



The Vital Role of Field Supervisors' Perspectives: Connecting the Field Setting to Social Work Competencies

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Abstract

Field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education, yet there has been criticism by field education scholars regarding its assessment and evaluation. In this qualitative inquiry, I used focus groups to inquire about how field supervisors understood educational competencies as applied to their students. Over half of the themes that emerged were associated with self-reflection, interpersonal challenge, or emotional readiness. Recentering the perspectives of field supervisors may provide new avenues to improve field assessment and evaluation.

Keywords: field education; field supervision; competencies; social work education

According to the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditations Standards (EPAS), field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education, and is defined as "elements of instruction and of socialization that teach future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline – to think, to perform, and to act ethically and with integrity" (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 12). In other words, field education is the connective experience that brings the classroom and social work application together for the student. The field experience for students also consists of the vital guidance and evaluation of field supervisors, who often are volunteers, within their field placement.

Current EPAS standards guiding the field experience are consistent with a competency-based framework that focuses on educational outcomes rather than the delivery of specific content, competency being defined as the "ability to do a task effectively" (Drisko, 2014, p. 416). The nine current core competencies are holistic in

nature, with knowledge, values, and skills embedded in the competencies' descriptions (CSWE, 2015; Drisko, 2015). Even with extensive definitions of the EPAS standards, however, gaps in the full realization of the aims of competency-based education in social work remain. For example, various concerns regarding field education as the signature pedagogy have been examined by scholars (Wayne et al., 2010). Schulman (2005) identified specific criteria for a signature pedagogy which challenge the claim that field education can be the signature pedagogy of the social work profession. For example, are there similar habits and rituals being trained across settings? Are students' skills being observed by their supervisors? Is there peer accountability, as is often found in legal and medical training? Is there a degree of "uncertainty, visibility, and accountability...[that] raise the emotional states of the pedagogical encounters" (p. 57)? Schulman (2005) suggested that in order for field education to be considered a signature pedagogy, the learning experiences it provides must be accountable by supervisors, be sufficiently intense, and be consistent with the training of peers.

The field learning contract used by students, field supervisors, and the educational program has been a core element for addressing these concerns, because the learning contract can connect classroom objectives, field experiences, and accreditation expectations (Boitel & Fromm, 2014). The competency-based language in the field learning contract can address the issue of setting common expectations, yet it can also provide the flexibility necessary given a diversity of population groups and settings. For example, the accreditation competency specific to assessment does not dictate the method of assessment, as methods can differ from setting to setting. However, the field learning contract could conceptualize and provide guidance about *how* the assessment might be done. For example, if a student conducted assessments for potential Head Start families in their internship, field learning contracts could operationalize the attributes of an inadequate, adequate, or excellent assessment. While flexibility can be seen as advantageous, it can threaten the consistency of competencies across field settings.

While the field learning contract, with articulated behaviors, holds promise in addressing the development of learning experiences at the student level, field supervisors have had concerns about their role in evaluating students. As Bogo et al. (2007) noted, field supervisors can be uncomfortable with methods that "grade, rank, categorize, or rate students" (p. 107), particularly with students who are not responsive to feedback. This should not be surprising, given that their training is likely to be specific to providing services to clients rather than providing assessment and evaluation (Cooper-Bolinskey & Napier, 2014). In an analysis of multiple studies, field supervisors found facilitating learning was the most rewarding aspect of supervision, whereas addressing problematic behaviors with students was particularly challenging. It seems negative feedback often countered the strength-based and empowerment perspectives of field supervisors (Bogo et al., 2007).

Other challenges are present as field supervisors evaluate students, and, consequently, the respective social work programs. At the student level, various incidents occurring in close proximity to the evaluation period could unduly impact an accurate evaluation of student skills. In addition, concerns about inter-rater variance remain, because it is unrealistic that a common numerical tool can be calibrated among a diversity of field supervisors serving different population groups within different settings (Cooper-Bolinskey & Napier, 2014). As Bogo (2010) noted, evaluations also tend to reflect the preferred models of the supervisors rather than the educational priorities and mission of the specific social work program.

Nevertheless, evaluation and feedback from field supervisors is vital to the effectiveness of the competency-based model. Kourgiantakis et al. (2019) noted the importance of direct observation with feedback to improving student learning. Supervisors, being embedded in field settings, have both the professional credibility and the ability to provide timely and relevant feedback. Drisko (2014), in examining the work of McClelland (1973), presented some vital criteria that underpin the development and evaluation of competencies: (1) clusters of competencies should relate to “real-life” outcomes; (2) measurement should occur in actual settings (ecological validity); (3) evaluation should be spontaneous or unplanned; (4) communication of quality performance should be communicated to the learner; and (5) improved outcomes should be correlated with greater wisdom and performance. These criteria demonstrate the importance of field supervisors, who witness these professional behaviors directly, in actual social work settings.

Despite field supervisors being vital to field education, there is a surprising lack of knowledge about how competencies are conceptualized by field supervisors. Despite a request by Boitel and Fromm (2014) for top-down leadership from the CSWE to provide training that could help field supervisors better understand their role, there is a lack of research examining how field supervisors understand and conceptualize social work competencies. My inquiry conducted a bottom-up qualitative assessment of how field supervisors understand EPAS competencies, to give our program greater clarity about the perspectives of these important stakeholders. This research had three overarching aims:

- To explore how field supervisors conceptualize competencies, detailing examples of how they see these skills in the field;
- To build a community of field supervisors by conducting the inquiry in a focus group setting;
- To provide research results that can be examined by field stakeholders to improve alignment of field, classroom, and profession.

Methods

Researcher Description

I have been tenure-track faculty for 15 years, have taught seminar courses for both undergraduate and graduate social work students at two different academic institutions, and have extensive experience visiting field settings to discuss the field experience and the learning contract between the students and field supervisors. Prior to this inquiry, I have found that many field supervisors seem daunted by the extensive nature of the competencies and descriptions of practice behaviors in the field learning contracts.

Participants

Two of the nine supervisors in the focus groups had been prior students in some of my classes. Field supervisors were also alumnae of our undergraduate and graduate programs. These factors could have provided a “halo effect” whereby criticism of our program or students could have been difficult to voice due to their allegiance to the program or prior relationships with me. Efforts were made to minimize this issue, as the conceptualization of competencies was the focus of inquiry rather than a global evaluation of our program, faculty, or specific students. Of additional note, our field supervisors do not receive any stipends or benefits for their role in providing field supervision to our students.

Participant Design and Recruitment

An e-mail list was obtained from the department's field director that consisted of 37 individuals currently conducting field supervision for BSW and/or MSW students. Ten individuals responded with interest in participating in the 90–120-minute focus group, with nine being able to make one of the two meetings. Two qualitative focus groups were conducted in July ($n = 4$) and August ($n = 5$) of 2021. Video-conferencing software (Zoom) was used to record and transcribe the conversations of these focus groups.

To improve flexibility in participation, supervisors were not asked additional demographic information within the focus groups, nor did they submit additional documents regarding their demographic information or work experiences. Most participants did mention their employment status spontaneously, with field supervisors working in a range of social services including school social work, juvenile justice, child welfare, and homeless services. All field supervisors had maintained the relevant social work degree required to supervise social work field students. Some supervisors could have recently served both BSW and MSW students. An incentive of

a \$25 Amazon gift card was provided for participation. The Institutional Review Board at my institution approved the procedures for this study.

Data Collection

The focus groups were intended to provide feedback to our department about how field supervisors interpret competencies in the field settings. While I did not use additional coders to examine focus group transcripts, this article will be shared with field stakeholders within our program to elicit additional feedback, and with the field director to consider changes to field supervisor training. Field supervisors reflected on the following nine core competencies (CSWE, 2015):

1. Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior
2. Engage diversity and difference in practice
3. Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice
4. Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice
5. Engage in policy practice
6. Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
7. Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
8. Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
9. Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities

After I read each of the competencies, without providing any additional definitions or examples, three questions served as the preliminary interview guide:

1. How do your students exhibit [x] competency?
2. In what ways do you look for improvement?
3. How do you know when they are “missing the mark” on [x] competency?

I asked each group of field supervisors to reflect generally on each competency, and facilitated the discussion until it provided no additional information.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data after the digital recordings were transcribed and checked for accuracy. The analysis began with *in vivo* or line-by-line coding, an open coding strategy that focuses on minute aspects of the data and categorizes responses using participants' own language and meanings whenever possible (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This led to the development of thematic categories, or axial codes, representing common themes that had emerged. Each axial code was analyzed and further collapsed into core categories that represented the most variation in supervisors' perceptions and behavior (Strauss, 1987). The encoding and interpretation process produced a comprehensive inventory of important ideas,

expressions, terms, and phrases that reflected the language and views of participants. The social work competencies, given their utilization in the interview guide, became the headings under which identified ideas were placed and clustered. Quantifying techniques (e.g., tables) were also developed to confirm consensus around these broader categories.

Findings

Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior

Field supervisors connected the practice experiences of social work students to conversations about ethics in one-on-one supervision. One supervisor noted they wanted students to be “mindful of confidentiality...not divulge more detail than is necessary.” Another supervisor noted the importance of confidentiality because in some settings students have access to information (regarding, e.g., child welfare or substance abuse) that could hurt a client’s reputation if such information was divulged. In terms of dual relationships, two different field supervisors mentioned the fine balance between friendliness and professionalism, particularly because of the similarities in age between clients and students in certain settings. Concerns regarding this competency included that some students lacked emotional self-reflection or could not correct weaknesses that have been brought to their attention.

Competency 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice

Field supervisors found great value in students having exposure to a diverse range of clients. With that exposure, supervisors noted that quality students were able to consider how to adapt their interventions to the needs of diverse clients. As stated, “We can’t do cookie-cutter stuff for every single client that we’re seeing.” Another supervisor mentioned, “Every client needs a different approach...some that need tough love, there’s some [who] need guidance, or some that need hands-off. There are some that need...an actual list of things to do.”

Many supervisors also mentioned that respecting diversity meant respecting the different family structures and parenting norms that clients have experienced. This could be a personal challenge to students as they compare these norms to the norms in their personal family of origin. As one supervisor noted, “People can parent differently and still parent correctly, and so, not letting those differences also block their [student’s] ability to work with the client.” This same supervisor connected this to student insight about their family: “What kind of household structure did you grow up in? Because in the foster care world, that can sometimes influence what you think a family should function as.” One concern that supervisors had was when students, intentionally or unintentionally, gravitated to clients similar to them and stayed in

their “safety net,” rather than working with clients who represented greater cultural differences between the client and themselves.

Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice

While neither of the focus groups defined “justice,” supervisors did note that students who excelled on this competency tended to have a more holistic understanding of how the agency, client needs, and societal issues were interconnected. As one supervisor noted, “By the time they leave, they’re [the student] like, ‘wow, this is all connected... why is this, you know, group getting this much money or why are we lacking this in a community that is so full of resources?’” Over time, supervisors noted that students tended to find novel ways for meeting client needs within their placements. Supervisors were also encouraged when students introduced justice concerns into supervision independently. One supervisor noted, “They can interact with the client and say, hey, this is something that we need to look at...are they thinking about ways that we can try to overcome it or make some small changes?”

Competency 4: Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice

In several agency settings, student research consisted of operationalized tasks that attempted to give feedback about the services provided at the agency. As one supervisor stated, “Trying to use data or get feedback to see if the counseling or the efforts that [we] are using are working in the way that you hope.” Another supervisor noted that they have students “read through the [client] surveys, and we compile all the comments and display them for the rest of the staff to see.”

Several supervisors also found it helpful for students to learn the benefits and drawbacks of evidence-based tools. For example, one supervisor noted it was helpful to students using certain tools or scales to understand the challenges and opportunities of using these in the field. Field supervisors commented that this competency demands a student who can be inquisitive about the issues at the agency and a willingness to develop ideas about what could be further explored, whether through an assessment tool, client feedback, or in a research proposal.

Competency 5: Engage in Policy Practice

Supervisors emphasized that students learn agency policies as a result of being embedded in the agency structure. It was important to them that students learn both specific agency policies and also the larger policy shifts at the federal or state level that could affect how they do their jobs. For example, one supervisor accounted how the

changing emphasis on incarcerated parents in foster care has influenced how foster care workers have had these parents involved. Yet supervisors also emphasized to students how to advocate for policy change when it is required. As one supervisor noted, "How do you follow policy, but then maybe still advocate for them if the policy really isn't advantageous to them?" One supervisor noted their agency's strong emphasis on training, so that agency policies could be practiced and missteps avoided. Supervisors were concerned when some of their students adhered to rigid interpretation of every policy, rarely considering aspects of policies and rules that did not serve client needs.

Competency 6: Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

When supervisors were asked how they knew students were excelling at this competency, a few noted that the clients tell the supervisors themselves. For example, clients ask, "'Hey, where is she? Why didn't she come this week,' like they missed them almost for them not being there versus the ones that are like 'can you not have them come.'" It was important to the supervisors that students were both self-reflective about their encounters with clients and made any necessary changes. In considering differences in personality between client and worker, one supervisor said:

There are going to be clients that you don't necessarily like because of personality...how are you going to still value the clients, even if they drive you crazy or they don't maybe take the steps that you are asking them to take?

For some students who lack initial engagement skills, training was an important aspect of the internship. For example, one supervisor recounted:

I remember an intern that I had who just said, "I just am not comfortable talking to people that I don't know"...so I said, "Okay, your homework is going to be, when you come into this building every day...I want you to talk to at least two people."

Another supervisor concern was regarding students who were unrealistic in thinking that they would have only positive interpersonal reactions in every social work encounter.

Competency 7: Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Supervisors mentioned giving guidance and support to students learning their agency's methods of assessment. For example, one supervisor commented how, initially, students would be coached through an assessment with a good deal of assistance from the supervisor prior to being observed independently doing that same

assessment. Throughout this process, students were receiving personalized feedback from the supervisor. Another supervisor wanted their students to think critically about the reason for asking certain assessment questions and the important connection between assessment and intervention efforts. For example:

What do we do with this information, you know, are we just retraumatizing them by having them talk about it, and then not doing anything? Or is this because we have a case plan that we come up with to then treat or help with whatever trauma they have been through?

Competency 8: Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

One supervisor emphasized the importance of students seeing multiple styles from different professionals on a clinical team. Another important aspect was goal development with a particular client. Since most settings require workers to develop goals, one supervisor noted the importance of authoring achievable goals with the client to help the client develop hope and a sense of progress.

The most dominant theme of the conversation was raising the level of difficulty over the course of the internship. One supervisor thoughtfully described her method:

I usually try to ease them in...I have a case where the parents are "rock stars" and they are getting everything done and their visitations go without fault and they are always on time...[then] I increase it with a more difficult client, and I try to gradually increase it and then make sure that I'm available if they have any questions or issues.

Competency 9: Evaluate Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Instead of specifically evaluating social work interventions, supervisors went in different directions in their responses regarding how they evaluate their students. For many, they were evaluating the work products of their students over the course of the semester. For example, one supervisor talked about how they "do a lot of baseline stuff and then compared to the end of the year, so like on the case note front." In addition, another supervisor wanted honest feedback about what the agency can do better do educationally serve their students. This theme of using client voices to evaluate agency interventions was previously discussed in the research competency (Competency 4), but as related specifically to using clients as evaluators of programs.

Limitations and Strengths of Research

Given the small convenience sample of nine field supervisors, a limitation of my

inquiry was the limited generalizability of the results. While qualitative research does not aim to be generalizable, the unique nature of perspectives found within our specific program kept this inquiry particularly narrow in focus. Despite specific themes emerging, a different group of field supervisors, a different interviewer, or a different coder could produce different interpretations of relevant themes. It is also reasonable that if multiple coders were utilized, these other coders would interpret field supervisors' responses differently.

Another limitation was that information about demographics and additional training experiences in field were not an aspect of the inquiry. I encourage both qualitative and quantitative inquiries that can investigate more fully the impact that field supervision training, experience, and education can have on the conceptualization of competencies. These factors likely have significant impacts on how field supervisors conceptualize the competencies.

While the specific conceptualization of student competencies would be expected to vary across educational institutions, the methodology used in this research is promising because of how it can include field supervisors more prominently in evaluating social work education. Quantitative findings that aggregate outcome scales on field contracts across students may provide signs of curricular gaps in the curriculum. However, it is unclear how numerical data can provide any specific information that can help improve teaching prior to the field experience. Qualitative findings can provide details of how social work programs might better prepare students and field supervisors.

For example, when the competency associated with human rights and social justice was discussed, the themes of advocacy and the impact of society on the individual were mentioned. The focus groups lacked a discussion of how the aims of economic, environmental, and social justice might be realized in various agency settings. This one example raises new potential questions: How do students see the theories associated with social justice applying to agency practice? What is the strategy by which field supervisors connect social justice and field setting? If the field supervisor lacks guidance, how can the educational setting better "connect these dots?" Field supervision training might be one place to provide greater clarification about the operationalization of the competencies, particularly when training can be informed by research that can determine the competencies that lack alignment.

Discussion and Implications

Upon examining the interviews of field supervisors, three interconnected issues warrant further discussion. First, a significant portion of the themes discussed by field supervisors was associated with personal values, self-reflection, and interpersonal

skills. Out of the 22 themes voiced by field supervisors, arguably half were associated with self-reflection, interpersonal challenge, and emotional readiness (See Table 1). This is consistent with other research that has noted the high value that field supervisors place on character, emotional maturity, and metacognitive skills (Bogo et al., 2006; Tam et al., 2018). Poor communication, lack of relational skills, little interest in personal self-development, and difficult boundaries with other colleagues were concerning to these field supervisors, whereas students who excelled at field settings knew when to use certain social work skills and had organizational awareness as they worked in different settings.

Table 1

Field Supervisors' Desired Understandings for Field Students by Competency

Competency	Desired understandings
1: Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidentiality • Dual relationships* • Emotional self-reflection*
2: Engage diversity and difference in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting interventions • Respecting difference* • Engaging with diversity that is personally challenging*
3: Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How society impacts individuals • Avenues for advocacy
4: Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliciting client feedback* • Critically analyzing research instruments • Developing research questions
5: Engage in policy practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding macro policies' impact on clients • Understanding agency policies with a critical eye
6: Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pushing personal comfortable limits* • Engaging with challenging clients*
7: Assess with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to be taught* • Seeing connections between assessment and interventions
8: Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using team approach* • Understanding goal development with clients • Tolerating greater difficulty over experience*
9: Evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluating personal experience and progress* • Evaluating client progress

* Involves self-reflection, interpersonal challenge, or emotional readiness

These insights from supervisors demonstrate that while the language of the competencies may suggest *what* students could do in field settings, it is the field

supervisors that have intimate knowledge about *how* they do these tasks. This theme also has implications for social work programs in their gatekeeping function, as programs attempt to assess student skills that appear associated more with emotional maturity and interpersonal relationships than merely with academic preparation prior to their placement in field settings.

Second, my research also suggests that a renewed emphasis on qualitative feedback may be necessary to improving both student skills and finding educational gaps in the larger program. Many field supervisors can be uncomfortable with evaluation (Bogo, et al., 2007), yet direct and specific feedback is vital to reach the aims of competency-based education. Quality feedback should be timely, regular, systematic, concise, and include both positive and negative comments (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Freeman, 1985). While such feedback may be difficult for competencies that appear abstract, field supervisors did provide details about what skills they see as desirable.

As students, field supervisors, and faculty develop the field learning contract, greater operationalization will be required for alignment between the field and the classroom. For example, in this inquiry, field supervisors noted a high level of proficiency on the diversity competency when students maintained active involvement with clients who were culturally different. Providing an explicit definition of "maintaining active involvement" within the learning contract is necessary so that students have direction toward improving their competency, instead of giving simply a numerical rating that may provide limited instructive feedback for improvement. To improve program alignment, I encourage utilizing qualitative methodologies to understand how field supervisors conceptualize competencies in field settings. Not only can qualitative feedback improve potential field training for field supervisors; hearing from field supervisors can help the social work classroom better prepare students prior to field.

Third, this research was conducted to recenter, prioritize, and encourage further research on the perspectives of field supervisors. They offer vital contributions to social work programs, and their impressions are rarely used in academic scholarship, with a few notable exceptions (Bogo et al., 2006, Foote, 2015). Our department can use these results in a number of different ways. First, we can assess the alignment of field supervisors' "desired understandings" (see Table 1) with the desired understandings of our program regarding educating social work students. Are the competencies conceptualized by our program being translated adequately to field settings? Cataloging and analyzing how field supervisors understand these competencies is a first step toward moving toward greater alignment through field supervisor training and dialogue between field supervisors and academic faculty.

Conversely, are there vital skills being considered by field supervisors that are not considered in classroom settings? For example, this inquiry demonstrated the

value field supervisors place upon emotional maturity, interpersonal skills, and metacognitive skills. It would be interesting to explore how academic coursework and other opportunities at the university can enhance these types of specific skills, given their value in the field.

Finally, in the process of this inquiry, I was particularly impressed by the energy and passion field supervisors had for their students. For a position that offers no stipend or compensation, field supervisors were interested in learning from each other about how they interpret these competencies to give better guidance to their students. Their voices warrant more attention in scholarship and curriculum development, because of their close connection to the skills, values, and behaviors of our students. Hopefully, this inquiry will stimulate an interest in the energies, passions, and abilities of field supervisors as they assess and evaluate the abilities of social work students.

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