

Chapter

Social work education: a framework for evaluating feedback on student social workers' understanding of child care and protection

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Abstract

A general lack of effective evaluations of social work education and practice has undermined the rigor and validity of some contemporary debates about the future of the profession within Britain. This is particularly acute in the area of child care where a series of child deaths have raised key questions about standards in social work education and how it might best be evaluated. The written feedback given by lecturers to students on a social work qualifying course in relation to child care and protection issues is examined in order to show the complexities involved in evaluating such an important aspect of the learning process. It is suggested that a framework of principles is a useful evaluation tool both for social work and other professional courses, especially in creating a dialogue about feedback. Unless social work is willing to engage in long term and robust evaluations of education and practice it might struggle to defend and improve standards in the 21st Century.

Introduction

The lack of comprehensive evaluations in social work education in Britain has left the profession vulnerable to externally imposed changes that are not necessarily in the best interests of service users or practitioners. This is particularly acute in the area of child care where the tragic deaths of children have posed fundamental questions about the role of social work. Whilst there are some important developments in our understanding of social work education there remains a level of ignorance and uncertainty about the most appropriate and effective way of linking theory to practice and how it might best be evaluated. An on-going problem is deciding what areas of education to investigate and what, if any, impact it has on practice. Social work qualifying courses are a core element of the profession and delivered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Britain who work in partnership with employers to ensure students are prepared for the workplace. This chapter focuses on the written feedback given by lecturers to students on a social work qualifying course in relation to child care and protection issues and the complexities involved in evaluating such an important aspect of the learning process (note: the term lecturer refers to individuals employed by the university who have a teaching/support role on the social work qualifying course). A framework using principles of good feedback is proposed as a method of evaluating the instructions given by lecturers to students. Extracts from the author's own research in social work will be used and it is suggested that this framework will be applicable to a range of professional courses. Whilst any evaluation of social work will be dominated by the current focus on 'outcomes', it cannot be understood in isolation from other key elements such as the content of the curriculum, teaching methods, level of qualification and the standard at which newly qualified workers are able to perform in the workplace. These elements are complex, contested and inter-related and it is therefore important to remember that evaluations

reflect a particular perspective at a given time and those conducting them can never be entirely impartial or neutral.

Limited role of evaluations in social work education

There is growing pressure on social work educators to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and practice when preparing students for the workplace. Various writers (e.g. Fook et al., 2000; Orme et al., 2009) have highlighted the limited research detailing the way students link theory to practice and become socialised into the workforce where professional knowledge and expertise is developed. It is somewhat ironic that university lecturers expect students to learn about evidence-based policy and practice in social work, whilst simultaneously offering such a paucity of evidence in support of the pedagogy. Yet, the importance of evaluating social work education is long established. Gardiner (cited in Taylor, 1993), for example, proposes that evaluation of practice is necessary not only to improve services, but for the very existence of social work courses within Higher Education (HE). Evaluation is therefore an important aspect of pedagogy and vital to the way current teaching and learning practices are developed and sustained in HE. Whilst there have been numerous changes to social work education in Britain over the past two decades, the most notable being the move from Diploma to Honours degree qualification, evaluations tend to be small-scale with a focus on particular subject areas, themes or teaching method. The limited role of evaluations by those working from within the profession has made it difficult to defend accusations about inadequate standards in social work education.

The external pressure to demonstrate and evaluate rigorous standards in social work education has arisen primarily from a succession of child deaths. A large-scale review by The Social Work Task Force (SWTF) in England (2009, p.16) stated that 'initial education and training is not yet reliable enough in meeting its primary objective, which must be to prepare students for the demands of frontline practice'. This is particularly concerning in high risk situations where vulnerable children are involved. In the wake of a number of high-profile child abuse inquiries and Serious Case Reviews (e.g. Brandon et al., 2008) fundamental questions have been raised about the role of social work when intervening in the lives of vulnerable children. The pressure from government, media and general public to ascertain who is responsible and/or to blame is not without consequence:

concern about competence standards in social work has again become a major issue in the UK in the wake of the baby Peter case, and a succession of child-care tragedies that have tarnished the profession's image among government and the general public and undermined confidence in practitioners (Wilson and Kelly, 2010. p.2432).

Whilst the expectation and pressure to improve standards in social work education are high, the absence of comprehensive evaluations or strong evidence base means there is a limited understanding of 'what works' in teaching and learning. A study by Orme et al. (2009) noted the absence of any baseline on which their evaluation of the new degree in social work might be compared. Similarly, Carpenter (2005) points to the general absence of any longitudinal studies. Without adequate evaluation there is a risk that external pressure from government, media and public opinion will generate changes to policy and practice which are ineffective and/or simply replicate previous

mistakes, which will do little to improve confidence and morale amongst practitioners.

Given that social work education in the UK takes place in the classroom and in practice settings, any evaluations must be sensitive to the complexities and inter-relatedness of these environments for student learning. Of course, social work educators have no real influence over many of the organisational and management practices that shape the working lives of practitioners, yet they have a key role in preparing students for the realities of practice. Some of the reality is not always conducive to developing critical and reflective thinkers. Munro (2011, p. 6/7) found that the amount of regulation, prescription and bureaucracy in the workplace prevents social workers from doing the type of work that brought them to the profession in the first place, and proposed a range of changes, including:

a radical reduction in the amount of central prescription to help professionals move from a compliance culture to a learning culture, where they have more freedom to use their expertise in assessing need and providing the right help.

Evaluating student learning for the demands and complexities of child care and within work environments that are not necessarily conducive to best practice is therefore, less than straightforward.

Tensions and competing paradigms

The government emphasis on 'what works' tends to convey a more pragmatic approach to practice. On closer scrutiny however, the what works agenda conceals a range of tensions, complexities and ideological positions that serve to highlight the difficulties in ensuring evaluations are relatively free from bias. A dominant feature of the current what works agenda is the focus on outcomes. Yet, social work education has been reticent to embrace the emphasis on outcomes when providing an evidence base. According to Braye and Preston Shoot (2007):

the paucity may derive from unease about the very focus on outcomes or uncertainty of approach, perhaps linked to a lack of training in methodology. Time pressures, or wariness occasioned by a felt need to prove value and effectiveness to a sceptical audience, may also have an impact.

The 'unease' over outcomes being the dominant focus for evaluation is not simply about a neutral or obvious preference, but rather an ideological position which is supported at a national level and particularly apparent within the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)

NQFs are intended to offer a guide to the way qualifications are set at different levels and compared domestically and internationally by comparing outcomes with little consideration of how they are achieved. For Allais (2011) the use of learning outcomes within NQFs is highly problematic because they marginalise and downplay the complexity of the learning process, terminology is poorly defined and descriptors become 'relatively unintelligible' due to over-specification. This will clearly have implications when evaluating outcomes. Yet, despite the prevalence of NQFs there is little empirical research or evaluation supporting their use, not least of all in terms of impact on student learning. According to McBride and Keevy (2010) this situation is not unique or unintentional and reflects the underpinning neo-liberal ideology of NQFs. Within this neo-liberalism the 'neutrality' of an outcomes approach is

presented as a natural or obvious solution to education problems which reduce any need for empirical evidence, critical debate or discussion (Cort, 2010). Despite such deficits many course evaluations in HE will be influenced, at least to some extent, by NQFs.

The position of outcomes when evaluating social work education is further complicated by tensions between two competing paradigms. To date, two dominant paradigms dominate social work education in Britain and each has a different bearing on evaluations. The competence-based approach is associated with those who want social work courses to focus primarily on training for the workplace, whereas proponents of the reflective approach emphasise the educational qualities whereby students are critical and reflective thinkers. The use of a competence-based approach has been subject to number of long-standing criticisms. Essentially, the competence-based approach demotes student learning because of the skewed focus on 'outcomes' at the expense of the process of learning. The ideology of an outcomes-based approach is 'technical rationalism' which contrasts with the ideology of a 'reflective paradigm' (e.g. Barnett, 1997). The former is a 'tick-box' approach that is narrowly aligned to observable tasks, whereas the latter adopts a more holistic perspective of learning. The reflective approach is better suited to the complexities of social work and encompasses the uniqueness of each individual's situation. In terms of evaluation the competence-based approach focuses on the extent to which the desired behaviour is achieved at the appropriate level. This means evaluation is focussed almost exclusively on specific tasks or behaviours irrespective of the individual's motivations or rationale. The reflective approach also focuses on outcomes, however, the cognitive processes underpinning the behaviour and performance of the task are equally important.

On a superficial level at least it is often tempting to make a link between a child's death or serious injury and getting social workers to do certain tasks which are measurable and aligned to performance indicators. This tends to reflect a more managerialist agenda where control is exerted via the organisational hierarchy and accepted unquestioningly and uncritically by front-line practitioners. Getting practitioners to adhere to such instructions/procedure is often accompanied with a 'to do' checklist for high risk situations. The problem, however, is when the outcomes become detached or skewed from the process of learning and realities of practice. For example, in Britain a child can be placed on the Child Protection Register, and as such, must as a minimum be seen by a social worker once per week. This action, usually in the form of a home visit, is relatively easy to record and identify whether correct procedure is being followed. However, what actually happens during the home visit and the quality of professional intervention is much more complex and often subject to less scrutiny. Subsequently, evidence for good practice becomes increasingly defined by the recording of information about observable behaviours (e.g. time and date of home visit, whereabouts of child and parents, and risk assessment) with less attention to the worker's method of intervention aimed at alleviating some of the difficulties affecting the child/family. The emphasis for the practitioner is to follow the correct procedure rather than necessarily do what is right for the child.

The focus on outcomes fits with the profession's increasingly bureaucratic and reactive philosophy which require children to be labelled or identified as sufficiently high risk before specified (and often scarce) resources can be allocated. Not only does this limit opportunities for more preventative work, it fails to recognise that some of

the most vulnerable children are not subject to child protection procedures. As Brandon et al. (2008, p. 24) remind us:

We know from studies of serious child abuse that most children who die from abuse or are seriously injured are not child protection cases but children known to have additional needs (Reeder and Duncan 1999, Sinclair and Bullock 2002, Brandon et al., 2002). As Lord Laming said '*child protection cases do not always come labelled as such*' (para 17.106 Cm 5730 2003).

Whilst there is widespread agreement about the importance of protecting vulnerable children, the tensions and complexities inherent to social work education means there is much less consensus about those aspects that require change or how current practice might be evaluated. Focussing on the written feedback given to students by lecturers in relation to child care and protection issues will provide an important insight into the role of evaluation in social work education and practice.

A framework for feedback

The decision to focus on feedback and child care as a priority for evaluation is twofold:

- feedback is a key aspect of the learning process, yet there remain few frameworks for lecturers to adopt in terms of its delivery or evaluation;
- good feedback might be one of the most effective ways of preparing students for the realities of child care practice.

Bringing together the themes of feedback and child protection will therefore show the complexity of evaluation and its potential to impact on practice.

Feedback is increasingly viewed as an essential element of the learning process. In particular, feedback is a crucial aspect in closing the gap between current and desired performance (e.g. Sadler, 1989), central to the way experts learn (e.g. Klein, 2000) and in enhancing self-regulated learning (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). Yet, Boud (2000) notes that feedback 'is bread and butter to teaching and learning, but it can become so commonplace that it gets ignored and becomes under-conceptualised' (Boud, 2000, p. 155). This may explain, at least to some extent why Nicol (2008) believes there are no common frameworks or models for academics to adopt. As such, it is difficult to know if feedback on child care and protection issues is of any quality or how it can be best evaluated. At present there does not seem any overwhelming desire to address such gaps in our knowledge through robust use of evaluation. As with social work education more generally, the impetus to improve the quality of feedback within HE has been external. A succession of National Student Surveys (NUS) in Britain has singled out feedback and assessment as having one of the lowest levels of satisfaction from students. Whilst the methodological robustness of the NUS survey is highly questionable, its findings seem to be taken seriously by senior management across HE in Britain. Ironically, much less interest from senior management is apparent when such issues are raised by academics. Shay (2008) believes HE is reluctant to acknowledge the 'crisis' in assessment and feedback practices and address some of the key problems. Existing studies suggest that the most effective way of dealing with the problems is to ensure students have greater involvement in the assessment and feedback process (O'Donovan *et al.*, 2008).

To date, there is minimal understanding of the different types and sources of feedback that are most effective in developing students' knowledge and skills in relation to child care and protection. During their course, social work students can expect formative and summative feedback in verbal and written forms from a variety of different sources, including lecturers, practice teachers (experienced practitioners who supervise students on placement), peers and service users. The evaluation framework presented below focusses on written summative feedback because it is often (1) a time consuming activity for lecturers, and (2) anxiety provoking for students.

Principles of feedback

This framework can be used by lecturers to enhance their own feedback practices and to evaluate practice within a student cohort. It is flexible in that it can be used to examine written feedback which focuses on a particular assignment, different sections of the assignment and particular themes. The framework is derived from Nicol's (2008) principles of feedback which have been used by Heron (2011) in analysing written feedback given to students. Identifying these principles within the written feedback provides an insight into its quality. Based on previous research (Heron, 2011) has separated the most relevant principles into first and second order principles. The first order principles of feedback are:

1. *Clarification – information on what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards).*
2. *Challenging tasks – instruction that directs students to undertake a relevant task.*
3. *Close the gap – direction that helps students move from current to desired performance.*

The second order principles of feedback are:

4. *Self correct – information that helps students work an issue out for themselves.*
5. *Encourage interaction – meet and have dialogue around learning with others (peers, academics).*
6. *Development of self-assessment and reflection in learning – direction that encourages students to think about their self and own actions.*
7. *Encourage motivation – positive instruction that increases self-belief and self-esteem.*

Differentiating between first and second order principles offers a more detailed focus on the most important areas of feedback as well as the option of including other aspects which can add more specificity to an evaluation. The first order principles are essential within the evaluative framework because they are more dynamic in that they comprise of instruction that enables the student to progress. That is, clarifying good performance about child care and protection issues is important; however, on its own it is rather static because it focuses on what the student has already done. It is the link between 'clarifying' (Principle 1) and giving a 'challenging task' (Principle 2) specific to child care and protection that enables the student to 'close the gap' (Principle 3) between current and desired performance. It is this process, which makes feedback more dynamic. Feedback that also includes evidence of the second order

principles is likely to be better quality, but compared to the first order principles they are not so important for student learning. These seven principles can be used to code the written feedback by lecturers in order to provide a detailed account of the instruction given to students. To illustrate, the following data has been extracted from a study by Heron et al (in review). The study examined tutor feedback given to 25 year four students. The assignments generating the feedback were the major practice-based written assignments that students compile at the end of the practice placement in years three and four of an undergraduate course. This gives a total of 50 feedback sheets which were coded using the principles of feedback.

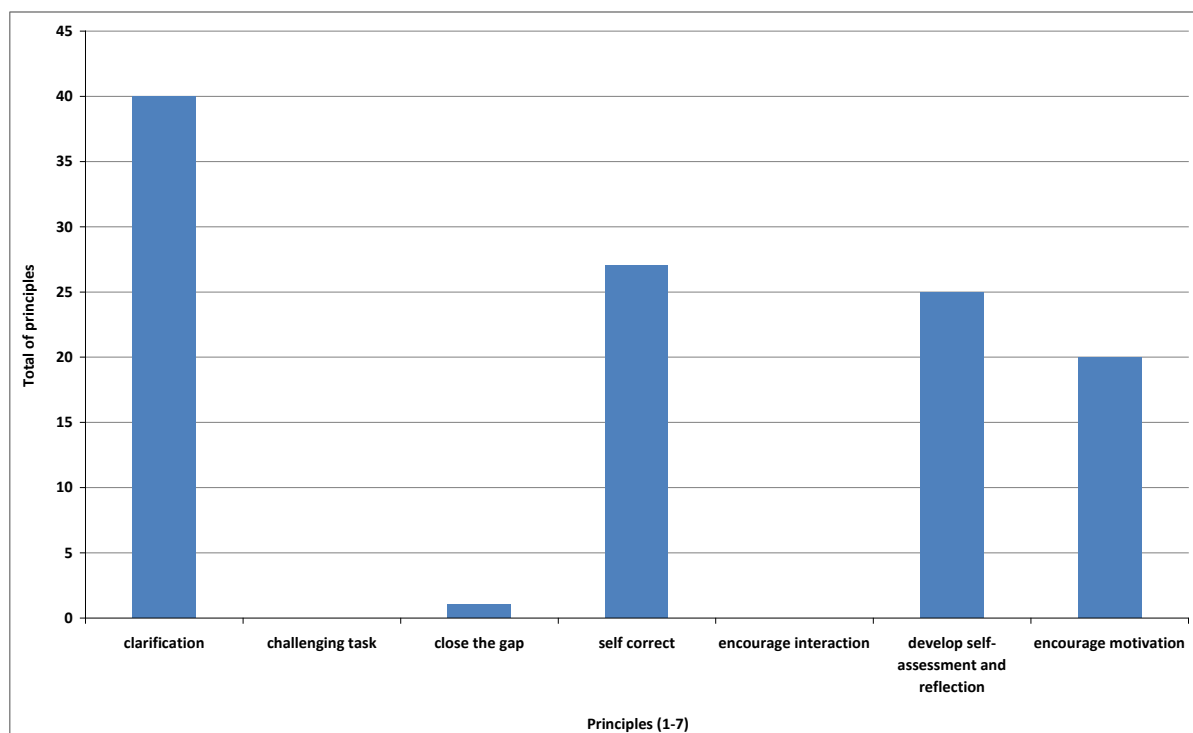


Figure 1: frequency of the seven principles in relation to child care and protection issues.

Figure 1 shows the written summative feedback given to 25 students in relation to child care and protection issues for the major practice-based assignments written in years three and four of the course. There are a total of 113 instances where principles of feedback relating to child care and protection are evident.

Four principles of feedback dominate the instruction given to students in relation to child care and protection. Clarifying (Principle 1), self-correct (Principle 4), develop self-assessment and reflection (Principle 6) and encourage motivation (Principle 7) indicate that instruction is aimed at getting students to take individual responsibility and regulate their learning about child care and protection issues. Whilst this reflects important feedback, the absence of any instruction linked to encouraging interaction (Principle 5) suggests that a more collective approach to learning with peers, practice teachers or service users is not encouraged. Given that no principles were evident in relation to challenging tasks (Principle 2) and the very low frequency of principles for closing the gap (Principle 3), it would appear that students are rarely given instruction that encourages them to progress from current to desired

performance. This suggests that feedback on child care and protection tends to take a more static form which focuses on the individual student. Such feedback is unlikely to be the most effective way of preparing students for the realities of practice.

A comparison between the assignments carried out in years three and four by the same cohort of students provides a useful insight into the timing of the feedback. Of the 25 students, 22 received feedback in relation to child care and protection: 14 students received feedback in year three and 10 students received feedback in year four. Only two students received feedback in both year three and year four and three students got no feedback about child care and protection in either assignment. This suggests that these students were more likely to get feedback on child care and protection in year three compared to year four. The general failure to reinforce feedback across the practice-based assignments suggests it is not being fully utilised to best prepare students as newly qualified practitioners.

This evaluation suggests the practice study assignments are unlikely to be effective learning tools when such variations in feedback exist across the cohort. Addressing this issue requires some recognition that students should only be assessed on those learning activities that can be fed back upon with accuracy and consistency. The focus is not on what lecturers want to assess, but rather what they are equipped to give feedback on and in a way that engages students in effective learning. An evaluation of this nature provides specific and tangible ways for lecturers to improve their feedback.

1. Feedback that focuses on the present to give 'snap shots' of tutor insight is unlikely to encourage students to seek out and develop their knowledge to meet the complexities of child care and protection. It must also provide challenging tasks which give students the opportunity to close the gap between current knowledge and what they need to know about child care and protection.
2. The dominance of summative assignments which focus on the individual is unlikely to generate feedback that addresses the realities of practice where effective child care requires teamwork between colleagues. Greater emphasis should be placed on generating formative feedback in activities where students are required to undertake tasks which reflect the work environment.
3. Students can have a dialogue with lecturers about evidence of the seven principles in their own feedback and compare it to the evaluation of the cohort's feedback. This will provide students with clearer expectations about what they might receive in terms of feedback and help lecturers to be more consistent in the feedback provided.

Whilst a framework of principles for evaluating feedback can provide important insights, there are some limitations.

Tensions and limitations

The most effective evaluation of feedback is likely to be localised in that it takes into consideration those characteristics and nuances of the student cohort and traditions

within departments, including the needs and expectations of teaching staff. Transferring such evaluative findings to a national or international arena is problematic because it requires more general language that creates tensions with the local knowledge and dialogue between students and lecturers. This is particularly evident with NQFs because the overly-specific outcomes are poorly defined and have little meaning in any particular context (Heron & Green-Lister, 2013). Feedback is personal and emotive, its content is culture specific and the importance of the relationship between the giver and receiver of feedback should not be underestimated. This evaluation framework is strongest when it is used to pose questions that generate a dialogue between students and staff about existing practices and future developments. It is the involvement of students at the local level that is likely to be crucial when creating the most effective feedback practices.

Any evaluation must consider how feedback aligns with other key elements of the learning process both in the classroom and in the workplace. Biggs' (2000) model of 'constructive alignment' highlights the need to integrate the course aims, teaching methods, assessment, feedback and learning outcomes. Any attempt therefore, to evaluate feedback as a discrete product or outcome which is separate from other elements of the learning process is likely to be limited. Hence, if this framework is used only to change feedback and not, for example, the assessment tool, then any attempt to improve students' understanding of child care and protection is likely to be limited. When evaluating feedback in relation to practice-based assignments any alignment must also include the work environment, including relevant stakeholders such as service. This brings additional complexities which have proved less than straightforward for social work. Robinson and Webber (2012), for example, point to the often tokenistic use of service user involvement in social work education, the lack of agreement over what constitutes meaningful involvement and the reluctance of organisation to publish evaluations with negative findings. Similarly, if Munro's (2011) concerns about an overly prescriptive and compliant work environment are not addressed, any feedback given to students may contribute little to their professional development. The need to align learning both in the classroom and the workplace might explain, at least to some extent, why feedback has remained such a problematic aspect of the learning process as well as the complexities involved in its evaluation.

Conclusion

Effective evaluation will help to inform debates about the nature of social work education required for the 21st century. Using a framework of principles to examine the quality of written feedback provides an insight into the complexity of evaluation. This framework for evaluation is likely to be most effective when there is meaningful student involvement and localised to a particular group of students. There are many competing areas in social work education and no agreement exists over what might constitute a set of priorities. Focussing on feedback as a crucial element of the learning process is not to ignore or deprioritise other areas of education. The key to effective evaluation is in recognising the relationship and links between different elements of teaching and learning. The framework of principles of feedback can be applied to other professions and future evaluations might make comparisons across different disciplines. At present, social work will have to embrace more comprehensive and long term evaluations of education if it is to develop greater robustness in defending standards.

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