A Report Summary of the Research Study Entitle:

Determining Student Competency in Field Placements

The practicum experience is a common requirement for pre-service students in the human service professions, including Nursing, Social Work and Education. Most often, this professional development occurs within a social-cultural setting with a more experienced and capable professional in a mentorship-like role (Ralph, 2002). Ralph and Walker (2008) report that relationships and interpersonal issues were considered to be both the most positive and the most negative aspect of a practicum students field experience. Cleary then, quality relationships and a type of connectivity between professionals have a significant impact with respect to motivation, social competence and well-being in general but also in regard to specific outcomes across different educational contexts (Hagenhauer & Volet, 2014). Given that evaluation is one of the primary roles of a field advisor (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014) and the construct of teacher-student relationships (TSR) is also a central component in successful teaching and learning (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schultz, 2008), understanding the intersection between TSR and evaluation in field placement is paramount.

This paper describes a qualitative study that explored how field advisors representing the three human service professions of Education, Social Work and Nursing determine the success (or not) of pre-service students who are struggling to meet minimum competencies in field placements. An emerging theoretical model derived from the findings is also presented.

Methodology
This study uses a qualitative case study design. Specifically, this study reflects what Stake (2005) refers to as an instrumental case study extended to multiple case studies or it is also referred to as a collective case. This design is useful when a number of cases are studied in “order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). Field advisors from the faculties of Nursing, Social Work and Education participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Twenty-three interviews were conducted, nine in both Nursing and Education and five in Social Work. Both intentional and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. Interviews were constructed using a semi-structured interview guide and conducted by the three researchers. Both in-person and telephone interviews were conducted that ranged in length from 30-90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis began with all three researchers reading and re-reading their own group of transcripts using open coding to identify ideas that represented social and psychological processes, not for topics (Charmaz, 2006). Data was compared across professions using constant comparison and some initial categories emerged. Next one researcher reviewed all the transcripts, alongside the codes and categories and refined the data categories and attempted to identify relationships among the categories. This type of focused coding is more selective and conceptual.

Findings

Five themes emerged from the interviews with field advisors who evaluated practicum students that had struggled or failed field placements. The field advisors main concern was the level of professional competency achieved by the practicum students. Related to competency
were themes concerned with the field advisors role in being accountable and protecting the reputation of their profession as well as the reputation of their professional program affiliated with the practicum student’s professional education. The field advisors also expressed a concern related to their perception of the practicum student’s suitability for their chosen profession. The final theme related to the field-advisor-protégé relationship and the feeling of connectivity between them.

**Relationship Lens**

All four of the factors used to determine the success of a practicum student were filtered or interpreted through a relationship lens. Although the most obvious relationship is the individual professional partnership between the field advisor and the practicum student, relationship dynamics are constructed at multiple levels, including and beyond the individual.

- **At the Micro Level: Relationships are affected by the Connectivity between people**
  
  Practicums at every level of field experience is predicated on professional relationships between the practicum student and the field advisor. When there is a high degree of connectivity it is simply more pleasant for advisors to address complex issues.

- **At the Meso Level: Relationships are affected by professional identities**

  Nurses, social workers and teachers’ professional identities are constructed around the attributes of a helping profession. An educator said, “we are produced to want people to succeed”. A social worker added, “we are trained to be nice people”. This helping profession identity and the way it effects relationships is linked to the issues raised in
the macro level concerning language but it is also related to the manner in which field advisors position themselves in relationship to the practicum student.

- **At the Macro Level: Relationships are affected by language**

  One participant suggested that the language that we use, particularly when field advisors are giving feedback can often be disguised with a tone of politeness and respect for the students’ feelings. Statements that are made in the conditional tense, as if to suggest the statements are suggestions, rather than imperatives permits a “niceness” and “comfort” in the relationship but may not accurately communicate the intended message.

**Benefits of a Trans-disciplinary Model**

Although the field placement context differed, the findings of this study suggest that there are many common issues among Social Work, Nursing and Education field placements. It might be reassuring for field advisors, who are contemplating how to address concerns related to their practicum students, to know that their unease may be understood and analyzed from a much broader trans-disciplinary perspective, rather than considering it a personal or professional mentoring failure. In our particular context, the trans-disciplinary nature of these findings may lead to more meaningful, frequent, and perhaps, even more economical common professional development opportunities with field advisors to better prepare them in their role as mentors and evaluators.

**References**


