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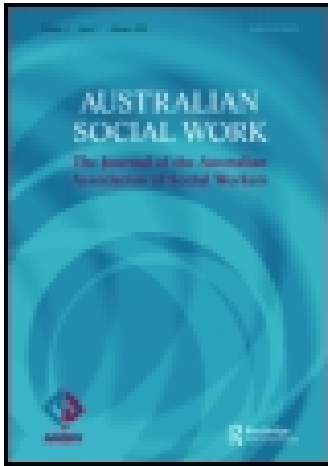
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“What Are They Really Doing?” An Exploration of Student Learning Activities in Field Placement

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Abstract

Social work students consistently identify their field placement as having the most impact on their learning. Despite this, research on learning activities used during placement and the impact on practice competency and social work identity is limited. This is the second paper from a research study exploring student experiences of learning on placement. Data were gathered from 263 social work students about 14 key learning activities they experienced during placement. The more regularly students engaged in learning activities with their social work supervisor, the more likely they were to report a sense of social work identity and feelings of practice competence. However, the regular use of learning activities varied widely between placements. Surprisingly, approximately half the students did not regularly have the opportunity to observe social work practice, have their practice observed, or to link social work theory and the Code of Ethics to their practice with their social work supervisor.

Keywords: Practice Learning; Practice Teaching; Social Work Field Placements

Social work field education is universally recognised as a key vehicle for transmitting core skills, knowledge, and professional values to emerging graduates (Barton, Bell, & Bowles, 2005; Bogo et al., 2004; Doel & Shardlow, 2002; Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001; Lam, Wong, & Leung, 2007; Lefevre, 2005; Teigiser, 2009). Understanding the role of social work and competence in practicing social work tasks have been identified in the literature as important aspects in the development of a professional identity and are key learning outcomes for field placement (Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Wilson, O'Connor, Walsh, & Kirby, 2009). Social work students have consistently described their field placement as the most significant and memorable component of their social work education (Garthwait, 2005; Maidment, 2006) and the value of practice learning continues to be recognised unanimously as an essential part of social work education (Sherer & Peleg-Oren, 2005).

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Educationally-focused supervision is provided by agency-based social workers who are guided by the university to assist students in achieving the educational objectives of the field program by providing appropriate learning tasks and evaluating how well the students achieved these (Bogo, 2006). The literature affirms that the field placement is an important site for learning where values and knowledge, skills and competencies, ethics, and sense of professional identity are developed. However, there is no Australian empirical work that looks at how teaching and learning activities are used by students and social work supervisors to describe and assess the nature and quality of student progress on placement. The aim of this paper is to report on a research project that assesses the type of learning activities that are used in field placements and to explore the relationship between these activities and outcomes in relation to student learning and competence.

Professional Framework for Learning on Placement

Social work student learning in the field placement is influenced by a number of regulatory policies, empirical evidence, and contemporary factors. Firstly, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) provides minimum standards and guidelines relating to field education in three main documents, namely the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (ASWEAS) (AASW, 2012), the *Code of Ethics* (AASW, 2010) and the *Practice Standards 2013* (AASW, 2013). The ASWEAS document (2012, p. 6) outlines that the main function and purpose of social work education “is to provide a rigorous program that results in graduates who are competent, effective, skilled, knowledge-based, ethically aware and confident practitioners”. The model of field education that the professional association uses to accredit and monitor all qualifying Bachelor and Master of Social Work courses is an integrated model where equal emphasis is placed upon aspects of knowing, understanding, and “doing” social work. Social work field education programs are encouraged to work in partnership with human service agencies and social work supervisors, to provide appropriate learning environments for students to prepare them as competent and professional practitioners (AASW, 2012).

There are a number of key guidelines and requirements outlined in ASWEAS Guideline 1.2: Guidance on Field Education Programs (AASW, 2012) that relate to learning in the field placement. These include the requirement that placements must be educationally viable (p. 3); that students are allocated a field educator who is suitably qualified, provides a minimum of 1.5 hours of formal supervision for each 35 hours of placement, and “ideally will be able to observe the students’ practice” (p. 5). Finally, the AASW states in the ASWEAS that “field education programs must employ strategies to ensure that students integrate social work knowledge, skills and values” (p. 13). While the essential requirements that any social work field education program must adhere to are set out in the ASWEAS, they do not provide any guidance about the specific learning strategies that would enhance professional learning in the field placement.

The AASW *Code of Ethics* (AASW, 2010) is the other professional framework that guides learning for students on placement. This document points out that field educators have a responsibility to include the profession's ethics and values as a component of their instruction and to ensure that students understand and act in accordance with the values of the Code as well as ensuring that field educators ensure that students are provided appropriate supervision, mentoring, guidance, and timely feedback (p. 35).

Effective Learning Strategies in Field Education

The literature also offers field education programs empirical evidence and a theoretical basis for the teaching and learning activities that guided students during their placements. The limited Australian and international literature identifies some key activities that promote effective student learning in the field placement. In essence, it recognises that placements should provide students with more than the opportunity to complete a range of learning activities and should incorporate other aspects of active teaching, such as giving feedback and creating an environment that motivates students to learn (Teater, 2011).

The relationship with the placement supervisor and access to learning opportunities have been two of the most commonly identified factors that promotes student learning on placement (Fortune et al., 2001; Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Todd & Schwartz, 2009). The quality of the supervisory relationship has been well documented as constituting a key influence on a student's learning and level of satisfaction (Deal & Clements, 2006; Fernandez, 1998; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). In addition, Fernandez (1998) found that students valued various components of the placement experience but the role of the social work supervisor was pivotal to student satisfaction with their learning. Students appreciated structured time for supervision and to examine skills, theory, values, and professional development. Student satisfaction with placement learning has also been associated with supervisors who actively involved their students in the learning process, and who provided instructive feedback to their students (Fortune et al., 2001; Kissman & Tran, 1990). Parker (2007) also acknowledged the importance of the student-supervisor relationship, the agency context and the structure and nature of the learning opportunities that students were exposed to. A more recent review of the literature of the factors contributing to a positive learning environment for health students found that most studies focused on the supervisory relationship or components of best practice such as the culture of learning and appropriate learning opportunities (Darcy Associates Consulting Services, 2009, p. 15).

Studies have indicated that social work student satisfaction with their placements has often been linked to what learning tasks they were exposed to. Maidment (2000) suggested that learning was enhanced when the student had access to relevant social work tasks, when the student's practice was observed, feedback was given, and where the field educator was accessible and able to assist in the integration of theory and

practice. Bogo (2006) identified the value of learning activities that provided students with the opportunity to observe their supervisor's practice and also to have their own work observed by their supervisor. A study by Fortune et al. (2001) also confirmed that students responded positively to learning activities that provided opportunities to see and work with professional role-models and that gave them contextual frameworks for what they were doing. Interestingly though, while observation was encouraged by schools of social work based on AASW guidelines, Maidment (2000) found that students reported a lack of observation of their practice by their social work supervisor. The usefulness of students' observation and discussion of practice with their social work supervisors or other staff or team members was reported by Wayne, Raskin, and Bogo (2010) as important to professional learning. One important study that contributed to this discussion was the work of Rogers and McDonald (1995) that looked at the teaching methods and content focus used in field placements and which aspects were most likely to prepare students for practice. They found that social work supervisors often used methods that were more expeditious and less time consuming and chose content focused on getting the job done, rather than selecting tasks for educative purposes.

Integrating social work theory and practice has been identified as a central task for a placement and the social work literature is replete with examples of conceptual linkage activities that promoted the integration of theory and field practice (Bogo & Vadya, 1998; Davys & Beddoe, 2010; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012). Knight (2000) identified the importance of encouraging students to make links between theory and the practice context, including an awareness of the student's classroom learning, and Teigiser (2009, p. 140) also argued that field placements should provide opportunity for the integration of practice and theory. However, despite it being a strongly sanctioned expectation of field placements (Knight, 2001), the integration appears to be "assumed, rather than demonstrated" and there is little empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of the methods employed to achieve this outcome (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012, p. 919) or the frequency of their use in the field placement. Similarly, Maidment (2000) commented on the unstructured approach to teaching the integration of theory and practice to students during the social work field placement.

Finally, understanding the organisational context (Nixon & Murr, 2006) and orientation to the agency are two other essential placement activities identified in the literature as being important for student learning, with Knight (2001) suggesting that student learning was enhanced when they were assisted to understand how their placement agency functioned or had participated in orientation activities.

The Educational and Industry Context

There are also a number of contextual factors that impact on the capacity of field placements to provide high quality teaching and learning environments for students. Training institutions have been under considerable pressure to produce greater

numbers of well-educated, highly competent health and human service professionals to meet changing community demands (Department of Human Services, 2007). The compulsory nature of field placement means that a significant share of responsibility for training social work students rely on an already over-burdened health and welfare service sector. However, the capacity of the field to accommodate the rising number of students requiring clinical placements has been stretched in the last five years as a consequence of the forecasted workforce shortage that resulted in government policy that encouraged the tertiary sector to increase enrolments in health courses, such as social work (Committee of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009; Department of Human Services, 2007). This unregulated growth in Australian social work programs saw the number of enrolled Bachelor of Social Work students doubling from 3,389 to 6,787 between 1989 to 2006 (Healy & Lonne, 2010), which Karger (2012, p. 324) called a “race to the bottom” where the intense competition between social work programs resulted in lowered academic admission standards. Internationally, the need to provide assurance to the industry that professional social workers are “fit for practice” saw more government initiated intervention into social work education curriculum and refocused attention on competence-based approaches (Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Hay & O’Donoghue, 2009; Healy & Meagher, 2007; Wilson, Walsh, & Kirby, 2008). Despite the professional value of offering a social work placement, there was also little recognition of the resource implications of providing this opportunity within the agency context and it has been “rare for field teaching to be recognised in workload allocation” of field placement supervisors (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012, p. 925).

While there have been some studies that have focused on individual learning activities in field placement, understanding how students are socialised into the profession and acquire, apply, and develop professional knowledge and expertise remains an underdeveloped area of research (Richards, Ruch, & Trevithick, 2005; Wilson & Kelly, 2010, p. 2432). This study was part of a larger research project that identified different models of supervision and student satisfaction with their learning experiences and the supervision they received on placement (Cleak & Smith, 2012). This paper focuses on the students’ experiences of the key learning activities as outlined in the literature and the AASW documents. A secondary aim of this study was to explore the relationship between the regularity of learning activities and feelings of practice competence and a sense of social work identity. The study has the potential to improve understanding of the field education context and to make a contribution to developing knowledge of how to support and prepare social work supervisors in their teaching and learning role with social work students in the field placement.

Method

This study used a cross-sectional, retrospective survey to explore social work students’ experiences of the learning activities used by their social work supervisors during

their field placement. The survey was undertaken in 2006–2007 using a written, self-administered questionnaire comprising a range of closed and open-ended questions. Ethics approval was received from the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (University of Tasmania) and the Human Ethics Committee (La Trobe University).

Sampling, Recruitment, and Administration

All third and final year Bachelor of Social Work students from the University of Tasmania and the Bundoora and Bendigo campuses of La Trobe University, who had completed at least one field placement in 2006–2007, were invited to participate in this study. Questionnaires were distributed to students during class attendance at the various university campuses, after the completion of their social work placements. Students were given a brief overview of the research project and were informed that they were under no obligation to participate and that participation in the study would be anonymous. A strong response rate (75%) was obtained from the 349 students who were enrolled in field education programs in 2006–2007 at the three campuses, giving a total of 263 respondents. Seventy-seven percent ($n = 203$) of the respondents were enrolled at La Trobe University and 23% ($n = 60$) were students of the University of Tasmania, with 75% ($n = 197$) of students reporting on their first fieldwork placement, 25% ($n = 65$) reporting on their final placement and one student on a repeat or third placement. The majority of students were full-time ($n = 226$, 86%), with 14% ($n = 37$) part-time.

Survey Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed by the first two authors and collected information about four areas: student characteristics (including university campus, first or second placement, full- or part-time); supervision structure; student experience of 14 key learning activities used by their social work supervisors; and placement learning outcomes (specifically, feelings of practice competence and a sense of social work identity). The survey questions were developed by the researchers from a review and analysis of available literature about social work field placement (including AASW documents), with particular reference to the learning activities used by social work supervisors and the intended learning outcomes of placement. Further information about the survey questions is provided below. The questionnaire was piloted with three final year students and minor modifications were made as a result of their feedback. The data regarding supervision structures have been reported elsewhere (Cleak & Smith, 2012) and are not included in the analysis presented in this paper.

Table 1 presents the 14 learning activities included in the survey questionnaire. Students were asked to record the extent to which they engaged in each learning activity with their social work supervisor using a 4-point Likert scale of “not at all”, “rarely”, “sometimes” or “regularly”. In the questionnaire, the term “social work

Table 1 Student Learning Activities on Placement

Learning activity
1. Assisted to understand agency mission
2. Oriented to agency service delivery protocols
3. Prepared and assisted to learn new skills
4. Observed practice of social workers in agency
5. Practice of student was observed
6. Reflected on practice skills
7. Given constructive feedback about progress
8. Discussed feelings
9. Reflected critically about role of social work
10. Reflect on own social work practice
11. Provided with weekly social work supervision
12. Given reading material
13. Linked practice to AASW <i>Code of Ethics</i>
14. Linked practice to theory

supervisor” was defined as a qualified social work practitioner with two or more years practice experience who:

- had primary responsibility for the placement learning experiences;
- provided the student with social work supervision; and
- assessed the student’s overall placement progress.

The questionnaire also assessed the student’s rating of their achievement of two key learning outcomes for field placement: the development of a sense of social work identity, and feelings of practice competence. In this survey, these outcomes were operationalised into two statements with respondents being asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with each statement using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

- (1) “By the end of placement I understood the unique role of social work as a profession”; and
- (2) “By the end of placement I began to feel some competence in practicing social work interventions”.

In addition, the questionnaire also provided space for respondents to record comments about their experience of the learning activities and their experience of supervision more generally, which were useful in beginning to understand the learning activities experienced by students on placement and add depth to the quantitative statistics.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were undertaken using SPSS (IBM, SPSS Statistics Version 20, Armonk, NY). The level of missing data on survey items ranged from none for the

demographic items through to 16% for one of the learning activities; for most items, the level of missing data was less than 10% of responses. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each of the 14 learning activities. An “overall regularity of learning activities” score was computed as the sum of the 14 individual learning activity scores, resulting in a scale with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.92, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Chi-square (χ^2) analyses were conducted to test for associations between the “overall regularity of learning activities” score and the two learning outcomes (“feelings of practice competence” and a “sense of social work identity”). To undertake these analyses, the responses for the outcome variables “feelings of practice competence” and “a sense of social work identity” were dichotomised into “yes” (strongly agree, agree) and “no” (strongly disagree, disagree). In addition, the “overall regularity of learning activities” scores were grouped into “low regularity”, “medium regularity”, and “high regularity” using tertile cut-offs to create three equally-sized groups for comparison. Chi-square (χ^2) analyses were also undertaken to test for differences in the overall pattern of responses to the questions about placement learning activities and learning outcomes in terms of student characteristics such as university campus and placement type. It was not possible to reliably test for differences between supervision structures on these variables due to small numbers. Statistical significance was set at 95% probability.

The responses to the open-ended questions were analysed using a simple content analysis and report on the importance of regularly receiving learning strategies and the impact on students’ sense of practice competence and professional identity. Caution was needed when interpreting these comments, as a recorded response in this section of the questionnaire was optional, resulting in comments being recorded by only 34% of participants.

Findings

The following section reports on the quantitative and qualitative findings in relation to the two aims of the study: (a) to undertake an audit of the extent of engagement with key learning activities experienced by social work students on placement; and (b) to explore the relationship between the regularity of learning activities and feelings of practice competence and a sense of social work identity. The results for the whole student cohort are reported together as there were no significant differences in the overall pattern of responses to the questions about placement learning activities and learning outcomes in terms of student characteristics (university campus, first or second placement, full- or part-time), using chi-square (χ^2) analyses.

A Snapshot of Learning Activities Experienced by Students on Placement

Figure 1 shows the proportion of students who reported regularly receiving each of the 14 individual learning activities from their social work supervisor, in order from highest to lowest.

As Figure 1 indicates, the learning activities that most students reported experiencing regularly were: “reflected on practice skills” (73%) and “provided with weekly social work supervision” (72%). Other activities experienced regularly by around two-thirds of students were: “discussed feelings” (66%); “given constructive feedback about progress” (66%); “reflected on own social work practice” (65%); and “prepared and assisted to learn new skills” (64%). The learning activity least experienced regularly (33%) was “practice was observed”. Further, as Table 2 shows, 36% of students reported that their “practice was observed” either rarely or not at all and “observing the practice of social workers in the agency” happened rarely or not at all for 24% of students. Less than half of the students regularly experienced learning activities related to “conceptualising” their practice: over 25% of the students reported that they rarely or never “linked practice to the *Code of Ethics*” and 22% of students reported that they rarely or never “linked practice to theory”. Additional analysis revealed that just 30 students (15%) reported that they regularly received all 14 learning activities.

While these statistics provide a snapshot of how regularly students experienced the range of learning activities on placement, the positive impact of regularly engaging with these learning activities for students was made clear in their responses to the open-ended questions in the survey. Formal social work supervision appeared to be

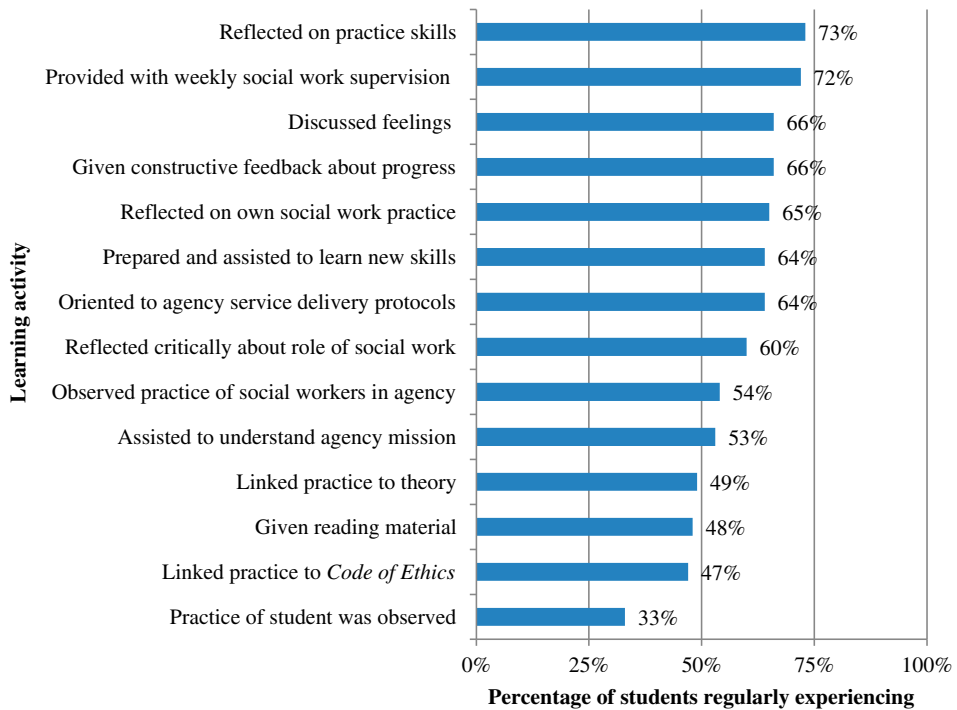


Figure 1 Proportion of social work students regularly experiencing key learning activities on placement

Table 2 Regularity of Experiencing Learning Activities on Placement

Learning activity	Regularity of learning activity				Total
	Regularly	Sometimes	Rarely	Not at all	
Reflected on practice skills	179 (73%)	39 (16%)	21 (8%)	7 (3%)	246 (100%)
Provided with weekly social work supervision	176 (72%)	39 (16%)	22 (9%)	9 (3%)	246 (100%)
Discussed feelings	163 (66%)	54 (22%)	21 (9%)	9 (3%)	247 (100%)
Given constructive feedback about progress	165 (66%)	50 (20%)	24 (10%)	11 (4%)	250 (100%)
Reflected on own social work practice	162 (65%)	50 (20%)	30 (12%)	7 (3%)	249 (100%)
Prepared and assisted to learn new skills	154 (64%)	56 (23%)	19 (8%)	11 (5%)	240 (100%)
Oriented to agency service delivery protocols	146 (64%)	56 (25%)	15 (6%)	12 (5%)	229 (100%)
Reflected critically about role of social work	151 (60%)	66 (26%)	26 (11%)	8 (3%)	251 (100%)
Observed practice of social workers in agency	124 (54%)	50 (22%)	29 (13%)	25 (11%)	228 (100%)
Assisted to understand agency mission	125 (53%)	72 (31%)	24 (10%)	13 (6%)	234 (100%)
Linked practice to theory	123 (49%)	74 (29%)	42 (17%)	12 (5%)	251 (100%)
Given reading material	114 (48%)	75 (31%)	33 (14%)	17 (7%)	239 (100%)
Linked practice to <i>Code of Ethics</i>	117 (47%)	70 (28%)	49 (19%)	15 (6%)	251 (100%)
Practice of student was observed	72 (33%)	70 (31%)	35 (16%)	44 (20%)	221 (100%)

the “forum” that students identified as particularly important along with opportunities to discuss the links between theory and practice: “Weekly supervision was crucial to my learning about social work”; “Supervision was fantastic in helping me reflect on social work practice and increased my understanding of the role and what social workers are trying to achieve”; “We discussed how to integrate theory into practice and used examples from my own case load to reflect on theory. I learnt a lot from this”; “The theory stuff was amazing. I learnt so much about social work from them both”.

On the other hand, for the many students who did not regularly engage in the learning activities (as shown in Table 2), this lack of engagement negatively impacted on them and their learning: “I rarely saw my supervisor which I believe affected my learning; felt more confused after supervision when I did have it”; “No adequate orientation, this created confusion as to my role and expectations of me”; “I didn’t get to observe social workers in practice. Even with two weeks left to go in my placement and I still had not observed a social worker at work, except for reading emails and drinking coffee”; “I wasn’t observed, even though I asked for it ... I needed this to get positive and negative feedback as a student to learn”.

Issues about the quality of engagement with supervisors around the learning activities were also raised by some students, particularly the knowledge and

confidence of supervisors with social work theory and the style of feedback provided: “My supervisor was not confident with the theoretical side of things”; “Supervisor unclear about practice models and theory ... was difficult for me to gain any insight”; “My supervisor rarely talked about them [ethics]”; “Supervisor was harsh in her feedback, resulting in me doubting my abilities”.

Feelings of Practice Competence and Sense of Social Work Identity: Link with Learning Activities

Overall, almost 90% of students reported feeling competent about their practice and 90% reported having a sense of social work identity (Table 3). However, when the overall regularity of learning activities on placement was taken into account, a more nuanced picture emerged. As Table 3 shows, while nearly all students (99%) with a “high regularity” score reported feeling competent and having a sense of social work identity, only 77% of students with a “low regularity” score reported feeling competent and only 72% reported having a sense of social work identity. These differences were statistically significant. This suggested that practice competence and a sense of social work identity were both linked to the overall regularity of learning activities received from social work supervisors on placement.

The students’ responses to the open-ended survey questions also provided evidence of a positive relationship between regular engagement with the learning activities and the development of practice competence and a sense of social work identity: “Approachable, open door policy for discussion and debriefing made this learning experience invaluable. I learnt heaps about social work practice”; “This was a fantastic placement and I value and appreciate the time my supervisor spent in supporting and nurturing my professional growth”. In contrast, but congruent with results presented in Table 3, students also commented on how a lack of regular engagement with learning activities and supervision led to a lack of a sense of practice competence and limited knowledge of the social work profession: “Although I repeatedly asked, I did not observe my supervisor work with clients. I lacked confidence in my practice and feelings of competency because of this”; “Overall only received 3 supervisions in

Table 3 Regularity of Learning Activities and Feelings of Practice Competence and a Sense of Social Work Identity

Overall regularity score	Feelings of practice competence?			Sense of social work identity?		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Low regularity	47 (77%)	14 (23%)	61 (100%)	43 (72%)	17 (28%)	60 (100%)
Medium regularity	63 (93%)	5 (7%)	68 (100%)	67 (99%)	1 (1%)	68 (100%)
High regularity	66 (99%)	1 (1%)	67 (100%)	66 (99%)	1 (1%)	67 (100%)
Total	176 (90%)	20 (10%)	196 (100%)	176 (90%)	19 (10%)	195 (100%)
	$\chi^2 = 16.97, df = 2^*$			$\chi^2 = 34.06, df = 2^*$		

* $p < .001$; df = degrees of freedom.

placement and because I was not in a social work agency I feel I didn't learn much about social work as a profession".

Discussion

This research supports previous studies that capable supervision results in students feeling more confident, competent, and empowered (Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Maidment, 2000). Further, it has reinforced the importance of student exposure to appropriate learning opportunities to socialise students into the profession and to ensure they acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and values (Bogo et al., 2004; Wilson & Kelly, 2010).

Of the 14 learning activities surveyed in this research, regular supervision and reflecting on practice skills were the most commonly used learning activities reported by students. These learning techniques have been consistently identified in the literature as key components of professional practice (Cleak & Wilson, 2013; Rogers & McDonald, 1995; Schön, 1987). Regular supervision by an experienced social work practitioner and reflection on practice are core components of successful student learning on placement. The comments made by students in this study also reinforce the importance of learning activities in developing a feeling of competency and social work identity (Knight, 2000; Richards et al., 2005; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). However, the use of these learning activities falls short of current, basic AASW expectations for student learning in the field placement. In spite of the importance of supervision to student learning, and ASWEAS (AASW, 2012, p. 5) guidelines requiring social work supervisors to provide 1.5 hours formal supervision per week in the field placement, receiving regular supervision was only experienced by 70% of students. Further, these guidelines suggest that it is unacceptable for almost 13% of students to be receiving regular supervision rarely or not at all.

The snapshot of the learning activities identifies a variable use across all learning activities. Only a very small percentage of students reported that they regularly experienced using all 14 learning activities during their placement, particularly students' access to being observed by and observing their social work supervisors' practice. The opportunity for students to observe modelling of professional practice by their social work supervisors has been identified as an essential and useful learning strategy to promote social work identity and competence (Fortune et al., 2001). The low rate of observing student practice and providing students with the opportunity to regularly observe social work practice is particularly puzzling, as observational learning opportunities enhance student learning as reported in the literature (Fortune et al., 2001; Maidment, 2000). There is also a professional requirement that the social work supervisor observes the student undertaking direct practice (AASW, 2012, p. 5). Although there may be other methods of assessing students' skills, the infrequency of direct observation of students by their social work supervisor may be deemed ethically questionable as it raises uncertainty about how a supervisor can assess a student's readiness to practice without direct observation of their skills. Maidment

(2000) has suggested that a possible explanation for the reticence by supervisors to observe could be explained by a lack of exposure to this form of evaluation themselves, time constraints, a lack of a trusting relationship, or inadequate training. These findings are also consistent with a study by Rogers and McDonald (1995) that suggested that supervisors can be selective of using teaching activities that are more expedient and less time consuming.

For many students in this study, linking social work practice to theory and to the AASW *Code of Ethics* was not a regular occurrence, even though they are important principles embodied in the ASWEAS policies (AASW, 2012) and the AASW *Practice Standards* (AASW, 2013) and were identified by King, Mackay, and Lishman (2002) as important in the role of practice teachers in the field placement context. The problematic relationship between theory and practice has been a significant leitmotif of academic debate in social work education (Bogo et al., 2004; Knight, 2001; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Parton, 2000; Wilson & Kelly, 2010) and it is perhaps not surprising that this learning strategy was one of the least used by students and social work supervisors on placement.

Social work supervisors are required to ensure that the profession's ethical values and responsibilities are a part of student learning on placement and that social work students and social workers under their supervision act in accordance with the values of the AASW. Given the importance of the *Code of Ethics* to social work practice, it is particularly concerning that 22% of students reported that their social work supervisors rarely or never linked the student's practice to the *Code of Ethics* and less than half the students in this study reported experiencing linking their practice to the *Code of Ethics* on a regular basis.

This study raises some important questions for consideration in relation to field education and while the variability in the students' experience of learning activities is alarming, it is perhaps not surprising. While the AASW *Practice Standards* (AASW, 2013) provide a "standard" for assessment of students in the field, that is, what students learn, they do not provide a comprehensive framework to guide the provision of a quality learning environment for how they learn. Similarly, the AASW accreditation document (AASW, 2012) outlines a number of broad statements in relation to expectations for the supervisors' responsibilities and qualifications, such as expected hours of supervision and undertaking of basic training, but fail to set standards for supervision or define what are quality learning activities. The findings from this study are consistent with a United Kingdom report by Hubbard and Kitchin (2010) that noted that a lack of any single nationally adopted set of standards by which to measure and develop the quality of practice learning was proving problematic to their field education programs. Further investigation about the impact of the agency context on the type of learning opportunities that are offered to students is warranted to assess if some settings prefer certain learning activities because they may be more time efficient or more appropriate to their service delivery model (Bogo, 2006). Different supervision models, such as external supervision or group supervision could

also impact on the placements' capacity to offer certain types of learning activities and could be the focus of further research.

The results of this study need to be seen in the context of a number of limitations. The study used a nonprobability, convenience sampling technique in selecting the survey sites. While a convenience sample is reported to be the least likely of any technique to produce a representative sample (De Vaus, 2002), the entry requirements for students into social work programs as well as AASW accreditation standards for placements, suggest that the students from these two schools of social work would be similar to students from the other 26 social work programs in Australia and would have experienced similar learning activities on their field placements, thus some claim to representativeness is argued. The retrospective nature of the study meant that while some participants answered the questionnaire immediately after their placement had finished, others answered the questionnaire up to six months after the placement had ended, and thus relied on memory recall. The placement experience has been identified as the most memorable component of the social work course (Maidment, 2006) and thus memory recall in relation to experiences on placement is thought to have had minimal impact in this sample. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study remain robust, due to the relatively large sample size and the strong response rate from two institutions and three university campuses.

There are also another two areas that would have been useful to explore. Firstly, it would have been valuable to have identified the agency setting where the student was placed as it could have explained some of the different activities that were offered to students and may have recognised some trends in what learning opportunities were being offered. Secondly, the way that the questionnaire was constructed prevented the research from asking questions that allowed a comparison between the different models of supervision identified in the earlier study and the different kinds of learning activities offered (Cleak & Smith, 2012).

Conclusion

Field education programs are facing increased pressure to locate greater numbers of quality placements in an already over-burdened health and community service sector which cannot always prioritise student learning needs above the agency's contracted need for service delivery. This study has provided clear evidence that many students are not engaging in important learning activities with their social work supervisors on a regular basis and that this negatively impacts on their sense of social work identity and feelings of practice competence. Further research is required to identify which learning activities are the most important for the development of practice competence and a sense social work identity, and to explore why students are experiencing such a variance in learning activities during their field placement.

This study also provides support for the development of "best practice" standards for teaching and learning in the field placement and would be a useful addition to the

AASW *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (ASWEAS). This exploratory study could provide a basis for further research to identify quality teaching and learning processes that produce competent and confident graduates with a strong sense of social work identity, particularly at a time when there is increasing pressure from industry to graduate professional social workers who are ready and competent to practice.

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