

BOOK REVIEW

Supporting Struggling Students on Placement: A Practical Guide

Jo Finch
Policy Press, Bristol, UK 2017
ISBN: 978-1-4473-2873-5, pp.133, Paperback. NZD\$20.00.

I was drawn to read and review this book through the title, *Supporting Struggling Students on Placements: A Practical Guide*, as the challenges that emerge in placements seem to be common to a number of different settings. Having been involved in New Zealand field education as a university placement co-ordinator for seven years, it is always helpful to add ideas and knowledge from people working in related areas in other countries.

The book sets out to offer practical direction for the support of students on placement. The first chapter is region-specific, relating to the United Kingdom setting and giving an overview of the development of social work training. This set the scene for the ongoing chapters which were succinctly summarised in the introduction. While the stage setting in the first chapter was not specifically relevant to the Australasian region, there was an encouragement to reflect on the background for our own social work training and the implications of this context for student struggles.

While the book was promoted as being designed for teachers, assessors and supervisors, in the main I found the writing faced towards the field educator (who, in the United Kingdom, is known as the practice educator). This is not a negative, as it encouraged me to put myself firmly in their shoes. It does, however, leave space for future writing for the needs of the university placement coordinator as we have in Australasia, as I believe there are aspects of this role that need further examining relative to supporting struggling students.

I really liked the clear format of the chapters which proceeded logically from section to section. This helped the reader to consider, in a staircased fashion, the typical scenarios that emerge with students on placement. I particularly liked the practical pieces interspersed throughout the book that gave considered thought to common dilemmas that arise in field education; these were facilitated by the use of reflective exercises.

I found the author approached the various challenges of working with struggling students in an even-handed and balanced manner. For example, in Chapter 2 Finch outlined a trait approach to diagnosing student difficulties, but also highlighted the limitations of this

approach as a caution against a “one size fits all” assessment of a situation. The following chapter came to grips with the emotional impact of working with a struggling student. This chapter is an important point for self-examination and aids the field/practice educator in cultivating a more objective and developmental approach to supporting and teaching the student. This segues nicely into Chapter 4 with assessment strategies giving a strong framework that encouraged a positive approach to the challenges outlined. In this chapter, attention is given to the timeliness of an intervention and is, in my view, at the heart of many of the issues that arise in the placement setting. The author guides the reader in confronting the potential barriers to having these conversations early on and encourages the reader to develop a strategic plan for working alongside the student to target areas of concern. I found this chapter had numerous useful resources and reflective exploratory questions that set the reader up well for preparing themselves for such challenges.

One area that I believe could have been explored more is the potential that sits with a solid collaborative relationship with the university, the placement agency and field/practice educator. In Chapter 5, while the focus is “Working constructively with key stakeholders in social work education,” the tone tends more towards the negative aspects of stakeholder relationships. This chapter finished on a more constructive note with the author promoting a critically reflective stance on how these tensions can be worked through. From my own experience, I would venture to say that this relationship is key for working with a struggling student and can be the difference in whether the field/practice educator feels the confidence to make the required call (whether it is a fail or a pass grade) is backed by the knowledge that they are supported by the university. This relationship starts at the beginning of the placement negotiation, prior to the student arriving on placement, where there can be a richness of relational interaction built between the university field education coordinator and the field/practice educator that provides a secure and safe environment for the student arriving on placement. The emphasis in this chapter is however, more upon the placement after it is under way rather on than the preparation that precedes it.

The concluding chapter helpfully collates 15 steps to working with struggling students on placement, a fitting and useful way to end, leaving the reader with a practical, easy reference and checklist for holding themselves to account for the serious work of developing and working with social work students who may be struggling on placement. It gives the field/practice educator the opportunity to pause and consider, pull back and objectively examine the key aspects at hand and hopefully lead to decision making that both develops the student towards competent practice and ensures that they enter the workforce “fit and proper.” This book is a helpful and thought-provoking read, giving the reader opportunities to reflect and develop their skills in supporting their students on placement.

Jenny Hare

Professional Teaching Fellow,
Practice Learning Team,
University of Auckland
j.hare@auckland.ac.nz