caliber students and targeted those from Russell group universities, who it was claimed, tended not to go onto post graduate social work training (Maclister et al., 2012). In 2021, however, Frontline acknowledged that there was further work to be done in the area of race equity when it was found that Black and racially minoritized applicants did not make it past the first round of the selection process (Smith et al., 2013). There remains however differences between traditional social work based postgraduate social work programs in terms of participation by global majorities (36%) compared with 22% on Frontline (Turner, 2020).

Social work in the UK remains a profession that is at the forefront of much public and political criticism; not least when cases of extreme child abuse hit the headlines (Jones, 2014). It has been argued that social work in the UK, and particularly in England, is a profession viewed by politicians and the general public alike, as 'failing' (Finch & Schaub, 2015), either removing children too prematurely or in error or not spotting obvious signs of child abuse (Parton, 2014). Indeed such a view is not only confined to the UK but also internationally (see for example, Kagan, 2016; Myers, 2008; Tower, 2000).

Returning to the English context, as mentioned earlier, social work and social work education has been subject to constant reform (Diaz & Hill, 2020; Finch & Taylor, 2013). Further reforms included changes in child care legislation – (for example, the introduction of the Children Act 2004 in England in response to the death of Victoria Climbie, a child killed by her carers), one review into children and families social work (Munro, 2011), two reviews into social work education in England (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Neary, 2014), and most recently, the outcome of a review on children in care, was concluded (Macalister, 2022).

In relation to social work education, this too has long been subject to criticism, particularly around the placement component. Long standing concerns have been noted which include:

- concerns about the quantity and quality of placements (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Kearney, 2003; Sharp & Danbury, 1999)
- how far placements, and particularly non-traditional placements, prepare students for the realities of social work practice in local authorities (Narey, 2014)
  - Differences in views about the need (or not) for contrasting placement experiences (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, Narey, 2014)
- a lack of willingness on the part of practice educators to fail students if required (SWTF, 2009) and an accompanying concern about low failure rates in social work. (Finch & Taylor, 2013; Raine, 2022)

This last concern has become more widely known as 'failure to fail', which, as we go on to discuss, has been leveled at both practice educators (those assessing social work students in placements) and within the academy. Indeed, the SWTF (2009) were very vociferous in their concerns, stating:

Specific concerns have been raised about the . . . robustness and quality of assessment, with some students passing the social work degree who are not competent or suitable to practise on the frontline. (SWTF, 2009, p. 24)

Methodological approach

The approach taken was an exploratory literature review (Aveyard, 2018), which aimed to identify existing literature on the overall issue of failure to fail in professional education. The search was focused on literature which addressed the following areas:

- The evidence relating to 'failure to fail' with a focus on the extent of 'failure to fail'
- The evidence relating to who has failed or not failed?

Key terms were used when searching for appropriate literature which were: 'Failure to fail', 'fail to fail', 'failing to fail' 'failing practice placements' 'failing practicums', 'failing professional education', 'failing students' and 'failing trainees'. We did not set limits on dates, as we were aware of an important UK social work article that dates from 1979 (Brandon and Davies) which is still highly relevant to contemporary discussions. We also did not set limits on country of origin, although we only located material that was written in English. We used a number of quality databases to search for material including ProQuest Central, EBSCO and Medline. We used this because of their international reach and relevance to professions with assessed practice learning requirements. The literature search took place from October 2022 until March 2023.

Overall, we located 57 articles that met the original search term criteria. We excluded 15 on the grounds that the article focused on assessment methods and/or grading practices for practice placements. We found 42 articles that fully met the inclusion criteria, 15 were literature reviews and 27 detailed empirical work (4 quantitative, 20 qualitative and 3 mixed methods). Most of the writing on failure to fail came from nursing (28 articles).[1] The discussion now moves on to explore the literature.

Failing to fail?

The literature presents failure-to-fail in-practice education as rightfully problematic, not least there is a danger that incompetent people may enter a wide range of caring professions and could have the potential to cause future harm to patients or service users. As discussed previously, the term 'failure to fail' has been strong in nursing, both in UK and international contexts. We also saw this being explored in medical/allied health education (see for example Gingerich et al., 2020; Swails et al., 2022), social work (see for example Finch & Taylor, 2013; Luhanga et al., 2014), physiotherapy (Cleland & Roberts, 2013), occupational therapy (Illot & Murphy, 1997) and medical clerkship (Ziring et al., 2015). What we noticed in the literature surveyed for this exploration were strong statements about the existence of this phenomena, or indeed, literature reviews restating the existence of 'fail to fail' in practice placement settings.

For example, in nursing, Duffy's (2004) research was a significant publication, which appeared to galvanize the 'failure to fail' idea, although it had been raised

previously within nursing by Lankshear (1990). Duffy's research explored why mentors 'failed to fail' students and why student nurses 'were being allowed to pass clinical assessments without having demonstrated sufficient competence' (2004, p. 5). The tone of such work, and other nursing writers, for example (Jervis & Tilki, 2011; Rutkowski, 2007), is similarly robust. Indeed, in a systematic literature review on fail to fail in nursing, Hughes et al. (2016) state very conclusively that; ''failure to fail' is indeed a real and significant issue' (2016, p. 61). Illot and Murphy (1997, 1999) claimed a similar phenomenon existed in occupational therapy and concluded that there was 'often a failure to fail' on the placement component and that the longer such a student remains on the program 'seems to transform what may have been a reluctance to fail into a pressure to pass' (1999, p. 13). So given such bold and unequivocal statements within the research literature, what is the evidence relating to the claim and indeed extent of failure to fail?

The extent of fail to fail

We identified two studies (out of 42) that identified the extent of fail to fail in nursing programs. One unpublished UK study (Gainsbury, 2010), that was reported in The Nursing Times, claimed that 37% of nurse mentors (N = 1945) reported that they passed 'underachieving students' although this included mentors who had passed a failing student and those who had concerns about the students performance, and so the extent of failure to fail in this sample cannot be ascertained with any degree of accuracy. Hauge et al. (2019) study of Norwegian nurse mentors found that 16.1% of mentors surveyed (N = 561) reported that they failed to fail students in Year 1 of their program, 58.2% reported failing to fail students in Year 2 and 36.3% reported failing to fail students in Year 3. The study found that there were three reasons given for failing to fail, first, if students did not put the patient's life at risk; second, mentors giving students the benefit of the doubt; and lastly, lack of support from the university.

We could not see compelling evidence in the research surveyed about the extent of the phenomenon of failure to fail. A few studies reported mentors believing the phenomena had existed, or had seen evidence of it. Watson and Harris (1999), for example, reported that 46% of nurse mentors in their study agreed with the suggestion that some students passed placements despite unsatisfactory performance. The remainder of the empirical studies did not provide convincing evidence of the extent of fail to fail. We also noted a number of literature reviews that repeated the assertion of the existence of fail to fail in practice learning settings without robust methodological analysis.

The literature surveyed, however, was very useful in contributing to debates about why failing a student is potentially challenging and why there *'might'* or *'could'* be a reluctance to fail students in placements across professions. The research undertaken was useful in offering solutions about how faculty or individual mentors could improve their practice and reminded practitioners about the importance of their gatekeeping role. They were also very helpful in identifying further structural barriers that may mitigate against failing a student on placement, for example, fear of litigation or assessment procedures that worked against failure. Indeed, we have worked within competency models for assessing practice and noted their limitations for dealing with the complexities of practice.

Fast tracking to failure?

Whilst the claims for the phenomenon of 'Failure to Fail can be challenged, what was apparent from the social work literature on placement outcomes and experiences (as well as literature from other professions) were particular demographics that put students at a higher risk of failing. Within social work practice placements, for example, Tedam (2014) found that being black, male or having a disability increased the chances of failing a placement. Tedam and Mano (2022) named this phenomenon 'fast tracking to failure'. 'Fast Tracking to failure' therefore refers to the:

> unwarranted speed with which some practice educators instigate facilitative processes or fitness-to-practice procedures in relation to Black African students. (Tedam & Mano, 2022, p. 250)

Such fast tracking to failure, they argued, could be avoided, if practice educators and other stakeholders involved in practice learning, focused on issues of diversity, equality and anti-racism within practice learning. Consequently, while there is a narrative which suggests a 'failure to fail' in placements across professions, this apparent reluctance appears not to apply to racially minoritized students in particular, who remain over-represented in taking longer to complete their placements, more likely to be subject to fitness to practice processes and indeed, fail their courses. This is seen not only in the UK (Bernard et al., 2011; Fairtlough et al., 2013; Sangha, 2021) but also in Australia (Bennett & Gates, 2019; Gair et al., 2014; Harrison & Ip, 2013; Zuchowski et al., 2013), the United States of America (Johnson Ahorlu, 2012) and Canada (Bains, 2017; Razack, 2001). This is also found in other professional training programs, for example nursing (Hill & Albert, 2021; Pryjmachuk et al., 2009), physiotherapy (Williams et al., 2015) and initial teacher training (Siraj-Blatchford, 1991; Wilkins & Lall, 2011).

> L. A. Hunt et al. (2012, p. 351) explained that irrespective of the profession or country concerned there is an agreement that those who assess practice are the gatekeepers of their profession; they and they alone determine whether the practice they have observed is or is not of the required standard.

In trying to understand the validity of the 'failure to fail' narrative, alongside its counterpart, fast tracking to failure, it is also important to consider wider structural and institutional factors which may be present. For example in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tedam (2021) reported placement difficulties experienced by Black African social work students in England. One participant, for example, reported differential processes applied to decisions about who could continue placements remotely and those who had to suspend placement. One Black African student reported then when they queried this disparity in treatment was then 'threatened' with failure. Indeed, this is such an important issue that racially minoritized students are potentially being fast tracked to failure that it urgently requires exploring as an issue in its own right – something we are urgently addressing via a follow up article.

Why might it be hard to fail a student?

What might be more helpful however, rather than blaming individual practice educators alleged failure to fail, is firstly a focus on why it 'might' be difficult or

hard to fail a student in a practice learning setting; second, what might help, enable or support a PE to make a difficult decision to fail a student; and third, how to address issues of discriminatory practice assessment. In terms of why it might be difficult, an old but still relevant study from occupational therapy (OT) (Illot & Murphy, 1997; Ilott & Murphy, 1999) argued, by uncovering and exposing why assessors find it difficult to fail it 'may prevent the most undesirable outcomes of assessment' (Ilott & Murphy, 1999, p. 52). Indeed, there appeared to be a stronger evidence base focusing on the reasons why it could be a challenge to fail a student or why practice educators from across professions might be 'reluctant'. We noted the use of these tentative words, i.e. 'might', 'could' and possible reluctance in some of the literature to more assertive statements, namely that practice educators gave social work students 'the benefit of the doubt' (see for example, Brandon & Davis, 1979; Burgess et al., 1998).

The literature identified a number of possible explanations as to why it might be hard to fail a student included; PEs not using the competency model appropriately, expertly and with any confidence (Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Kemshall, 1993; Shardlow & Doel, 1996) and the limitations of the competency approach in assessing professional practice (Franklin and Melville, 2015; O'Hagan, 1996; Shardlow & Doel, 1996). Linked to this are placement procedures not being followed correctly (Kaslow et al., 2007; Vacha-Haase et al., 2004). As discussed earlier, there have been long-standing concerns about how placement assessment systems and processes can be discriminatory (Cowburn, et al, 2000) and the very poor placement experiences of Black and ethnic minority, First National, Aboriginal, Maori and Strait Islander students (Tedam, 2014).

Murray and McGovern (2015) argue the importance of evidence in situations where students have failed and propose the need for students to know exactly why and how they have failed the placement. It is also good practice for the students to be told what the next steps will be; however, in some instances, students stated that the decision to fail them had been made from the outset (see for example Tedam, 2015) where within days of being on placement, one Black African student reported being threatened with failure.

Another theme to emerge is that practice educators and mentors do not feel adequately supported by their own agencies and indeed university staff (Schaub & Dalrymple, 2013) and the challenges associated with the potentially conflictual role inherent in the practice educator role, i.e. enabler of learning versus the assessor role. Fear of litigation has also been identified across countries and professions (see for example; Duffy, 2004; Raymond, 2000; Royse, 2000) as another possible reason. The very real challenging emotional experience involved in working with a struggling or failing student has also been identified (Bogo et al., 2007; Finch et al., 2021).

Discussion

The current research evidence available suggests there is a concern about the phenomenon or the potential of 'failure to fail' particularly in practice learning settings. Further, this is a significant concern internationally and across disciplines, although in social work such concerns are tied up with larger concerns about the overall quality of social work education in England. Research across professions is very useful however in identifying why it is experienced as hard, challenging and difficult to

fail a student. The research identifies some reasons why some practice educators felt they could not fail the students.

The evidence, however, is considerably weak in terms of the extent of this problem. A significant amount of the research identified, thus, relies on individual practice educators/mentors experiences and there is limited work on how other systems or actors may also impact on the decision to fail a student. There are, for example, variations in how universities manage placement failure and this leads to wider discussions about how professional education, in moving to the academy','fits in' with university processes that may be at odds with professional education. So in some UK universities, for example, the placement is seen like any other module, with an automatic right to have two attempts to pass the module, unless fitness to practice issues have been identified (Finch et al., 2021). In other universities, the placement module is viewed differently from a taught module (Shapton, 2006) and different regulations may apply, i.e. there is no automatic right to undertake a further placement if one is failed. We would strongly advocate that the term 'failure to fail' be critically considered and used with great caution, if indeed at all. Instead, it is more productive to focus on why it might be challenging or hard to fail a student, not least the emotional impact on all stakeholders, i.e. students, the individual practice educator, the wider placement team within agencies as well as university tutors.

Future work should therefore perhaps be directed on how to support practice educators and mentors to fail students when required but also recognizing how practice education, practice assessment or work based assessments are difficult and complex terrains, not least assessing what is good enough. In relation to Black and racially minoritized social work students, the murder of George Floyd in the United States of America in 2020, and the subsequent BlackLivesMatter movements, gave a further impetus to confront the hard truth that racism still persists in society, and indeed in social work. Practice Educators therefore, must be prepared and confident, to work within anti racist paradigms, which means consciously reflecting on the potential of failure to fail or fast tracking to failures processes for different groups of social work work students. Worryingly, there is also emerging evidence to suggest that fast tracking to failure is present for Black and racially minoritized social workers undertaking their assessed and supported year in employment (Carter, 2021). Indeed, there continues to be a disproportionate number of racially minoritized practitioners from a range of professions that are subject to fitness to practice procedures. For example, Wise (2019) found that in the UK, between 2012 and 2017, 1.1% of Black and minority ethnic doctors were referred to the General Medical Council compared with 0.5% of white doctors. Further for those who qualified overseas, the figures were 1.2%. There is a similar pattern in terms of referral to the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council, which reported in 2019 that whilst 7% of registered nurses were from Black African backgrounds, there were disproportionate numbers of BlackAfrican nurses appearing at tribunal (12%) (NMC, 2019). The same issues are also prevalent within social work, for example a former social work regulatory body in England, The General Social Care Council (GSCC) found that of the 4118 referrals for misconduct between 2004 and 2012, 16.2% were black social workers despite being 10.8% of social work registrants. Black workers therefore were 1.7 times more likely than white workers to be referred to FTP (GSCC, 2012) and this appears to still be the case with Social Work England (Samuel, 2020)

Limitations

We believe that this article is the first attempt to consider robustness of the evidence based upon which the failure to fail contention is based. A criticism of our methodological approach could be that utilization of comparator professions literature, when, as has been indicated, there is not quite the ferociousness of the failure to fail debate within social work that can be seen in other professions. Nonetheless, we maintain our position that the complexities and challenges of assessed practice learning more generally, found across professions, can yield useful insights into social work. Social work education is unique of course, in the overall constant concerns that it is failing.

We also acknowledge that we could have taken a different approach with the literature search that may have yielded different results, for example we initially considered a scoping review but rejected it because of our relative familiarity with the research. Similarly, we also considered undertaking a systematic review but felt given the focus on a wide range of research, we saw an initial exploratory review as a much needed first step, not least we found that the current research we identified appears to be limited in terms of methodological rigor.

Further research

This exploratory literature has highlighted a number of areas where further research is needed in social work education. We would recommend firstly a quantitative approach to assess the extent of whether practice educators in the UK are failing to fail students, but we would need to define and operationalize this term. For us, it would mean an acknowledgment by practice educators that they should have failed a student, rather than focusing on those deemed just good enough or a borderline pass. Phase 2 of such a project would then identify the reasons why that practice educator felt unable to pass that student. Phase 3 of the project would focus on those students who were passed but were felt to be what one practice educator referred to as a 'bare pass' (Finch, 2015). Phase 4 of the project must be to consider the issue of fast tracking to failure.

Concluding comments

It is important that researchers consider both issues of methodological rigor as well as the tone of their language when writing about this phenomenon. There is a need therefore to be more tentative, avoid repeating unevidenced claims within literature reviews, i.e. thinking or believing something happened is not the same as it actually happening and also critically reflect on issues of hindsight in research processes. There is an urgent need to reflect on the emotional climate that can emerge when working with struggling or failing students, and ensure that decision-making processes are not impacted adversely by difficult and challenging emotions.

It is vital that university tutors need to have an understanding of their role and university whilst also ensuring students' rights are upheld. Working toward a good fail, might be possible, but equally recognizing for some students (and the staff around them) it may be intensively painful.

Finally, until there is additional and robust evidence about 'failure to fail' in social work placements, agency partners, universities and researchers and students should use the phrase sensitively and with caution, because there remain members of the social work student and practitioner community for whom the 'fast track to failure' phenomenon, is a regular occurrence and indeed, this should be the focus of future research in this area.

Note

1. The remainder were comprised of :Health Professions (1); Health Science (1); Allied Health (1); Physiotherapy (1); Speech and Language Therapy (1); Social work, (2); Medical Doctors (3); Occupational Therapy (2) Combination of Nursing, Education and Social wok (1) and medical Clerkship (1).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Jo Finch is Co Head of Couselling, Psychology and Social work at the University of Suffolk. She is known internationally for her work on practice learning and has published widely on this topic. She also writes about PREVENT and social work, and undertakes commissioned research.

Prospera Tedam is an Associate Professor of Social Work and the Chair of the Department of Social Wellbeing, United Arab Emirates University. She has a long standing interest in the progression and attainment of social work students from Black and racially minoritised groups, culturally sensitive approaches to practice, anti-racism and anti- oppressive practice in social work.

References

Aveyard, H. (2018). *Doing a literature review in health and social care*. Open University Press.

Bachmann, L., Groenvik, C. K. U., Hauge, K. W., & Julnes, S. (2019). Failing to fail nursing students among mentors: a confirmatory factor analysis of the failing to fail scale. *Nursing Open*, 6(3), 966–973. https://doi.org/10.1002/nop2.276

Bains, D. (2017). *Doing anti-oppressive practice: Social justice social work* (2nd ed.). Fernwood Publishing.

Bennett, B., & Gates, T. G. (2019). Teaching cultural humility for social workers serving LGBTQI Aboriginal communities in Australia. *Social Work Education*, 38(5), 604–617. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2019.1588872

Bernard, C., Fairtlough, A., Fletcher, J., & Ahmet, A. (2011). *Diversity and progression among social work students in England*. Goldsmiths University of London.

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Power, R., & Regehr, G. (2007). When values collide: Field instructors' experiences of providing feedback and evaluating competence. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 26(1–2), 99–117.

Brandon, J., & Davis, M. (1979). The limits of competence in social work: The assessment of marginal students in social work education. *British Journal of Social Work*, 9, 295–347.

Burgess, R., Phillips, R., & Skinner, K. (1998). Practice placements that go wrong. *Journal of Practice Teaching*, 1, 48–64.

Carter, C. (2021). *Black, ethnic minority and disabled practitioners face 'disproportionate' difficulties passing ASYE, says BASW.* www.communitycare.co.uk/2021/02/23/black-ethnic-minority-disabled-practitioners-face-disproportionate-difficulties-passing-asye-says-basw/

Cleland, J., Arnold, R., & Chesser, A. (2005). Failing finals is often a surprise for the student but not the teacher; identifying difficulties and supporting students with academic difficulties. *Medical Teacher*, 27(6), 504–508. https://doi.org/10.1080/01421590500156269

Cleland, J., Knight, L., Rees, C., Tracey, S., & Bond, C. (2008). Is it me or is it them? Factors that influence the passing of underperforming students. *Medical Education*, 42(8), 800–809. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2923.2008.03113.x

Cleland, J., & Roberts, F. E. (2013). "I don't want them working alongside me", or assessing performance of physiotherapy students on clinical placement. *Health and Social Care Education*, 2(1), 3–5. https://doi.org/10.11120/hsce.2013.00013

Cooper, J. (2015) What is the problem with social work education? Community Care Magazine available from https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/08/26/problem-social-work-education/ accessed 1/4/23 date unknown should be deleted and page unknown inserted

Cowburn, M., Nelson, P., & Williams, J. (2000). Assessment of social work students: Standpoint and strong objectivity. *Social Work Education*, 19, 6, 627–637. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470020002344

Croisdale-Appleby, D. (2014). *Re-envisioning social work education: An independent review*. Department of Health, London. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285788/DCA_Accessible.pdf

Danyluk, P. J., Luhanga, F., Gwekwerere, Y. N., MacEwan, L., & Larocque, S. (2015). Failure to fail in a final pre-service teaching practicum. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 6(3). https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2015.3.5

Diaz, C., & Hill, L. (2020). A critical evaluation of the extent to which the reform and modernisation agenda has impacted on the professionalisation of social work in England. *Child Care in Practice*, 26(3), 272–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2018.1555138

Dudek, N. L., Marks, M. B., & Reger, G. (2005). Failure to fail: The perspectives of clinical supervisors. *Academic Medicine*, 80(10), 584–587. https://doi.org/10.1097/00001888-200510001-00023

Duffy, K. (2004). Mentors need more support to fail incompetent students. *The British Journal of Nursing*, 13(10), 582. https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2004.13.10.13042

Elliott, J. (2018). Teach first organisational discourse: What are teach first teachers really being trained for? *Power & Education*, 10(3), 264–274. https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743818771393

Fairtlough, A., Bernard, C., Fletcher, J., & Ahmet, A. (2013). Black social work students' experiences of practice learning: Understanding differential progression rates. *Journal of Social Work*, 14(6), 605–624. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017313500416

Finch, J. (2015). Running with the fox and hunting with the hounds': Social work tutors' experiences of managing failing social work students in practice learning settings. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45(7), 2124–2141.

Finch, J., Hill, N., & Rollins, R. (2021). Assessment in field education, capability, competence and contradictions. In R. Egan, N. Hill, & W. Rollins (Eds.), *Challenges, opportunities and innovations in social work field work education* (pp. 118–130). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429453618-12

Finch, J., & Schaub, J. (2015). Projective identification as an unconscious defence: Social work, practice education and the fear of failure. In D. Armstrong & M. Rustin (Eds.), *Social defences against anxiety: Explorations in the paradigm*, (pp 300 – 314). Karnac.

Finch, J., & Taylor, I. (2013). Failing to fail? Practice educators' emotional experiences of assessing failing social work students. *Social Work Education (Special Edition, Field Education in Social Work)*, 32(2), 244–258. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.720250

Franklin, N., & Melville, P. (2015). Competency assessment tools: An exploration of the pedagogical issues facing competency assessment for nurses in the clinical environment. *Collegian*, 1, 25–31. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.colegn.2013.10.005

Furness, S., & Gilligan, P. (2004). Fit for purpose: Issues from practice placements, practice teaching and the assessment of student's practice. *Social Work Education*, 23(4), 465–479. https://doi.org/10.1080/0261547042000245053

Gainsbury, S. (2010). Mentors passing students despite doubts over their ability. *Nursing Times*, 106(16), 2–3.

Gair, S., Miles, D., Savage, D., & Zuchowski, I. (2014). Racism unmasked: The experiences of aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students in social work field placements. *Australian Social Work*, 68(1), 32–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2014.928335

Gingerich, A., Sebok-Syer, S. S., Larstone, R., Watling, C. J., & Lingard, L. (2020). Seeing but not believing: Insights into the intractability of failure to fail. *Medical Education*, 54(12), 1148–1158. https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14271

GSCC. (2012). *Regulating social workers 2001-2021, a learning report*. Retrieved February 1, 2023, from http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_34828-9.pdf

Guerrasio, J., Furfari, K. A., Rosenthal, L. D., Nogar, C. L., Wray, K., & Aagaard, E. M. (2014). Failure to fail: The institutional perspective. *Medical Teacher*, 36(9), 799–803. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2014.910295

Hanley, J. (2021a). The best and the brightest': Widening participation and social justice in contemporary English social work education. *European Journal of Social Work*, 24(2), 504–514. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2019.1653829

Hanley, J. (2021b). The 'quality' of social work students in England: A genealogy of discourse 2002-18. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 9(2), 253–268. https://doi.org/10.1332/204986019X15567132118821

HanleyHanlet, J. (2021). Left behind: Exploring how mainstream social work students see themselves compared to the 'best and brightest'. *Social Work Education*, 41(4), 497–513. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1851361

Harrison, G., & Ip, R. (2013). Extending the terrain of inclusive education in the classroom to the field: International students on placement. *Social Work Education*, 32(2), 230–243. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.734804

Hauge, K. W., Brask, O. D., Bachmann, L., Bakken, H., Bergum, I. E., Grønvik, C. K., Gutteberg, A., Heggdal, W. M., Julnes, S. G., Malones, B. D., & Ulvund, I. (2019). Are mentors failing to fail nurse students in practice? *Klinisk Sygepleje*, 33(1), 23–29. https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1903-2285-2019-01-03

Hill, S., & Albert, N. M. (2021). Understanding the experiences of African American nursing students. *The Journal of Nursing Education*, 60(3), 50–154. https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20210222-05

Hughes, L. J., Mitchell, M., & Johnston, A. N. B. (2016). 'Failure to fail' in nursing – A catch phrase or a real issue? A systematic integrative literature review. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 20, 54–63. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2016.06.009

Hunt, L. A., McGee, P., Gutteridge, R., & Hughes, M. (2012). Assessment of student nurses in practice: A comparison of theoretical and practical assessment results in England. *Nurse Education Today*, 32(4), 351–355. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2011.05.010

Hyslop, I. (2018). Neoliberalism and social work identity. *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(1), 20–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2016.1255927

Illot, I., & Murphy, R. (1997). Feelings and failing in professional training: The assessor's dilemma. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 22(3), 307–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/0260293970220304

Ilott, I., & Murphy, R. (1999). *Success and failure in professional education: Assessing the evidence*. Whurr Publishers.

Jervis, A., & Tilki, G. (2011). Why are nurse mentors failing to fail student nurses who do not meet clinical performance standards? *The British Journal of Nursing*, 20(9), 582–597. https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2011.20.9.582

Johnson Ahorlu, R. B. (2012). The academic opportunity gap: How racism and stereotypes disrupt the education of African American undergraduates. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 15(5), 633–652. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2011.645566

Jones, R. (2014). *The story of baby P - Setting the record straight*. Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447316305

Jones, R. (2015). The end game: The marketisation and privatisation of children's social work and child protection. *Critical Social Policy*, *35*(4), 447–469. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018315599333

Kagan, M. (2016). Public attitudes and knowledge about social workers in Israel. *Journal of Social Work*, *16*(3), 322–343. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017315572937

Kaslow, N. J., Forrest, L., Van Horne, B. A., Huprich, S. K., Pantesco, V. F., Grus, C. L., Miller, D. S. S., Mintz, L. B., Schwarz-Mette, R., Rubin, N. J., Elman, N. S., Jacobs, S. C., Benton, S. A., Dollinger, S. J., Behnke, S. H., Shealy, C. N., & Van Sickle, K. (2007). Recognizing, assessing, and intervening with problems of professional competence. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *38*(5), 479–492. https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.38.5.479

Kearney, P. (2003). *A framework for supporting and assessing practice learning*. Social Care Institute for Excellence.

Kemshall, H. (1993). Assessing competence: scientific process or subjective inference? Do we really see it? *Social Work Education*, *12*(1), 36–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479311220041

Lankshear, A. (1990). Failure to fail: The teacher's dilemma. *Nursing Standard*, *4*(20), 35–37. https://doi.org/10.7748/ns.4.20.35.s33

Larocque, S., & Loyce, F. (2013). Exploring the issue of failure to fail in a nursing program. *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship*, *10*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijnes-2012-0037

Luhanga, F. L., Larocque, S., MacEwan, L., Gwekwerere, Y. N., & Danyluk, P. (2014). Exploring the issue of failure to fail in professional education programs: A multidisciplinary study. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, *11*(2), 17–41. https://doi.org/10.53761/1.11.2.3

Macalister, J. (2022). *The independent review of childrens social care - the final report*. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf

Maclister, J., Crehan, L., & Olsen, A. (2012). *FRONTLINE: Improving the children's social work professional*. Institute for Public Policy Briefing Paper. Retrieved December 6, 2021, from https://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2013/03/frontline-childrens-social-work_Oct2012_9705.pdf

McGimpsey, I. (2017). Late neoliberalism: Delineating a policy regime. *Critical Social Policy*, *37*(1), 64–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018316653552

Munro, E. (2011). *The munro review of child protection: Final report, london, department for education*. Retrieved November 14, 2021, from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175391/Munro-Review.pdf

Murphy, T. (2016). The frontline programme: Conservative ideology and the creation of a social work officer class. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, *4*(2), 279–287. https://doi.org/10.1332/204986016X14651166264354

Murray, R., & McGovern, M. (2015). Two sides of the one coin: Assessment of students who have previously failed a placement and the role of the practice teacher. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, *13*(2–3), 73–87. https://doi.org/10.1921/jpts.v13i2-3.816

Myers, J. E. B. (2008). A short history of child protection in America. *Family Law Quarterly*, *42*(3), 449–463.

Narey, M. (2014) Making the education of social workers consistently effective Report of Sir Martin Narey's independent review of the education of children's social workers, Uk Government, available from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/287756/Making_the_education_of_social_workers_c available from

NMC. (2019). *Annual equality, diversity and inclusion report 2018–2019*. Nursing and Midwifery Council.

O'Hagan, K. (1996). Social work competence: An historical perspective. In K. O'Hagan (Ed.), *Competence in social work practice - A practical guide for professionals* (pp. 1–24). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Parton, N. (2014). Social work, child protection and politics: Some critical and constructive reflections. *British Journal of Social Work*, *44*(7), 2042–2056. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu091

Pryjmachuk, S., Easton, K., & Littlewood, A. (2009). Nurse education: Factors associated with attrition. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *65*(1), 149–160. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2008.04852.x

Raine, L. M. (2022). From protectiveness to fear of retaliation: Social work educators' experiences with gatekeeping in social work. *Social Work Education*, *41*(6), 1239–1252. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1942825

Raymond, G. T. (2000). Gatekeeping in field education. In P. Gibbs & E. H. Blakely (Eds.), *Gatekeeping in BSW programs* (pp. 107–134). Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/gibb11050-010

Razack, N. (2001). Diversity and difference in the field education encounter: Racial minority students in the practicum. *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, *20*(2), 219–232. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470120044310

Royse, P. (2000). The ethics of gatekeeping. In P. Gibbs & E. H. Blakely (Eds.), *Gatekeeping in BSW programs* (pp. 22–44). Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/gibb11050-006

Rutkowski, J. (2007). Failure to fail: Assessing nursing students' competence during practice placements. *Nursing Standard*, *22*(13), 35–50. https://doi.org/10.7748/ns2007.12.22.13.35.c6299

Samuel, M. (2020). *Black and ethnic minority social workers disproportionately subject to fitness to practise investigations*. www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/07/31/black-ethnic-minority-social-workers-disproportionately-subject-fitness-practise-investigations/

Sangha, J. (2021). What are the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in relation to their progression on an undergraduate social work course in one university in England? *Social Work Education*, *41*(8), 1748–1767. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1960305

Schaub, J., & Dalrymple, R. (2013). Surveillance and silence: New considerations in assessing difficult social work placements. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, *11*(3), 79–97. https://doi.org/10.1921/2302110306

Schraer, R. (2014). *ADCS president defends 'crap students' comment after apologising for his language, community care available from*. Retrieved April 1, 2023, from https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2014/07/11/adcs-president-defends-crap-students-comments-apologising-language/

Shapton, M. (2006). Failing to fail: Is the assessment process failing the caring profession. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, *7*(2), 39–54. https://doi.org/10.1921/175951506784477681

Shardlow, S., & Doel, M. (1996). *Practice Learning and Teaching*. Macmillan Press Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-11308-8

Sharp, M., & Danbury, H. (1999). *The management of failing dipsw students - Activities and exercises to prepare practice teachers for work with failing students*. London: Routledge.

Siraj-Blatchford, I. (1991). A study of Black students' perceptions of racism in initial teacher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, *17*(1), 35–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192910170104

Smith, R., McLenachan, J., Venn, L., Weich, H., & Anthony, D. (2013) Step up to Social Work Programme Evaluation 2012: The regional Partnerships and Employers Persepctives Research Report, Dept for Education, available from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/563268/Step_up_to_Social_Work_Programme_Evaluation_2012.pdf available from

Social Work Task Force. (2009). *Building a safe confident future: The final report of the social work task force*. SWTF.

Swails, J. L., Gadgil, M. A., Goodrum, H., Gupta, R., Rahbar, M. H., & Bernstam, E. V. (2022). Role of faculty characteristics in failing to fail in clinical clerkships. *Medical Education*, *56*(6), 634–640. https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14725

Taylor, I., & Bogo, M. (2013). Perfect opportunity~Perfect storm? Raising the standards of social work education in England. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *44*(6), 1402–1418. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct077

Tedam, P. (2014). When failing doesn't matter: A narrative inquiry into the social work practice learning experiences of Black African students in England. *International Journal of Higher Education*, *3*(1), 136–145. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v3n1p136

Tedam, P. (2015). *Black African Students' Experiences of Social Work Practice Learning in England: A Critical Race Inquiry* [Doctoral thesis]. http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/13778/1/Tedam_Prospera_2015_Black_African_Students_Experiences_of_Social_Work_Practice_Learning_in_England_A_Critical_Race_Enquiry.pdf

Tedam, P. (2021). We just don't matter: Articulating the experience of Black African social work students during the Covid 19 pandemic in England. In D. Turner (Ed.), *Social work and Covid-19*, (pp. 33–42). Critical publishing.

Tedam, P., & Mano, I. (2022). 'She subjected me to pressure from everyone in the team'. Aligning Black African students' experiences of field education with social workers' motivations for becoming practice educators in England. In R. Baikady, S. M. Sajid, V. Nadesan, M. R. Islam (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Fieldwork Education in Social Work*, (pp 249–264).

Tower, K. (2000). In our own image. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *36*(3), 575–585. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2000.10779029

Turner, A. (2020). *Frontline says it must improve on race in response to critical feedback from participants*. Community Care. Retrieved June 18, 2023, from https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/06/26/frontline-says-must-improve-race-response-critical-feedback-participants/

Vacha-Haase, T., Davensport, D. S., & Kerewsky, S. D. (2004). Problematic students: Gatekeeping practices of academic professional psychology programs. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *35*(2), 115–122. https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.35.2.115

Watson, H. E., & Harris, B. (1999). *Supporting students in practice placements in Scotland, department of nursing and community health*. Caledonian University.

Wilkins, C., & Lall, L. (2011). You've got to be tough and i'm trying': Black and minority ethnic student teachers' experiences of initial teacher education. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, *14*(3), 365–386. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2010.543390

Williams, A., Norris, M., Cassidy, E., Naylor, S., Marston, L., & Shiers, P. (2015). An investigation of the relationship between ethnicity and success in a BSc (Hons) physiotherapy degree programme in the UK. *Physiotherapy*, *101*(2), 198–203. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physio.2014.08.003

Wise, J. (2019). Poor induction and lack of honest feedback is blamed for higher rate of GMC referrals among BAME doctors. *BMJ*, *365*, l4391. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.l4391

Ziring, D., Frankel, R. M., Danoff, D., Isaacson, J. H., & Lochnan, H. (2015). Silent witnesses: Faculty reluctance to report medical students' professionalism lapses. *Academic Medicine: Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges*, *90*(7), 913–920. https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000737

Zuchowski, I., Savage, D., Miles, D., & Gair, S. (2013). Decolonizing field education: Challenging Australian social work praxis. *Advances in Social Work Welfare and Social Welfare Education*, *15*(1), 47–62.