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Key frameworks: understanding how to make your placement work

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

To identify and explore the three key frameworks underpinning placement success:

- Critically reflective practice
- Actively engaging with the placement team
- Understanding the processes of field education from start to finish

Introduction

As we wrote this book, with its many contributors providing a range of perspectives, significant key themes emerged. From these, we identified three frameworks that can be used to make explicit the complexities of **field education** in ways that foster communication between **students** and those who are supporting them in their **agency** or through the broader field education structure. The three frameworks—critical reflection, the placement team and field education placement structures and stages—are discussed below.

Critical reflection

While there are many definitions of **critical reflection** and reflective practice in the literature, we wanted to affirm the need for a *critically* reflective approach. Because of this, the contributors to this book are using the Fook and Gardner (2007) model of critical reflection. This model defines critical reflection as both a theory and a process that 'involves a deeper look at the premises on which thinking, actions and emotions are based. [This] is critical when connections are made between these **assumptions** and the social world as a basis for changed action' (Fook & Gardner, 2007, p. 14). Four sets of theories underpin critical reflection, and some contributors refer to these in their chapters. Very briefly, the key aspects of these theories are:

- *reflective practice:* identifying the underlying feelings, thoughts, assumptions and values that influence practice
- *reflexivity:* understanding how who we are influences how we see others and how they in turn see us, including the influence of social context and history
- *postmodernism:* valuing diversity—there are many ways and a variety of possibilities, not one right answer; challenging limited categorisation and fostering awareness of the influence of language
- *critical social theory:* reinforcing the need to understand the influence of history and social context and to seek socially just change.

The process of critical reflection involves taking a particular, specific experience that is unresolved in some way (puzzling, annoying, confusing) and deconstructing it—teasing out the emotions, thoughts, reactions and actions related to that experience and the meaning of the experience: why does it matter, what underlying assumptions and values are influencing this experience and how is the experience influenced by the social context (individually and socially) (Gardner, 2014, p. 24)? Questions that help this process are identified in detail in Gardner (2014).

Briefly, it can help to think about critical reflection by asking yourself:

- What is my reaction? How am I feeling? What am I thinking?
- What is the meaning of this experience and my reactions? What matters to me in relation to my attitudes and values? What assumptions have I made that have influenced my reaction?
- How has my reaction been influenced by my own social context and experience— including my family, life and work experience—and by the broader social context: the society I live in; and the attitudes, values and assumptions, implicit or explicit, in relation to how it operates?

To provide examples of how critical reflection can foster field education, we asked each contributor to critically reflect on a specific experience in writing their

chapter, to help tease out what makes a placement successful (and how to engage with failure) as well as demonstrate how this can facilitate field education processes. Making underlying assumptions explicit was critical in this process. For example, Eve was a student working with Jill Hanlon (see Chapter 6). Her initial assumption was 'easier is better'. Articulating this enabled Eve not only to move to a more helpful assumption for her learning, but also to have a new assumption: that uncomfortable conversations can have rewarding outcomes. Another example is that of the **field education liaison visitor** in Chapter 13, who became conscious of how her past interactions and those of others influenced her assumptions about a student and her **field education coordinator** that were unhelpful and needed to change.

Using critical reflection can be particularly helpful in supervision for both or all of those involved: the student being supervised, the supervisor, students in group supervision, those presenting and those engaged in supporting the process (Fook & Gardner, 2013). In Chapter 13, Roslyn Giles and Rosalie Pockett illustrate how critical reflection is as useful for the field educator and liaison visitor as it is for the students involved in a particular placement. Being able to receive high-quality supervision, which can be challenging in the current environment, is also key to placement success (Baines et al., 2014). Many of the contributors to this book demonstrate how supervision can foster placement success, and using critical reflection in supervision is an important aspect of this. Jill Hanlon, for example, explores the value of both individual and group supervision using critical reflection processes (Chapter 6); and Tim Adam (Chapter 8) and Lynne Allan (Chapter 4) illustrate how critical reflection contributed to understanding their own reactions as supervisors.

The placement team

Another key aspect of a successful placement is engaging with the idea of being part of a **placement team**. From a student perspective, this team makes explicit that you are part of a group of people committed to making your placement work: you are not alone in wanting your placement to be successful. For those supporting you, it is also helpful to see this as a team endeavour—that is, a group of people working together for the same overall goal.

> From a student perspective, your placement team makes explicit that you are part of a group of people committed to making your placement work—you are not alone in wanting your placement to be successful.

Several people, each in a different role, make up the team; how they are referred to at different universities varies. We have chosen to use the Australian Association

of Social Workers (AASW, 2015) definitions and have standardised this use across chapters. The first role is that of the student, who is expected to actively participate in the field education placement by preparing well; proactively negotiate supervision and contact with placement team members, and participate in agency activities and developing and achieving relevant goals and tasks to demonstrate their appropriate level of competence. Field education placement is generally full time, but can be part time if requested by the student and/or agency. Students may have some choice about placement depending on their university. More often universities are challenged to offer students choice for their placements, which reflects the resource-depleted context outlined in Chapter 2. Then there is the **field education coordination role**, which is usually undertaken by the staff member/s in the university's social work department who coordinate student field education placements. In addition, each team has a **field educator**: the person who provides social work supervision during the social work placement and is responsible for the evaluation of the placement. Generally speaking, this is a social worker in the agency, but if no qualified supervisor is available, the student will have a **co-supervisor** (often referred to as a **task supervisor**) in the agency and an **external field educator** who provides social work supervision. Co-supervisors are generally experienced human service workers, but they do not hold a social work qualification. There is also the **field education liaison visitor**, who may be an academic staff member from the university or an external person appointed by the university to undertake this role. The liaison visitor supports the placement by making contact with the student and their supervisor to make sure the placement is working and the student is able to complete the required number of tasks. How this is done varies depending on the university, but there is usually at least one face-to-face visit and then there may be other visits, phone calls or online contact.

While all of these people are working with the same goal—ensuring a successful placement—the roles and responsibilities are different. Although this has the benefit of different perspectives, it can also create confusion. As noted above, working towards a successful placement is resource intensive, which in part stems from the many 'players' involved and the need to ensure their suitable preparation and support. This is particularly the case for staff and students involved in a 'triad' relationship, which may include an external field educator (supervisor), task supervisor and liaison visitor. Social work academics Cleak and Smith (2012) surveyed social work students at three universities and found only half had a traditional social worker in the agency as a supervisor and many expressed dissatisfaction with external supervision. On the other hand, social work academic and field education coordinator Zuchowski's research found external supervision can provide a safe and neutral place for exploration (2013, 2016). Several contributors to this book address the challenges of the different kinds of supervision arrangements and roles, as well as the benefits.

So, the make-up of the team for a particular student will vary depending on the agency and the context for that student. Generally, the placement team in most agencies consists of the student, the field educator and the field education liaison visitor, with the field education coordinator a source of background support and experience. In agencies where there is no social work supervision, the team will include the student, the task or co-supervisor, the external field educator and the liaison visitor, again with the field education coordinator as background support. In some agencies, students might include as part of their team other colleagues who informally support their placement.

Ideally, this team will have an opportunity to meet and gain an understanding of each other's background, skills and experience in order to support each other—and particularly the student. This would also provide a foundation for exploring and managing any differences in views that emerge during the placement. Several of the examples given in the chapters do include at least some team members meeting and this is something that Zuchowski particularly advocates for including in a more planned way for all placements.

Getting the placement team to work effectively

In any of these roles, it is useful to understand the complexities of the team and the need to actively engage with all of the perspectives.

- *Field educator:* This is the social work supervision role, with the social worker based in the agency. Many contributors comment on the centrality of this role to a successful placement. In Chapter 7, Rebecca Say articulates the need to build a relationship based on understanding the differences in learning and supervision preferences to find ways of working together. The assumption is clearly that not all students and not all supervisors are the same and time needs to be spent negotiating differences. From student perspectives, both Moses Paul (Chapter 14) and Say affirm how nurturing such a relationship can be productive as it provides a safe space for reflection that builds knowledge, skill and confidence.

- *External field educator:* One of the main advantages of external supervision is the provision of a separate space from the placement organisation where students may feel freer to explore their reactions, to be initially critical and then to be exploratory. The external field educator can encourage this and then explore how to raise this or engage with it in the agency. Here, the focus can be on being critically reflective, identifying underlying assumptions and making connections to social work, rather than only particular agency tasks. The disadvantage is the danger of what Lisa Derham (Chapter 10) calls 'splitting': a disjunction between how the agency and the external field educator see the placement or misunderstandings about expectations. Commitment to transparency and

communication helps with this. External field educators may also need to work on getting a clear sense of what the student is doing, so they may ask for specific examples. Derham suggests it can help to have specific, measurable tasks built into the Placement Assessment Report (PAR) for the external field educator to be involved in.

- *Task (or co-) supervisor:* This supervisor will most likely be from a different discipline background (although they may be a relatively new social worker). Anne Fahey (Chapter 5) suggests this has the advantage of offering supervision from a different professional perspective, enabling both the student and the supervisor to sharpen their understanding of what is more specific to social work. The task supervisor needs to have a confident and positive understanding of their own discipline and to be able to work across disciplines. Critical reflection can provide a shared framework to foster understanding across disciplines. Task supervisors also need to find ways for students to spend time with other social workers where possible. The external social work supervisor obviously helps provide this, but if there are no other social workers, the student may need to find other ways of making links to social work (through peers or visits to other agencies). Chapter 5 has a useful list of questions about whether a task supervisor is ready to take on this role, including the support they need from their university.

> Critical reflection can provide a shared framework to foster understanding across disciplines.

- *Liaison visitor:* Managing the interactions between student and supervisor and supporting both, while being mindful of the expectations of the university and of the field in terms of quality of social work graduates, can be a delicate balancing act. Similarly to the other roles, it is essential for this role to be enacted sooner rather than later to help with planning and clarifying expectations, wherever possible resolving or managing issues before they become major. A challenge of this role is that the liaison visitor is often the one who needs to take responsibility for flagging that a placement is not succeeding in any sense. Adam points out that if the placement is simply not working out, someone needs to make the decision. The liaison visitor may be better placed to do this in a way that allows for maintaining positive relationships with everyone concerned and the social work course—noting that withdrawal may be experienced as more constructive than formal subject failure.

Field education structures and stages

Finally, it is helpful to keep in mind as an overall framework, the stages of the field work placement. Many contributors also suggest aspects of the value of thinking

about key factors for success in terms of practicalities of placement such as different stages of pre-placement, during placement and ending placement, particularly in the use of the PAR. Planning ahead is seen as critical for all team members, the university and agencies. Social work **placements** have a series of stages with a distinct beginning, middle and end, and students move through the stages in sequence. Details about these stages are provided next.

> Planning ahead for each stage of placement was seen as critical for all team members, the university and agencies.

Stage 1: Pre-placement

This stage encompasses the planning and preparation for placement, and as highlighted in this book, is an essential stage for all involved in placements: university academics, students, field educators, co-supervisors and liaison visitors. Elements of the pre-placement stage include:

- *pre-placement seminars:* Universities generally have **pre-placement seminars** for students and separate sessions for field educators and liaison visitors. While only a few contributors mention these specifically, those who have suggested they were significant are Giles and Pockett for field educators' understanding of relevant theory and processes; and Annie Townsend (Chapter 11), Kate MacAulay (Chapter 12) and Moses Paul for orienting students to how the placement would work. Attendance and active participation at these is vital for setting the foundations for successful placements

- *pre-placement interviews:* Some contributors mention the value of pre-placement interviews, when a student and potential supervisor meet and mutually explore whether the placement will suit both parties. This can be an opportunity for students and agencies to honestly state their interests, preferences and possibilities before making a commitment and has certainly prevented some unsuccessful placements. Of course, some students are so keen to have a placement they may not feel able to express their preferences or reservations honestly. We would encourage you as a student to take this opportunity to be realistic about what will work for you, while also being open to having a placement in a field that you would not have thought would fit. Many students are positively surprised to find how much they enjoy a field they hadn't previously considered

- *pre-placement meetings:* Some contributors see meeting as a team and/or clarifying roles as essential pre-placement to avoid boundary confusion and to generate positive working relationships. Some give examples of meeting with several or all members of their placement team at once. Ines Zuchowski (Chapter 3), for

example, planned for this from the beginning of placement and while this created some organisational pressures, it clearly also had advantages. Others don't hold meetings, but instead organise the distribution of information—for example, Hanlon gives her students a handout about the role of each team member.

- *pre-placement planning:* Whether or not there is an interview or meeting, most contributors emphasise the importance of pre-placement planning, including orientation towards the placement, identifying expectations and exploring these on all sides, and being ready for placement in various ways. More specifically, many contributors, particularly students, comment about the value of becoming oriented to the placement. For students, this might mean starting to clarify hopes and expectations and reading relevant background material. Paul, for example, had researched working in mental health and MacAulay regretted not having researched more about her international placement location. For supervisors, it might mean thinking about a formal orientation to the agency, ensuring there is space—a place for the student to sit—that the student will be welcomed on arrival, and that there is a commitment to meeting early to explore how the placement will proceed. Everyone in the team can ensure familiarity with placement documentation and university expectations, possibly through a joint meeting. Ideally, everyone in the placement team will allow time to get to know each other to facilitate working together. Some contributors, such as Zuchowski, recommend always having a joint meeting before, or at least early in, the placement. Adam, as a liaison visitor, also advocates making contact in the first two weeks of the placement, at least by email and/or if possible by phone. This means a relationship can begin in the 'absence of any problem'.

There are particular issues related to pre-placement preparation for international placements as identified by Townsend as a liaison visitor and MacAulay as a student. In these situations, students are significantly more removed from easily organised contact with and support from their university and their peers. Townsend has developed a five-stage acclimation framework for international placements that outlines the likely reality of being confronted with significant cultural differences, heightened by distance and feelings of isolation (see Chapter 11). While Townsend developed this for international placements specifically, the stages are useful for anyone going into a placement that feels significantly different from their past experience. Townsend suggests strategies for acclimatising to difference and ways of noticing your reactions that can be complementary to using critical reflection. Having this framework as part of pre-placement preparation helps students to anticipate to some degree the possible tensions and so to navigate them better. Reflecting critically on strengths as part of this pre-placement process provides a foundation for students to re-identify with them at more challenging times in their placement.

Stage 2: During placement

Stage 2.1: Early days of placement—orientation

Preparation and planning continues once placement has commenced as students are orientated to the agency, begin supervision and make contact with their liaison visitor. This stage of placement is often associated with high levels of stress for students (and sometimes supervisors) and it is important for students to feel supported by supervisors and liaison visitors during this period. This early stage involves a significant transition—from the university setting to the field setting—as discussed by Helen Hickson and Natasha Long in Chapter 16. The first supervision session is a critical part of the early days of placement.

Several contributors make specific comments about the first supervision session in placement and the importance of this happening early. This session is critical in clarifying understanding of the agency, building a relationship and starting to explore expectations and hopes of both student and supervisor. This includes making explicit the duality from the supervisor's perspective not only of supporting you as a student but also assessing you. Expectations about time to meet, how to meet and preparation for sessions all need to be covered at this stage. Building the relationship may include sharing preferred learning and teaching styles, past experiences and preferences related to supervision, and some background from each on past relevant experience and interests.

The contributors who are external field educators stress that it is vital in this first session to ensure that you as a student are clear about roles and how theirs differs from a task or co-supervisor and from the liaison visitor. Confidentiality needs to be explored given it is more complex. Hanlon and Derham provide more specific details about this in their chapters.

Stage 2.2: Continuing into placement

If preparation was organised prior to placement and orientation commenced at the beginning of placement, students can focus on the learning experiences, observations and activities that will be available to them on placement. This aspect also requires the supervisors and agency to have prepared for the students to be involved in activities in the agency. We explain some of the key elements of this stage of placement in more detail here.

- *Establishing the learning goals:* All universities have a formal learning contract or Placement Assessment Report (PAR) that provides a framework to establish the goals and tasks for placements. The framework encourages discussion between the student and other team members, making explicit what you as a student are hoping for from the placement, and how this might be achieved. Getting this established reasonably early in the placement is also seen as key, given that the PAR can then be adjusted over time. Students and supervisors talk about

using this as a guide to refer back to, then to add, modify and change as needed to reflect what is happening in the placement. An example of the PAR used in Victoria, Australia, is included in the appendix.

- *Collaborative practice:* During placement, key elements for successful placements include being committed to working together as a placement team and generating cooperative and collaborative practice. For this to happen, it is universally agreed that each team member needs to be clear about their role—that is, the student, the internal field educator or task supervisor, the external field educator (if needed), the liaison visitor and the academic. Contributors affirmed that there are advantages in all possible combinations in the team and, consequently, disadvantages, as discussed earlier. A shared aim was identified as creating a safe space within which students would be able to express honestly how they were feeling and what they were thinking as part of building capacity for critical reflection and for deeper learning. Zuchowski calls this 'ensuring safe passage', Hanlon as creating a 'safe and robust learning space' and Derham as helping students contain the inevitable anxiety of placement to 'develop their curiosity' and engage in supervision and placement constructively. This also ensures that the focus remains on how to achieve learning goals even if this means facing and articulating uncomfortable and conflicting views rather than simply ignoring conflict in order to finish placement. There is a clear understanding that success means all team members are open to **reflexivity**, learning and being challenged, and naming and aiming to manage difference and conflict rather than simply surviving. Contributors recognised that this isn't necessarily easy, particularly given the power differences in various placement team roles. Students are very conscious of being judged for their competence and, of course, wanting to complete the placement. However, it is worth noting that the student contributors themselves acknowledge the value of becoming more confident in articulating their views and wanting to explore issues. Learning to name and engage with these early in the placement also avoids the danger of significant issues being ignored until late in the placement, when it is too late to make changes, with the greater danger of students then not completing the placement successfully.

- *Maintaining open communication:* A key challenge for students and other team members is supervisors or the field educator and liaison visitor, or the student and supervisor, disagreeing significantly. Communication is central: several contributors give examples of proactively making contact with their liaison visitor as soon as conflict becomes evident, which is more likely to generate a positive outcome. Some supervisor contributors use critical reflection in such situations to show it is possible to name such differences to open up discussion and foster collaborative agreement across the team. Giles and Pockett's example in Chapter 13 uses critical reflection to articulate differences in a neutral way: different learning styles and different past experiences related to different

assumptions. The naming of these can lead to mutual understanding and new ways of working together. Others affirm the use of a strengths or narrative approach, so that each person remembers what the other has to offer rather than only focusing on problems. External supervision can provide a separate space. Hanlon suggests that, when away from the agency, students can feel more able to explore issues without being disloyal to the agency: to move reflexively from a more self-protective attitude to a 'curiosity about another's perspective'. This can help them move to a different place where understanding and agreement are possible. Implicit in this is recognising that all members of the team need to be prepared to reflect critically on their own reactions: it may be that a student evokes an unhelpful past experience that needs to be dealt with separately by their field educator in their own supervision.

- *Engaging in supervision:* Students actively using supervision is another key factor for success across all stages of placement: coming to supervision prepared, and having thought about what you want to explore. Supervisors being committed to the time for supervision was also critical in ensuring a successful placement: for Say 'supervision felt like a harbour to return to after each week out on an ocean of experiences', though she acknowledges that ensuring this remained a priority could be challenging given other workload demands. For Paul, reflecting daily with his supervisor was helpful, in formal supervision or informally in car trips. He wrote down whatever he was interested in or concerned about and raised it when there was time. Varying supervision methods were also of benefit to some placement teams.

  Strained resources can lead to innovative developments, as indicated by Long and Theobald, and these are outlined by other contributors here. Hanlon, for example, values group supervision for students on placement and demonstrates how students have found this to be helpful in learning critical reflection processes as well as how to integrate critical reflection theories with practice, grounding the learning from university. Using online resources can also be a significant factor, particularly in providing external supervision. Derham uses video links and phone for supervision, though she suggests it helps to start with video so that each person has a greater sense of the other. Her chapter identifies a number of points for making this work well, including working actively with the student to set up the technology needed in advance and ensuring privacy. While Derham mentions video conferencing and phone, the options in this area have increased significantly with free access to video calls online, and this may help with finding creative ways to access supervision in the future.

- *Staying connected with the university:* Most universities have some kind of classes or **integration seminars** during placement. These are mentioned by some contributors as useful for students, particularly for connecting to the university

and to their peers. Paul, for example, saw these as important for connecting theory and practice as well as hearing from other students about their experience and 'ideas about other things you can try'.

Stage 3: Ending placement

The ending of placement is also mentioned by several contributors as an important process that might not be given sufficient attention. The final supervision session needs to include a transparent discussion of the final report. Hickson and Long outline some of the key aspects of ending the placement well, including acknowledging and planning for ending both with clients and with staff and the placement team.

SUMMARY

This chapter has outlined three key frameworks that encourage successful placements: the use of critical reflection, particularly in supervision but also in how you approach and consider your placement and your reactions to it in general; identifying and engaging with your placement team; and recognising and managing the stages of placement, and how these relate to achieving key placement goals and tasks.

TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR PLACEMENT WORK

Tips for students

- Use pre-placement seminars well, to start preparing for placement. Start planning; find out about the agency, its context and the specific areas of practice covered. Think about your hopes and expectations and how you can express these clearly and constructively while remaining open to what is possible.
- Use placement tools such as the PAR effectively for working with your team, and clarifying goals and strategies.
- Make sure you attend and plan for supervision sessions, coming with a specific agenda of what you want to discuss.
- Remain conscious of the stages of placement and what that means for planning, including planning for ending the placement well.

Tips for the whole placement team

- Think about how you might build critical reflection processes into the placement for all team members.
- If there is conflict or confusion, consider using critical reflection processes to explore what is happening.
- Identify your reactions to the idea of the placement team. Clarify any uncertainties you have about each role in the team.
- Given a particular placement, work out some suggestions about how you and other team members can contribute to the team working effectively together.
- Identify how relationships in the team might change over time, given the stages of the placement.

CRITICAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1 How do you react to the idea of having a placement team?
2 Who will make up your placement team and how will you engage with them?
3 What critically reflective processes are you confident in using? If you are not confident, how can you learn more about these?

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