

In Praise of Practice Teaching

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Biography:

Ruth Murray worked as a social worker in Adoption until 2001, when she moved to the Department of Applied Social Studies in UCC. Initially, Ruth worked as a Tutor and long-arm supervisor on the Masters in Social Work Course, until she became Fieldwork Coordinator in 2003. Ruth retired in December 2018.

One of my own placements while training to be a social worker was in Adoption. I mention that as from my experience and anecdotally from the many social workers I meet, especially those on the Postgraduate Diploma in Advanced Fieldwork Practice and Supervision (Social Work), they tell me that they have never forgotten the experience of having been on placement when they were social work students. Social workers have said they might not recall some of the content/subject matter taught to them as students but invariably they recall their student placements with great clarity. It is not uncommon for these placements to lead to employment and/or a lifelong interest in specific areas of social work. This was my experience with my placement in Adoption. Janine Buck, in her article in the *Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning* 7(1) 2006-2007 wrote that 'practice learning is the cornerstone of social work education, and the experience that is most likely to be remembered post-qualification' (p12).

The significance of placements to social work students cannot be underestimated due to its importance for the personal and professional development of students. We all know it is an intrinsic part of their training, not least because students cannot qualify if they do not succeed on placement. Placements offer the students the opportunity for reflection and reflexivity on their emerging professional selves. Being on placement and working collaboratively with an experienced social worker facilitates this process. I cannot overstate the key role that the practice teacher plays in this regard as he/she will model good professional practice, act as mentor, advisor and "critical companion" in this learning journey. The placements also afford them the opportunity to apply academic and theoretical learning to real-life situations.

Mark Doel in his book 'Social Work Placements, A Traveller's Guide', outlines four functions of practice teaching. These are: Education, Support, Management and Assessment. He maintains that 'good supervision is the skilful integration' of all four of these (p102). As the goal of a social work placement is to test whether the student has developed social work knowledge, values and skills that equip him/her for the world of social work after graduation, the supervisor makes a judgement about the student's suitability to practice in the future. The Practice Teacher is the assessor and may engage other colleagues also, who may take the student to meetings, on home visits, MDT meetings, and so on. Doel also emphasises that 'supervision is not counselling, and any serious personal problems should be addressed outside supervision'. I would concur with this and students who experience personal problems are advised to liaise with the student counselling service available to them at the University.

Despite the ever-increasing demands being put on social work services, many social workers take students on placements. This commitment to our profession is admirable. It must be acknowledged that without the goodwill of the practice teachers professional social work courses could not operate. The insights and feedback of social workers/practice teachers supervising students is invaluable to the School of Applied Social Studies, because this feedback loop strengthens our understanding of current and arising issues in professional practice.

The feedback from practice teachers who have had students is mainly very positive; some examples of this is exemplified by the following:

'Having a student is a good revision of your own training and the theoretical base of what we do.'

'I had gained so much experience over the years, it might have become lost if I had not shared it.'

'I practice taught for my own professional development and the experience of supervising someone. I also was able to show my Principal Social Worker I was capable of the extra responsibility.'

'I was motivated to practice teach to provide a student social worker with good learning opportunities, to provide them with the experience to help them develop their skills and identify their future leaning needs.'

'I wanted to help students develop the capacity for reflection and self-awareness and pass on these values to future social work students.'

These social workers were also asked were there benefits to their career development?

One social worker commented that: *'at multi-disciplinary meetings, the skills I learnt have enabled me to help other clinicians to take a moment longer in reflection before making final decisions about drawing up treatment plans or closing off cases'*. Another said that *'taking a student is extra work, but is rewarding, especially as you see the student grow and develop over the course of the placement.'*

When asked for suggestions that they would put forward to someone who was thinking about supervising a student, they offered the following advice:

'Do not overlook the importance of a good and detailed placement contract with the student. I would also suggest a Practice Teacher keep a learning journal to help reflect on their own experiences. Being familiar with the Kolb cycle, and Morrison's supervision model, is also helpful.'

'Try to help develop the capacity in the student for reflection and self-awareness. Having had two very committed, skilled and reflective Practice Teachers as a student inspired and motivated me to practice teach. Therefore, I try to create an environment where a student can learn from experience and make mistakes. The ability to give critical feedback without the student feeling he/she had done something seriously wrong, is very important.'

Points to consider for best practice when considering supervising a student in the future:

Prior to the pre-placement meeting with the student, Practice Teachers should take a good look at the student's CV. This CV gives an indication of the student's previous life experience, including any voluntary and paid employment, and any other qualities and skills they say they have. The CV should also highlight the student's gaps in knowledge and hoped-for learning experiences for this coming placement. Having a conversation about what is on the CV is then helpful before the placement begins. A useful question is to ask then of the student is: *'is there anything I should know before the placement begins?'* These could be matters like: has the student dyslexia and/or writing difficulties,

illnesses, child care commitments, caring responsibilities for older relatives or any other possible personal issues relevant that the Practice Teacher should know about.

Finally, if you are thinking of supervising a student for the first time, it is advisable at the outset, to have the go-ahead from your Senior/Principal and try to go on a training/preparation course. If you work with people who have supervised before, talk to them for advice and get suggestions. You can also consider sharing a student with a colleague. Remember, you had to go on placement twice yourself when training. You are in the best position to give back to the profession, by offering a social work student the opportunity to learn and develop. "It is part of the gate-keeping process that ensures that service users can feel confident that their social worker has been rigorously educated, trained and tested". (Doel, 2010). I sincerely thank all the social workers who have taken students on placement heretofore, and I would like to encourage those of you who are considering taking a student on placement to take the plunge. Your professionalism, practice experience and corporate knowledge is one of the most valuable learning resources available to trainee social workers.

References

Doel, M. (2010) *Social Work Placements: A Traveller's Guide* London Routledge

Buck, J. *Social Work Placements: A student perspective, Journal of Practice Teaching & Learning* 7(1) 2006-7, pp6-12 Whiting and Birch