

# Editorial

## Decision-making in practice learning and education

To make defensible assessments and decide, practitioners must constantly configure their skills, knowledge and values in unique patterns, to respond in ways which satisfy numerous, often competing imperatives. Professionals must also ensure that any intervention is both warranted and proportionate and that similar standards are applied across welfare, health and educational systems. Therefore, the decision-maker must diagnose the situation, by evaluating the states of its most salient features and make a judgement about their merits.

Historically however, a disparity has existed between theorists as to how best one should assess and make decisions. Should they be based on the ostensible solid grounds of scientific quantification, where all the variables are weighed and measured? Or, should they be based on the experiential expertise of knowledgeable practitioners? Both these approaches have their merits. Analytic models are valuable for telling us how things ought to be and for systematically setting out the options, but they do not represent real life decision-making. Conversely, intuitive models that are fast and frugal, have demonstrated their utility in helping professionals assess and make successful decisions but they are likely influenced by our own biases, leading others to question their worth.

In practice then, assessing and making decisions is an incredibly complex task that challenges professionals greatly. When assessing and deciding, professionals are entrusted both ethically and legally, with acting in a person's best interests and deciding where and how those best interests are met. These best interest assessments and decisions are recognised as being among the most testing that professionals are likely to make. They are complex because they take place within an interconnected set of contested ethical, legal and policy contexts

which may involve the views and opinions of service users and of other professionals, and service systems such as the court. Contextual challenges too render assessment and decision-making in practice demanding. Such challenges place boundaries on the extent to which rational judgement can be practised. Assessments and decisions are multifaceted and non-linear in nature, prone also to variation due to the increasingly nebulous vicissitudes of modern practice, seriously taxing the skills of practitioners.

The same circumstantial, theoretical and real-world challenges occur in practice learning and education too, but they are insufficiently researched and understood, which is why it is worth devoting a full edition of the journal to this issue.

So, just as one example, say a practice educator assesses a student as struggling and makes the decision to fail that student. The need for a decision such as this has arisen because anomalous events have occurred – the student may not have performed as expected and the practice educator may feel the student has not met a predefined criterion for passing. To make sense of this anomalous event, the practice educator must mentally put the events in the proper context in order to give them meaning (framing), which allows her/him to decide what to do. If this is very similar to a situation that has been encountered before, the practice educator can use prior experience to deal with the events. If the situation is substantially different from previously encountered situations, the practice educator can set about formulating an action plan that deals with its uniqueness. Whether or not the practice educator's framing of the events results in the use of previously acquired knowledge about what to do in formulating a new action plan, s/he must use the events to fine tune the response. Therefore, the practice educator must diagnose the situation by evaluating the states of its most salient features and make a judgement about their merits. The practice educator must now decide about what action to take – pass or fail.

However, this decision is enormously problematic. In practice learning and education, just as in professional practice, the practice educator might be making this decision based on contested and complex information. Decisions such as this are frequently made under high levels of uncertainty and stress because of insufficient, ambiguous or sometimes misleading information as well as a lack of institutional support and time constraints. Moreover, this decision might often be

taken in the context of inadequate resources and poor supervision. Making failing decisions in such environments can result in practice educators searching for meaning amongst competing versions of events, which casts doubt on their ecological reliability. In such situations decisions are open to error, especially if the practice educator does not have the opportunity to consider the available options and the range of possible meanings and accounts more fully at a later stage.

Many assessments and decisions in practice learning and education are also value decisions and the drive for security and certainty in those making the decisions can lead to over confidence and an unchallenged analysis of the situation. Furthermore, poor intra and inter professional working relationships, between the practice site, the practice educator, the off-site supervisor and the university can also negatively affect assessments and decision-making. The overall organisation and team norms can also influence how we frame a narrative about students, which in turn has an impact on the assessments and decisions taken and these narratives are not always benign.

To complicate matters further, there is a wide variation within and between placement sites, practice educators, off-site supervisors and universities, in the way competency is understood, defined and applied, causing further confusion in relation to assessing students and making decisions. It has also been noticed that practice educators' decision-making falls on a spectrum, with some having a higher or lower propensity to substantiate pass or fail recommendations.

Furthermore, decisions by practice educators can be affected by the cognitive structure, the heuristics and schema held by them; the educator's attitudes, beliefs, values, and knowledge. Decisions are also affected by memory and by changes to mood. We tend to pay attention to information that is more vibrant and less attention to that which is less so. We are also subject to wishful thinking – that our preferences for an outcome increase our belief that it will happen. So, we hold off failing a student because we *hope that in the end, they will come good*.

As a result of these combined challenges, several problems occur during the assessment and decision-making process in practice learning and education. First, students may pass who should not so that service users are exposed to someone of questionable practice standards. Secondly, students that should have passed do not, and service users are denied the opportunity of having a suitably competent practitioner work with them. Thus, we can see that student, practice educator, off-site,

university, organisational, external and individual factors impact on the decisions that take place in practice learning and education, mirroring the fraught assessments and decisions qualified practitioners face.

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Given the magnitude of these issues, it is germane to dedicate a special edition of this journal to the issues of assessment and decision-making in practice education. Doing so gives the journal and educators alike an opportunity to take some dedicated time to devote themselves to thinking and writing about issues faced when assessing and making decisions in health, education and social care training and education. Issues ripe for analysis and reflection might include:

- the challenges of assessing and deciding; the models and frameworks for assessing and making decisions that we use and whether they are helpful;
- the theoretical frameworks we reference when assessing and deciding;
- how we practically assess and make decisions; and
- how students perceive of our methods.

Issues related to the academic frameworks we use, their utility and our ease in using them are equally areas suitable for dissection and analysis, as are the ethical issues involved when assessing and deciding.

So, it is with pleasure that I present the following articles that deal with these and other issues for you to read and enjoy. The articles and practice notes give much in the way of helping us understand a wide range of issues related to assessing and deciding in health, education and social care training. They offer us all a chance to reflect on the issues educators are currently grappling with, offering insights, inspiration, and much needed guidance on a variety of topics related to assessment and decision-making in health, education and social care education.

So, first up is Joanna Rawles, Head of Social Work, from The Open University. This article is based on findings of research into how social work students begin to develop expertise in professional judgement during their practice placements and what enables, facilitates and supports them to do so. The research seeks to understand the 'authentic professional learning' that took place for social work students who were

at the point of qualification. The findings indicate that the optimal environment for the development of the skill of professional judgement is one in which there is the presence and positive inter-relationship of three domains of learning which are outlined. The article goes beyond merely re-articulating the positivity of the student/educator relationship to illuminating what it was about the practice educators' pedagogical approach that facilitated the development of the skill of professional judgement.

Taghreed Abu Sarhan and Prospera Tadam from the Social Wellbeing Department at the United Arab Emirates University, outline both BSW and MSW practicum courses in the United Arab Emirates, examining the assessment tools and methods that contribute to students' readiness for practice upon qualifying. The authors explore the framework in UAE practicum settings and critically reflect on the challenges of the current assessment methods in preparing professional social workers for practice upon graduation. They examine the absence of service user contribution in the assessment process which is considered to be a major disadvantage to the holistic development of social workers in the UAE. Significantly, the two authors who are female, address the issue of gender within the context of assessment due to gender segregation in field practicum linked to the cultural and religious requirements in the UAE. The paper concludes with recommendations to improve the assessment of social work students at both BSW and MSW levels at the United Arab Emirates University.

Diane Apeah-Kubi, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Middlesex University, argues that whilst Fast Track (FT) social work programmes have successfully established themselves within the social work education landscape, there is nothing publicly available examining the experiences of the practice educators who assess these students. Using end-of-placement feedback data from a sample of 14 trainee practice educators based in England, she discusses the experience of assessing full time students at one university, including how the students performed on placement and the educators' views of their own training programme. Some educators noted a physical and emotional impact on students and a struggle with some to engage in reflective practice. Comments regarding the fast pace of both the Fast Track and practice education programme are also made. Recommendations for the training and support of practice educators supervising Fast Track students are identified and discussed.

Marguerita McGovern, University Galway, recognises that in social

work education failing a placement is a seismic event. She outlines the many complex reasons why placements fail. Her article presents four failed Masters in Social Work placement assessments – two case examples from practice failures and two from portfolio failures – for us to read. Findings are analysed by exploring the four case studies for themes. The article explores and presents these interesting themes. An interesting additional feature of this article is the section on ‘what happened next’. Often, we only see data but as these are real human stories, it was a thought-provoking empathic addition to the article to add this element.

Sarah Jean McCulloch, University of Strathclyde and Independent Practice Teacher’s article explores the importance of sound relationship-based practice in the supervision and assessment of social work students in practice learning. The article considers the origins of relationship-based practice and explores and analyses the literature in this area. McCullough draws parallels between good relationship-based practice in the supervision of social work students and the formation of successful and meaningful working relationships between students and the people they support on placement. She provides practice examples from student supervision sessions to model how sound relationship-based practice complements the assessment process with students and leads to good partnership working and shared goals on placement.

Jim Rogers and Lucy Bright, both from University of Lincoln, focus on how learning on a post graduate professional academic training module is developed and articulated via processes of shadowing and the production of two assignments – written case study and a reflective piece. The context of the paper is learning about key aspects of Mental Capacity legislation and the data for the study came from work submitted by fifty students on four successive iterations of a ‘Best Interests Assessor’ (BIA) training course in England. Findings are shared from an analysis of the assignments and the shadowing experience.

Finally, we have an excellent practice reflection from Elmien Claassens, Practice Lecturer, University of Pretoria, South Africa. In her practice note, Claassens, highlights the challenges practice lecturers overcame during a national lockdown amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Claassens discusses the ingenious and fascinating way practice lectures continued to teach community development despite the very real challenges presented by Covid-19. By using a fictitious virtual community created by the practice lecturers, students were able

to apply the theoretical knowledge on community work in the practice module online. Claassens shares the practical application on how students were able to 'do' community work in the virtual community during the practice module. This is an excellent example of ingenuity overcoming pedagogic adversity and can be a lesson in how to work creatively whilst keeping students safe.

Two book reviews are also included. The second edition of *Writing Analytical Assessments in Social Work* (2019) by Chris Dyke is reviewed by Dr. Sue Taplin. *Assessment, Risk and Decision-making in Social Work: An Introduction* by Campbell Killick and Brian J. Taylor (2020) is reviewed by Jenny Peddar.

In this special edition of the journal we try as always to keep you abreast of the latest developments in practice learning. This edition brings you a mixture of empirical research, reflections on practice, case studies and theoretical analysis and application, all with a focus on assessment and decision-making. We hope that you will find it of value in your work, and enjoy reading it.

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Guest Editor