

# Students' suitability for social work: Developing a framework for field education

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## **ABSTRACT**

Social work field education is a path of evaluating student suitability for the social work profession. This evaluation relies heavily on the field educator's practice framework and interpretation of the professional standards of social work. The variable nature of this framework to guide evaluation can be problematic in providing guidance to field educators and students when problems emerge relating to the student's conduct. This article presents an approach for discussing suitability and un-suitability based on the authors' work with field educators.

The authors ran workshops with field educators exploring student suitability and unsuitability for social work. Based on this work they developed a model defining those terms and sought and integrated feedback from field educators, further refining the model that is presented here. Key considerations in determining suitability are a student's willingness and ability to critically reflect on and address identified concerns. Assessing suitability for social work is presented as a joint endeavour of students, field educators and academic liaison people as key stakeholders that is steeped in professional values, ethics and standards.

**Keywords:** *Field Education; Supervisors; Social Work Students; Suitability; Social Work Education*

## INTRODUCTION

This article explores issues relating to student suitability for social work practice arising within the compulsory field education component of the social work degree in Australia. A student's performance in field education is a key indicator of students' suitability for entry to the profession of social work (Homonoff, 2008). The article was motivated by a shared concern, between field education academics and social work field educators in North Queensland, about a lack of consistency, clarity and equity in responding to student suitability for future practice whilst a student is undertaking field education. It explores the concept and assessment of student suitability for social work practice by examining the field education context, reviewing current practices and sharing the development of a framework arising out of educative workshops involving field educators and field education academics. These workshops underscored the importance of addressing student suitability for practice during field education, by focussing on the consequences of not addressing the issue prior to graduation. Workshop participants and field education academic staff collaboratively explored how 'suitability' and 'unsuitability' may be defined. Consequently, a model to define suitability and unsuitability was developed by the field education academic staff and a holistic approach to addressing concerns proposed. While terms such as models, approaches and frameworks can be used interchangeably in the literature, the use of the term model here is reflective of Trevithick's (2011) discussion, bringing a lower level order to information and focusing on showing the relationship between elements. The authors considered how the definitions of suitability and unsuitability may assist to address conceptualising and assessing suitability by taking into account their own knowledge and experiences, the field educators' expertise and the literature. A survey has been implemented with field educators to seek feedback on the model. This article discusses concerns about suitability and assessing suitability and presents the model.

## CONTEXT

### **Social work education**

Australian Universities are able to offer a Bachelor of Social Work [BSW] and a Master of Social Work (Professional Qualifying) [MSW-PQ] under guidelines set by the Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW] (2012a). The accredited study load for a BSW degree is four years of full-time study and two years of full-time study for a MSW-PQ degree including a total of 1000 placement hours over two or more placements in either of the degrees (AASW, 2012a). Each social work program is required to have an academic field education unit coordinator who oversees the field education program and ensures the compliance of the field education program with professional standards and Australian Qualifications Framework [AQF] requirements (AQF, 2016; AASW, 2017). University field education staff organise student placements and social work programs are required to appoint a staff member as the academic liaison for each placement; these maintain an overview of the placement, input in learning goals and assessment processes and respond to concerns and issues (AASW, 2017). Social work programs are required to provide resources, training and support to field educators and ensure that the practice experience of the student is integrated with theoretical social work knowledge (AASW, 2017). Social welfare organisations provide the day to day support, resources and tasks for the student placement and also

generally provide the qualified social worker who acts as a field educator. If not, a qualified social worker is appointed externally to act as the field educator (Zuchowski, 2013).

The field placement is a part of the social work course that is highly anticipated by students. Students appreciate the opportunity to participate in organisations, finally putting their theoretical knowledge to the practice test and develop self-reflective knowledge for professional social work practice (Greeno, Ting & Wade, 2016). Students have identified field education as the single most important factor of social work education (Wayne, Bogo & Raskin 2010).

From the profession's perspective, placement may be seen as the "profession's gatekeeper", an experience where performance difficulties, that might not become evident during the academic studies, emerge in the practice context (Razack, 2000). Razack argued that field education is '... the place where significant issues pertaining to students' abilities and competencies for professional practice become evident' (2000, p.196). Professional and institutional expectations of students' active engagement in field education experiences are high and field education is often a twofold experience for students, where students undertake significant professional learning, however also experience associated stress emerging from integrating placement and life responsibilities and being assessed against their performance (Maidment, 2003, 2006).

The great majority of students do well in field education and develop appropriate social work practice in line with professional expectations. However, on occasion some students do not do well, and a significant proportion of these deem themselves unsuitable for social work practice and/or are deemed unsuitable by other stakeholders. The reasons for this are manifold and relate to the values, cognitive and affective skills necessary for practice which have not been thoroughly tested earlier in the course. Assessing students in the practice context is challenging for field educators, academic liaison people and students and has raised questions around current practices of assessing students' suitability for placement and the profession.

### **Social work practice**

The student field education experience is influenced by the social work practice context. Economic, social and political changes that shape social work practice and social work practitioners, include large workloads, limited resources, increased measurements and accountabilities, and the impact of changing technologies (Lager & Robbins, 2004; Chenoweth, 2012). Further, neo-liberal market principles that frame the social work practice environment put strain on social workers in practice (Agllias, 2010). Importantly for this discussion, this practice context sees field educators supervising students on placement in increasingly restrictive settings without additional remuneration/compensation (Wayne et al., 2006). This can lead to a reduction in the availability of supervision and support for students and/or a focus on students as an option to meet staffing shortfalls, which can change the context and expectations for assessing students' performance on placement.

### **The student body**

The social work student body has diversified over recent years, including increasing numbers of students with family responsibilities, needing to earn an income (Wayne et al.,

2006). Students engaged in placements while continuing to juggle family and employment related responsibilities, face significant pressure (Buck, Bradley, Robb, & Kirzner, 2012).

There are also increasing numbers of students experiencing serious psycho-social problems (Homonoff, 2008). Lager and Robbins (2004) observed that these students may perform well academically, but then encounter difficulties in field education (Lager & Robbins, 2004). The authors pointed out that this can lead to increased complexities in the gate keeping role of field education, where the field educator may be placed in a position to supervise and support an academically well-versed student, who may not cope well emotionally in the placement (Lager & Robbins, 2004). Similar complexities can arise where placement triggers past emotional issues for some students who choose the social work profession because they themselves have gone through traumatic times. Other challenges include those arising for mature aged students, a significant proportion of the social work student cohort, such as integrating experience and skills, acknowledging different learning styles, working collaboratively and making connection with new learning (Razack, 2000).

The social work students' understanding of themselves as students is also changing as university funding structures change, where students see themselves as customers of the tertiary education system in a neo-liberal context, and are increasingly demanding specific types of placement experiences (Buck et al., 2012). Coupled with limitations in regards to part-time employment, family responsibilities and preferences for specific geographical areas, it can be difficult to 'satisfy' students' expectations for field education (Buck et al. 2012).

### **Assessment in field education**

Consistent with our experience, Razack (2000) outlined that failing students in a placement is complicated and uncommon. Finch (2014) highlighted that field educators needed to be supported in failing a student, and that tensions exist for both field education staff and academic liaison people '...between the need to support and protect the student, and ensure due process occurs' resulting in less than transparent practice at times (2014, p.14). In the context of such complexities Agllias (2010) suggested that social work field educators may actually shelter students on placement.

The difficulties for field educators in failing students can be both conceptual and emotional (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Finch & Poletti, 2014) despite clear motivating factors of why a student should fail a placement. Motivating factors for failing students include protecting standards, and thus protecting professional integrity and safeguarding clients (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Finch & Poletti, 2014). Conceptually it can be difficult to locate the problem and clearly identify the issue of concern (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010). Emotionally, failing students can impact the field educators' own sense of professional identity, and be internalised as a failing of their own (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Finch & Poletti, 2014). Field educators may also be dealing with concerns for the student's wellbeing (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010).

Indeed, clear guidelines and processes have been identified as important to assess a student's suitability for practice and guard professional integrity (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). Both

formative and summative assessment processes are employed in social work field education. Formative assessment involves an ongoing process of feedback between the field educator and student typically to assist students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in order to improve their learning. Formative feedback can facilitate students' insight into their behaviour and progression through field education (Greeno et al., 2016). However, this is highly variable in practice. Successful continuing formative assessment requires a sound teaching/learning relationship between student and field educator. This entails honest, open communication, mutual respect and the field educator's ability to give balanced, constructive feedback (Hughes & Hycox, 2000, p. 87) over the whole of the placement. Qualified social workers/field educators possess these skills to varying degrees. Hughes and Hycox (2000) pointed out that at times it is difficult for supervisors to provide clear formative assessment feedback on students' performance due to the blurring of the roles of a field educator (supportive, administrative, educative and managing), and a general human service orientation of not finding faults, reflected in strengths based approaches to social work practice. They note that personalities of the parties involved can also impact on the supervisory relationship and associated assessment.

Summative assessment is used to evaluate student learning at key points over the course of the subject (commonly at the mid and end points) by comparing performance against set standards or benchmarks. Significant challenges in relation to summative assessment in social work field education include achieving clarity in terms of expected benchmarks or standards and consistency in assessing against those. There are various aspects of students' performance that may be measured including application of their skills, values and knowledge to practice. Assessment may involve self, supervisor and/or client assessment of student performance and/or it may be competency based to evaluate the students' growth and achievement (Tapp, Macke & McLendon, 2012).

Students' suitability concerns can arise in relation to both formative and summative assessments undertaken in field education. Frameworks for assessing suitability are often ambiguous or non-existent and where they exist, they may be experienced as a subjective rather than objective assessment tool by the students (Ayasse, 2016). Where attempts are made to reduce potential subjectivity and students are rated purely against competencies it can be difficult for field educators, '...who may view themselves as teachers and models for reflective practice rather than as judgmental and deficit focused raters of students' behavior' (Ayasse, 2016, p.6).

### **Strategies to support students' development in field education**

The field educator- student relationship is identified as crucial to the success of field education (Ornstein & Moses, 2010). The literature suggests effective field educator – student relationships require supportive practice environments and need to recognise the uniqueness of the individuals involved, take a collaborative partnership approach, have clearly articulated expectations and involve ongoing structured formal feedback on students' work (Baretti, 2009; Beddoe, Ackroyd, Chinnery & Appleton, 2011). The impact of a supportive practice environment on student development during field education, should not be underestimated.

Building the supervisory relationship can be achieved through 'appropriate self-disclosure; establishing an understanding of each other; the exploration of issues of professional

identity and learning' and 'mutual expectations about the purpose of the supervision relationship' (Beddoe, 2000, p.53). Irwin (2006) highlighted the significance of clarifying roles and responsibilities and specifying mechanisms for feedback and evaluation and recommended the development of a supervision contract to acknowledge the importance and validity of supervision for professional practice.

Another important supervisory tool is structured observation of students' work to facilitate the integration of theory into practice and ongoing critical reflection (Maidment, 2000). Maidment (2000) suggested three phases for structured observation of students' practice. Phase one entails joint planning of the skills and processes to be demonstrated and how they are to be evaluated (Maidment, 2000). Phase two is the actual observation of practice and in phase three the supervisor and student jointly evaluate the work of the student (Maidment, 2000).

### **Suitability for practice**

Discussion on students' suitability for practice focuses heavily on competencies and skills, rather than critical reflection and praxis which are equally important (Ledwith, 2001). Barlow et al. (2003) explored suitability policies of Canadian universities and found a range of approaches focused on non-academic behaviours and personal factors. Most of these programs focus on unsuitable behaviours such as illegal or unethical behaviour, and personal factors such as poor judgement or persistent substance abuse (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). A few programs highlighted other suitability behaviours such as '...a belief in the values and goals of the profession...The ability to recognise one's own limitations...A willingness to serve the public, client, or patient and place them before oneself' (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 158).

Suitability policies can be seen as problematic for social work because principles of social justice and respect for diversity (AASW, 2013) challenge a mainstream framework of suitability. The process of establishing suitability policies should involve '...identifying of specific criteria, determining how to avoid punishing 'difference', respecting fundamental human rights, and defining a just and fair process that considers the student, the profession, and the future cohort of clients' (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 163). The challenge is to develop a framework that includes different cultures, different experiences and different knowledges (Pletti & Anka, 2013; Tam, Coleman & Boey, 2012).

Concerns for universities seeking to adopt a suitability evaluation process include the fear of retribution from students evaluated negatively (Tam, Coleman & Boey, 2012), the commitment of the education process to transform students to become suitable for practice (Barlow & Coleman, 2003) and a lack of clarity on the definition of suitability from the perspective of students (Pletti & Anka, 2013) or evaluators (Barlow & Coleman, 2003).

### **Sharing Practice Wisdom – Engaging with the field educators**

In 2014 the university field education team of James Cook University ran workshops with field educators on the topic 'social work student suitability for practice'. The workshops arose out of feedback from the field that discussion and guidance around suitability needed to be developed further. In total, 18 field educators attended the workshops across three locations in North Queensland.

The workshops were delivered with the understanding that the field educators have a wealth of knowledge and practice wisdom and that sharing understandings would facilitate further growth for social work educators and practitioners (Madsen, 2009; Ayasse, 2016). It was acknowledged that building strong connections with the social work field can encourage the ongoing exchange of ideas and thoughts, constructive discussion and research that can then inform education practice. The aim of the workshops was to identify and explore general concerns about a lack of clearly established frameworks for assessing student suitability for the profession.

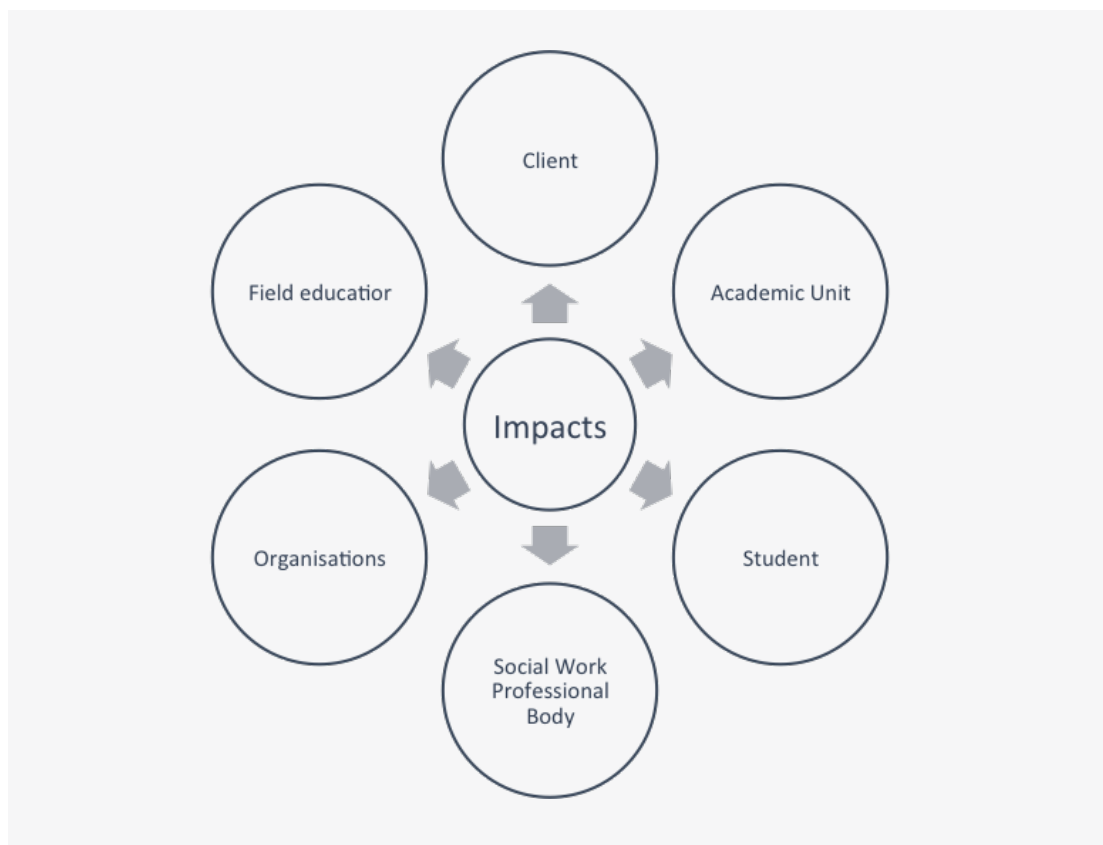
Large and small group discussions explored a number of themes. The field education staff members facilitated the workshops. A solution focused framework was utilised to develop and deliver the workshops, based on partnership, curiosity, believing in possibilities, valuing the resourcefulness of our partners in the field, and engaging in empowering processes (Madsen, 2009). The key questions explored in the workshops centred on what would be possible consequences of not addressing student suitability for practicing social work and how could suitability and unsuitability be defined.

Based on the discussions with the field educators, and further reflections and discussions within the field education team the authors developed four diagrams (see figures 1 to 4) to commence the development of a framework for considering suitability and unsuitability and facilitate further exploration of the topic at subsequent workshops. Human ethics was sought and granted by James Cook University to seek feedback from field educators about the usefulness of the model.

An anonymous survey link was successfully sent to 337 field educators associated with James Cook University via the university's administration team. The survey sought feedback in regards to the model presented in figure 3 'Model for Defining Unsuitability' and the usefulness for practice. Questions explored whether respondents had used a framework for assessing suitability, whether they thought the presented model was useful and suggestions for improvements. In all 38 surveys were submitted, an 11% response rate. The responses were used to fine-tune the model that is presented in figure 3 below. One of the changes from the feedback included further consideration of the context of the placement, i.e. not just a focus on the student. This feedback of exploring the contextual setting of the placement further and other comments that suggested a clearer emphasis of suitability rather than unsuitability will be used to further develop figure 2 'Defining Suitability' in the future.

### **Building on practice wisdom: defining suitability and unsuitability**

The diagrams about suitability and unsuitability were developed by the field education staff team based on their work with field educators, engagement with colleagues, research and critical reflections, relating to (i) the consequences of not addressing student suitability for social work practice (ii) definitions of suitability and (iii) definitions of unsuitability. The summary of this work is presented below in a series of figures developed by the authors.

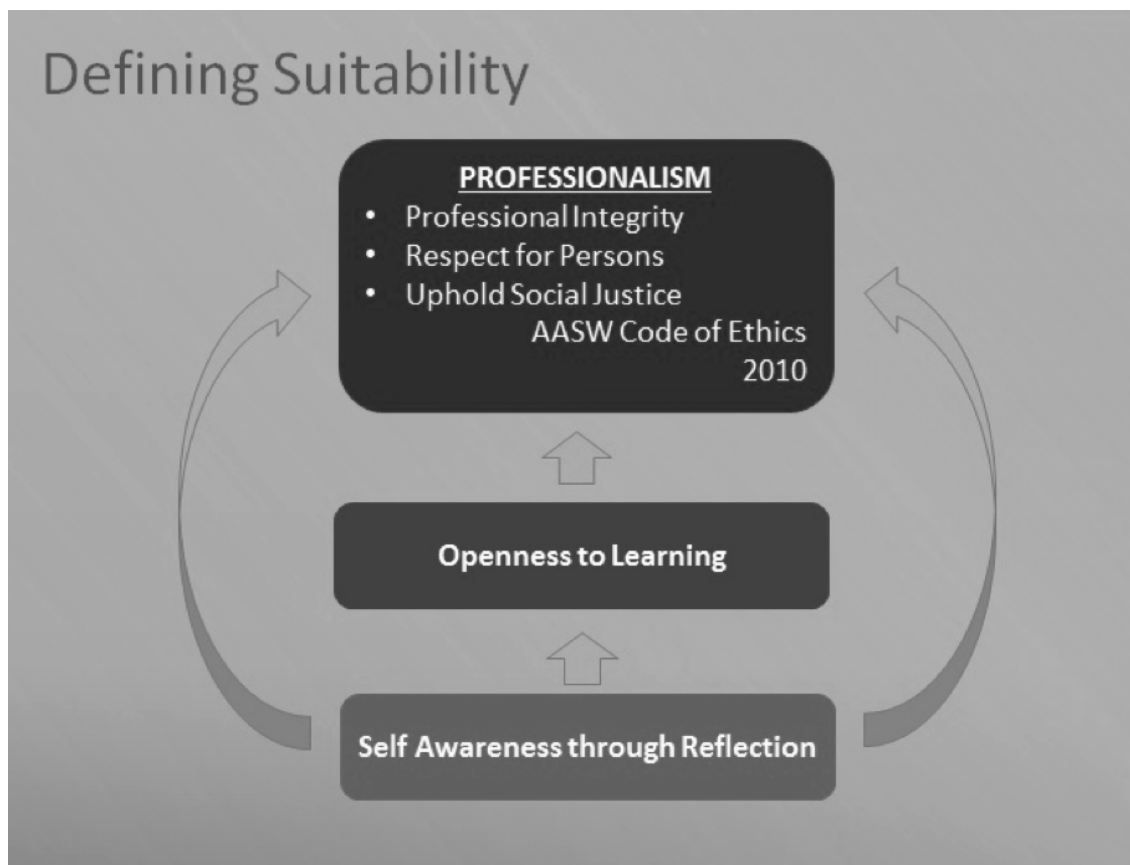


**Figure 1.** Not addressing suitability issues impacts key stakeholders

Figure 1 highlights the impacts of not addressing student suitability. Although it was acknowledged that student suitability could be addressed throughout the degree, there are impacts of not addressing suitability within the field education context. Negative impacts on key social work education stakeholders include the social work profession body (professional integrity), the social work academic unit (education provider), field educators, organisations, students and clients. The safety of the client is principal when addressing any unsuitability traits demonstrated by the student.

An initial consequence of not addressing suitability issues on placement is 'heightened stress levels' for both students and field educator. The cause of stress can be varied and dependent on the context. This often leads to ethical dilemmas for field educators faced with tensions between the role of educator/evaluator and that of professional social worker working with principles of social justice and respect for diversity (AASW, 2013). In speaking with field educators, field education staff identified that field educators felt compromised where they saw that students' current circumstances may be the potential cause of their inability to demonstrate suitability for the profession at that moment in time. At the same time, there seemed to be concern that the reputations of organisations and universities could be 'tarnished' if they were associated with 'passing' unsuitable social work practice among students. Ultimately, the potential adverse effect on the credibility of the social work profession if 'unsuitable' students were transitioning into the social work profession was a major concern.





**Figure 2.** Defining Suitability

Figure 2 summarises initial reflections on suitability that can be used to define suitability. Key indicators that guide field educators' sense of social work professional identity are reflective of the professional values and ethics and include professional integrity, respect for persons and upholding social justice (AASW, 2010). Students deemed suitable for the profession demonstrated commitment to these indicators.

Self-awareness and reflective practice were critical to developing and upholding these values in practice for both practitioners and students. Self-awareness could be developed with reflective practice and demonstrated by showing a capacity for non-judgemental, compassionate and empathic practice and by identifying their own challenges within practice. Importantly, students need to demonstrate an openness to learning on placement, by for example being open to feedback, taking the initiative around their own learning experience and respecting colleagues' diversity in practice.

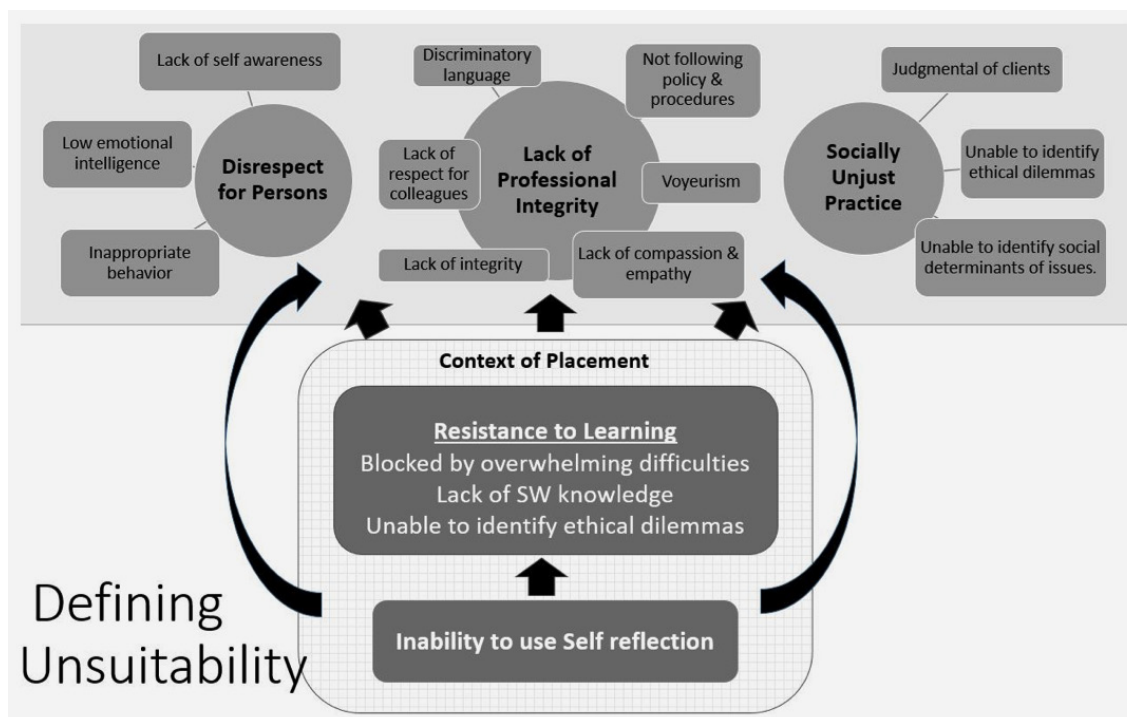


Figure 3. Defining Unsuitability

Figure 3 presents a model for defining unsuitability for practice that was developed from the field education team's work with field educators and that was then explored with field educators via the survey. Students' inability to demonstrate key values, skills and knowledge required for practice in an acknowledged learning and reflective context is a key consideration when discussing suitability. It seems that this was often displayed by a lack of professionalism, showing disrespect for others (clients or colleagues) and delivering socially unjust practice.

It is acknowledged that each student's experience and response to issues is individual and could, in most cases, be overcome to reach suitability. The decisive factor in determining unsuitability is a student's lack of willingness or ability to learn and/or develop self-awareness about the identified issues of concern through reflection. The physical, social and emotional wellbeing of the student is identified as a major influence on a student's behaviour and ability to engage with learning on placement.

Overall, four areas that indicated that a student might not be suitable for social work practice were identified as: lack of professional integrity, disrespect for persons, socially unjust practice and resistance to learning. It became evident that challenging behaviours in students are linked to a lack of adherence to key values of the profession and a resistance to learn and/or use self-reflection to develop their professional identity. Participants were in agreement that demonstrated commitment to social work values (AASW, 2010) and the process of critical reflection were critical to the practice of social work. Field educators were challenged by the tension between assessment of student suitability for social work practice and the social work principle of empowerment. Discussion emphasized that the barriers to learning and personal growth for some students could be seen as contextual and time limited.

Very few survey respondents had used the model depicted in figure 3, but some identified that naming behaviours can have positive results:

*'We have incidences where we have had to name these behaviours with students and discussed with positive results'*

Respondents shared that they saw the usefulness in the model as a visual aid, a tool they could use with the students prior to placement, for placement assessment or when problems arise:

*'Discussion with student of strengths and areas of concern'*

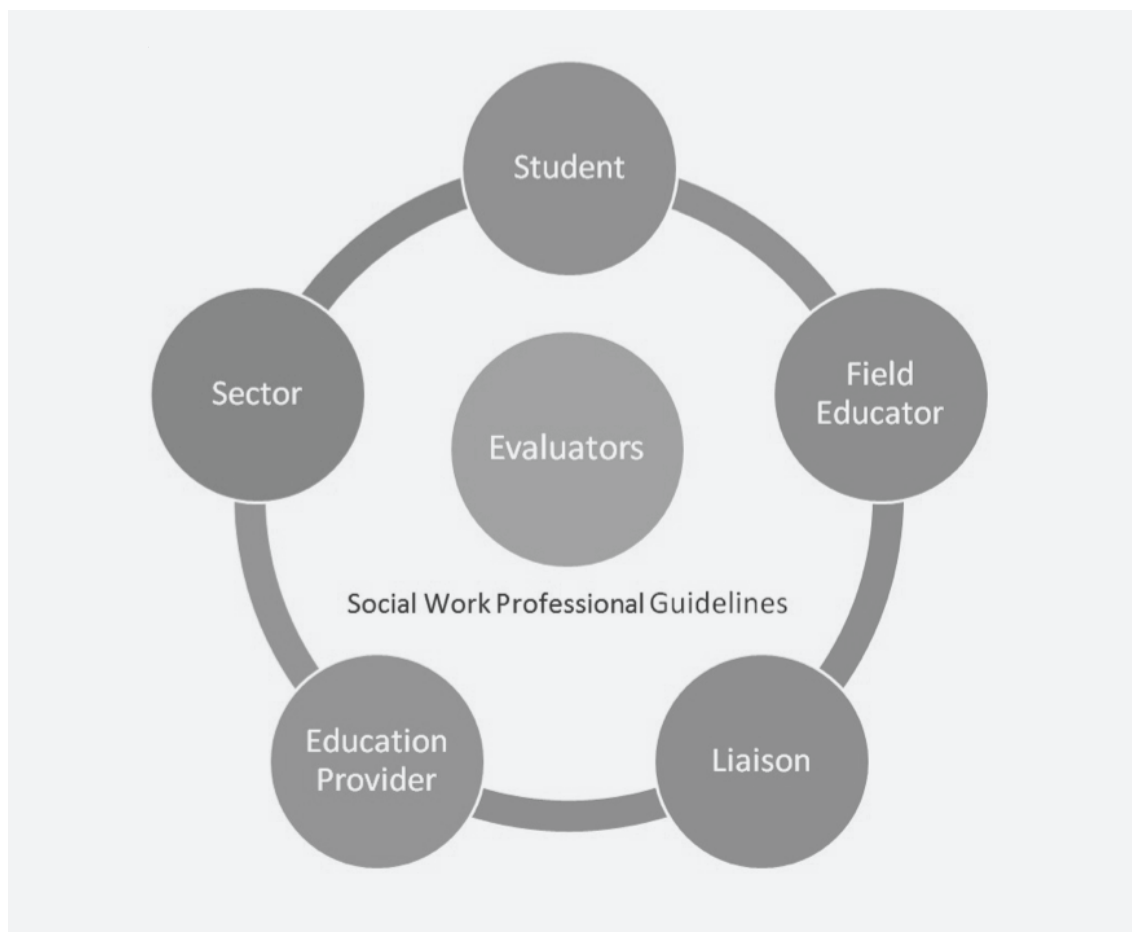
*'...look if they fit into this prior to offering placement....'*

*'I would use it to review learning goals at mid placement review'*

The greatest challenge and concern is when students do not engage in their learning or were unable to self-reflect. Managing students that are assessed as having an inability to self-reflect is difficult. Working with students that have this skill allows field educators to work 'with' the student in overcoming challenges on placement. Whereas, students' lack of reflection on 'self' has the obvious consequence that they do not have the awareness of self to be able to see the issue. Figure 4 below, looks at field educators, students, academic liaison staff and the agency working jointly to gather evidence and develop strategies particularly in situations where students are struggling with reflections on self.

Ambiguity can arise when a student's assessment of their reflective process and a willingness to learn is in conflict with that of the field educator. Guiding principles to support an evaluation in this situation can be found in the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010) and the Practice Standards (AASW, 2013). Respondents also sought to ensure that the evaluation process was collaborative, involving relevant stakeholders identified in Figure 4.

Where students demonstrate continuing difficulties with respect to learning or reflection, options may exist for students to enter an alternative learning environment to provide the opportunity to further explore, develop and demonstrate these capacities. However, before such an alternative opportunity is offered, students ought to satisfactorily complete a reflective exercise on issues such as their contribution to learning, their understanding of the field educator's assessment to date and strategies to address identified issues in a potential future placement.



**Figure 4.** A way forward: An holistic approach to the challenges

Considering the discussion and the literature it is important that a collaborative approach to gatekeeping for the profession is maintained. Students, field educators, placement academic liaison people and/or field education staff/ education providers and the social welfare sector, as the evaluators of the placement more broadly, need to mutually support each other in this collaborative approach.

A number of comments from survey respondents indicated the appreciation of a structure to identify issues:

*'Gives me some structure to identify what might be the blocks- if they arise'*

Through the processes of self-reflection and openness to learning, social work students have the potential to develop a professional identity that is congruent with AASW Code of Ethics (2010). These processes need to commence long before the field education experience in the degree, and need to be directed at assisting students to develop a sense of professional integrity, respect for persons and an ability to uphold social justice.

This framework for suitability utilises and values both demonstrable skills and knowledge alongside the social work professional values and principles which Tam, Coleman and Boey (2012) stress should be intertwined and of equal importance. Embedding the use of self-reflection within the framework addresses the challenge of providing a framework that is inclusive of different cultures, different experiences and different knowledges (Pletti &

Anka, 2013; Tam et al., 2012). Importantly, students' ability to reflect on self and their ability to work within the values of the profession needs to be guided, developed and assessed prior to practice learning. Academic staff, the sector, professional bodies and reference groups as well as clients can all feed into this in the education program.

## **DISCUSSION**

Field educators need support when issues around use of self, lack of reflection and/or lack of willingness or ability to learn are emerging. The way forward requires joint engagement in evaluation, assessment and guidance. Failing students can be costly for the student, the sector and the education provider, the alternative of not failing them when they are performing poorly can be detrimental for clients, the profession and students themselves. Transparent and supportive processes are important (Finch, 2014), utilising a framework that clearly links practice suitability with professional values, critical reflection and an openness to learning, in keeping with the overall professional commitment to ongoing learning and professional development (AASW, 2013). Potentially, concerns about professional integrity are influenced by current AASW consideration and debate in relation to the issue of registration (Hancock, 2016) and professional recognition within the Allied Health sector and market systems (Healy, 2004).

A number of important points emerged from the exploration of suitability and unsuitability. First, not addressing student suitability issues has potential consequences for clients, the service sector, the education provider and the profession. Field educators are particularly concerned about these possible repercussions. Secondly, while there may be specific behaviours that could indicate that students are unsuitable for the profession, unsuitability connects most prominently with a student's inability to critically self-reflect or engage in their learning. It is generally possible to identify specific behaviours that are not acceptable, but what is lacking was a framework for evaluating self-reflection and openness to learning. The presented suitability framework identifies self-reflection and openness to learning as key to examining students' suitability for placement and ultimately professional practice.

Students' suitability for practice is also clearly linked to their ability to demonstrate the core values of the profession in practice. For social work educators this can be explored at micro, meso and macro levels. At a micro level students need to be well prepared for field education in terms of their allegiance to professional values and ethics and a recognition of the need to continually grow and develop in this area. Field educators and students need to be skilled to build supportive, collaborative relationships that create safe spaces for difficult values related discussions. The field educator can lead this process by creating a safe, trusting environment for student supervision and assessment (Beddoe, 2000). Students, field educators and academic liaison people can use the presented suitability model to explore and assess the student's demonstration of professional values in field education. On a meso level the workshops have shown that collaborating and networking is a useful way for field educators and social work field education staff to review practice and develop models to further support and assess their students. On the macro level it is important to recognise the influence of neo-liberal environments that shape and impede social work practice, the delivery of the education program and the field education experience (Agllias, 2010; Buck

et al., 2014). Neoliberalism impacts on changes in the student body (Lager & Robbins, 2004), the context of field education delivery and supervision (Wayne et al., 2006), and work place practices (Agllias, 2010).

The contexts, as stated previously, contribute to stress in field education. Stress is inhibiting of open and respectful communication and working relationships, the basis for building a successful student-educator relationship. We noticed the lack of a framework to assess suitability, and have produced a valuable tool based on discussions with field educators. We will continue to work in collaboration with field educators in the further development and testing of this tool, as well as presenting the model to students and academic liaison people in the next phase of the research, with a view to adopting it as part of the social work field education assessment framework of James Cook University and presenting it as an applicable model for field education units elsewhere. As social workers our reflection highlights that this is not just about individual students failing to learn, grow and develop, there are meso and macro level elements that cause stress for all stakeholders and have the potential to de-rail a placement. So, there needs to be a focus on the macro level challenges and advocate for a change of the very system itself instead of trying harder and harder to make the people in it fit the changing system. While this is not the main focus of this paper we want to acknowledge the impact of the neo-liberal context on field education and include a call to review educational responses to this.

## CONCLUSION

Assessing student suitability for field education is complex and often an emotionally laden process. Based on our work with field educators we have presented a model for discussing un-suitability. In using the model, the impact of not addressing unsuitability, defining suitability and involving all key stakeholders in supporting the placement need to be considered. The work with field educators highlights that the ability for critical reflection on self, values, skills and knowledge and adherence to professional values are key to students' suitability for social work. Assessing student suitability for social work needs to be a joint endeavour by key stakeholders and importantly field educators need support when issues around use of self, lack of reflection and/or lack of willingness or ability to learn are emerging within field education.

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