

“Ma non e’ lo stesso anche in Inghilterra?”: A comparative study of practice educators experiences of working with struggling and failing social work students in practice learning settings in the UK and Italy.

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Periods of assessed learning in practice are common requirements for qualifying social work students worldwide (Raymond, 2000; Shardlow and Doel, 2002). The ‘Practice Learning Opportunity’ as it is known in the UK, and ‘tirocinio di servizio sociale’ as it is referred to in Italy, are important sites of gatekeeping in preventing unsuitable people from becoming social workers (Finch and Taylor, 2013). The experience of assessing failing students in practice learning settings however, has been found internationally to be particularly stressful for practice educators in both social work and other professions (Gizara et al, 2004; Bogo et al, 2007; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2012). Given the importance of the assessment of students’ practice in promoting high standards of professional practice, this is an important area for research. Two qualitative studies comparatively explored UK and Italian field educators’ (26) experiences of working with struggling or failing social work students. In-depth interviews methods were used and the data was subsequently analysed using the Voice Centred Relational Method (Gilligan, 1982). The comparative nature of the study thus provided an opportunity to uncover hitherto taken for granted assumptions in the original UK study and uncover new insights. The findings highlighted similarities and differences in the narratives from the two countries. Similarities includes: unpleasant emotional experience of working with failing students, internalisation of the students failing as their own, perceptions that the universities hide negative information about students and lack of acknowledgement of the gatekeeping function. The differences include the levels of emotionality experienced, the way students were spoken about and the perceived role of the university. The research findings intend not only making explicit particular localised cultures of social work education, but they also aim to stimulate a broader debate that can be translated outside the two original national contexts in which they originated.

Keywords: comparative research, emotions, practice learning, practice educator, failing students