The author discusses the role of the field instructor as an agent of socialization into the social work profession. A self-assessment profile is presented to help students and field instructors identify their physical and personality attributes as well as their cognitive styles.

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THE ROLE OF THE FIELD INSTRUCTOR is to help students achieve greater self-awareness so that the students can work more effectively with clients. The shaping of appropriate professional behavior in students is a difficult task for both new and experienced field instructors. They often seek guidance on this matter in seminars and workshops.

Because the boundaries between personal and professional identity inevitably blur in teaching, learning, and helping situations, field instructors must encourage students to think about how their personal identity affects their role as a practicing professional. Becoming a social worker involves more than mastering a body of knowledge and skills. The process of education in the social work profession includes reorganization of self-image and crystallization of role expectations and new behavior patterns as well as the acquisition of new technical skills. The field instructor's role is to help students with this important transformation.

The recognition of personal identity is a vital first step in the formation of professional identity. Because the person of the worker is a crucial component in the helping process, the worker must know himself or herself in order to reduce subjective response and to increase actions that are deliberate, disciplined, and consciously directed to serve the client's best interests. Although most social workers believe that self-awareness contributes to effective practice, the professional literature provides little guidance on how to develop self-awareness in social work students. Field instructors typically deal with this matter on a case-by-case, student-by-student basis by transferring and adapting their practice skills to their teaching methods. However, this transposition of practice skills with teaching methods can be risky: field instructors are admonished repeatedly not to "case work" or "therapize" their students. Many professionals fear to trespass inadvertently on the forbidden territory of the student's psyche in the process of encouraging appropriate self-reflection.

This caveat directs field instructors to focus on aspects of the student's personality or work style only when the student's work with a client appears to be faltering. Field instructors, therefore, delay such personal discussions until they can document repetitive patterns or themes in the student's work. Unfortunately, the well-meaning avoidance of "therapeutic" super-vision frequently results in insufficient attention to the student's personality and cognitive characteristics, both of which are significant to the development of a professional persona. Many students discover the impact of their personal style on clients only after trial-and-error experience culminates in failure.

The personal characteristics and individual learning style of students should receive routine and systematic attention in field instruction, regardless of whether the student is having difficulties. When the student's personal characteristics are part of the regular educational assessment during the initial phase of field instruction, the field instructor has a basis for planning assignments and for understanding a student's future difficulties both with clients and in field instruction itself. Insofar as "conscious use of self" is a desirable component of practice, field instructors have an obligation to help students appreciate the impact of their personality and cognitive style on their practice with clients and their approach to learning. This goal is educational, not therapeutic; equal weight is given to both the psychological and the cognitive dimensions of field work performance.

The approach to field instruction presented here also takes into account the degree of fit between the field instructor's style and that of the student. Although field instruction should always emphasize the student's practice and learning, the work style and personality of the field instructor cannot be ignored in this dyadic relationship. Recognition of differences and similarities in the personality and work style of both individuals lays the foundation for a working relationship based on mutual respect and tolerance for difference within the boundaries of the professional role.

The present article grew out of seminars and workshops for new and experienced field instructors. Both groups frequently stated their concerns about unprofessional or inappropriate student behaviors (for example, passive, demanding, or manipulative). Personal characteristics and work style are common problems in field instruction. Rather than automatically assuming that these problems originate with the student, however, one should also consider the possible lack of fit between the student and the field instructor, client, or agency. In so doing, the way is paved teaching-learning interaction that requires individual difference and models reciprocal adaptation.

Field Instructor as Socialization Agent

Socialization, whether in childhood adulthood, involves behavior change, which occurs primarily through the purposeful influence of others. In social work, the instructor's mandate is to inspire and reinforce behavior change in the student. The specific methods by which field instructors accomplish their task vary according to models of practice and field instruction held sway in the profession. When apprenticeship method was used, for example, the field instructor served as a model for the student, who imitated techniques and behaviors of the expert practitioner. In the tutorial, growth, and clinical treatment methods of supervision, the field instructor performed a permissive function in fostering student's personal growth. The expectation was that the student would learn about or herself in the process of learning how to help clients. The individual conference the field instructor focused on the student's process recordings, which served as a form for discussing problems in the student's work. This discussion often included consideration of the student's countertransference reactions to client addition to positive and negative fee


The Role of the Field Instructor in the Socialization of Students

Nancy Boyd Webb

Abstract

Fieldwork experiences for social workers who specialize in school social work have been an integral part of social work education since the 1950s. The field instructor plays a crucial role in the socialization process of students. This role is not only about teaching students practical skills but also about facilitating their development of professional identity and values. The field instructor is responsible for providing students with a learning environment that promotes their growth and development. This paper discusses the responsibilities and challenges of the field instructor and offers strategies for effective field instruction.

Key Words

Fieldwork, School Social Work, Student Socialization, Field Instructor, Professional Development

Introduction

School social workers play a vital role in the lives of students. They are responsible for providing a wide range of services, including academic, social, and emotional support. In addition to their direct practice, school social workers also engage in supervision, consultation, and staff development. The field instructor is a crucial component of the social work education process and plays a significant role in the socialization of students.

Responsibilities of the Field Instructor

The role of the field instructor includes providing students with a learning environment that promotes their growth and development. This involves several responsibilities, including:

1. Setting clear expectations and guidelines for student behavior.
2. Monitoring student progress and providing regular feedback.
3. Facilitating learning opportunities through supervision and consultation.
4. Providing feedback on student performance and encouraging professional growth.
5. Collaborating with other members of the school community to support student success.

Challenges of the Field Instructor

Field instructors face several challenges in their role, including:

1. Balancing the need for structure with the flexibility required for student learning.
2. Managing the diverse needs of students and the school community.
3. Navigating the ethical and legal aspects of field instruction.
4. Dealing with the emotional demands of working with students.
5. Managing their own workload and personal life.

Strategies for Effective Field Instruction

To address these challenges, field instructors can implement several strategies, such as:

1. Establishing open lines of communication with students and other stakeholders.
2. Providing regular, constructive feedback to students.
3. Using a variety of teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles.
5. Collaborating with colleagues and administrators to support student learning.

Conclusion

The field instructor's role is critical in the socialization of students. Effective field instruction requires a combination of knowledge, skills, and values that support student growth and development. By understanding the responsibilities and challenges of the field instructor, social work educators can better prepare students for the demands of the field.

References

inventory in thinking about how prospective clients may perceive them, and field instructors should use it to anticipate difficulties arising from differences in style and background between them and their students.

These goals should be clearly stated to the student at the time the profile is introduced, and its potential importance in planning the student’s assignments should be emphasized. When the profile is given to the student during the first or second supervisory conference, then discussed the following week, it serves as a very helpful tool in the development of the teaching-learning relationship. It is recommended that the field instructor suggest to students that they fill in the first and last columns of the profile early in the semester. Discussion of the middle two columns can be postponed until six weeks later, when the student’s educational assessment is discussed.

The physical and descriptive attributes in the left column of the profile are straightforward and easy for the student to complete. Discussion of how the student’s attributes may potentially affect his or her work is more challenging. Allen Pincus and Anne Minahan describe the thoughts of a very young student as she prepares to work with an elderly group of clients.18 The student is very aware of her youthfulness and how aging is a constant concern for elderly people. She knows her youth will help her in some instances and create problems and hostility in other situations. Unfortunately, this same level of self-awareness was not evident in the situation of an extremely obese student who wanted to be placed in a medical setting but was oblivious to the negative impression caused by her weight in a ward of dialysis patients who had to adhere to strict diets. Fixed personal attributes such as age, sex, and physical characteristics do have an impact on clients. Students need to be sensitive to potential client perceptions regarding their own presentation of self.

Discussion of the items in the right-hand column, labeled “life experience and future goals,” is helpful in planning assignments. For example, a student who has just gone through a difficult divorce and who does not feel ready to work with marital problems can express her concerns. Such information allows the field instructor to structure initial case assignments in such a way that the beginning student has a reasonable chance for experiencing success.19

Before the student is asked to fill in the two center columns of the profile—“social/personality attributes” and “cognitive patterns”—some time should transpire. Learning patterns will become evident during field instruction and as the student and field instructor become better acquainted they may feel more comfortable discussing these issues. The student’s relative degree of openness and trust, together with any self-reflective ability, will signal the optimal timing for this discussion. The student who is cautious and unwilling to risk self-disclosure may feel less defensive when this pattern is identified (in the second column) as one of several possible “personal style” characteristics.

It is important for the field instructor to stress that the student’s individual characteristics are not judged per se. However, in the course of the student’s professional development, he or she is expected to vary his or her style according to the best interested of the client. The field instructor who is willing to share with the student some aspects of his or her own characteristic style models a quality of openness that helps the student overcome defensiveness. Lawrence Shulman believes that the supervisor’s sharing of feelings contributes to a helpful working relationship.20 For example, it is certainly instructive for a student to hear about how the field instructor deliberately changed a very informal style of relating to a more formal approach when working with a group of senior citizens who were lobbying in their housing development for increased services. The field instructor realized that older people often prefer to be addressed by their last names, although this was not the field instructor’s own preference or usual pattern.

Field instructors tend to note immediately when their students demonstrate a work style that is drastically different from their own. For example, a student who is an intuitive learner wants to discover inductively from his or her own experience, rather than utilize the extensive agency information available about a client. When this student is paired with a field instructor who prefers to review all available information and discuss various alternative interventions prior to seeing the client, the student-field instructor interaction is headed for certain conflict.

Impasses can also occur when the student’s style is similar to that of the field instructor. The danger is that the similarity of styles will blind the field instructor to the student’s learning needs. For example, a field instructor and student who both tend toward intellectual and verbal styles may spend an inordinate amount of time in field instruction speculating about possible diagnostic categories and the theoretical foundations of various clinical syndromes, thereby minimizing attention to the student’s actual work with clients.

It is, of course, the field instructor’s responsibility to adapt his or her style to the needs of the student, to adapt the student’s style to the needs of the client’s. Field instructors must recognize that students will present more challenge than they are. Martha Giz says that “the supervisor tends to maintain a given style, which has its own therapeutic style, but that a given style is a given style.”21 Sonia R. Rhodes points out that therapeutic style is a personality trait and attribute of the worker’s technical competence.22

Use of the self-assessment part encourages the field instructor to anticipate the meshing or possible conflict between him or herself and the student thus serves as a very helpful tool in appraising self-awareness in the professional Consideration of style difference similarities between the student and instructor is often a productive beginning to overcoming an impasse.

In the example of the field instructor whose approach to clients is intellectual highly structured paired with an intelectual action-oriented student, it would be appropriate for the field instructor to discuss with the student about different ways of preparing for the first client, pointing out that their preferences represent two very different approaches: the student should be encouraged to consider possible effects on the client of so

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20 Lawrence Shulman, Skills of Supervision and Staff Management (Itasca, Ill: F.E. Peacock, 1982), p. 113.


Nancy Boyd Webb - The Role of the Field Instructor in the Socialization of Students

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