

Ethics and Field Education: Important Reflections for Educators and Students

Ethics and field education

The subject of ethics is undoubtedly one of the most important subject areas for social work practice; and therefore, is crucial in student education both theoretically in course work as well as in practice when on field placement.

It is vital that students, when on placement, are given substantial opportunities to develop their skills in ethical decision making, to reflect on ethical dilemmas and issues and to develop a model or frame of reference for ethical decision making in practice. The Australian Education and Accreditation Standards 2012 (ASWEAS) specifically mention *Knowledge of Social Work Ethics* as core content of social work programs (ASWEAS Section 3.3.1, pg 10). Guideline 1.2 of the ASWEAS (Guidance on field education) also refers to ethics www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/3553. It is equally important that field educators refresh their knowledge and awareness of ethics and ethical considerations before taking on social work students and ensure that throughout the placement, they model accountable and ethical practice as per the *Code of Ethics* 2010 (Code) (<http://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/1201>).

It is important to note that ethics is taught very differently among universities that have accredited social work programs. Some universities have ethics as dedicated courses, whereas others incorporate ethics into specific subject areas of study. Therefore, students may start their first placements with varying levels of knowledge and understanding about ethics and how it applies to practice as well as varying knowledge of the ethical responsibilities as outlined in the Code.

As well as highlighting the importance of assisting students to develop skills in ethical practice while on placement, it is also important to highlight that ethical issues can arise in terms of student/supervisor conduct during a placement, particularly relating to issues around professional boundaries, dual relationships and conflicts of interest. These often place the university and/or the organisation in difficult positions. It is therefore very important that university field education staff, field educators and students are particularly familiar with these sections of the Code and reflect on their practice and interactions with others in light of the ethical responsibilities outlined.

Some common issues that are reported to the AASW are: students forming friendships with clients; an organisation discovering personal information about a student which may have implications for their placement and deciding whether to disclose this to the university (and vice versa); students and field educators (whether social workers or not) entering into intimate/sexual relationships with one another; and alleged harassment by students to staff members (or vice versa) while on placement. All of these issues are extremely problematic for social work education and the profession in general. If you are a student

going on placement, a social worker (or relevant other professional) supervising students or a university employee involved in field education, it is strongly encouraged that you stop and reflect on your role and take stock of the ethical responsibilities you have as part of your role, paying particular attention to issues of power, boundaries, your own personal values and how these relate to others' and to the social work profession's core values, any conflicts of interest that do or may exist and issues of disclosure and confidentiality.

Some Important Considerations

It is important that field educators and university field education coordinators:

- Are familiar with the *Code of Ethics* (2010) (the *Code*) (*even if you are a field educator and not social work trained it is still important to be familiar with the *Code*). The *Code* can be downloaded via the following link: <http://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/1201>
- Be especially familiar with section 5.5.1 of the *Code* which discusses ethical responsibilities in Education, training, supervision and evaluation (p. 35).
- Have an in-depth understanding of the common areas where ethical dilemmas arise within social work practice such as *Issues of disclosure and privacy and confidentiality; issues of dual relationships, boundaries and conflicts of interest; issues of impaired practice/impact of personal issues; issues of assessment and transparency processes; and issues of values – accepting diversity or challenging unacceptable positions*. It is important for field educators to be especially aware of these issues with respect to their role as supervisor.
- Actively demonstrate ethical decision making processes by making reference to the *Code* and actively reflecting on scenarios with the *Code's* ethical responsibilities as the frame of reference.
- Include ethics as part of learning goals/assessment and encouraging students to actively reflect on the ethical responsibilities as outlined in the *Code*.
- Contact the AASW Ethics and Practice Standards Consultation Service (if members of the association) when faced with ethically difficult or problematic situations.

It is important for students:

- Take responsibility for ensuring that they are aware of their ethical responsibilities as emerging practitioners.
- Have a copy of the *Code* with them on placement, and to refer to this document as much as possible when they encounter difficult and challenging ethical situations. This will assist students to become familiar with the ethical responsibilities outlined in the *Code* and ensure that consulting the *Code* becomes a normal part of their practice.
- Gain a sound understanding of ethical principles with respect to their role as a student on placement and their relationships with their supervisor, colleagues and clients. If students are faced with difficult situations during their placement, either in relation to direct practice or a

relationship with a colleague or supervisor students should consult with their field educator, if appropriate or the relevant university staff member. If students hold membership with the AASW, they can also contact the Ethics and Practice Standards Consultation Service.

How to contact the AASW Ethics and Practice Standards Consultation Service:

If you have any further questions relating to mandatory reporting, contact the Ethics and Practice Standards Consultation Service on 03 9320 1044 or ethicsconsult@asw.asn.au

Case Examples

Paul is a social worker in a rural and remote health service. Paul's manager has approached him to ask if he will take on supervising a third year student for a semester. Paul initially agrees but when his manager sends him through the details of the student he realises that the student is the daughter of a friend of his. There are very few social workers in Paul's community and therefore limited options for student placements. What should Paul do?

If Paul agreed to take on this student, many ethical and other issues could arise due to the pre-existing relationship that Paul has with this social work student. It would be important for Paul to consider and discuss with his manager, generally, issues around professional boundaries and dual relationships (section 5.1.6), conflicts of interest (5.1.7) and privacy and confidentiality (5.2.4).

More specifically, if Paul has concerns about the student's performance while on placement it may be difficult for him to address these concerns by giving the student negative feedback or giving the student a poor mark due to the pre-existing relationship he has with the student. Paul may be in a position where section 5.5.11 of the *Code of Ethics* is in question which states that *social workers will evaluate the performance of students and supervisees fairly and responsibly, ensuring that timely feedback is provided and that those evaluated are included in the process*. If Paul feels unable to be honest with the student about placement, it could impact on the student's learning requirements and inevitably impact negatively on the student's future practice as a social worker. Conversely, if Paul provides the student with honest feedback and evaluation and the student does not react well, this could impact on Paul's personal relationships outside of his work.

While the AASW appreciates that in small communities, dual relationships can often be unavoidable, it is important to recognise these potential issues and explore as many alternative options as are available to avoid this situation. It is also important to demonstrate to students the importance of professional boundaries in social work practice. If these issues are not raised, discussed and alternatives explored the student may not appreciate and understand the issues that can arise when social workers engage in dual relationships.

If all other options are explored with no alternative found and the organisation accepts the student, it would be important for the student; the university; Paul and the organisation to all acknowledge the actual and potential issues, and to ensure that all parties understood and are able to maintain professional boundaries, to manage any actual or potential conflicts of interest and to ensure confidentiality.

Jane is a 4th year social work student and currently completing her placement at a community health service. Jane has a difficult relationship with her supervisor in that she does not agree with some of her supervisor's behaviours and conduct. Her supervisor has informed her that she meets clients for coffee on weekends, is friends with a lot of her clients on Facebook, and had one client stay over at her house one weekend due to the client having an argument with her partner. Jane is not sure what to do as she only has a few weeks left of her placement, and doesn't want to do anything to jeopardise passing her placement.

The professional boundaries of Jane's supervisor are extremely blurred and it would appear, in openly discussing these things with Jane, that she lacks insight into the importance of professional boundaries.

Jane is in a difficult position due to the power imbalance between her and her supervisor, given her supervisor is also her assessor. If she raises these concerns with either her supervisor or with someone else at the organisation where she is conducting her placement, this could have consequences for her placement assessment as well as for her experience in the last four weeks of placement.

Jane would need to make a decision about whether she believed the issues were concerning enough to report. Even though she is a student, she has the same ethical obligations as a fully qualified social worker in that she will address suspected or confirmed professional misconduct, incompetence, unethical behaviour or negligence by a colleague through the appropriate organisational, professional or legal channels and that she would familiarise herself with the complaints processes of their workplace and with the AASW procedures for complaints against members (5.3j). Jane could perhaps consider having a confidential discussion with her field educator about her concerns and seek advice. It might be that Jane decides that she does need to notify the appropriate person within the organisation but that she waits until her placement has finished.

This is a very challenging situation for qualified social workers when they are faced with situations where their colleagues are practicing unethically and it is, therefore, even more challenging for social work students given the power imbalance and the position of the student.

Alice is a social worker at a large public hospital and is currently supervising a student, Emily, in her final placement. Alice has generally been happy with Emily's practice on placement so far. When Alice was leaving work on a Friday night, she saw Emily getting into the car with a doctor at the hospital who she knows is married and who works in the same ward as Alice where Emily is doing her placement. What should Alice do?

Alice is in a difficult position as both Emily and the doctor are adults and can make their own decisions. Alice would need to ask herself, are there issues regarding Emily's placement and therefore within Alice's domain as field educator, or is this the personal business of Emily which should have no bearing on Alice's supervision and assessment of Emily?

The question around when one's professional responsibilities/obligations stop and when one's personal right to do as they please begins is another question. Alice might need to consider whether it is her own personal values that are causing her unease or whether she believes there are issues from a professional/conduct perspective. For example, she may refer to section 5.3 f of the Code of ethics (2010) which states that social workers will consider carefully the potential for professional conflicts of interest where close personal relationships, social, business or sexual relationships with colleagues are

contemplated or existing. She would also need to consider section 5.5.1 I which states that social workers will take all reasonable steps to ensure social work students and social workers under their supervision act in accordance with the values of this Code. Certainly there could be power issues, but if the doctor does not have any involvement in the assessment of Emily, or any involvement in her placements tasks, it should not impact on her placement outcomes. Alice should also consider that this might be completely innocent – and a generous gesture (giving the student a lift to the train station for example).

Alice might need to discuss this situation confidentially in supervision. If she decides that it is not her place to say anything, she should still explore this in supervision in terms of any judgement she might now have of the student, if she will be biased toward the student and if she has made any assumptions about the student and her colleague. She may also wish to consult with the organisation's Code of Conduct, HR manual or similar to see if there are any organisational stipulations regarding relationships between colleagues.

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