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Determining Student Competency in Field Placements: An Emerging Theoretical Model

Abstract

This paper describes a qualitative case study that explores how twenty-three field advisors, representing three human service professions including education, nursing, and social work, experience the process of assessment with students who are struggling to meet minimum competencies in field placements. Five themes emerged from the analysis of qualitative interviews. The field advisors primary concern was the level of professional competency achieved by practicum students. Related to competency were themes concerned with the field advisor's role in being accountable and protecting the reputation of his/her profession as well as the reputation of the professional program affiliated with the practicum student's professional education. The final theme – teacher-student relationship –emerged from the data, both as a stand-alone and global or umbrella theme. As an umbrella theme, teacher-student relationship permeated each of the other themes as the participants interpreted their experiences of the process of assessment through the mentor relationships. A theoretical model was derived from these findings and the description of the model is presented.

Cet article décrit une étude de cas qualitative qui explore comment vingt-trois conseillers de stages, représentant trois professions de services sociaux comprenant l'éducation, les soins infirmiers et le travail social, ont vécu l'expérience du processus d'évaluation avec des étudiants qui ont des difficultés à acquérir les compétences minimales durant les stages. Cinq thèmes ont été identifiés lors de l'analyse des entrevues qualitatives. La préoccupation principale des conseillers de stages était le niveau de compétence professionnelle acquis par les stagiaires. Les thèmes liés à la compétence étaient le rôle des conseillers de stages dans leur responsabilité pour protéger la réputation de leur profession ainsi que la réputation d'un programme professionnel affilié à la formation professionnelle des stagiaires. Le dernier thème – les rapports entre les enseignants et les étudiants – a été identifié à partir des données, à la fois en tant que thème particulier et thème général. En tant que thème général, les rapports entre enseignants et étudiants sont marqués par chacun des autres thèmes puisque les participants ont interprété leurs expériences du processus d'évaluation par le biais de leurs rapports avec leurs mentors. Un modèle théorique a découlé de ces résultats et la description du modèle est présentée.

Keywords

field placements, pre-service education

Cover Page Footnote

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The practicum or field experience is a common requirement for pre-service students in the human service professions, including education, nursing, and social work. Although the role of a supervisor, or alternatively referred to as a mentor or advisor, might vary from context to context, practicums typically rely on students developing professional competencies through a professional development process. Most often, this professional development occurs within a social-cultural setting with a more experienced and capable professional in a mentorship-like role (Ralph, 2002). The role of the mentor or field advisor is often fraught with uncertainty. According to Sim (2011), supervisors of pre-service professionals rarely have control over the timing of the supervision, the personalities of those with whom they will work, nor the opportunity for input into the student's previous practicum or course work.

Moreover, interpersonal factors affect the interactions between pre-service students and their field advisor (Sim, 2011). Ralph and Walker (2008) reported that relationships and interpersonal issues were considered to be both the most positive and the most negative aspect of a practicum student's field experience. Clearly then, quality relationships and a type of connectivity between professionals have a significant impact with respect to motivation, social competence, and well-being in general, but also with regard to specific outcomes across different educational contexts (Hagenhauer & Volet, 2014). Given that evaluation is one of the field advisors' primary roles, (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014), and the construct of teacher-student relationships is also a central component in successful teaching and learning (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schultz, 2008), understanding the intersection between the teacher-student relationship and evaluation in field placement is paramount.

This paper describes a qualitative study that explored how field advisors representing the three human service professions of education, social work, and nursing experience the process of assessment of pre-service students who are struggling to meet minimum competencies in field placements. An emerging theoretical model derived from the findings is also presented.

Literature Review

Assessment and evaluation of competencies in professional pre-service placements continues to be an area of debate and ongoing development (Smith, 2010). Field placements of professional pre-service undergraduate students, such as social work students, require the creation of spaces that not only support risk-taking in new learning, but also provide the means to accurately assess the efforts of those students who fail to meet the competency requirements during placement (Uche, Uche, Eme, & Ebue, 2014). Phelps, Schmitz, and Wade (1986) reported that summative evaluations in field experience can be suspect because they contain both halo and leniency effects. They describe a halo effect as the potential for field advisors to bias an overall student evaluation based on one favourable characteristic and a leniency effect when field advisors are reluctant to provide an unfavorable rating. In an educational context, Clarke et al. (2014) suggest that it is challenging for mentor teachers to "discriminate sufficiently when evaluating a student teacher's final grade and that cooperating teachers summative evaluations are often reduced to general impressions and fail to report individual differences" (p. 14). These researchers also contend that "authentic and genuine participation in the assessment of student teachers by cooperating teachers has yet to be fully realized" (p. 15).

While there may be several variables that might account for the challenges in evaluation, the teacher-student relationship is one critical dimension. The teacher-student relationship is intrinsically linked to a humanistic or phenomenological approach to learning, as the core of this

approach is relationship connectivity, and includes constructs such as caring, learning, participation and reflection (Diekelmann, 1990, 2001). Specific theories such as developmental contextualism theory (Lerner, 1991, 1998) and the theory of resonant leadership (McKee & Massimilian, 2006) provide theoretical foundational insights that are also linked to the construct of teacher-student relationship. Contextualism theory focuses on the changing relations between the developing individual and his or her context; the theory of resonant leadership focuses on effective leaders that are seen to be in tune with the emotions of those around them, to use empathy, and to manage their own emotions effectively in order to build strong, trusting relationships and to create a climate that inspires commitment. In addition, Winnicott's parent-infant relationship (1960) and relationship theory (1970) have also been utilized in the literature to support the notion of connectivity between supervisee and protégée, particularly with regard to growth, development, and the conditions by which these will occur, and therefore mirrors the process of clinical supervision (Rafferty, 2000).

Empirical research indicates that the teacher-student relationship has an *independent* influence on students' successful learning, when controlling for personal characteristics. Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya's (2010) study found that establishing some sort of *connection* or *connectedness* (comprising factors such as mutual respect, fairness, safety, etc.) are important features of a positive relationship between the mentor and mentee. In addition, Palmer, O'Cane, and Owens (2009) demonstrated that study satisfaction for university students and the likelihood of them remaining at university increased when their sense of *connectedness* or *connection* with their teachers also increased. According to Litvak, Bogo, and Misha (2010), the teacher-student relationship was both a crucial protective factor and a crucial risk factor. Positive relationships supported students during challenging times while non-positive or disconnected relationships often became an added stressor for students who could not successfully navigate given their perceived position of vulnerability in a relationship perceived as hierarchical (i.e., pass or fail placement). Students describe feeling "at ease" in connected relationships (Gillespie, 2005); a connected teacher-student relationship incorporates contextually determined personal and professional dimensions. Disconnected relationships are characterized by fearfulness and anxiety (Gillespie, 2002). In a qualitative study that explored practicum student perceptions, one student stated, "you can tell by their attitude, they don't want to be preceptors" (Calmann, Watson, Norman, Redfern, & Murrells, 2002, p. 521). Positive teacher-student relationship or connections are linked to: (a) maintaining the possibility of success and minimizing a shift to teaching-as-evaluation (Diekelmann, 1992); and (b) supporting the possibility of a student failing (students at risk of failing) to meet the learning intentions of a clinical placement but retain a sense of dignity, self-worth, and a vision of future possibilities (Diekelmann & McGregor, 2003).

The significance of the teacher-student relationship has also been highlighted in mentoring literature as a central component in practicum placements for human service providers. Kram (1985) first described the three crucial elements to the mentoring process: connection, needs, and context. From Kram's perspective, the relational component between a mentor and a protégé or pre-service/practicum student is understood alongside two other factors including the developmental component and the contextual component. The developmental component includes functions and processes such as reflection and assessment feedback that help both the mentor and protégé achieve their professional goals. Accordingly, the relationship component mediates opportunities for the development of these goals. Similarly, the contextual component reflects the day-to-day processes of a teacher in a particular school community and is also affected by the relationship between the mentor and protégé (Ambrosetti, Knight, & Dekker, 2014). Based on

Kram's work, Ambrosetti et al. described a holistic mentoring model where relationships are located as the central component where the developmental needs and context shape the connectivity that occurs between the mentor and protégé.

Ostensibly, not all mentor-protégé pairs participate in reciprocally beneficial relationships, where both the mentor and the protégé have skills and knowledge that is shared equally. Ehrich and Millwater (2011) suggest that this relationship requires careful negotiation as the protégés in their study identified a collegial and professional relationship necessary for learning. It is under these connected conditions where transformation may occur. According to Eby, Rhodes, and Allen (2007), mentoring relationships are often reciprocal but asymmetrical, suggesting that although there might be shared responsibility, the mentor may assume greater responsibility, particularly with regard to assessment and evaluation. Also, not all practicums are successful, and field instructors must navigate a complex decision-making process in their determination of student success or failure. Luhanga, Larocque, MacEwan, Gwekwerere, and Danyluk's (2014) study revealed that field advisors find it extremely difficult to fail practicum students. How do field advisors make decisions about the success or failure of the protégé when the protégés struggle to meet competency levels for their profession? Ambrosetti et al.'s (2014) holistic mentoring model is helpful to begin to address this query as it focuses on describing the interconnectedness of the roles of the mentor and protégé in three dimensions: relational, developmental, and contextual. However, the model does not consider how field advisors determine the success or failure of undergraduate students in pre-service placements during evaluation or when competencies might be questionable.

Definition of Terms

Each profession under study uses particular terms to represent the pre-service students engaging in the practicum experience. In education, for example, such students are often referred to as interns; in social work they are called practicum students. Similarly, the name and role of the primary evaluator and mentor in each profession varies as well. In nursing, the mentor is often referred to as the preceptor, whereas in education, she/he is referred to as cooperating teacher. There is also variation in terms between institutions even within the same profession. Also, some of the mentors are professionals whose primary responsibility is as a practitioner in the field, whereas other mentors are faculty advisors more closely connected to the University program. In this study, the term practicum student will refer to the protégé or pre-service student engaged in a practicum field experience. The term field advisor is a broad term, capturing multiple roles including faculty advisors and in-field mentors who have supervisory and evaluation responsibilities for the practicum students.

Method

This study uses a qualitative case study design. The essence of a case study is that “it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions; why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (Yin, 2009, p. 17). Specifically, this study reflects what Stake (2005) refers to as an instrumental case study extended to multiple case studies or it is also referred to as a collective case. This design is useful when a number of cases are studied in “order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). It is also a useful design when cases may be both similar and dissimilar and where the researchers select particular cases to

lead them to a better understanding of a larger collection of cases. Given this study sought to understand how field advisors make decisions about the success or failure of their practicum students based on the development of connective relationships between field advisors and students, an instrumental collective case study design was optimal. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University Research Ethics Review Committee. Prior to commencing data collection, all participants were informed about the objectives of the study, that participation was voluntary. They were assured of privacy and confidentiality with respect to reporting of findings.

Field advisors from the faculties of education, nursing, and social work participated in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. Twenty-three interviews were conducted, nine in both nursing and education and five in social Work. Both intentional and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. Only field advisors that were known to have mentored practicum students that had either failed or struggled through a practicum were invited through confidential emails to participate in the study. Additionally, participants suggested other potential field advisors that would be suitable for the study. In some cases, the researchers contacted the field advisor and in other cases the field advisor contacted the researchers and volunteered to participate in the study.

Interviews were constructed using a semi-structured interview guide and conducted by the three researchers. Both in-person and telephone interviews were conducted that ranged in length from 30-90 minutes. In an effort to deepen our understanding of other professions, to minimize bias, and with a view to widen our perspectives for data analysis, participants were interviewed by a researcher outside of their field.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis began with all three researchers reading and re-reading their own group of transcripts using open coding to identify ideas that represented social and psychological processes (Charmaz, 2006). Data were compared across professions using constant comparison and some initial categories emerged.

One researcher then reviewed all the transcripts, alongside the codes and categories and refined the data categories and attempted to identify relationships among the categories. This type of focused coding is more selective and conceptual. Charmaz states that “focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (p. 57). Next, the research team reviewed the focused codes and moved to memo-writing, which is the “pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (p. 72). Memo writing was important because it helped the researchers analyze the data and codes throughout the research analysis process prior to the writing phase.

Results

Five themes emerged from the interviews with field advisors who evaluated practicum students that had struggled or failed field placements: (a) professional competency, (b) professional suitability, (c) accountability to the profession, (d) accountability to the program and (e) the teacher-student relationship. The field advisors primary concern was the level of professional competency achieved by the practicum students. Related to competency were themes concerned with the field advisor’s role in being accountable and protecting the reputation of his/her profession as well as the reputation of the professional program affiliated with the practicum student’s professional education. The field advisors also expressed a concern regarding their perception of the practicum student’s suitability for their chosen profession. The final theme related to the field-advisor-protégé relationship and the feeling of connectivity between them.

Professional Competency

Professional competencies based on a professional standard was the primary factor for the field advisors in determining whether their practicum students were professionally competent for their developmental level and chosen profession. This finding was not particularly surprising; however, the way the competencies were described, observed, and evaluated gave pause for analysis. Although the term competency was implied by the social work and education field advisors, nursing field advisors gave the most specific examples related to required competencies related to given standards. This nursing field advisor described it this way:

They [students] need to meet the competencies in every area. They don't necessarily need to be an expert at [named] theory but they need to be able to demonstrate that they are maintaining the professional practice and the overarching safety principles, that they're preparing for clinical, that they're coming with a decent knowledge base. They need to demonstrate the underlying principles throughout.

Field advisors also noted that identifying problem patterns was more important than isolated incidents of poor practice. Repeatedly administering medication unsafely was one example of incompetency that was often cited as a reason for students to be unsuccessful in practicum. One nursing field advisor suggested that incompetence is sometimes difficult to measure and prove, but students who failed to meet basic safety standards were easier to identify as incompetent. This nursing advisor stated, "If it's not linked to patient safety, we're having a very, very difficult time failing these students. So if I can link it to patient safety, like I said, that's my go-to."

Similarly, social work field advisors were concerned about their students meeting competency standards but their concerns were not as much about patient safety as they were about providing appropriate client services and practicing interpersonal skills. This field advisor explains how students with a profile of questionable competency might manifest in a social work practicum. "I feel they'll do very incompetent work and there would be workplace issues where clients would be underserved or not serviced [at all]."

There was also competency issues associated with inappropriate behaviour that were more difficult to define but easier to describe. One field advisor described incompetent students as those "saying things inappropriately or just act[ing] radically." Another social work field advisor recognized that sometimes there were reasons for incompetent student behaviour but those reasons could not usurp client needs. She stated, "I worry about people going into practice that are not going to be either well enough because of mental illness or just emotional maturity that they are able to put the client's needs ahead of their own needs." In other words, she recognized that human service organizations such as schools and hospitals are not therapeutic institutions for professionals to work out their own personal problems during their practicum.

High standards of competence were also expected in the field of education. One field advisor concluded, "There is no room in our profession for mediocrity. We can only have the best." Similar to the nursing participants, educators often measured competency in relation to technical skills such as organization, lesson planning and meeting learning outcomes. One faculty advisor stated that mentor teachers have called him in exasperation to say, "Get out here; because it is over. I can't go on; because they're [the intern] hurting my class." Field advisors in education had concerns similar to social work field advisors regarding interpersonal and communication skills.

In some cases, as this field advisor explains, practicum students may possess some of the technical skills related to planning but fall short in competencies related to responding to the needs of children. She explains incompetence in this way:

They [intern] practice the lesson and it's like a stage play, but the people at the other end, the kids aren't the important part. They're missing that and they can't seem to connect. No matter how they spin their wheels, they just don't have those people skills. I think a good intern has the ability to plan but can deliver the lesson while connecting with the kids and the kids are the most important.

In all three professions, competency was always described in the context of how the patient, client, or children might be affected by the pre-service student's competency. Notably, almost all of the participants from all three professions used a similar measure of care to assess the competency of their pre-service students: Would I want this practicum student caring for or teaching my child or loved one? Although the following quote comes from an education participant, it captures the sentiments of other participants from both nursing and social work as well.

We can't be irresponsible about sending people who are ill-prepared or ill-suited to working productively with people because we don't have a fake laboratory where people can practice. It's always with real students in real classes, which is at once a strength and a potential weakness.

In other words, the faculty advisors acknowledged that their role in supporting the practicum students was actually secondary to their role in caring for the patient, client or student whose quality of care or learning was the primary focus. Thus, competency was described in terms of technical skills and professional skills. The next section presents another theme that we have described as professional suitability. This theme was closely related to professional competency, but there was a distinction between the two themes that warranted further analysis and exploration.

Professional Suitability

For participants, decisions about a student's proficiency rested on assessing professional competency but also on determining professional suitability. Suitability to the profession, in this study, refers to the attitudes and aptitudes that the field advisors observed that were congruent with the dominant norms of practice adhered to in his/her profession in his/her particular context. Participants often referred to professional suitability when they described non-desirable personality traits that reflect a potential level of incompetence but are not easy to remediate or evaluate. The terms "lazy," "disengaged," "immature," and "unrealistic expectations" emerged repeatedly throughout the participants' descriptions of students with questionable competency. The field advisors shared a common sentiment that lack of professional suitability was often not, in and of itself, a reason to fail a student in practicum but was at best irritating, and at worst, a red flag for more serious underlying competency issues. When professional suitability was questioned, faculty advisors in all three professions used a similar strategy of intervention which involved a private discussion with the student. The purpose of the discussion was to try and determine the source of the questionable behaviour. Sometimes the appearance of lack of suitability could be

rectified by clarifying expectations or more closely supporting technical skill development. However, there was a clear perception that the type of work involved in each profession, required a particular attitude and if this professional attitude did not exist, it was difficult to cultivate and assess. One participant explained:

I think teaching is about personality too, and if you don't have the personality, you are never going to get it...just being able to deal with all types of people, being flexible, being adaptive and understanding and firm and I think energetic.

Also, according to the participants, being “socially awkward” was a common personality trait that could have a negative impact on the student’s ability to succeed in their practicum. The dilemma for this faculty advisor is clear in this quote: “[This practicum student] was just really socially awkward, her interactions were so awkward. I wouldn’t want to work with her. Is that reasons to not pass her because I don’t want to work with her?” Socially awkward behaviour manifested in various ways. This social work faculty advisor stated, “They were afraid of working with people and I thought to myself, what part of social work did you, you know social work is working with people?” Similarly, a nursing field advisor stated:

[The students] might not be able to actually physically speak to the patient. You’ll find that most of them will walk into the room and even ignore the patient completely. It is not like that will fail you, but it will be one of the considerations.

Although the following quote is from an education field advisor, the sentiment is reflected in the nursing and social work professions as well. According to this participant, working in the human service professions is:

A tough job. It’s very demanding. You have to be multitasking and if you’re slow on your feet and you’re not planned and you’re not ready to work hard, you’re never going to make it and the kids will suffer.

Professional suitability might be tacit criterion to evaluate but a lack of professional suitability manifested in real ways for the field advisors and they described this factor as measureable and tangible, when there were harmful consequences. Also, it might not be the named reason for an unsuccessful practicum but professional suitability will likely prompt an intervention that either leads to remediation or a more thorough examination of how lack of professional suitability affects professional competencies. When the connection between the two factors, that is competency and suitability, can be made, field advisors were more likely to consider the practicum a failure.

Accountability to the Profession

Clearly established and well-articulated national and provincial organizations such as the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association, Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, and the Canadian Association of Social Work Education represent each of the three professional associations and the field advisors in this study. Many participants revealed their allegiance to their respective profession. One of the ways their commitment to the profession was expressed was through their language of "gatekeeping" responsibilities as a field advisor. For some participants, accountability to the profession was one of the factors directly named in determining the competence of a student. For example, this participant noted, "It is very difficult, but I am adamant to protect our profession; because we have a tough enough time getting respect from the general population."

For these professionals, compromising standards for the sake of ease or oversight was not an option when, "you have to do what is right for the profession." Often, field advisors recognized that the pre-service students could potentially be their colleagues, "if you pass someone that should not be practising, they very well may end up being your colleague and that is a scary thought." A few participants recounted how their former students who struggled or failed their practicum eventually became their co-workers. In several cases, the field advisors described this scenario as a steep learning opportunity and one they may not repeat in the future. Beyond their own collegial experiences, the participants also expressed concern and a responsibility to their clients served by their profession. This social work field advisor stated, "But I do think the biggest consequence is a huge disservice to clients in the future and to agencies where people get hired who don't know what they are doing." Another participant explained her perception of her responsibilities as a field advisor:

I think she could have done some harm with clients and you know it's an important role, it's a gatekeeping role in our profession...we have to be sure that we are putting people out into the field that are going to be practising ethically and responsibly...so it is a very important role.

There is a paradox that also emerged that relates to the sense of accountability participants felt towards keeping ill-prepared students out of their profession and the professions cultural norms that develop a commitment to helping and success. The participants felt a tremendous responsibility to ensure students met a particular level of professional standard but at the same time human service professions are defined by their willingness to help. This paradox was explained by this participant:

We are in a helping profession. We want to help. We are produced in this way. We are produced to want people to succeed also. I think that is one of the challenges that we have to deal with the student who is not succeeding. I think that is one of the challenges is to go in and say "not right now."

Additionally, as the field advisor noted above, an unsuccessful attempt in practicum does not necessarily mean that it is the final attempt or complete termination of a program. Perhaps, the participants took some comfort in protecting their profession against incompetence, knowing that students who fail and/or repeat their practicum might eventually meet professional standards. In

another example, one of the participants described a situation where, in retrospect, she said she probably should have failed a practicum student but did not want to be part of a “failing” endeavor. Instead, she reported that she created successful situations so the student could not fail. She reported that at the time she perceived that a failing student represented her failing her profession as a caring, helpful human service provider. Now with more experience she reflects on the situation differently when she stated, “We shouldn’t lack the courage of our...we have a greater responsibility just being what I was...an architect of somebody’s fake success. I don’t want to be that, I want it to be genuine.” This comment demonstrates the tension between field advisor’s strong affinity to their profession and their strong attraction to being a “helper” and a facilitator of success. This participant remarked that any sense of lowering standards would be a “disservice to the profession” but “it is also a privilege, maybe, to protect the profession and keep it top notch.”

Accountability to the Program

The final factor in the field advisor’s decision making process related to the accountability he/she felt to the actual program of study. This factor was particularly strong in the social work and education participants. We surmised that it may have been less prevalent in the nursing faculty because of the significant program changes that the nursing program was experiencing at the time of the study.

The integrity of the university program was rooted in more than just pride. The very existence of field placement practicum in a university program of study relies on the good will of community partnerships, including schools, hospitals, mental health agencies, and a variety of other stakeholder groups involved in the human service professions. Maintaining this relationship depends on university faculty programs ensuring quality and accountability through competent students who are placed in the agencies to learn. One field advisor described it this way:

We have a reputation to think of. If we are continually releasing ill-prepared people on the field, we deserve a bad reputation and they should be reluctant to cooperate and work with us ...we have a duty to our colleagues in the field. I don’t want to be an additional burden. It is already is a great responsibility [for them] I don’t want it to be an unpleasant and fruitless endeavor.

Another field advisor described the program’s reputation as “credibility in the community.” She continued:

When field instructors see a student that they believe is not fit for social work or not meeting the standards required and they see the student carry on. [It] can erode a relationship with a community agency or preceptor so quickly that creates and there’s a ripple effect ... we have since struggled to place a student anywhere within that sector...because word travels, right, people talk.

All three professions were concerned for the future of their field placements for this particular reason, “When agencies have bad experiences with students they often would not take students again or they are very hesitant to.” Potential declining numbers of field placements or lack of quality field placements is a tremendous burden for programs. It was clear that the field advisors did not want to graduate “sub-standard” students for integrity reasons, but they also did

not want to jeopardize the reputation of the program itself, which could bring harm to a future student's ability to access field placements and participate in a high quality program.

The Teacher-Student Relationship

The final theme – the teacher-student relationship –emerged as a theme from the data, both as a stand-alone and global or umbrella theme. As an umbrella theme, teacher-student relationships permeated each of the other themes as the participants interpreted their experiences of the process of assessment through the mentor relationships. In other words, professional competency, suitability and accountability to the professional and the program were all interpreted through a teacher-student relationships lens. In this study, relationship dynamics were constructed at multiple levels. The teacher-student relationships theme is discussed in three sections related to the connectivity between people, the way language influences relationships and the connection between relationships and professional identity.

At the micro level: Teacher-student relationships are affected by the connectivity between people. Practicums at every level of field experience are predicated on professional relationships between the practicum student and the field advisor. When there is a high degree of connectivity it is more pleasant for advisors to address complex issues when there is a strong teacher-student relationship. An educational field advisor stated,

[E]verything is built on human relations...I will say that when two people are on the same page and have a relationship, there is a much greater degree of communication and openings and frankness, which is what the whole internship is built upon, if possible.

Establishing a genuine relationship may promote enhanced communication but it also complicates the situation when the student is underperforming. One field advisor said, "If I have hesitated to fail someone, it is based on the fact that I am worried about them or I care a lot about them." The happy stories are the ones where the advisor invests time and nurtures the student through a difficult practicum. There were also a few participants who took great pride in the fact that they could maintain a friendly relationship with students who had failed. Every profession had an example of students who had insight into their shortcomings and thanked the advisors for failing them. The assumption in this scenario is that a fairly trusting relationship must have been established to achieve these outcomes.

At the meso level: The teacher-student relationship is affected by professional identities. Nurses, social workers, and teachers' professional identities are constructed around the attributes of a helping profession. An educator said, "We are produced to want people to succeed." A social worker added, "We are trained to be nice people." This helping profession identity and the way it affects relationships is linked to the issues raised in the macro level concerning language, but it is also related to the manner in which field advisors position themselves in relationship to the practicum student. They expressed concern for the student's well-being and when students were not being successful, they were empathetic to the students' situation and if they "would be hurting someone's feelings and squashing their dreams."When students are struggling there is a tendency to hope for improvement or suggest they are not passing "yet" but may be later. It seemed counterintuitive for the participants who identified with a helping profession to have to fail a student. There was a genuine sense from many participants that when a student fails, the profession and the program have also failed.

The participants also relied heavily on supportive structures that facilitated relationship development. Whether advisors asked for support from colleagues or engaged students in learning contracts or journaling, the communication structures that they were described are indicative of professions that define themselves by the quality of the relationship and the “help” they provided to others. The relationship between a student and the advisor is then mediated by the professional’s sense of identity as a helper.

Even though the participants were not directly asked about the ways they formed relationships or even if they valued that aspect of being an advisor, most of the participants commented on the need for good communication and strong relationships, “I have to build relationships to recognize if they have anxiety; students don’t thrive in that rigidity”. A few participants reflected back to a time when they were less experienced and wanted to be liked by their students. Another participant admitted that she “tr[ie]d to build success regardless of their competency.” Research indicates that *connectedness* or what may be described as the *affective* dimension of teacher-student relationships (Hagenhauer & Volet, 2014) needs to be balanced (to establish ethical and professional boundaries) with the *supportive* (i.e., approachability, availability, providing constructive feedback, celebrating strengths, etc.) dimension of the teacher-student relationship that university or field personnel must provide. Empirical evidence suggests that the teacher-student relationship is critical for successful university student learning but is an under-researched construct (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). This is somewhat surprising given that Hagenhauer and Volet (2014) suggest that the teacher-student relationships can be viewed as a precondition of successful learning for all students.

At the same time, there was a clear boundary for field advisors; many of the participants noted that they were “not trying to be friends” with their students. One nurse stated that she found it quite awkward when students tried to get too friendly. She thought that was a red-flag for low competency. The participants indicated that there was, however, a certain level of connectivity needed to “understand their world.” Getting to know the students and understanding how extraneous factors might be affecting their performance is once again a balancing act. One participant described the need to have standards and a relationship, “[I] can’t treat everyone the same. I still expect the same competencies and level of safety but I need to establish a relationship to see what is going on – help them through it – and get results.” Many of the participants described their students from a holistic perspective, not just as a set of skills to be passed or failed. From a holistic perspective advisors often attributed low performance to “emotional baggage and other issues behind the incompetence.” In most cases, the connectivity within the relationship allowed the advisor special access to understand why the student was not successful. Whether it was mental health issues, addictions or other issues, the reason may not have affected the final outcome, but it made the process of understanding the students’ failure or near failure acceptable.

Of course, all relationships are not forged easily and almost all the participants referred to the potential for personality clashes. Obviously, negotiating a situation where the personalities are not managing to connect is challenging. At the same time, one education participant explained the “primary concern is learning but personality glitches they should never lead to failure in internship.”

The conceptualization of the teacher-student relationship in higher education is difficult as the field is under-explored, multi-dimensional and context-dependent (Ralph & Walker, 2010; Raufelder, Bulowski, & Mohr, 2013). Although there have been a few qualitative studies that have focused on the teacher-student relationship as a variable of interest, most qualitative studies do not designate the teacher-student relationship as a variable of interest nor in quantitative studies as a

dependent variable, but rather tend to designate the teacher-student relationship as an explanatory variable to explain student outcomes. Research for both students and teachers suggest that those in the social sciences or helping professions such as psychology, education, social work (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000) rate the importance of the teacher-student relationship higher than students in fields such as business administration and biology (Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, Komulainen, & Hirsto, 2010).

At the macro level: The teacher-student relationship is affected by language. One participant suggested that the language that we use, particularly when field advisors are giving feedback can often be disguised with a tone of politeness and respect for the students' feelings. Statements that are made in the conditional tense, as if to suggest the statements are suggestions, rather than imperatives permits a "niceness" and "comfort" in the relationship but may not accurately communicate the intended message. The root of this polite language may be based in social norms that hold the way we communicate in relationships in high regard. In other words, the language and tone that we use may be a choice to adhere to social norms, rather than genuine sentiments, particularly if those sentiments have a negative message.

The participants also suggested that it is a balancing act to know how to be "forceful enough" and yet still supportive of the student's growth. Several of the nursing participants described how they tried to overcome the tendency for politeness by using a particular brisk tone to clearly communicate "this is what I want." One participant stated that when it came to difficult conversations, she became almost scripted. Others role-played in their minds, how to communicate effectively – avoiding the conditional tone but maintaining respect for the student. The faculty of nursing also provided "literal descriptors" a rubric of sorts, describing in specific terms the level of the student's performance. Using the literal descriptors, not only in written but also in verbal feedback, provided the nurses with a way to clearly communicate their observations and avoid the inclination to situate the feedback in a socially acceptable polite manner.

An Emerging Model

Figure 1 represents the findings of this study as an emerging theoretical model, offering a possible heuristic to understand the process field advisors may experience when assessing complex situations where pre-service students appear to be struggling to meet program requirements. Positioned at the middle of this model, the practicum student is the focus and central aspect. The model depicts all five themes: (a) professional competency, (b) professional suitability, (c) accountability to the program, (d) accountability to the profession, and (e) the teacher-student relationship.

Four of the five themes (professional competency, suitability to the profession, accountability to the profession, and accountability to the program) form each quadrant in the presenting model. The fifth and global theme, the teacher-student relationship, encircles the four aforementioned themes. Underpinning the circular model are three ovals, each reflecting broader dimensions in a trans-disciplinary approach. The contextual and the developmental dimensions (Ambrosetti et al., 2014) acknowledge that the field placements occur in various contexts and that the evaluation must be developmentally appropriate for the stage of the practicum student. Also, the complexity oval signifies other unnamed factors such as the experience of a field advisor, or personality types that were not studied in this research but may also be determining factors.

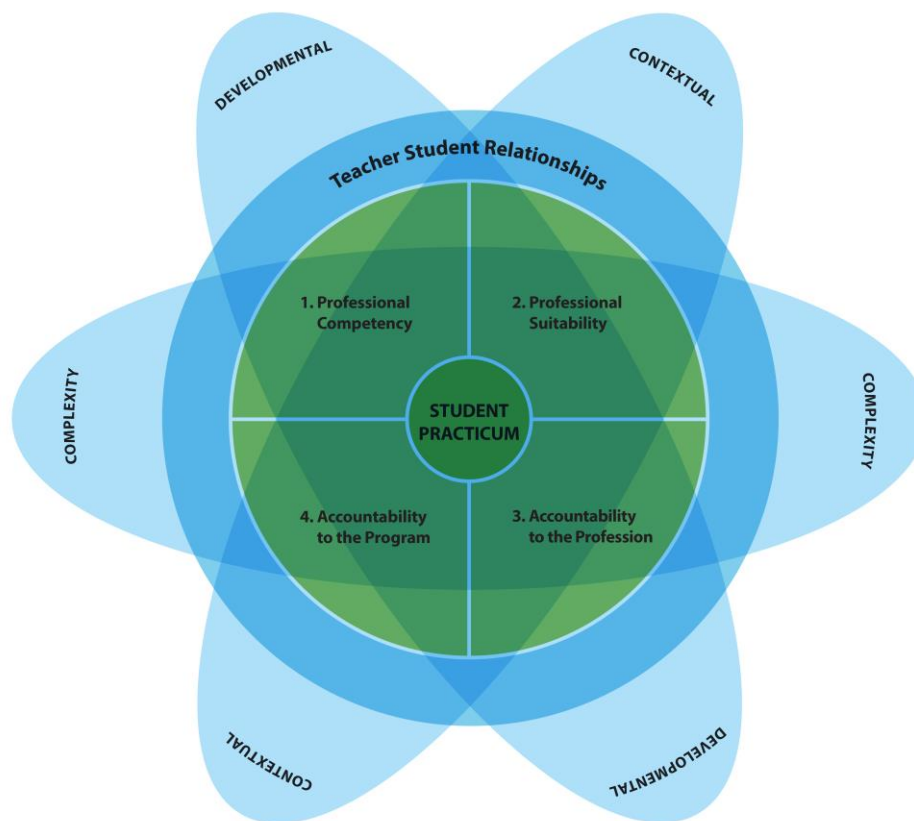


Figure 1. Transdisciplinary model for assessing students in complex field placements.

Benefits of a Trans-disciplinary Model

Although the field placement context differed, the findings of this study suggest that there are many common experiences among social work, nursing, and education field placements. It might be reassuring for field advisors, who are contemplating how to address concerns related to their practicum students, to know that their unease may be understood and analyzed from a much broader trans-disciplinary perspective, rather than considering it a personal or professional mentoring failure. In our particular context, the trans-disciplinary nature of these findings may lead to more meaningful, frequent, and perhaps even more economical common professional development opportunities with field advisors to better prepare them in their role as mentors and evaluators.

The emerging model demonstrates that there are common themes that can provide a basis for further discussion, offer a more robust analysis, and perhaps a better evaluation of the situation. For example, field advisors might consider whether a lack of the teacher-student relationship between the practicum student and the field advisor has influenced their assessment of the student's field placement. This study contributes to other related empirical research that suggests that positive the teacher-student relationship contributes to achievement (Halawah, 2006), engagement (Zepke & Leach, 2010) motivation (Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009), and commitment (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). We suggest further research is needed to further develop and deepen

the understanding of assessment in students that may be struggling in field placements. A potential study might involve trans-disciplinary professions using this model as a heuristic to understand their experiences during the assessment process in order to get feedback regarding the model's utility. If the model is field tested in this way, it may be validated, refined or revised to better meet the needs of field advisors from all three professions.

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