

***Projective Identification and the Fear of Failing:***

***Making Sense of Practice Educators' Emotional Experiences of Failing Social Work  
Students in Practice Learning Settings***

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## **Abstract**

The paper focuses on emotions and processes that may arise for practice educators when working with a struggling or failing student in a practice learning setting.<sup>1</sup> The paper firstly documents a previously undertaken thematic review of the literature, which explored why practice educators appeared to find it difficult to fail students in practice learning settings. Secondly, the paper draws on two UK qualitative studies that highlighted the emotional distress experienced by practice educators when working with a marginal or failing student. The paper documents key findings using a case study approach from both studies. We argue that the concept of projective identification offers a plausible and illuminating account of the states of mind experienced by practice educators and in making explicit, unconscious states of mind, our aim is that practice educators will feel confident to make appropriate assessment decisions when required.

## **Key words:**

**Failing students, practice educators, emotions, projective identification, containment, reflection**

## **Introduction**

There is a growing body of international and inter-professional research that explores the difficulties and challenges faced by supervisors when confronted with a struggling, or failing student in a field placement (see for example, Hughes and Heycox, 1996; Raymond, 2000; Duffy, 2004; Gizara and Forest, 2004; Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Bogo et al, 2007). Whilst various reasons have been proffered to explain the challenges and the apparent reluctance on the part of supervisors to fail students (Finch, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013); there has been less focus on the emotional and relational aspects of the process. The limited research that explores the emotional responses to emerge when assessors are confronted with a struggling or failing student in practice learning settings, highlights the strong, difficult and conflicting emotional responses that can occur (Samec,

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<sup>1</sup> In recognition of an international readership it is important to clarify terms. The term *practice educator* is employed consistently in the present discussion although it is recognised that other terms are used internationally. For example *field instructor* is the term that is used in North America. The term *practice learning setting* is used here to describe the placement or practicum – i.e. an assessed period of practice in the field. It is recognised that these are UK specific terms.

1995; Gizara and Forrest, 2004; Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Bogo et al, 2007; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch, 2010).

Consequently, in an attempt to extend the research base, the present discussion begins with a thematic analysis of existing research exploring the various reasons put forward as to why practice educators, from social work and other professions, may find it difficult to fail students in practice learning settings. The limited extant research into the emotional aspects is also explored and new lines for enquiry in the area are identified. The discussion then focuses on two empirical studies previously undertaken by the authors (Finch, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011); whose original findings highlighted the considerable emotional impact on practice educators when working with a struggling or failing social work student. Our aim however, is to do more than describe the range of feelings that can emerge, rather, to theorise the reasons for the emergence of these strong emotional reactions using a key concept within psychodynamic theory – the ego-defensive mechanism known as projective identification.

In proffering this concept as a means of articulating hitherto unconscious processes, it is hoped that practice educators might become increasingly aware of uncomfortable feelings; reflect on the dynamics that might emerge between themselves and their student; (and often with the affiliated university); and use these feelings reflexively to consider how the student might be feeling, with the aim of aiding their learning. Most importantly, we argue that by becoming conscious of emotional experiences and understanding ego-defensive processes, practice educators will be more confident to fail a student if required; as our concern is that the uncomfortable array of difficult feelings experienced, appear to render some practice educators reluctant, unable or unwilling to fail students.

## **Background**

There is a limited but internationally consistent interest in the issues raised by students of a range of professions who are struggling or failing in practice learning settings and the attendant challenges for their practice educators in reaching determinations of failure. Indeed, the last decade has seen the emergence of a substantive body of work in the fields of nursing and social work particularly, on the phenomenon of “failure to fail” (Duffy, 2004; Shapton, 2006; Rutkowski, 2007; Basnett and Shepherd, 2010; Lawson, 2010;

Jervis and Tilki, 2011; Finch and Taylor, 2013). In the English social work context, concern with the topic has been particularly long-standing, Brandon and Davies (1979) having first explored the issue some thirty-four years ago, establishing key parameters for much of the ensuing discussion.

Explorations of the issue often proceed from concern about the perceived low numbers of students failing the placement (Hughes and Heycox, 1996; Sharp and Danbury, 1998; Raymond, 2000; Finch and Taylor, 2012). Indeed, in 2006-7 the failure rate on social work programmes in England was a mere 3.2% (GSCC, 2008), and still lower at 2.5% in 2008-9 (GSCC, 2010). The question then follows as to how far this might be attributable to practice educators' reluctance or difficulty in failing social work students (Evans, 1995; Finch, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011).

A recent inter-professional and international thematic review by Finch and Taylor (2013)-supplemented in Finch and Poletti (forthcoming) - sought to identify those factors which constrain assessors in reaching failure determinations for students in practice learning settings. The review identified five central themes. The first contends that assessment frameworks are used incorrectly or inappropriately (Kemshall, 1993; Shardow and Doel; 1996, Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Shapton, 2006) and linked to this, that placement procedures are not properly observed with concerns not addressed in a timely fashion (Burgess et al, 1998a, 1998b; Duffy, 2004; Kaslow et al 2007; Vacha-Haase et al, 2004). Secondly, practice educators can feel isolated and unsupported by their agencies or the university in making a fail recommendation (Sharp and Danbury, 1999; Finch, 2004; Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011). Thirdly, practice educators report experiencing 'role strain' or confusion (Fisher, 1990; Owens, 1995; Cowburn et al, 2000, Duffy, 2004; Bogo, et al, 2007), *i.e.* the practice educator perceives their role as encompassing two potentially conflicted positions: nurturer and enabler of learning on one hand and assessor/manager on the other (Shardlow and Doel, 1996; Finch, 2010). Fourthly, the fear of litigation impinges on assessment judgements - this consideration appears more significant in a North American context (Cole, 1991; Cole and Lewis, 2003; Duffy, 2004; Raymond, 2000; Royse, 2000; Vacha-Haase et al, 2004). Finally, practice educators attest to the emotional cost and accompanying psychological disruption that can emerge when working with a struggling or failing student (Burgess et al, 1998a; Burgess et al, 1998b; Beverley and Worsley, 2007; Basnett and Shepherd, 2010; Waterhouse, 2011).

This last consideration has been well documented across a range of professions. Samec's 1995 study of a cohort of North American psychotherapy supervisors identified the stark emotional responses elicited when working with failing trainees, embracing guilt, anger and shame. Similarly, Gizara and Forest (2004) explored American supervisors' narratives of failing counselling psychology students. They report that the experience for supervisors was "horrible...painful...very sad...a gut wrenching experience" (2004:136). Likewise, from a Canadian social work perspective, Bogo et al (2007) comment on the emotional difficulties and conflict experienced by practice educators when having to give negative feedback and assess competence; while the discomfort and unease experienced by social work practice educators has also been attested in a recent UK study (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010) .

Yet when it comes to accounting for the psychological processes *underlying* the 'failing to fail' phenomenon, the extant research base is limited. The few studies which have considered the rationalisation process undertaken by practice educators in this position, note the common recourse to hopeful expectation as a means of reconciling concerns about practice with a resistance to reaching failure judgements. Educators adopting this stance nurture the 'hope' that problems manifested by a struggling placement student will sort themselves out without intervention (Hoffman et al. 2004; Good et al, 1995) or the 'hope' that students will eventually become satisfactory practitioners in other settings (Finch, 2010). Arguably such a strategy offers release rather than resolution of the tensions experienced by practice educators of failing students. The rationale is thus clear for evolving a more nuanced model for recognising and articulating the psychological cost to practice educators in this unenviable position.

### **The preceding studies**

The first empirical study undertaken (Finch, 2010) focused on why practice educators appeared to find it difficult to fail social work students. The study was qualitative in design and utilised practitioner-researcher and narrative paradigms. In-depth interviews were undertaken with twenty practice educators from across England and Wales. The sample was purposive in that the research participants were recruited on the basis that they had worked with a struggling or failing student; although not all the respondents went on to fail

the student. The participants were all qualified practice educators and worked in a variety of social work settings, statutory and voluntary; with adults as well as children and families.

What emerged was a concern that the unpleasant emotional reactions, including guilt, anger and anxiety for example, experienced by practice educators, potentially got in the way of a robust assessment process. The emotional distress appeared to instate or reflect an atmosphere of uncontainment, which also appeared to affect the dynamic between the practice educator, student and university tutor. It appeared that some practice educators struggled to make sense of the reasons for these emergent feelings, and that there was a missed opportunity to make use these feelings to understand and aid the student in their learning. Further, in terms of psychological processes, it was hypothesised that practice educators might also internalise the student's failure as their own, making it difficult, or even impossible, to fail a student. To fail a student therefore, would be to fail oneself; what we term here 'compound failure', a theme we will return to later.

The second study undertaken (Schaub & Dalrymple, 2011) ostensibly focused on what support practice educators required from universities when working with struggling or failing students. A dual strand qualitative methodology was used, comprised of semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, including practice educators and tutors from across the South-East of England, and two corroboratory focus groups of practice educators to further explore themes developed from the interviews. The sample was drawn purposively to interview those practice educators who had previously assessed a struggling or failing student.

Though the aim of the study was to focus upon support and provision for practice educators, what also emerged from the interviews were the strong emotional reactions experienced by practice educators. The participants identified feelings of isolation, frustration, anxiety, immobilisation or indecision, and even persecution. It was noted that practice educators were not always able in the discursive space of both the interview and within focus groups to demonstrate insight into the dynamics that emerged between themselves and the students, as well as their relationships with universities. Practice educators in this study, also articulated an anxiety of being judged and reported feeling a pressure to pass students, although they were not able to identify its source. Intersecting

concerns about the adverse impact on individual practice educators, the host team and service users were represented by emergent feelings of being overwhelmed and powerlessness. The intersection of themes and concerns in the two independent studies is patent.

This is not to say that all practice educators experienced strong and uncontained emotional responses or were unreflective. In both studies, there was evidence of emotionally measured narratives that were reflective and revealed clarity of understanding roles and assessment tasks. We noted that these practice educators did not appear to register an inordinate emotional cost when failing the student, although it was, nonetheless, an unpleasant experience.

### **Methodological Approach**

Our methodological approach in synthesizing these studies and proposing a new theoretical stance is to draw key narratives from both studies that appear to evidence the process of projective identification. The analysis will focus on the narratives of Daisy and Lily from the Finch (2010) study and Mary and Carol from the Schaub and Dalrymple (2011) study. A strength of this approach is to offer an in-depth and rich analysis from two similar but methodologically distinct empirical studies. While a possible limitation of such an approach is the potential for determinism, i.e. finding evidence within the data to support a pre-existing theory, we argue that there is a pressing need to offer fuller and more nuanced accounts of the psychological processes underlying the 'failure to fail' phenomenon as part of supporting practice educators in reaching informed and appropriate failure determinations without undue emotional cost.

### **Projective Identification**

The Freudian concept of projective identification was elaborated by Klein, and subsequently deployed by Bion and theorists within the object relations tradition (Frosh, 2012). Projective identification is understood as an unconscious defensive mechanism that, like all defensive responses, protects us against psychological harm (Trevithick, 2011). Whilst the concept of projective identification is contested (see for example, Frosh, 2012; Joseph, 2012; Sandler, 1988), a helpful explanation is offered by Frosh (2012) who argues that projective identification concerns the process of unconscious communication

from one person to another, in the form of affects or emotion. Projective identification however is more than transference, rather it is the process of an individual's expulsion of "unwanted or threatening ideas into their environment" (Frosh, 2012:162). Projective identification is thus understood as an unconscious mechanism in which a person rids themselves of their unwholesome parts that they themselves cannot bear or "are very deeply denied in the self" (Segal, 1992:36) onto others. In a clinical setting the assumed object of the projection would be the therapist; in the context at hand we suggest that the practice educator is the object into which the students may project deeply troublesome or unwelcome parts of themselves; indeed, there is widespread acceptance that these defensive mechanisms take place in organisation settings (see for example Halton, 1994; Moylan, 1994; Trevithick, 2011).

The theory suggests that such projections are sufficiently cogent to compel the object to unconsciously feel or act out the projected attitudes and behaviours (Spillius et al, 2011). Trevithick (2011), describes the process as the object being "*mobilised* by another person to act on his or her behalf" (2011:404). The theory further posits a supplementary process of not only projecting the unwanted aspects of one's own psyche onto the object but also "entering the mind of the other in order to acquire desired aspects of his psyche" (Spillius et al, 2011;126). One can argue that a student who is struggling or failing a placement will be experiencing significant emotional distress. Trevithick (2011) argues that the impact of projective identification on a practitioner can be significant. Once "mobilised", the process may cause the practitioner to experience confusion, may limit recognition and articulation of what is happening and, of chief concern, may cause failure "to notice and to respond appropriately to dangerous or threatening situations" (2011:404). Clearly, such a process, if indeed in operation, may impinge upon assessment judgements and inhibit determinations of failure.

The origin of the process of projective identification is found in early infancy where the infant projects anxiety and aggression onto the mother due to their own limited ability to contain such feelings. The mother acts as container for these feelings and projects back to the infant the feelings in a more digestible form. Bion terms this process "reverie" (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al, 1983). The container function therefore is important so that the infant can "internalise a container of feelings but also a mind that can hold thoughts" (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al, 1983:60). If an infant has an inefficient container for his



feelings, one that cannot understand his feelings, then he will revert to a state of what Bion terms, “nameless dread” (Bion, 1962). The need for an infant’s primitive feelings to be contained and transformed into something bearable is therefore vital for a baby’s development. (Saltzberger-Wittenburg, 2013).

## **Mobilisation**

This notion of projective identification gives shape and coherence to a range of behaviours and discursive forms observed in the aforementioned narratives. For instance, we noted that some practice educators reflecting on a challenging placement experience were inordinately exercised by their recollections, giving vent to hostile feelings and becoming *mobilised* to voice or act out difficult or uncomfortable feelings – feelings which might arguably have been projected in part by the failing student. Daisy’s narrative for example, was one of rage and anger and was far removed from a professional discourse. In one instance, Daisy imagines a conversation with her student, moving from reported to direct speech as if prompted to enact the imagined confrontation:

...and I did think the next time you shout at me, I might just actually shout back at you because who the fuck do you think you are?

If the tone and register of this recollection indicate Daisy’s own emotional engagement (or ‘mobilisation’) in the challenging placement, other sections of her narrative move beyond mere venting of frustration and anger with the student, to impinge on sensitive, even taboo, areas. In one scenario, she hypothesizes how aggrieved service-users might insult the student’s body size (the student was significantly overweight):

...they’ll [service users] call you a fat bitch because you are fat...because it will be their way of releasing, hurting you.

Elsewhere, she refers to another difficult interchange with the student where poor practice has been accounted for in terms Daisy finds unpersuasive:

...I just thought...I thought ‘Fuck you!’ You are not going to apologise for your fucking behaviour with a period. Every fucking woman in the world gets a period, yes some have difficulties, some get emotional [ . . . ] you’ve like resorted to like fucking bottom of the barrel...

This reference to menstruation is particularly suggestive as projective identification processes are often associated with bodily fluids and the expulsion of “dangerous substances (excrements) out of the self” (Klein, 1931:8).

Daisy it might be argued, was here, in addition to her own emotional engagement, vicariously experiencing negative aspects of student’s unconscious self that the student herself could not acknowledge, encompassing intense rage and self-loathing. However conceptualised, the situation was patently unsustainable and Daisy terminated the placement after seven days. Consequently her decision to fail the student could not be upheld due to lack of evidence.

A comparable instance is found in Lily’s account of a failing student, her retrospective account apparently evoking or mobilising some of those feelings experienced at the time:

...she was absolutely terrible, she was appalling, she was abysmal and no way should she ever be near clients...there were a million difficulties with her...she was incredibly arrogant and rude...she was also very aggressive.

Mary, whilst more experienced, and suggesting she was able to manage these difficult circumstances, nonetheless found them noteworthy for the presentation of aggression or intimidation from a student when faced with potential placement failure. She stated:

At the end, when he didn’t complete what he was to have completed, I explained, again, that I was going to fail him, and he became sort of aggressive, you know that sort of silent aggression? Intimidation, like, you know, what are you doing failing me? It was very unpleasant in his reactions to me...

### **Compound Failure**

We suggest that in recollecting (and in so many instances, re-enacting) these challenging encounters and experiences, practice educators might helpfully reflect further upon their own states of mind when working with a struggling or failing student and consider whether

these might be influenced by defensive projections from the student, prompting them to experience further difficult emotions vicariously. This would go some way to account for a marked phenomenon in the preceding studies – a phenomenon we might term as “*compound failure*”, involving a process of internalisation of the student’s failure as the practice educator’s own. For example, Mary, a practice educator, based in a Children and Families statutory setting states:

I think when you start off with students...it makes you challenge, am I...was it something that I did or didn't do.

Mary goes on to state:

What was it that we *weren't* doing that didn't enable her [the student] to learn, and questioning our practice, and our methods.

Likewise Lily, an experienced assessor of both nursing and social work students, relates how she terminated a placement when a student made offensive homophobic comments. Rather than viewing the episode as a positive instance of her own appropriate gate-keeping practice, Lily internalises it as her failure, stating:

...I still felt I must have done something wrong with that one because I couldn't enable him or work with him to see why his way of thinking was inappropriate in social work, never mind in society.

Daisy also experiences this process of compound failure. She describes the process of a meeting with the tutor and student, where she is required to state explicitly that the student is failing. She imagines the sacrifices the student has had to make. She states:

“Oh my God! She [student] has been on this course a couple of years, the sacrifices she’s made...this is her livelihood, her career and its all my fault”.

Daisy thus acts and feels like a failure herself and enacts a process of identification with the student.

## **Lack of Reflection**

Both studies confirmed once again how there is mitigation of reflective capacity when professionals are overwhelmed with a range of intensively distressing and disturbing emotions that they cannot process. In the case of the practice educators in these studies, those feelings included anger, rage, guilt, fear, hopelessness and dread. Daisy, in between her discourses of rage, often reverted to a guilty state of mind, stating how 'the guilt set in' once her decision to fail a placement was formalised by the processes of the affiliated university:

...when I heard the tutor say, 'and if it's not going well, we'll move straight into a disruption meeting', that's the time you need to say whether you're going to fail the student...and then the guilt set in.

Daisy continues with this theme, she states:

Because at that time I made the decision, the guilt, it was unbearable...but at the end of the day, it's her livelihood, it could have been the end of her career, oh my god, what about her children...I felt like I am a rotten shit.

It is striking that the last line conflates both past and present tense – suggesting that the retelling of the narrative is invoking the very state of mind previously experienced.

Other evidence of the inability to make sense of and process the dynamics involved in a failing placement, derive from the narrative of Lily who worked within a voluntary drugs and alcohol agency. Lily assessed a student who had very limited knowledge of drugs and alcohol, was a Muslim and had recently moved to the UK. Lily relates how she passed the student despite reservations about general conduct and competence. In the interview space, Lily acknowledged that this 'was the worst career decision I have ever made' and emphasises how the determining factors were that she felt threatened by the student, and was worried what her university colleagues would think of her if the student made an

allegation of racism. It was interesting to note that in the research interview Lily kept repeating the following phrase:

I was out of my depth...I felt really out of my depth...I was completely out of my depth at that point.

Lily explains this as being out of her depth in working with an Asian Muslim student – she acknowledges her limited interaction with Asian people, having grown up in a monocultural area in the North of England. Again, we would suggest that this feeling of being ‘out of one’s depth’ could helpfully be seen as in part a projection from the student – she is a Muslim student, having recently moved to the UK, from a privileged background and one who has limited knowledge of alcohol and drugs. Lily expresses narratives of being victimised and she presents the student as persecutory. When Lily challenges the student about leaving the placement early with no negotiation, Lily recounts:

she immediately started screaming at me, saying I was racist...and I was picking on her and she just went constantly on about me being racist and that she would sort me out and talk to the University about me...she was going to go to the Board of Trustees...and she managed to put the fear of God into me....She beat me down really with threats and I allowed myself to be beaten down.

Likewise, Carol also found it difficult to process the strong feelings that emerged in her work with a failing students. When she confronted the student about his inappropriate behaviour, she felt:

... quite traumatised for a week or so, until I could get it into perspective, and [another staff member involved in the placement] felt very personally attacked by her, and felt quite intimidated by her. There were kind of trust issues with the rest of the team...

Meanwhile, Mary suggested that she was concerned whether her approach was appropriate, and wondered whether she needed to change her methods, stating:

“I had to question myself: was I being too nice, and not hard enough?”

We would suggest that this aspect of projective identification, whereby the object loses their reflective capabilities and experiences the student painful and unbearable emotional projections, is an important insight into why the experience can be so emotionally challenging for practice educators. As alluded to earlier, the unrecognised impact of these projections, and the defensive processes that are their corollary, might well explain why inappropriate assessment decisions are sometimes made. In the case of Lily for example, she passes her student, stating:

[T]o be honest I kind of passed her because I was glad to get rid of her and I know that's dreadful...I feel awful...I've never forgotten her and I have a huge regret to this day.

### **Containment**

If the notion of projective identification provides illumination of some of the challenges faced by practice educators of failing students, the accompanying notion of containment likewise points towards potential interventions and means of resolution. As explored earlier, Bion (1965) stresses the importance of the mother in early infancy in containing the infant's emotions and suggests, in a position later elaborated by Hinshelwood (1994) that projective identification processes can have a normative function whereby the mother regulates emotion and helps the infant to accommodate it, projecting it back to the child in more palatable form in a process of valuable communication. Only where the emotion remains uncontained, unregulated and without reciprocal projection is the process viewed in more negative and problematic terms as a process of attempting to gain "threatening control" (Hinshelwood, 1991;184). Again, in the context of practice educators overseeing struggling placement students, the notion is illuminative: perhaps in the examples considered above there was perhaps a missed opportunity for practice educators to understand the state of mind of the struggling or failing student and to open a process of dialogue to enable regulation and accommodation of some of the feelings evoked. Certainly, Hinshelwood (1994) argues that in a clinical setting, the analyst must be able to contain the patient's intolerable projections, in order to understand it as something the patient is communicating. Perhaps it is the case that practice educators also need to tolerate the uncomfortable projections that are generated when a student is struggling or failing in placement, and consider whether beneath the challenging behaviours something is being communicated.

Certainly if, projections are indeed in play in the case studies reviewed above, we can observe a limited capacity for containing and tolerating them and certainly no orientation to perceive these projections as potentially communicative of a struggling student's state of mind. Perhaps the respondent known as Carol comes closest when she relates how she and her colleagues had sought to engage with their failing student:

[S]he would never acknowledge that she was the one that wasn't coping, and it was always about getting someone else into trouble for what they weren't doing... At the time [we] both... felt very like we'd failed in some way. It didn't feel good, we came here and had a meeting, and it was all left up in the air. And I felt really really awful about it.

Carol goes on to explain that during the placement, she had to contain fears of the student making damaging claims which might impact on her (or her colleagues') careers. She stated:

It felt like, even my colleague said to me, 'She's dangerous, she's going to come in here and wreck somebody's career.' Somebody could work their way up for years, and she could come in and say something, and that could be their career. Tons of people just didn't trust her being around.

Mary suggested that having a student that was not passing a placement required that she contain the information (and the resulting emotions) needed to write an assessment of failing. She stated that:

... I had ... to follow literally every single thing that she did. So I had a load of evidence. ... There were two aspects of her, to the failing. There was the values side ... and then there was the quality of the work. If you had a one-to-one she was able to give really good understanding of her own values ... but at the same time she wasn't demonstrating it with any service users that she came into contact with. She just started talking to [service users] without any communication about what she was going to do first, and actually got [them] very distressed, and then didn't acknowledge this at all. She had no awareness that this was a problem.

Carol's approach is unusual in the studies, most of the practice educators having instead exhibited more reactive or symptomatic responses to the projections in acting out some of

the projections (i.e. being abusive about the students) and in showing diminished reflective capabilities. Practice educators were also engaged in 'splitting', in terms of the student, i.e. thinking in terms of exclusively 'good' students and 'bad' students, as well as sometimes adopting an adversarial stance towards the affiliated university. Universities in general and university staff, were often talked about in hostile and angry ways. It was felt further, that the relationships between practice educator, student and the university tutor were often 'uncontained' and reactive with all stakeholders experiencing anger and blaming one another with the result that the assessment process became even further obscured and the subsequent decision-making processes polarised.

The concepts of projective identification and containment thus offer a coherent way into thinking about the challenges faced by practice educators of failing students. There would certainly appear to be a plausible case for drawing upon these notions as a framework for reinstating dialogue and communication when these are failing in the educator-student relationship and for recognising that the difficult emotions educators in this situation experience need not represent an end point but instead the starting point for a dialogue which may prompt failing students to recognise and articulate their own potential issues and concerns and to become more critically conscious of their own psychological processes.

## **Discussion**

This analysis suggests there is an urgent need for practice educators of social work students, as well as supervisors or assessors of other professionals, to extend the range of their habitual reflective practice so that the strong, often uncomfortable and often hidden, feelings that inevitably emerge in a challenging educator-student relationship (Saltzberger-Wittenberg et al, 1983; Bower, 2005; Hunt and West, 2006) are actively recognised and explored to enhance that relationship and to aid the student in their learning and professional orientation (Coren, 1997). Reflective, rather than reactive, practice educators are best placed to transcend intense emotions of anger, guilt and shame with the consequence that struggling students can indeed be failed if required as part of ethical gate-keeping practice (LaFrance et al, 2004). This concentration on the relational aspect of the situation is key to improving the experience of both practice educators and students in practice learning settings. The work of Mattinson (1992)



advocates using a transcendental approach in the context of casework supervision and work with service users and this approach could be utilised effectively by practice educators.

In both of the research studies reviewed above, it is patent that even in retrospect, practice educators were often *reactive* to difficult emotional climates and contexts rather than analytical and reflective, with sometimes far-reaching consequences, often; abruptly terminated placements requiring a further placement for the student to undergo practice assessment; poorly evidenced assessment reports again resulting in the student being given a further placement opportunity; and students being passed as competent when the evidence strongly indicated otherwise. These psychological processes however do not appear to be just experienced by practice educators – indeed, recently undertaken research by one of the authors of this paper, also reveals that university tutors also appear to get caught up in these difficult dynamics when attempting to manage placement breakdown or difficulties.

Utilising a key psychoanalytic concept, namely projective identification and associated ideas as a habitual component in reflective practice and professional development could offer a useful theoretical framework and discursive space to make sense of the above described intense emotional drama. This concept offers a plausible explanation as to why practice educators sometimes describe intense sensations of anger, guilt, anxiety, isolation and pressure and why decision making becomes difficult and challenging. It may well also explain the often difficult dynamics that can emerge between practice educators and the university.

Additionally, the use of Ruch's (2007) containment principles, developed for use in child-care social work, nevertheless has a useful application for this context. She suggests the use of 'safe spaces' where social workers can 'make sense of the uncertainty and anxiety they encounter on a daily basis' (Ruch, 2007: 662). The need for a space to explore contentious or difficult feelings, and potentially poorly defined feelings, as a way of enhancing practice could be a valuable tool for the practice placement context, and is echoed in the suggestions of participants in our studies, who feel isolated and are searching for connection with other practice educators for support in these situations. Our empirical studies and subsequent analysis revealed some practical recommendations for

practice educators when faced with a difficult practice student. Foremost is the importance of supervision for practice educators, finding ways of discussing with other practice educators the issues encountered when working with students, possible use of mentoring systems, informal networks and formalised practice educator forums held within the field and within universities. Practice educators therefore, need support and help to work with resistance and defensive processes.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from the existing research as well as our own empirical studies reveal that assessors of students in placements may well suffer strong, uncomfortable and difficult emotions that emerge most starkly when working with a struggling or failing student. Whilst our research has focused on the experience of working with a failing or struggling student, it seems imperative that assessors take account of, are consciously aware of, and understand, the dynamics that arise between themselves, the student and the university tutor, including the wider practice environment. Practice educators would benefit greatly from becoming aware of their states of mind and be able to recognise projective identification processes when they occur. Learning and teaching relationships are thus complex and can evoke in all of us unconscious feelings associated with our early attachment patterns (Saltzberger-Wittenberg et al, 1983). These relationships, if utilised reflectively, can be helpful in enhancing the experience of students on placement; reduce the concerns of practice educators when assessing struggling students and ensure gate keeping practice is of the highest quality.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like thank Professor Stephen Briggs and Professor Pamela Trevithick for helpful comments and guidance on an earlier draft of this paper.

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