Surveillance and silence: assessing difficult social work placements

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Background:Studies to date have highlighted a number of key factors in the assessment of difficult social work placements including: the need for adequate professional formation; communication; the changing social work education framework; and the influence of the wider social work context. Factors less widely examined are the perceptions of some practice educators that the assessment of placement students operates in a wider context of surveillance and scrutiny by a range of stakeholders. Their experience of struggling to assess challenging students within complicated environments is less evident in the literature.

Methods:A dual strand qualitative research methodology was used, with semi-structured recorded interviews (15) of practice educators and university-based tutors and two focus groups of practice educators in the South of England.Results:The study found a sense of uncomfortable oversight from a variety of external bodies. Practice educators identified the following issues as being of primary importance in their experience of a difficult or failing student placement: communication; professionalism; values; insight; impact; and most importantly, engagement and orientation towards practice. Practice educators struggled to verbalise their concerns about students, and appeared concerned with the sensation of surveillance.

Conclusions:There appears to be a need to create a safe discursive space for conversations to take place during the challenging placement and suggest that a reduction in perceptions of surveillance and enhanced outcomes for students and practice educators will result. Such perceptions of surveillance can cause a discursive anxiety for practice educators and can inhibit key conversations between assessor and student, or inhibit robust assessment.