Research Article

# *'It's been hell.'* Italian and British Practice Educators' Narratives of Working with Struggling or Failing Social Work Students in Practice Learning Settings

Authors: Jo Finch[*a] and Alberto Poletti[b]

[a]Cass School of Education and Communities, University of East London, London, United Kingdom; [b]Department of Applied Social Studies Faculty of Health & Social Sciences, University of Bedfordshire, United Kingdom

***Abstract***

*Periods of assessed learning in practice settings are common requirements for social work students world wide. The 'practice learning opportunity' as it is known in the UK, and 'tirocinio di servizio sociale' as it is referred to in Italy, are important sites of gatekeeping in preventing unsuitable people from becoming social workers. The experience of assessing failing students in practice learning settings however, has been found to be particularly stressful and challenging for practice educators. This article documents findings from two qualitative studies that explored field educators' experiences of working with struggling or failing social work students in Italy and England. The study finds both similarities and differences in the narratives of the assessors from the two countries Similarities include, unpleasant emotional experience of*

[*] Corresponding Author, Jo Finch, J.Finch@uel.ac.uk

*working with a failing student, internalisation of the students failing as the practice educators' own failing, perceptions that the universities may hide negative information about students and lack of acknowledgement of the gatekeeping function inherent in the practice educator role. Differences include the level of emotionality experienced by educators, the way students are spoken about and the perceived role and responses of the university. Further comparative European research which focuses on practice education is indicated.*

*Key words: practice educator, practice learning, failing students, assessment frameworks, emotions.*

## *Introduction*

Assessed practice is common across the world (Hughes and Heycox, 1996, Raymond, 2000; Shardlow and Doel, 2002) and is an important component of social work training (Evans, 1999; Raymond, 2000; Furness and Gilligan, 2004): in that it gives students the opportunity to put into practice what they have learnt in academic settings (Evans, 1999; Furness and Gilligan, 2004); although the amount of time spent in practice learning settings varies across countries (Hughes and Heycox, 1996; Harris and Gill, 2007). The practice learning component is also important for screening out unsuitable students, although, as we explore, there is concern that practice educators are failing to fail students.

***Practice Learning in England***

In the UK, undergraduate and postgraduate students undertake 200 days of assessed practice, which must include experience of working within statutory contexts (Department of Health, 2000a; GSCC, 2002b, 2003; Parker, 2004; Harris and Gill, 2007). Students are assessed against national occupational standards (TOPSS, 2002) and practice educators make a *recommendation* as to the student's competence, usually to a panel held at the university.

***Social Work in England***

There have been a number of significant developments in social work in England, including the introduction of the degree in social work in 2003 (Department of Heath, 2002; GSCC 2002b, 2003; Orme et al, 2009), requirements to register with a regional care council, protection of title and adoption of a code of ethics (GSCC, 2002a; Curer and Atherton, 2007; Finch, 2010). The post qualifying frameworks, revised in 2007, made the practice educator qualification equivalent to post graduate level (GSCC, 2005; GSCC, 2006).

Further developments include the work of the Social Work Reform Board. Plans to change the system of assessment to a capability framework in 2013 arose from this process; and requirements to undertake practice education will change to a two part qualification (SWRB, 2010). The General Social Care Council, the regulatory body for social work in England, is now abolished, with some functions taken over by the Health Care Professions Council.

Social work in the UK remains relatively well paid and its professional status developing; these have raised concerns however, about an unchecked, neo-liberal manageralist agenda (Webb, 2006; White and Harris, 2007) which, Parrot (1999) argues, has ensured greater government control in social work, at the expense of social workers critically engaging with social inequality and injustice. The competency approach to assessing social work students has also been criticised as promoting a tick box mentality (O'Hagan, 1996). Indeed Munro, who was appointed by the Government in 2010, to undertake a review of children and families social work, commented critically on target driven approaches to social work (Munro, 2011).

***Practice Learning in Italy***

There are no national requirements for students to undertake a set number of days in placement and so there are regional variations. In the Northern region of Italy, 300 hours of practice are required (Villa, 2002). There is concern that the practice learning component is not sufficiently emphasised (Campanini, 2009). Each university sets its own assessment framework and makes decisions about failed students. There are no requirements for practice educators to have qualifications to undertake this role and there is no daily placement fee in direct contrast to the UK model.

**Social Work in Italy**

There is a decentralised model of welfare with regional variations in the provision of social services, resulting in some areas having, what Lorenz

(1994) terms, a "rudimentary" (1994:26) welfare system characterised by minimal legal rights for social security. A feature of such approaches to welfare is that qualified social workers work mainly in the public social services (Farglio, 2008) although there is a blurred distinction between formal and informal care, where mainly alternatively qualified practitioners or volunteers work (Lorenz, 1994). A law passed in 2000, aimed at eradicating regional variations in welfare provision by integrating health and social services and promoting family support and community services, although a change in government, ensured that not all regions have implemented the law (Campinini, 2009).

Social work in Italy is poorly paid and not considered a profession (Campanini, 2007; Farglio, 2008). Developments that began in the mid 1980s, have ensured that social work programmes of study became recognised as the only route to become a "social worker", a register set up and a code of ethics produced (Campanini, 2009). A further development in 1993, required social workers to pass an exam, post degree, to ensure they are licensed to practice (Farglio, 2008). Concern remains about the lack of recognition of "social work" as a distinct academic discipline and practice in its own right (Campanini, 2009), the result of which, is a shortage of teachers of social work, a lack of Professors of Social Work and limited social work research activity (Campanini, 2009).

**Similarities and Differences**

Thus British and Italian social work are not directly comparable as they are based on different models of social welfare. Lorenz (1994) argues that the model of social work within the UK, falls within what he terms the "residual model" (1994:23) in which care and control functions are polarised within social services provision. This contrasts with the decentralised model of welfare provision in Italy. There are clear differences in the rationalist approach to social work found in the UK (Chapman, 2004) and the more autonomous, optimistic approach to social work found in Italy (Hetherington, et al, 1997), recognising that generalisations of this order are difficult to draw.

There are similarities in the values and ethos of social work practice although the context of practice reflects the particular characteristics of welfare in each country. In social work education, there are differences in terms of the more developed status of social work as a distinct practice and academic discipline found in the UK compared with its inferior status within the academy in Italy (Campanini, 2009). In practice, there are similarities in the requirement to undertake a degree in social work alongside a practice component that is overseen by a qualified social worker, protection of title and registration.

***Assessing failing students***

The literature, international and multi-disciplinary, highlights the perceived low failure rate in practice learning settings (Coulshed, 1980; Owens et al, 1985, Hughes and Heycox, 1996, Raymond, 2000; Finch, 2010) and practice educators' apparent reluctance to fail students (Finch, 2010). This phenomena is not just particular to social work but also occurs in other

professions, i.e. occupational therapy (Ilot and Murphy, 1997), teaching (Proctor et al, 1993; Knowles et al, 1995), nursing (Lankshear, 1990; Duffy, 2004; Jervis and Tilki, 2011) and counselling psychology and psychotherapy (Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Hoffman et al, 2005; Johnson, 2007; Kaslow et al, 2007).

From an analysis of the literature, five areas emerged that might explain why supervisors find the process of failing students challenging. First, lack of competence in using an assessment framework (Owens, 1995; Cowburn et al, 2000; Duffy, 2004): not following the correct procedures (Burgess et al., 1998a, 1998b; Ilott and Murphy, 1997; Duffy, 2004; Kaslow et al., 2007) and not addressing concerns in a timely fashion (Floyd et al, 1998; Duffy, 2004; Hoffman et al, 2004). Secondly, fear of litigation, most notably in the North American context (Cole, 1991; Cole and Lewis, 1993; Raymond, 2000; Royse, 2000; Urwin et al 2006) although there is limited European research on this. Thirdly, the notion of role strain or confusion (Fisher, 1990; Proctor, 1993; Shardlow and Doel, 1996; Hoffman et al, 2004); namely, that the role of practice educator encompasses potentially conflicting elements, i.e. nurturer/ enabler of learning versus assessor/manager. Fourthly, a perception of lack of support given to practice educators by universities has also been found to be significant (Brandon and Davies, 1979; Finch, 2010, Basnett and Shepherd, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011).

Lastly, the emotional experience of working with failing students has been highlighted. Bogo et al (2007), writing from a Canadian social work

perspective, argued that practice educators found it difficult to fail students because of the conflicting emotions they experienced. Gizara et al (2004) researched US supervisors' accounts of working with counselling psychology students who were failing. The experience for supervisors was:

> "horrible...painful...very sad...a gut wrenching experience"
>
> (2004:136).

Samac (1995) describes the guilt, anger and shame felt by US clinical supervisors of psychotherapy students when failing their work.

***The UK Research***

The established position is that procedures to fail students in practice learning settings are usually well documented; practice educators are qualified and usually undergo training on working with failing students; and decision making in relation to students failed in practice is usually situated in a practice assessment panel (PAP). Membership of the PAP is comprised of experienced practice educators and academics. This should suggest robust and confident decision making through clear procedures and a collaborative approach. Some of the existing research suggests however, that practice educators find the task of making a fail recommendation difficult and they experience a lack of support from universities. Finch (2010) explored why it appeared difficult for practice educators to recommend a fail. The study highlighted unpleasant emotional responses that emerged when working with failing students, e.g anger and guilt; and the adverse impact on the

assessment process. This study highlighted psychological processes that appeared to impede practice educators in making fail recommendations, despite quite overwhelming evidence at times of failure. The findings also revealed conflictual dynamics between universities and practice educators.

We were interested in exploring how far the findings that emerged in this study might accord with practice educators' experiences in a Southern European Country. The Northern region of Italy was chosen as a comparison site as one of the authors has existing links there; acknowledging that direct comparisons between English and Italian social work is not straightforward.

***Comparative Research Approaches***

The advantages of undertaking comparative European social work research has been stated (Hetherington, et al, 1997; Hackett et al, 2003; Kantowicz, 2005; Shardlow and Wallis, 2003). Cooper et al (1995) explored child protection systems in the UK and France and argues that comparative approaches allow researchers to develop new insights. Comparing different models, systems and cultures of social work, enables a process of "critical reflection on how we do things ourselves" (1995:viii).

Kantowicz (2005), argues that European comparative social work studies offer researchers the opportunity to consider both universal and local expressions of social work – thus our comparative approach aims at making explicit, particular cultures of practice learning. Comparative research approaches are not without difficulties however; as Shardlow and Wallis (2003) argue,

there are distinct methodological problems with comparing "like with like" (2003: 922). Indeed, in this analyses we are not even attempting to compare "like with like" as both countries have different welfare systems and approaches to social work. After recognising these limitations; there is still gain in undertaking a comparative approach; to enable a critical consideration of hitherto taken for granted assumptions.

***Methodology, Methods and Data Analysis***

The research design was not traditionally comparative, as the research in the two countries was not conducted simultaneously. We undertook a pilot study in Italy using the same qualitative methodology and methods as the prior UK study. Our aims were to:

- Explore how far Italian practice educators experienced similar emotional reactions that were revealed by English practice educators.
- Explore how the particular contexts of social work in each country might impact on decision making in respect to failing students.
- Consider how far a comparative approach might yield potentially interesting new insights.
- Consider the usefulness of this comparative approach to see whether a larger, qualitative, European comparative research project might be justified.

The research method employed was an in-depth interview. Twenty practice educators from Britain and six practice educators from Italy were interviewed.

The British participants were all qualified practice educators, working in a variety of social work settings, statutory and voluntary, adults and children and families; and with ten universities across England. The Italian practice educators, unlike their British counterparts, were not qualified; all worked in statutory settings, adults and children and families, in a North Italian region and with two universities.

The samples in both studies were purposively chosen on the basis that the practice educators had experience of working with struggling or failing students.

The data was analysed using the "voice centred relational method" largely associated with Gilligan (1982). The method advocates four distinct readings of the transcripts focusing firstly on the stories, subplots, protagonists and recurrent imagery; secondly, how respondents talk about themselves; thirdly, how relationships are narrated; and lastly the impact of contexts is considered (Brown and Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan et al, 2003).

**Limitations of Study**

There were clear limitations in the empirical studies undertaken; of most importance is the fact that the studies were small-scale, indeed, one was a pilot study, and thus national generalisations are impossible to draw. Secondly, because the research participants chose to be involved in the research, it may have biased the results towards those whose experience had been particularly unpleasant, difficult or who had not yet managed to reconcile

the role of practice educator. Thirdly, given the different cultures and contexts of social work in the UK and Italy, this may make national comparisons of subjective experience difficult.

## *Findings*

First we will consider findings that were common to the British and the Italian practice educators; then we will look at differences.

### *Internalising Failure*

It appeared that some British educators' internalised the student's failings as their own. This made the decision to fail the student difficult and in some cases impossible. Martha states:

> "I actually felt it was my failing because I wasn't getting it [evidence] out of her…."

Lily, a deputy manager in a drugs and alcohol voluntary agency and an experienced assessor of both nursing and social work students, terminated a placement when the student made homophobic comments. Rather than view this as evidence of her ability to maintain appropriate standards of practice, Lily internalises it as a failure on her part. She states:

> "…I still feel that I must have done something wrong with that one because I couldn't enable him…to see why his way of thinking was inappropriate in social work, never mind in society".

This process of failure being internalised, is seem most starkly in the narrative of Terry. He states:

> "So I think for someone to fail…most of the time there has to be failure on both parts…I would say that 90% of the time if the student fails, there's something wrong with the practice assessor."

For Terry, failing the student would mean failing himself;

> "That was the issue I was struggling with through the whole thing. How much of her [student's] failure was a reflection of my own practice teaching".

It was concerning to note that even by Terry's own defined minimum standards of practice, the student was clearly failing. When prompted to reflect on whether he had made an appropriate decision in passing the student, he became angry and states:

> "…simply because she wasn't able to do this kind of social work, doesn't mean that she is not able to work with people and help people in some capacity…the question is, is she going to be able to do social work? Well yes, but not anything that involves a whole lot of deadlines. So maybe not statutory…"

Despite his own admission that the student did not meet the standard required for workers within his own team, he passed the student. This process of

internalisation of failure was also seen in the Italian narratives. Antonia, for example, states:

> "For a long time I wondered where I made the mistake with that student".

***Difficult or conflictual relationship with the University***

Most of the British practice educators talked negatively about the university. A sense of "us and them" and feelings of powerlessness emerged in their narratives. Katie, for example, complained that the university did not "hear" her concerns about the student. She states:

> "So I went and had a meeting at the university after things had broken down…they were only interested in what he [student] had to say…and in fact when they sent the report, I wasn't prepared to sign the report they had sent because it didn't stress or recall any of the concerns I had raised".

Katie also speaks of feeling intimidated by the university. Martha expresses her concern that the tutor had an overly positive view of the student. She states:

> "…we had such…difference of opinion that I really questioned my own judgment…this is somebody who has twenty years experience of teaching, he's seen lots of students and I seem to be the only one who thinks there's a problem."

This was also seen in the narratives of the Italian practice educators. Maria states:

> "When things don't go as they expect, sometimes, you don't understand what they [universities] want from us."

A British practice educator spoke of a "surreptitious discouragement of failure" and another expressed the view that she had a "feeling" that failing students would tarnish the reputation of the university. This was also seen in the Italian narratives. Paola, for example, states:

> "I couldn't understand the reason of their decision…perhaps failing a student doesn't look good on them".

Linked to this were concerns expressed by both British and Italian practice educators that universities were not being entirely open or honest about prevailing concerns about students. Martha recounts the student not having a report from her last placement:

> "There was no assessment report, and I asked for an assessment report, and I was told at the time there wasn't one... so I had no real evidence on how she had done [in her first placement]."

Concerns were raised by British and Italian practice educators that universities were not forthcoming about health or disability issues that could potentially impact on the placement. Katie, a British practice educator, whilst

understanding the need for confidentiality around disclosures of students' HIV status, felt that given the agency supported people living with HIV and Aids – such a disclosure was necessary, as the work given to the student was felt to be inappropriate because of his own health issues. Likewise, Emma, a British practice educator, complained that the university had withheld vital information about the student's disability. She states:

> "...the tutor at the midway, said, have you read the access report? It turned out she [student] was dyslexic."

Similarly Paola, whose views have already been quoted, states:

> "…often they don't tell us everything, or perhaps, they cannot disclose information because of confidentiality".

This added to the beliefs held by some practice educators that universities were "secretive", hid important information and did not want students to be failed.

***Unacknowledged gatekeeping role***

Practice educators were asked in the interviews to discuss their roles and responsibilities. It was surprising that British and Italian practice educators, bar one, did not explicitly acknowledge the gatekeeping role. Whilst for Italian practice educators this might relate to the fact that the number of placement days is comparatively short and that the university makes the decision to pass

or fail, British practice educators, explicitly tasked with the role of making a recommendation to a PAP, were unable to acknowledge this function. The exception to this, Peter, a British educator, states:

> "I also feel as a practice teacher you also have some responsibility to…the people who are likely to be served by the students".

***Emotionality***

A striking difference concerned the levels of emotion and drama in the stories told. British practice educators' accounts were often (though not always) angry, emotional, blaming and unreflective. This contrasted with the emotionally measured Italian stories, which acknowledged the process had been difficult, but were more muted in their emotional response. For example Paola again, states;

> "I felt sorry, it wasn't a pleasant situation, but at the end it was me who had to take the final decision."

Francesca, who extended a placement for the student, states:

> "She was young, I felt sorry for her, but I am sure she would learn from the experience"

One Italian practice educator, Giorgia, said of the experience of working with a failing student, "It's been hell", the overall tone remained relatively

measured and reflective in style. Three British practice educators remained measured in their emotional responses. They were reflective in their accounts, did not blame the university or the student and the students were spoken about in a professional tone. These practice educators appeared to have a understanding of their role and had clear expectations about their responsibilities and that of the students.

The emotionally measured accounts, contrasted with the angry accounts revealed in the majority (approximately 85%), of the British educators' narratives. Some British practice educator's were able to recognise their anger. Claire for example states:

> "…I was really pissed off with him…I felt angry."

Jenny also reports:

> "I got angry with him [the student] sometimes…I would be smouldering, pissed off, felt like I was working harder than him in his practice placement."

The most extreme example of anger concerned Daisy, who failed the student after just seven days in practice. Daisy describes a situation where she challenged the student about her aggressive behaviour and the student's response to this challenge was to claim she was menstruating. Daisy states:

> "…I thought, fuck you! You are not going to apologise for your fucking behaviour with a period. Every fucking woman in the world gets a period…so now you've resorted to like, fucking bottom of the barrel".

Daisy narrative uses strong, invective language and she complains bitterly about the student's lack of reflective capacities.

A concern is that this anger – not always recognised and appropriately managed by the British practice educators, obscures the assessment process. In Daisy's case, her recommendation of a fail was not upheld, due to lack of evidence within the report she provided to the panel. The anger was often accompanied by guilt – which also appeared to get in the way of making an appropriate assessment decision.

***Good students and bad students***

Linked to the issue of anger, we noted that whilst Italian and British practice educators spoke of "good" and "bad" students. The descriptions of the "bad" students by some British practice educators were much more pronounced, and in Daisy's case, deeply unprofessional.

For example, Antonia, an Italian practice educator, discusses being in touch with former students who she had had concerns about. She states:

> "With a few students I am still in touch nowadays… they are now good practitioners".

Similarly Paola, who had worked with a problematic student that had been failed by the University, was still in contact with him and they had recently written an article together.

This contrasts some British practice educators' descriptions of students. Tim, describes a student as:

> "…he was poisonous…he was venomous…he was a flipping nightmare".

Lily also spoke of the student in negative terms. She states:

> "…she was absolutely terrible. She was appalling, she was abysmal and no way should she ever be near clients…there were a million difficulties with her…she was incredibly arrogant and rude…"

***The Role of the University***

As discussed earlier, practice educator's relationships with universities in both countries, were challenging. In the British context some of this bad feeling emerged after the assessment board, especially if the university did not uphold the recommendation of a fail. Peter for example, when his recommendation was not upheld, despite the student's placement ending abruptly when she failed to follow instructions which put a service user at risk of harm, states:

> "I mean, when I did the report…I remember feeling, what the fuck..!"

Similarly, Tim, who also had his decision of a fail overturned by the assessment board on the grounds that the student's practice did not demonstrate "dangerous or risky practice" states:

> "I have to say that I didn't feel the same. I thought the evidence was absolutely crystal clear...I was really concerned".

Tim feels relieved when he hears unofficially that the student has withdrawn from the programme but is still angry towards the university some four years later and had kept all the paperwork, "just in case".

Additionally, the narratives of British practice educators revealed that they believed they were responsible for making the assessment decision, when in fact they are making a recommendation to the PAP and/or assessment board. For the Italian practice educators' this misunderstanding does not arise, they are clear it is the universities role to make decisions to pass or fail students. Francesca states:

> "Universities should make the final decision: they know the students better than us… we could only judge what we have seen during the placement".

This suggests that Italian practice educators may trust the system more than their British counterparts, though of course, this is a very small sample. It might also be the case that a stronger, and more trusting partnership in

England, between universities and practice learning agencies may prevent this lingering resentment and mistrust.

***Discussion***

We were interested in theorising the differences in emotional responses between the Italian and British practice educators. The lack of a national or even regional assessment framework in Italy, could be a significant factor in that it potentially makes it more difficult to fail a student, i.e. there is nothing to measure the student's performance against. On the other hand, it appears to shield Italian practice educators from difficult and unpleasant emotions that emerged so starkly in some of the British narratives. The universities' decision making role in Italy also appears more prominent and defined; this is both understood and accepted by Italian practice educators unlike their English counterparts who often felt angry when their recommendations were not accepted. Perhaps this reflects a stronger professional and merged identity, i.e. social worker-practice educator in Italy compared with England, despite British practice educators, unlike their Italian colleagues, having undertaken a programme of study designed to equip them for the task of practice education. They appeared to struggle to define the role of practice educator, did not explicitly connect it to their identities and tasks as social workers, and struggled to manage the potential conflict between an enabler of learning and the managerial/assessor function. Indeed, as Lily explicitly states:

> "…there was a clash for me between the facilitator of learning role and the kind of management roles…I respond really well to people who are learning but the flip side of that was when I had to become the kind of teller-off or the person who was making judgments about that, I did struggle with that."

Another factor might be the significant differences in time students spend in practice learning settings in each countries, making it potentially more difficult to fail a student who has been in placement for anywhere between 80 to 120 days rather than 300 hours (i.e. about 43 days). British practice educators might therefore have emotionally invested in their student to a greater extent than their Italian colleagues, and appeared to be engaged at times, in an unacknowledged power struggle with the university.

Another factor might be that as Italian social workers have to sit a further exam to gain registration, there may be an implicit acceptance that there is another "gate" for would be Italian social workers to pass through (Farglio, 2008; Villa, 2002). The implications for the British system with plans to introduce an assessed newly qualified year, known as the "assessed and supported year in employment" might be that difficult decisions are put off by practice educators.

Lastly, it was interesting to note those British practice educators that experienced less emotional pain when failing the student, were all approved mental health practitioners. It might be the case that the culture of the particular social work setting, influences the culture of practice education. As

Hetherington et al (1997) found in their study of child protection systems in Europe, English children and family social workers often seemed uncertain about their power and professional standing compared with their European peers.

**Conclusion**

Despite the limitations of the studies, it is clear that working with a struggling or failing student is at times fraught, complex and painful for practice educators. In some cases, these emotional experiences play a significant role in decision making. The studies also reveal a particular psychological process, in which students' failings are internalised as one's own, which also impacts on decision making.

The studies revealed a surprising and deeply concerning finding, namely, the lack of explicit acknowledgement by the participants of the important gatekeeping function inherent in the practice educator role. Lastly the studies also revealed that the relationship between the field and the academy can be potentially problematic in that it is felt that universities may hide negative information about the student's previous placement or important information about health or disability that could impact on the placement. Practice educators from both countries did not always appear to fully understand the expectations of the university.

The findings of the Italian pilot study echoed some of the findings in the British study although important differences were highlighted, not least the more

emotionally contained narratives of the Italian practice educators and the lower levels of hostility shown towards the student and the university. A number of key issues arose from the study which would benefit from further research.

First, there are continuing concerns in both countries that unsuitable people may be "getting through". The need for an appropriate assessment framework and clearly understood assessment processes that ensure students in practice learning settings can be failed if required is indicated. In Italy however, the practice component appears currently to be under-emphasised within the overall programme of study and, in England, the existence of a national assessment framework does not appear to shield practice educators from the pain of failing a student.

Secondly the need for partnerships between practice learning agencies and the field is indicated in both countries. It would seem obvious, as well as imperative, that both practice educators and university staff are jointly involved in making decisions about social work students' competence to practice and this has implications for both Italy and England. Linked to this point concerns the need for further research that tests out the hypothesis that good quality partnership arrangements between the field and the academy will result in robust decision making.

Thirdly, practice educators in both countries need to explicitly recognise and operationalise their vital gatekeeping function to ensure unsuitable people do

not enter social work. Universities need to develop procedures for ensuring practice education is robust, confident and that appropriate decisions are being made; thus research that explores the discomfort around gate keeping functions is indicated, both within the field and the academy. Additionally, the research in the UK indicated that there was great variability in practice and this needs further exploration.

Further comparative European research into the particular issues raised by failing students in practice learning settings is indicated. This should explore models of practice learning and assessment; how placement failure is managed and considers particular local cultures and practices of field learning. This small study demonstrates the potential of comparative research to reveal new understandings. For example, the Italian phase of the research highlighted the unintended consequence of the English assessment framework and the potential effects of culture of social work that is rational, manageralist and outcome-based The narratives discussed here therefore, echo recent criticism of such approaches. That British practice educators appear to struggle to integrate the elements of the role compared with Italian educators' apparent ease at managing these tensions is an important insight. It does appear somewhat paradoxical, in light of the fact that British practice educators were all qualified, unlike their Italian colleagues.

Finally, we argue for a model of practice assessment that pays attention to the emotional climate, works more consciously and reflectively with the uncomfortable feelings that can emerge in teaching and learning

relationships, and one that places emphasis on a professional social work-practice educator identity.

***Acknowledgments***

Thanks go to Professor Stephen Briggs and Professor Mark Doel for support and encouragement in writing this article.

***References***

Basnett F., and Sheffield D., (2010) The Impact of Social Work Student Failure upon Practice Educators, British Journal of Social Work, 40, 2119-2136

Bogo, M., Regher, C., Power, R. And Regher, G. (20070 When Values Collide: Field Instructors Experiences of Providing Feedback and Evaluating Competence. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 28 (2) pp.178-190

Brandon, J. and Davis, M. (1979) The Limits of Competence in Social Work; The Assessment of Marginal Students in Social Work Education, *British Journal of Social Work,* Vol. 9, pp 295-347

Brown, L. M. and Gilligan, C. (1992) *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girl's Developmen*t, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Campanini, A. (2004), Italy in Campanini, A.; Frost, E. (eds), (2004), *European Social Work. Commonalities and Differences*, Roma, Carocci:

Campanini, A. (2007) Country Perspectives – Social Work in Italy*, European Journal of Social Work* Vol. 10, No. 1, March 2007, pp. 107-116

Campanini, A. (2009) Social Work in Italy – Problems and Perspectives, *LocuSOCI@L* (3) pp 36-47 http://locussocial.cesss-ucp.com.pt/page7/files/artigo-007c-paper-campanini_ls00233.pdf (accessed 23/6/12)

Chapman, J. (2004) *System Failure (2nd edition),* London, Demos

Cole, B. S. (1991) Legal Issues Related to Social Work Program Admissions. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 27 (1).

Cole, B. S. and Lewis, R. G. (1993) Gatekeeping Through Termination of Unsuitable Social Work Students: Legal Issues and Guidelines. *Journal of Social Work*, 29 (2).

Cooper, A., Hetherington, R., Baistow, K., Pitts, J. and Spriggs, A. (1995) *Positive Child Protection – A View from Abroad,* London, Russell House Publishing

Coulshed, V. (1980) Why is Placement Failure so Rare? *Australian Social Work,* 33 (4)**,** pp.17-21.

Cowburn, M., Nelson, P. and Williams, J. (2000) Assessment of Social Work Students: Standpoint and Strong Objectivity. *Social Work Education*, 19 (6)**,** pp.627-637

Currer, C. and Atherton, K. (2007) Suitable to Remain a Student Social Worker? Decision Making in Relation to Termination of Training. *Social Work Education*, iFirst article**,** pp.1-14.

Department of Health (2002) *Requirements for Social Work Training*, London, HMSO

Duffy, K. (2004) *Failing Students*. London, Nursing and Midwifery Council.

Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, London, The Falmer Press

Evans, D. (1999) Practice Learning in the Caring Professions, *Aldershot, Ashgate Arena.*

Fargio, S. (2008) Reflections on Social Work's Identity – International Themes in Italian Practitioners Representation of Social Work, *International Social Work,* Vol 51 (2) pp 206-219

Finch, J. (2010) *Can't Fail, Won't Fail – Why Practice Assessors Find it Difficult to Fail Social Work Students. A Qualitative Study of Practice Assessors Experience of Assessing Marginal or Failing Social Work Students*, University of Sussex, Professional Doctorate in Social Work

Fisher, T. (1990) Competence in Social Work Practice Teaching. *Social Work Education,* 9**,** 9-25

Floyd, M.R., Myszaka, M.T. and Orr, P. (1998) Licensed Psychologists Knowledge and Utilization of a State Association Colleague Assistance Committee. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice,* 29 pp594-598

Furness, S. and Gilligan, P. (2004) Fit for Purpose: Issues from Practice Placements, Practice Teaching and the Assessment of Student's Practice. *Social Work Education*, 23**,** 465-479.

Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development,* Cambridge, Harvard University Press

Gilligan, C., Spencer, R., Weinburg, M. K. and Bertsch, T. (2003) On the Listening Guide: A Voice-Centred Relational Method. IN Camic, P. M., Rhodes, J. E. and Yardley, L. (Eds.) *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Expanding Perspectives in Methodology and Design*. Washington D.C, American Psychological Society.

Gizara, S. S. and Forrest, L. (2004) Supervisors' Experiences of Trainee Impairment and Incompetence at APA-Accredited Internship Sites. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35 (2)**,** pp.131-140

GSCC (2002a) Codes of Practice for Social Care Workers and Employers, London, GSCC

GSCC (2002b) Accreditation of Universities to Grant Degrees in Social Work, London, GSCC

GSCC (2003) The General Social Care Council (Conduct) Rules 2003 and Explanatory Notes, London, GSCC

GSCC (2005) Post-Qualifying Framework for Social Work Education and Training. London, GSCC

*GSCC (2006) Specialist Standards for the Requirements for Post Qualifying Social Work Education and Training - Practice Education. London, GSCC.*

Hackett , S., Kuronen, M., Matthies, A. & Kresal, B. (2003). The motivation, professional development and identity of social work students in four European countries. *European Journal of Social Work Vol 6 (2) pp163-178*

Harris, V. and Gill, M. (2007) Practice Learning in Context in Lymbery, M. and Postle, K (Eds) *Social Work – a Companion to Learning*, London, Sage

Hetherington, R., Cooper, A., Smith, P. and Wilford, G. (1997) *Protecting Children – Messages from Europe,* London, Russell House Publishing

Hoffman, M. A., Hill, C. E., Holmes, S. E. and Freitaz, G. F. (2005) Supervisor Perspective on the Process and Outcomes of Giving Easy, Difficult, or No Feedback to Supervisees. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 52 (1), pp.3-13

Hughes, L. and Heycox, K. (1996) Three Perspectives on Assessment in Practice Learning. in Doel, M. and Shardlow, S. (Eds.) *Social Work in a Changing World - An International Perspective on Practice Learning*. Aldershot, Arena (Ashgate).

Humphrey (2007) Observing Students' Practice (Through the Looking Glass and Beyond) *Social Work Education,* 26 (7) pp723-736

Ilott, I. and Murphy, R. (1997) Feelings and Failing in Professional Training: the assessor's dilemma. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 22**,** pp 307-316.

Johnson, B. W. (2007) Transformational Supervision: When Supervisors Mentor. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice,* 38 (3)**,** pp.259-267

Jervis and Tilki (2011) Why are Nurse Mentors Failing to Fail Student Nurses who do not meet Clinical Performance Standards? *British Journal of Nursing*, 20 (9) pp 582-597

Kantowicz, E. (2005) Dilemmas in Comparative Research of Education for Social Workers in Europe, *European Journal of Social Work*, Vol 8 (3) pp297-309

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., Schwartz-Mette, R., Rubin, N. J., Elman, N. S., Jacobs, S. C., Benton, S. A., Dollinger, S. J., Behnke, S. H., Shealy, C. N. and Van Sickle, K. (2007) Recognizing, Assessing, and Intervening with Problems of Professional Competence. Professional Psychology: *Research and Practice*, 38 (5)**,** pp.479-492

Knowles, J. G., Skrobola, N. L. M. and Coolican, M. J. (1995) We watched them "fail": university supervisors perceptions of "failure" in student teaching. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8**,** pp.149-170.

Lafrance, J., Fray, E. and Herbert, M. (2004) Gate-Keeping for Professional Social Work Practice. *Social Work Education*, 23**,** pp.325-340

Lankshear, A. (1990) Failure to Fail: The Teacher's Dilemma. *Nursing Standard,* 4**,** pp.35-37.

Lorenz, W. (1994) *Social Work in a Changing Europe*, London, Routledge

Lorenz, W. (2006). Perspectives on European Social Work, Opladen, Barbara Budrich Publishers,

Munro, E. (2011) The Munro Review of Child Protection: The Child's Journey, London, Department for Education, http://www.education.gov.uk/munroreview/downloads/Munrointerimreport.pdf (accessed 24/2/11)

O'Hagan, K. (1996) Social Work Competence: A Historical Perspective in O'Hagan, K. (Ed) *Competence in Social Work Practice – A Practical Guide*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Orme, J., MacIntyre, G., Green Lister, P., Cavanagh, K., Crisp, B., Hussein, S., Manthorpe, J., Moriarty, J., Sharpe, E., Stevens, M. (2009) What (a) Difference a Degree Makes: The Evaluation of the New Social Work Degree in England, *British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 39, pp 161-178

Owens, C. (1995) How the Assessment of Competence in DipSW is Changing the Culture of Practice Teaching, *Social Work Education,* 14 (3) pp 6-78

Parker, J. (2004) Effective Practice Learning in Social Work, Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd

Parrott, J. (1999) *Social Work and Social Care*, London, Routledge

Peach, J. and Horner, N. (2007) Using Supervision – Support or Surveillance? In Lymbery, M and Postle, K (eds) *Social Work: A Companion to Learning,* London, Sage

Proctor, A.K (1993) Tutors' Professional Knowledge of Supervision and the Implications for Supervision Practice in Calderhead, J. And Gates, P (Eds) *Conceptualizing Reflection in Teacher Development*, London: The Falmer Press

Raymond, G. T. (2000) Gatekeeping in Field Education. IN Gibbs, P. and Blakely, E. H. (Eds.) *Gatekeeping in BSW Programs*. New York, Colombia University Press

Royse, P. (2000) The Ethics of Gatekeeping. IN GIBBS, P., BLAKELY, E.H (Ed.) Gatekeeping in BSW Programs. New York, Colombia University Press
Samac, J.R (1995) Guilt, Anger and Shame: Failing the Psychotherapy Candidate's Clinical Work, *The Clinical Supervisor*, 13 (2), pp.1-17

Rutkowski, J. (2007) Failure to fail: assessing nursing students' competence during practice placements, *Nursing Standard*, 22 (13) pp 35-50

Samec, J.R (1995) Shame, Guilt and Trauma. Failing the Psychotherapy Candidates Clinical Work. *The Clinical Supervisor,* 13 (2) pp1-17

Schaub, J. and Dalrymple, R. (2011) *"She didn't seem like a social worker": Practice Educators Experiences and Perceptions of Failing Social Work Students on Placements,* London, Higher Education Academy

Shapton, M. (2006) Failing to Fail: Is the Assessment Process Failing the Caring Profession, *Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 7 (2) pp39-54

Shardlow, S. & Doel, M. *(1996) Practice Learning and Teaching*, Basingstoke, Macmillan Press Ltd.

Shardlow, S. and Doel, M. (1996) *Practice Teaching and Learning,* Houndmills: Macmillan.

Shardlow, S. and Doel, M. (Eds) (2002) *Learning to Practise Social Work: International Approaches*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Shardlow, S. and Wallis, J. (2003) Mapping Comparative Empirical Studies of European Social Work, *British Journal of Social Work*, Vol 33 (7) pp.921-942

Sharp, M. and Danbury, H. (1999) *The Management of Failing DipSW Students - Activities and Exercises to Prepare Practice Teachers for Work with Failing Students,* Aldershot, Ashgate.

Social Work Reform Board (2010) *Building a safe and confident future: One year on - Progress report from the Social Work Reform Board,* London, Department of Education, accessed 23/5/12 *https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00601-2010*

TOPSS (2002) National Occupational Standards for Social Work. Leeds, Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services (TOPPS).

Urwin, C., Van Soest, D. & Kretzscher, J. A. (2006) Key Principles for Developing Gatekeeping Standards for Working with Students with Problems. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work,* 26, (1), pp.163-180.

Vacha-Haase, T., Davenport D. S. and Kerewsky, S. D. (2004) Problematic Students: Gatekeeping Practices of Academic Professional Psychology

Programs. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35 (2)**,** pp.115-122.

Villa, F. (1991) *Social Work Education. Un confronto internazionale tra esigenze e modelli di formazione per il Servizio Sociale*. Vita e Pensiero, Milano

Villa F. (2002) *Dimensioni di Servizio Sociale*. Vita e Pensiero, Milano

Walker, J., McCarthy, P., Morgan, W. and Timms, N. (1995) In Pursuit of Quality: Improving Practice Teaching in Social Work, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Relate Centre for Family Studies, Newcastle Upon Tyne

Webb, S. A. (2006) *Social Work in a Risk Society.* Basingstoke, Palgrave

White, V. And Harris, J. (2007) Management in Lymberry, M, and Postle, K. (Eds) *Social Work – A Companion to Learning*, London, Sage