

“...there are students who should not be in social work and we have to make that decision” – Exploring social work tutors experiences of managing struggling or failing students in practice placements.

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In the UK, social work students are required to undertake 170 assessed days of practice. Tutors are required to undertake 2 placement visits and play an important gate keeping role, particularly when issues of failing students arise. The study emerged out of previous research undertaken by the author, which indicated the need to explore the tutor experience of working with failing students. Finch (2004) for example, revealed variations in tutors' understandings of their roles and Finch (2010), highlighted inconsistencies in tutors practice and conflictual relations between the field and the academy. The current study aimed at; exploring the social work tutor role and their experiences of managing failing students, identifying good practice and assessing the need for a larger study. The study was qualitative and influenced by practitioner-research paradigms (Shaw and Lunt, 2011) and practice-near approaches (Froggett & Briggs, 2012). Twelve tutors were interviewed. Participants were recruited directly and online via a bulletin board. The interviewees were drawn from universities across England. The data was analysed using the Voice Centred Relational method (Gilligan, 1982). Findings show that tutors are able to articulate the tasks of their roles when issues of failing students arise in practice learning settings although the experience is challenging. The challenges include: supporting practice educators and students, concerns about other tutors' practices, the difficulties in promoting appropriate professional standards and values within higher education contexts and frustrations with practice educators and placements. Only a quarter of the respondents however, articulated gate keeping responsibilities. Given the current reforms in social work education in England, with greater emphasis on threshold standards, the research is timely in terms of the critical consideration of the tutor role and the challenges inherent in promoting appropriate standards to ensure incompetent students do not become qualified practitioners.

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