

From Moth to Butterfly: Thoughts on Student Practica Supervision from Education and Practice

C. Niall McElwee

Editor, Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies and Athlone Institute of Technology, Ireland

Phil O'Reilly

Residential Child Care Worker, South Eastern Health Board, Waterford, Ireland

Susan McKenna

SocSci Consultancy, Kilkenny, Ireland

ABSTRACT: This paper summarizes four years of collegial conversations about practicum supervision in Ireland. The authors, two students and an educator, discuss the nature of supervision and its benefits and make suggestions for a collaborative approach to supervision that has the potential of added benefit.

KEY WORDS: practicum; supervision.

Dr. C. Niall McElwee is President of the Irish Association of Social Care Educators and editor of the Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies. He is Head of Department of Humanities at the Athlone Institute of Technology in Ireland and has written five books and published over 50 papers nationally and internationally. Niall has given over 100 conference papers. His Ph.D. was the first awarded in Ireland arguing specifically for a child and youth care approach to children at risk. Phil O'Reilly has just completed a B.A. Degree in Social Care at the Waterford Institute of Technology for which he received second class honours. He has worked as a front line social care practitioner in both community and residential settings and is currently working in a residential child care setting in Waterford. Susan McKenna is a graduate of social care at the Waterford Institute of Technology having obtained first class honours in her B.A. studies. She has worked in child and youth care practice in early learning, community child care and with special educational projects. She has lectured at both the Waterford Institute of Technology and the Athlone Institute of Technology's social care programmes. She is, at present, working as a consultant with SocSci Consultancy. Niall, Phil, and Susan share a strong interest in rugby and hope to continue this together over the next few decades following Munster and Ireland on their various jaunts in Ireland and abroad!

Correspondence should be directed to C. Niall McElwee, Department of Humanities, Athlone Institute of Technology, Athlone, Ireland; e-mail: nmcelwee@ait.ie.

Introduction

Practicum placements are considered to be an integral component of Irish social care programmes. College faculty and students acknowledge the changes that take place in students' worldviews during the practica experience across the various years of study. Phil and Susan (the students), between them, completed eight student practica in all areas of child and youth care as they are practiced in Ireland and agree with Gilmore (2001) that "it is as if they have suddenly come of age as workers; the theory in college now seems to fall into place; they are invigorated by the challenges they face rather than daunted by them; they seem to feel a vocational sense in doing this type of work."

In order to facilitate the transformation described by Gilmore (2001), students must be exposed to practica environments and to the process of supervision. However, what exactly is supervision and how might access to supervision be provided to students? Much has been written on this topic (see, for example, the references listed for this article), and the CYC-NET, a website devoted to Child and Youth Care, has a separate discussion site for supervisors (enter CYC-Net in any search engine, e.g. Google). Also important is that the supportive aspect of supervision has been identified as being perhaps the most important factor in good supervision (Gilmore, 2001). With these aspects of supervision in mind, we offer the following overview of supervision.

Towards an Understanding of Supervision

Leddick (2001) argues that supervision may be understood as the construction of individualized learning plans for supervisees working with clients and notes that any systematic approach to supervision constitutes a model for supervisory practice. Leddick points to both the Standards for Supervision (1990) and the Curriculum Guide for Counseling Supervision (Borders, Bernard, Dye, Fong, Henderson & Nance, 1991), which identify knowledge of models as fundamental to ethical practice such as the 'Developmental' models of supervision, 'Integrated' models (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992), 'Discrimination' models and 'Orientation-specific' models.

With the notion of models in mind, an important debate from the 1970's onwards has been concerned with the extent to which supervision needs to be maintained as an integral part of effective management (Douglas, 1990). We note that there is an emerging literature on human service supervision, but most of it is not specific to the child and youth care context in Ireland (see Forkan & McElwee, 2001; McElwee, 2001; O'Neill, 1998). We also take it as a given that any orientation towards

supervision in social care should be founded on the principles of adult learning (cf. Mezirow, 1991). Barber and Swansberg (1987) state,

Supervision is an interpersonal process in which the skilled practitioner helps a less skilled or experienced practitioner to achieve professional abilities appropriate to his role, at the same time being offered counsel and support. (p. 1)

It is our belief that practicum supervision is a process that must be seen as an active, participative partnership between the student, the college and the field practicum supervisors, offering stimulation of new learning and structured feedback on work practices.

Student practicum supervision is important because it helps to provide an effective learning experience within the practice placement environment that will complement what is taught in college and experienced in seminar role-play. In Ireland, student practicum supervision is moving toward becoming a 'discipline' in its own right and moving away from being tied to a specific counselling orientation. Moreover, it is developing theory and frameworks that separate it from counselling, while using some of the same but also quite different skills (Blocker, 1987; Bayne et al., 1996).

Whitely et al. (1996) and McElwee (2001) found that the success of a practicum placement will be greatly enhanced by the amount of prior preparation done by the college and practice supervisors with the student. Given these findings, it is possible that all too many cases in the past, students have hastily arranged their practica at the last minute and have later been bitterly disappointed that they could not get a preferred choice of practicum or the particular aspect of a placement they wanted such as experience with a particular 'client' population within a specific setting.

In a study conducted by the Centre for Social Care Research at the Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland (Doyle, O'Brien, O'Callaghan, O'Reilly, O'Shea & Reihill, 2001), all 25 students who participated in the study noted the central importance of supervision, with 21 stating "it helps to alleviate stress."¹ Participants in the study noted the space for "support and advice about your work," "gaining confidence," and "one-to-one time to talk and vent any concerns or issues" as necessary to successful supervision. Thus, supervision needs to focus not only on counselling, but also on support.

From Moth to Butterfly

It is now widely accepted that child and youth care practitioners must within the context of practice set aside a focus on personal needs and desires if they are to be truly effective helpers. It is also suggested

that many students in the area of social care and child and youth care have unresolved conscious and unconscious needs deriving from their life-experiences which will impinge on their work practice and level of engagement or, indeed, non-engagement with peers and 'clients' (Ricks, 1993; McElwee, 2001). Child and youth care practitioners are not "born" and must become or develop into practitioners over time. Jack Phelan (1990), an Instructor at Grant McEwan College in Alberta, Canada, has identified three stages that child and youth care practitioners go through during the first three years of their development as a professional.

According to Phelan (1990), early in the first phase, practitioners are overwhelmed and seek to establish pragmatic control techniques. At this stage, they are somewhat lacking in confidence. With progress through the educational programme, practitioners will display increased confidence, are more able to exert influence and are ready to commence the difficult application of therapeutic techniques. During the second phase, practitioners are able to practice what they learned both in college and through experience, demonstrate greater competence, feel more confident and appear to see themselves as competent service providers (pp. 134–135).

This is a crucial stage as Phelan (1990) argues, a stage at which practitioners can become "stuck" in their professional development and run the risk of engaging in constant repetitive interventions. Without further growth, practitioners either stay at this level of development (paraprofessional) or may begin to search for other work. In phase three, practitioners become energized by the nuances of the various messages from their clients, show an appreciation for the need for skill, knowledge and self to be integrated in practice and respect the clinical expertise necessary to work effectively (cf. Garfat, 1998). As Garfat (1998) points out, the integration experienced in phase three, especially the ability to understand self in practice, is crucial to continued reflective, effective practice. The nurturing and the experience that support the transformation from phase one to phase three described by Phelan can be provided by supervision.

During practice placements, social care students are subject to a continuous process of informal learning (Whitely et al., 1996). Supervision sessions, however, provide the more formal context for teaching and learning and demand more of the supervisor than simply being available to discuss the next step on a particular piece of work.

The authors are in agreement that the main purpose of practica should be to provide students with the opportunity to learn how to (best) practice in the social care field. However, it is necessary for students' performance to be effectively monitored and evaluated in order to check that adequate standards are being reached from colleges' perspectives as well as students' (Dessler, 1998).

Pre-Practicum Planning

It is our contention that good supervision is fostered by good planning. We therefore, suggest that before a student is placed in a practicum, a considerable amount of planning and activity should take place. Several steps need to be taken before a student is placed in a practicum setting in order to ensure and support good supervision: A suitable placement must be found, and a supervisor selected. Judgements must be made that the practicum will be able to meet the student's individualised learning needs and that the student will be acceptable to the particular placement chosen (Forkan & McElwee, 2001; Walton & Elliott, 1980). Tentative plans must be established in order to ensure that the opportunities for meeting the identified learning needs are present, so that the student may be immediately involved in learning when she commences her placement (Knapman & Morrison, 1998).

Locating a Supervisor with Relevant Qualifications

Many qualified social care practitioners see student supervision as an enrichment of the ongoing process of developing their professional skills and a logical step in professional growth and advancement (Taylor & Devine, 1993). We believe that it is of paramount importance that the student chooses a supervisor who is adequately qualified in their field. Unfortunately, in Ireland there is currently little formal recognition of the supervisor and only in-service training programmes. This lack of recognition and training results in supervision and the supervisory process being undervalued. We recommend that Ireland considers implementing programs like the one found at the University of Glasgow in Scotland which operates an Advanced Certificate in Supervising and Managing Personal and Social Services run on a part-time basis over nine months.

We (the discussants) have all experienced the social care supervisor with no qualifications in social care and believe that a practice supervisor who is a graduate of a social care programme understands the nuances of social care practice better than anyone else. A supervisor should be clear about the "child and youth care orientation" (Garfat & McElwee, 2001). Such a supervisor is generally more aware of the content of national social care programmes and demands that may be made on the student by various faculty. It is our experience that supervisors qualified in related disciplines (for example, social workers or psychiatric nurses) tend to "see" situations and judge these situations somewhat differently than those who hold social care qualifications. This has much to do with their own education and practical experiences as social workers and psychiatric nurses where the emphases are quite different from those found in child and youth care. It is our belief

that any potential supervisor of a practica student should be formally trained in supervision from a child and youth care perspective.

On Becoming a Practicum Supervisor

Perhaps the first issue we might address is why a qualified practitioner would take on a student in the first instance. It is difficult work, one is never guaranteed a suitable student and, in Ireland, social care practicum supervisors do not normally receive remuneration from their employers. Thus, the system operates in a free market of goodwill, which is, of course, inadequate. Interestingly, the peer-reviewers for this paper identified three reasons why one might supervise a practicum:

- Out of a sense of obligation and responsibility to the profession and one's own professional development
- Because one's supervisor has requested it, and
- Because it may offer some relief in terms of the normal workload.

All of these reasons, no doubt help, but are inadequate in themselves as the social care landscape becomes more complex, proceduralised and legalistic in orientation. Irish social care supervisors are now openly demanding financial remuneration for their efforts, and this is being debated at the highest levels of educational planning (HETAC, 2001). It remains to be seen what will happen in this regard.

The Supervisor Sells the Practicum

Once a practicum has been located, perhaps the next task for the practicum supervisor is to provide a 'placement prospectus.' This involves a review of 'what's on offer,' both in respect of work experiences and learning opportunities (Knapman & Morrison, 1998; Lishman, 1994). Irish students are fortunate in that, given the current social and political climate in Ireland, child and youth care programmes are desperate for staff, and, in particular, the demand is high for male students (see McElwee, 2001). Interestingly, all of the third-level colleges have experienced a significant increase in entry into year one of their social care programmes for this academic year (2001/2002).

Getting to Know Each Other

It is important that both the prospective student and practicum supervisor sit down and discuss their mutual expectations of the placement and the supervision process. The supervisor has a responsibility

to inform students whether or not they will have the same access to resources, personnel and client's files as a full-time staff member. A vital part of learning for social care students is to experience both the opportunities and constraints of working in a particular organisation. The supervisor should clearly explain how policies are formulated and expressed, how change is implemented and the various roles social care practitioners take within the organisation.

Supervision is a responsibility that demands significant preparation effort by both student and supervisor. If the placement is chosen carefully by the host college, students and their college tutors have a right to expect that a prospective supervisor will have clear, well thought-out ideas as to what is offered in the placement. Here, the colleges have a particular responsibility to ensure a quality environment, one that holds dear the emerging principles of child and youth care in Ireland.

How well the practicum supervisor has prepared beforehand will make a considerable difference to the student's start in the workplace (Pettes, 1979). An effective supervisor would inform her/his colleagues and other members of the organisation about the terms and conditions of the student's placement and inform clients that the student should be treated the same as any other staff member when it comes to boundary and other similar issues. However, it should be acknowledged that a student is not a full-time member of staff.

Student Anxiety

At this point, it is important to consider how student supervision sessions will be conducted. The student and supervisor must agree on a particular structure for the supervision sessions. A delicate balance has to be struck between too little structure and too much structure, which makes the whole practicum experience into a ritual dance (Atherton, 1986). In many cases, the supervisory relationship generates a number of anxieties for students: the anxiety of exposing their ignorance and vulnerability and also the risk of not meeting their supervisor's high expectations (Brown & Bourne, 1996). However confident students may appear, or however impressive their previous experience, the supervisor needs to be aware of the context in which the learning takes place and prepared to handle issues sensitively (Davies, 1997). We believe what is needed is a forthright sharing of attitudes, knowledge and information, which will enable the student to learn in the most unthreatened way. Students often approach practica with a sense of foreboding and are quite fearful of what might happen to them in the field and how this might be interpreted by their peers. Many horror

stories abound, and faculty often don't hear about such events until well after they have occurred and anything meaningful can be done.

Providing Opportunity

As we have stated, the main purpose of the practicum placement is to provide students with opportunities (however brief) to become involved in helping 'clients' and also to test themselves out in the role of social care practitioner (Carter et al., 1995; Forkan & McElwee, 2001). It seems to us that a key task for supervisors is to maximise the opportunities for students to learn for themselves, within the context of the particular organisational setting (Dawson, 1998; Griffin, 1999). Planning developmentally appropriate work should reflect the agreed upon learning tasks of any placement across year one, two or three of a programme. The allocation of work to a student is crucial because there may be very little or too much work for a student in certain social care placements. The supervisor needs to be aware of and agree to the areas of evaluation that the particular educational establishment has requested, so as to ensure that the student is allocated work in those areas (Morrison, 1996).

Supervision Should Be a Positive Experience: "Go Ahead, Make My Day"

For us, supervision should not be a fearful experience. It is not the role of a practicum supervisor to "bawl a student out" at every opportunity. A practicum supervisor should attempt to be positive when engaging with and assessing a student's work. Far too many of us have encountered what we will term the Robert de Niro "You looking at me?" phenomenon and the Clint Eastwood school of communication of "Go ahead, punk. Make my day!" styles of supervision.

The function of supervision is to help the student become aware of the nature of the job to be learned and to acquire knowledge and skills involved in responding to people's needs in a helpful way (Hawkins & Shohet, 1997). From previous placement experiences, we feel that it is important that the student has a positive relationship with their supervisor where at all possible (McElwee, 2001). Supervision is viewed as an essential educational process vital to the acquisition of effective therapeutic skills and is central to professional growth (Butterworth & Faugier, 1992). If there are problems in the supervisory relationship during the practicum, the student undoubtedly suffers and misses out on valuable insights and experiences that their supervisor has to offer.

Feedback

Another key responsibility of the supervisor in the supervision session is to give feedback to the student (Morrison, 1996). Feedback is the process of relaying observations, impressions, feelings or other evaluative information about a person's behaviour for their own use and learning. Receiving feedback is essential to the student's progress (Jones, 2000). Without structured feedback, students have no way of thoroughly evaluating their work. Providing effective feedback, therefore, enables an individual to modify what is perceived to be ineffective behaviour and serves to reinforce effective work (Knapman & Morrison, 1998).

Feedback must be given in such a way that the receiver understands clearly what is being communicated and is able to accept the information (Jones, 2000). Evaluation, or the feedback which is given to the student, can be summed up as a useful explanation of the quality of certain aspects of the student's performance at specific points in time. It takes into account such matters as the student's previous experience, their stage in the course, the difficulty of the work and personal pressures (Morrison, 1996).

Assessment

The variety of supervisory styles in practica creates difficulties when it comes to filling in forms at the end of a placement. Assessment concerns the standard that all students of a particular college programme have to achieve. This standard usually varies, depending on whether the placement is at the beginning of a course or towards the end. There is a notable difference between the performance of a pre-entry year student and a final year diploma student in a practice placement setting in terms of the complexity of the work undertaken. The effective supervisor should be aware of the difference between a pre-entry year student and a diploma student and have different methods of assessing them both (Kemshall & Pritchard, 1997).

One of the major weaknesses of Irish social care practice placements is the fact that the student's performance is not as closely monitored, assessed and evaluated to the same degree as students in the fields of general and psychiatric nursing. As a result, it has been alleged by some managers that several students have progressed to the final year of their course without having all the necessary attributes required to work in this area. As social care practitioners will work with the most vulnerable members of our society, colleges must place significantly more emphasis on the evaluation and formal assessment of the student's performance throughout their placement.

College practice placements vary considerably, but they have in common the need for a comprehensive and constructive report on the student's performance (Harris & Kelly, 1992). Such a report is important because it contributes to the final assessment of the student and identifies learning objectives for the future (Jones, 2000). The performance report should not only clearly indicate the standard which the supervisor believes the student has reached, but also make the reasoning and justification behind the judgement accessible to the student and other relevant people (e.g., examiners). From personal experiences as a student of a child and youth care programme and as a director of that programme, we feel that the report should give a sufficiently detailed description of the performance competencies of the student's work in the placement, with clear illustration and evidence to support the opinions given.

This is easier said than done. Until the introduction of a common set of placement evaluation forms across the Irish colleges last year on a trial basis, all colleges used their own forms. This made little sense to a practicum supervisor who happened to have two students on placement in the same year of study from two different colleges at the same time with reports vastly different in orientation. Meaningful comparisons are not possible without standardization.

Concluding Thoughts

There has been a growing recognition of the importance of clinical supervision for developing safe, professional practice (Ashmore & Carver, 2000; Butterworth & Faugier, 1992; Forkan & McElwee, 2001; McElwee, 2001). Supervision complements the student's training and is crucial in that capacity. The fluid transfer of ideas from college to practice is always difficult, partly because it is sometimes hard to directly apply a theory when dealing with an immediately problematic situation and partly because a student may be 'doing' a social care task for the first time. With the assistance of structured supervision and feedback, there is a better chance that the student may be able to apply their academic knowledge of the particular field (Bayne et al., 1998). The very existence of a supervision programme testifies to the commitment of the organisation to staff development (Harris & Kelly, 1992).

In an ideal situation, the student comes to supervision bringing a piece or pieces of their work to explore with the supervisor. The supervisor enables the student to examine their perceptions of it and understand it more fully. The student then leaves with a clearer view of themselves and their work and the connection between these. This

puts them in a more favourable position to take their work forward (Dominelli, 1997) and become a more reflective practitioner.

Supervision is a process which makes the student aware of how they perform in their practice placement and encourages them to try new approaches as opportunities present themselves (Knapman & Morrison, 1998; Payne, 1997). It is important for the supervisor to convey to the student that supervision is their time. This can be demonstrated by the supervisor's commitment to regular and uninterrupted supervision sessions.

We believe that practicum supervisors should not rush into accepting a student for a practicum unless the expectations are clearly understood by the potential supervisor, the student and faculty and the individual feels she has enough resources to dedicate to the student. There is a high degree of ethical responsibility to ensure that 'clients' receive the best possible care and that the student does no harm whilst on what is effectively a learning exercise. Students need varying amounts of assistance in coming to terms with the practicum experience, away from the relative safety of the college environment. Listening passively in class to peers discussing "assault in social care" is not the same as facing down an irate fifteen year-old high on drugs in the confines of a small room and then processing this experience later!

Ricks (1993) makes the point that, if students are to evolve into clear-thinking, sensitive practitioners, they must experience the same qualities in their teachers. The practicum supervisor should, therefore, demonstrate skills to the student, monitor the student and review the student's performance in a fair and forthright manner. This must be a dual process between the supervisor and student. This we have learned in our time together wearing our various hats over the past few years as students, then practica supervisors and now as instructors. Finally, we want to acknowledge that being a practicum supervisor is an onerous task, and we salute and honour their work to further the field of child and youth care generally and to nurture the development of individual students specifically.

Recommendations

We recommend that:

- a nationally certified supervision programme be established,
- employers facilitate their staff's entry into these programmes,
- colleges, in partnership with service providers, play a leading role in determining syllabus content,
- supervision is recognised as a complex and demanding task,

- supervisors are given remuneration for their time spent with students, and
- a detailed task description is given to practicum supervisors.

Note

1. Interestingly, only 14 of the 25 students felt that supervision helped them in making ethical decisions.

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