ABSTRACT. This paper reports on an analysis of qualitative data accrued across four research studies that addressed the experiences of field instructors in evaluating students and providing corrective feedback when necessary. Findings suggest that while tools for field evaluation are increasingly attempting to provide standardized, objective, and “impartial” measures of performance, these evaluations nevertheless occur within a professional and relational context that may undermine their value. As social workers, field instructors are guided by the professional values of respecting diversity, focusing on strengths and empowerment, advocating...
for vulnerable individuals, and valuing relationships as avenues for growth and change. By placing field instructors in a gatekeeping role, the university requires them to advocate for particular normative standards of professional behavior and to record a negative evaluation for a student who fails to achieve or adhere to these normative standards. Such activities can be in direct conflict with social workers’ personal and professional values, thereby creating a disquieting paradox for the field instructor. Models of student evaluation must consider the influence of this conflict on the field instructor’s ability to fulfill the role of professional gatekeeper and must find new ways of addressing the problematic student. doi:10.1300/J001v26n01_08

KEYWORDS. Field instruction, educational assessment, evaluation, supervision

The accurate assessment of competence is of vital concern to all the professional disciplines. The ability to reliably and validly differentiate between those students who possess the knowledge, skills, and judgment necessary for safe and effective practice and those who do not is central to the critical role that is expected of university-based professional programs as gatekeepers of their respective professions. Social work educational programs delegate a major portion of the responsibility for evaluating students’ practice competence to field instructors in the practicum. While faculty field liaisons are involved to a greater or lesser extent in this process (Bennett & Coe, 1998), the primary responsibility for providing corrective feedback and for assessing students’ practice competence rests largely with community-based social workers in their role as field instructors. When students have strong social work skills, or when students are active and open learners who quickly integrate corrective feedback in a positive manner, the process of providing feedback can be rewarding for field instructors as they participate in the generative activity of teaching and preparing the next generation of social workers (Bogo & Power, 1992; Globerman & Bogo, 2003). But what happens when the student is not able to develop the skills and competencies necessary to be a competent practitioner and displays many deficits? How does a field instructor respond to situations in which the pleasure of generativity is transformed into the responsibility for gatekeeping?
In an attempt to better understand the factors that contribute to field instructors’ ability to communicate with students about their level of performance, this article examines dynamics and issues in instruction and evaluation. The data for this analysis were drawn from a series of studies on conceptualizing and assessing student competence where the topics of working with students who present problematic behaviors, providing corrective feedback, and generating summative evaluations of students were explored directly or arose spontaneously.

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Students’ presenting with attitudes and behaviors inconsistent with social work has frequently been raised as a concern for educators. In one line of inquiry addressing this issue, researchers have attempted to determine whether it is possible to identify students who may not possess characteristics required to attain competence in social work prior to admission. Pelech, Stalker, Regehr, and Jacobs (1999), for example, examined the predictive validity of admission criteria in identifying potentially unsuitable students. Analyzing quantitative data from admission files, they determined that students who were later identified as problematic were on average older than other students, were more likely to be male, had lower grade point averages, and had more social service experience. These findings were consistent with some earlier findings regarding the value of age and gender as predictors of difficulty in student social workers (Cunningham, 1982; Duder & Aronson, 1978; Pfouts & Henley, 1977). However, these demographically-based findings were considered to be of limited use to admissions decision makers in establishing screening criteria, and therefore a further content analysis was conducted of personal statements prepared at the candidacy stage. When compared to other students, issues identified in the statements of students later recognized as problematic included a focus on personal histories of abuse, injustice, or neglect, and plans to work with others with similar experiences (Regehr, Stalker, Jacobs, & Pelech, 2001). To the extent that these predictive markers manifest as professional challenges for the student when entering the practicum setting, they are likely to be difficult issues for field instructors to address with students.

Other research has focused on the evaluation of students and identification of those with inadequate skill levels or those who do not possess the characteristics that would render them suitable for social work. Social work educators have sought to articulate outcome objectives and related
criteria for assessing student field learning and practice competence and to develop reliable and valid measures of field performance (Bogo, Regehr, Hughes, Power, & Globerman, 2002; Dore, Morrison, Epstein, & Herreras, 1992; Koroloff, & Rhyne, 1989; O’Hare, & Collins, 1997; Reid, Bailey-Dempsey, & Viggiana, 1996; Vourlekis, Bembry, Hall, & Rosenblum, 1996). Despite the movement to increasingly standardized measures, clinical performance evaluation remains a complex process that is further complicated by the social and relational issues involved in a mentoring relationship (Lazar & Mosek, 1993). Yet, in all these efforts to “improve the scales,” researchers and developers have left the responsibility for both evaluation and communicating negative evaluations primarily to the field instructor.

If a student is identified as potentially unsuitable for the profession, the issue of termination takes precedence. Research by several authors in this area has identified the absence of policies and procedures in schools of social work for terminating students for reasons such as professional unsuitability (Cobb & Jordan, 1989; Koerin & Miller, 1995), and others have addressed the legal issues associated with such termination including the framework provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Gillis & Lewis, 2004). From this work, it is clear that whether one is finding mechanisms to avoid termination of a student by correcting problematic behavior or whether one is preparing the way for termination, feedback must be provided to the student regarding performance deficits, and explicit expectations for change must be enunciated. Again, given the fact that problematic behavior is most likely to be manifested and detected in the field placement, it becomes the challenging responsibility of the field instructor to enact many of these underspecified and ill-supported, but legally necessary corrective actions.

Even for students who are not in potential difficulty, however, the importance of providing meaningful corrective feedback has been a consistent theme in social work education literature. Munson (2002), for example, cautioned against giving only positive feedback observing that in general, social workers (not unlike others perhaps) dislike giving or receiving criticism. Freeman (1985) provided guidelines for giving balanced feedback that is systematic, timely, clear, and invites dialogue. Kadushin (1992) offered similar guidelines and observed that workers’ and students’ performance failures need attention from their supervisors. Noting that despite social workers’ valuing of feedback they find it difficult to give when it is more negative in nature, Abbott and Lyter (1998) surveyed students and field instructors about their perceptions of
giving and receiving criticism. They found that criticism was experienced as helpful when part of a positive trusting student and field instructor relationship. Criticism was seen as harmful when delivered in a demeaning or harsh manner. More than a quarter of the respondents opposed criticism that was also not balanced with positive comments, and some highlighted the importance of the student being prepared for receiving criticism. Without such preparation, criticism was thought to be responsible for damaging self-esteem and self-confidence, decreasing motivation for learning social work practice, and impeding growth.

While there has been little empirical investigation of field instructors’ experience of their role as evaluators, anecdotal evidence from field coordinators note that field instructors find this aspect of their role as “most worrisome” (Pease, 1988, p. 35). Gitterman and Gitterman (1979) found that field instructors experienced defining criteria, writing the formal document, assessing student practice, and engaging the student in the evaluation process as stressful. In a study on the supervision of workers, Kadushin (1985) found that supervisors disliked evaluation as it reinforced the power differential with supervisees, and that a negative evaluation evoked anger and upset the balance in the relationship.

Similar concerns about evaluation and gatekeeping are expressed by supervisors in related human service fields. In the field of clinical psychology, researchers have acknowledged the presence of conceptual articles regarding the evaluation of competence and the responsibilities of internship supervisors for gatekeeping, but they have also noted that there is little empirical work related to these concepts (Gizara & Forrest, 2004). Problematic student behaviors and trainee impairment have been studied in incidence studies and in surveys that document the perceptions of training directors’ regarding the scope of the problem and ways of addressing it (Vacha-Haase, Davenport, & Kerewsky, 2004). Gizara and Forrest (2004) studied the experiences of 12 supervisors who had worked with students with serious competence problems, and, argued that further qualitative studies of this type would provide information that could be helpful to other supervisors. They found that supervisors perceived the process of evaluation, especially when trainees were not achieving expected levels of competence, as complex, challenging, and difficult. Issues that affected supervisors’ experience included lack of adequate preparation in their own training for the evaluation role in supervision, the degree of support they received from colleagues in their agencies, and the negative personal and emotional impact on the supervisor.
In a study of clinical supervisors in medicine and surgery, Dudek, Marks, and Regehr (2005) explored supervisors’ perspectives about evaluating poorly performing medical students and/or residents. They found that these supervisors felt they were able to identify poor performance but were often reluctant to report it for a number of reasons. Factors included their lack of previously documenting poor performance and their lack of clarity about what to document as supporting evidence for their judgment. Concerns about the potential of an appeal, its impact on their own credibility with their colleagues, and whether there would be faculty support for their decision also had an impact. In addition, the perceived lack of remediation opportunities for the trainee affected their decisions.

In summary, across the human services professions, studies about gatekeeping at the admissions level have provided some data regarding potential difficulty that some students might experience in field practice with populations with similar experiences to the students. In addition, studies on termination have described the processes required to remove unsuitable students and highlight the need for explicit feedback regarding unacceptable performance. However, these studies have not fully illuminated the issues and challenges faced by field instructors in their day-to-day interactions with students presenting with problematic behaviors. Similarly, despite anecdotal reports from field coordinators regarding the central role that field instructors play as educators and evaluators, and despite the apparent responsibility these roles engender for the field instructors as the frontline gatekeepers of the profession, there is little empirical evidence available regarding the issue of how field instructors enact these crucial gatekeeping roles: how they evaluate students and provide feedback when performance does not meet expected standards.

**METHOD**

As part of a program of research on conceptualizing and measuring students’ practice competence, a number of studies were conducted (see the following for a complete discussion of methodology of each study: Bogo et al., 2002, 2004, 2006; Regehr, Bogo, Regehr, & Power, 2007). A range of research methodologies were used in each study including scaling student behaviors, sorting vignettes, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. In an attempt to understand the challenges field instructors experience when teaching and assessing for competence, the researchers pooled qualitative data from these four studies. The data relevant to this
elaborated reanalysis were elicited when various aspects of evaluation were specifically investigated or when instructors’ experiences were offered spontaneously during discussions of evaluation scales. These relevant qualitative data from across the four studies were compiled for the current analysis. The methodologies of the four studies and the resulting qualitative data sets from which the relevant data were extracted are described as follows.

**Study 1:** In-depth interviews were held with 19 experienced field instructors who were asked to provide descriptions of exemplary, average, and problematic students they had taught in the field practicum (Bogo et al., 2006). Spontaneous comments made by field instructors during these interviews about educating and evaluating students with problematic behaviors were subjected to grounded theory data analysis. An iterative process involved the research team in reviewing the open coding reports, engaging in selective coding and developing a theoretical understanding, which was grounded in the themes that emerged.

**Study 2:** From the 57 descriptions of students collected in the study above, 20 realistic student vignettes were created to represent a range of student competence. Ten experienced field instructors were asked, first independently and then in one of two small groups, to divide these vignettes into as many categories as they felt necessary to reflect various levels of student performance. Two recorders (one for each group) captured the content and process of the groups as members discussed their rationale for ranking students (Bogo et al., 2004). Spontaneous comments made by field instructors about what they imagined it would be like to teach and to evaluate these fictitious students were used for this analysis.

**Study 3:** A Practice-Based Evaluation Tool, grounded in the concepts and language used by field instructors during the first two studies, was created. This tool consisted of six dimensions of competence described in detail along five levels of student competence. Forty three experienced field instructors were asked to recall their most recent student and to evaluate the student first using the school’s current competency-based tool, then using the new practice-based evaluation tool (Regehr et al., in review). Following completion of the tools, focus groups of approximately 10 instructors each, were held where participants were asked for their opinions about the two tools, about giving feedback to students (especially negative feedback), and about evaluation of student competence in general. One recorder captured the content in the discussions. Following the focus groups the recorder and group facilitator reviewed the written notes to check for accuracy and comprehensiveness. These notes
were subjected to grounded theory analysis following the procedure described above.

Study 4: The 20 realistic student vignettes, as described in Study 2, were provided to 28 experienced instructors who were asked to recall their most recent student and select the vignettes that were “most similar” to their student. They were then asked to rate the same student using both the practice-based evaluation tool and the school’s current competency-based evaluation tool described above (Regehr et al., in review). Following completion of the evaluations, focus groups ranging from 6 to 10 participants were held where participants’ opinions about the various evaluation methods were elicited and recorded. As well, participants discussed their experiences of giving feedback to students, especially negative feedback, and about evaluation of student competence in general. Methods of recording, data checking, and analysis were the same as described in Study 3.

In summary, 100 field instructors participated in these studies with 19 instructors providing data in individual interviews and 81 instructors providing data in 9 focus groups of 5 to 10 participants.

The researchers reviewed the relevant data from these four studies and, in the analysis, used a grounded theory iterative approach building on the themes emerging from each study. Each successive study provided an opportunity to challenge the team’s interpretations through engagement with groups of field instructors who had not participated in the earlier phases of the research program in order to assess transferability and confirmability (Cresswell, 1998; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

**FINDINGS**

Discussions with the field instructors across these four studies revealed six recurrent and interconnected themes. Each of these themes will be discussed separately in the following sections, and a model of how these various considerations combine to represent field instructors’ experiences and constructions of giving negative feedback will be offered in the discussion section.

**Posture Towards Evaluation**

Evaluating students presents a range of issues for social work field instructors. When field instructors in these studies were expected to evaluate
their students’ performance and rank or categorize it on a continuum, they reported conflict between the need to determine skill levels and their deeply held professional values, such as being nonjudgmental, using a strengths perspective, individualizing the person one is working with, and understanding behaviors in context. While they acknowledged that as social workers they must make judgments “in the real world of practice,” the role of facilitating learning is far more appealing to them than the role of judging student performance.

Field instructors in this group of studies were asked to provide feedback on a series of tools for evaluation. Given their commitment to being nonjudgmental and focusing on strengths, field instructors were very sensitive to the language used in various evaluation tools, preferring what they perceived as the neutral and specific behaviors found on competency-based inventories. They were critical of tools that used what they perceived to be value-laden terms (such as unfocused, authoritarian with clients, inflexible regarding intervention planning) or referred to personal qualities (initiative, warmth, sensitivity) despite their acknowledgment that these factors were often more important dimensions of practice than some of the concrete behavioral skills. They wanted to “individualize the student” and preferred tools that provided a framework and a means for them to “describe the attributes and process of learning and development” of the particular student rather than tools that required them to grade, rank, categorize, or rate students. They recognized the time challenge also, with one participant expressing explicitly that “Whatever evaluation tool we use we will complain about the time it takes, even though evaluation is important.”

Student Response to Feedback and Evaluation

Giving feedback is not a problem for instructors when the student responds in a thoughtful manner or accepts it, works with it, and uses it in subsequent work with clients. Instructors spoke about their gratification when they “could see the student using the feedback in the next interview.” Giving feedback becomes difficult, however, when the student does not accept it. The instructors described a range of student reactions including arguing, becoming defensive, attacking the instructor’s teaching style, and becoming silent and avoidant. Three types of circumstances were identified by instructors as limiting students’ acceptance of feedback: (1) where students had difficulty understanding the role of social work and the nature of practice and hence could not accurately assess their behaviors or skills; (2) where students had worked before entering the
educational program, believed themselves to be competent and were not open to a new view of their skill level; and (3) where students’ personality style was such that problematic behaviors were a pervasive part of their interactions with clients, colleagues from related professions, or both.

When students did not use the instructors’ feedback productively, the focus in the practicum changed from developing practice competence to concerns about the possibility of the student failing. Some students became fearful and cautious, and their struggles in learning were exacerbated. A downward and deteriorating cycle ensued with negative feedback producing more anxiety and concerns for students, which in turn interfered with their ability to learn and progress.

**The Relationship as a Context for Feedback and Evaluation**

Social worker field instructors in these studies discussed giving both positive and negative feedback to students as similar to giving feedback to clients. They highlighted the importance of the relationship as the context where feedback and information are provided that could produce growth, development, or change: “You have to be open and honest from the beginning and not shy away from correcting behavior and skills. In establishing an open and honest relationship you earn the right to give open and honest feedback.” They underscored the importance of giving feedback in a nonjudgmental way in practice and when working with students: for example, “I try not to only be critical but ask how could you have done better?”

Using social work values and adult education principles, the instructors encourage student participation and collaboration in all aspects of field education including setting learning objectives and evaluating learning. When expected to provide a numerical ranking for students on a rating scale, they reported that students pressure them for rankings at the high end of the scale. Interpersonal dynamics, differences in interpreting the meaning of the numbers on the scale, and time constraints left instructors feeling burdened and pressured to provide higher ratings.

As a consequence of the intensity in the dyadic tutorial model of social work field instruction, the instructors commented on how giving feedback, especially negative feedback, is difficult. Hence as one instructor stated, while other focus group participants nodded in unison, “giving negative feedback to the student is so difficult . . . it feels so personal.” They noted this was especially so when aspects of the student’s personality or personal style were at issue, for example, relationship abilities or degree of initiative in learning and practice. In these situations, students
frequently were reported to have difficulty accepting feedback. Field instructors reflected that when feedback was not accepted, not only was learning and change impeded but also an acrimonious process developed in the relationship with the student. Field instructors used strong terms to describe the atmosphere in their subsequent sessions and in the relationship such as “becoming tense,” “very heavy, intense,” “emotional,” and “like me against the student.”

The Practicum Setting as an Influence on Feedback and Evaluation

Social work practicum generally takes place in organizations where students join instructors on multi-professional teams. Instructors reported being caught between organizational needs and students’ needs. On the one hand, they needed to preserve longstanding inter-professional relationships and the organization’s positive perceptions about social workers’ contributions. These perceptions were challenged when colleagues were critical of problematic student behaviors and impatient with the instructors, perceiving them as inappropriately defending the student. On the other hand, instructors wanted to be fair and ensure the student had every opportunity to learn and progress. A time-consuming balancing act ensued: “I had to spend inordinate amounts of time managing the fall-out from the student’s behavior in the setting.”

Similar to the instructors’ concern about individualizing students’ approaches to learning and progress was their perception that evaluation takes place within the context of a particular organizational setting. They were concerned that dynamics in their setting affected opportunities for student learning. Even though the instructors might rate the student highly, they were concerned that their rating would be interpreted to mean that the student could function in other settings, a prediction they were not comfortable in making.

The Responsibility of the School of Social Work

A general theme emerged that can best be labeled “Where is the school?” While faculty field liaisons were praised on an individual basis as supportive and involved, instructors voiced concern about the school supporting their judgments. Instructors working with difficult students felt isolated in their role: “[I felt] lonely, alone and out there to do the hard work of giving feedback about problematic behaviors.” Critical comments related to the structure of social work education that relegates
primary responsibility to the field practicum for developing and evaluating students’ self-awareness, professional use of self, ability to self-assess, and level of practice competence. Instructors questioned criteria used in the admissions process that resulted in enrolling students who appeared to lack interpersonal skills or the ability to learn. They were critical of the primacy given to outcomes such as grades on written papers in academic courses rather than to assessments that provide an indication of professional competence. Finally, they resented what they perceived as the burden placed on them to evaluate student practice performance and serve as gatekeepers for the profession.

The Field Instructor’s Sense of Self

Conscientious about their teaching role, field instructors reported “second guessing” their judgments and seeking out the opinions of other social workers and colleagues in the setting to determine whether their assessment of the student was fair, accurate, or too harsh. They tried to sort out “how much is me and how much is the student?” They spoke about questioning themselves and their ability to deal with the situation: “Could I do this differently or better?” Sharing their impressions and experiences with other field instructors or colleagues resulted in feeling less isolated.

Giving negative feedback and continuing to teach in a deteriorating and tense relationship with the student was highly stressful, and instructors described their experience as “tedious, the repetition in teaching the same thing again and again with no change in the student’s behavior was draining.” In the end it had a profound impact on the instructors: “[I felt] horrible, depleted . . . I had to take a break from taking students for a few years after that experience,” and “three days feels very emotionally draining.” The time involved in working with a student displaying problematic behaviors, who did not join the instructor to change and develop, was a pervasive theme. In an era of demands from employers for increased productivity, students who need a considerable investment of time created an added burden and stress for these social workers.

Valuing a strengths focus in their practice and in their teaching, these field instructors expressed regret and a concern that they had in some way failed to make progress with these students. Generally they tried to provide explanations and rationalizations for the lack of change and attributed problems to a lack of fit with the setting or the developmental stage in the student’s life. The experience of judging student behaviors as problematic created dissonance and discomfort for these social workers.
who were motivated to provide student education as a generative and energizing professional activity.

DISCUSSION

Evaluation of students in the field is viewed by field instructors to be one of the most challenging and stressful aspects of practicum teaching. When the skills and characteristics of the student do not meet expected standards for a professional social worker, the evaluation role becomes even more difficult and dreaded. From the findings of these four studies, we conclude that the evaluation of student competence and the provision of feedback in field education are complicated by a number of interconnected factors. The tools of evaluation, the student response to evaluation, the relationship in which the evaluation occurs, and the organizational context in which the evaluation occurs all present challenges. These challenges are exacerbated by the professional values these field instructors embrace as social workers. While in the field instruction role, these social workers continue to draw on the professional values that inform and guide all aspects of their practice. When social work values come into conflict, field instructors experience dissonance and stress as evaluators and gatekeepers.

Several values come into conflict when field instructors are faced with the task of evaluating students and providing corrective feedback. The first conflict relates to the responsibility to ensure professional standards of competence are upheld while simultaneously being committed to the belief in individuals’ abilities to build on strengths and develop greater capacities. On the one hand, social workers expect their colleagues to be competent, and they believe that clients need to be protected from incompetent social workers. In their roles as field instructors, they judge negatively students who display problematic behaviors when working with clients and colleagues. When students are not able to change and learn competent practice, instructors expect such students will not proceed to become practitioners. On the other hand, these social workers are committed in their practice to empowerment of individuals with challenging and difficult behaviors and interpersonal styles. Social workers strive to engage such individuals, understand the life situations that have contributed to these difficulties, and work collaboratively towards helping clients develop more adaptive behaviors. Empowerment practice includes focusing on individuals’ strengths and avoiding judgmental, deficit-focused,
and problem-saturated perspectives. When the social work field instructors in our studies were confronted with students who displayed negative behaviors or attitudes they experienced conflict about their responsibility to identify and label incompetent practices, in language they experienced as pejorative or negative, and their convictions about a “strengths” perspective. While the field instructors in our studies (Bogo et al., 2004, 2006) and others (LaFrance, Gray, & Herbert, 2004) clearly identified that students who are most suitable for the profession possess qualities of maturity, honesty and integrity, the ability to form relationships with colleagues and clients, self-awareness, receptiveness to feedback, and personal congruence with social work values, there was marked discomfort in addressing deficits in these areas. Such reluctance is undoubtedly accentuated in light of previous findings that problematic students are more likely to report histories of abuse, injustice, and neglect (Regehr et al., 2001). Field instructors may perceive such students as already disadvantaged and vulnerable and are understandably averse to adding to these students’ negative interpersonal experiences. Critical feedback can reinforce a student’s negative self-image, and damage self-esteem and self-confidence (Abbot & Lyter, 1998). To communicate that particular behaviors or attitudes do not meet expectations of competence can be experienced by field instructors as conflicting with the value of acceptance of individual difference and commitment to enhance each individual’s unique skills and abilities. Hence providing direct and concrete feedback to students can represent a challenge to field instructors’ professional self-image as caring and accepting. A similar theme emerged in a recent study of supervisors of psychology interns (Gizara & Forrest, 2004). Trained as therapists to be nonjudgmental, empathic, and accepting of individual differences, supervisors in their study found it difficult to provide critical feedback experiencing themselves as judgmental, confrontational, and uncomfortable with the power and responsibility in their role.

The second value conflict involves the primacy social workers’ place on maintaining positive relationships as the context for practice and also the context for learning. They recognize that negative feedback can lead to deterioration in a relationship such that progress is impeded. Numerous studies identified the crucial nature of student and field instructor relationships in promoting student learning and satisfaction in field education (Alperin, 1998; Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001; Knight, 2001; Raskin, 1989). The intense dyadic tutorial model is also valued by field instructors as they experience their mentoring as contributing to the next generation of social workers (Globerman & Bogo, 2003). However, when negative feedback and evaluation become a regular part
of supervision, a disjuncture in relationships between students and their instructors can occur and often cannot be repaired (Bogo, 1993). This is especially so when students do not agree with the instructors’ assessment of their behavior or competence. Students may experience their instructors as demanding, “too negative,” or unfair, and they may react negatively in supervision. Field liaisons are frequently involved and a process of setting learning goals and reviewing progress established. The relationship does not end abruptly with the negative feedback but continues with intensity for sometime. Field instructors who appreciate the potential of relationships to bring about growth and change are then continuously confronted with frayed relationships and the challenge of maintaining a productive interpersonal climate in the face of potential conflict or avoidance. The focus moves increasingly towards following policies and procedures required for supporting a failing grade (Cobb & Jordan, 1989; Keorin & Miller, 1995).

Finally, the context in which the students’ behavior occurs is important as it reflects social workers’ value on understanding individual behavior in relation to systemic forces. Field instructors are not neutral when viewing social work in the host organization. Social work students are representative of the profession of social work—particularly in settings where social work is a secondary service (Globerman & Bogo, 2003). Students’ behavior can be experienced as a reflection of the profession and also as an extension of their field instructors. As a result, students’ problematic behaviors may be experienced by field instructors as a source of professional and personal humiliation on the team. Field instructors as social workers, however, are also committed to social justice and advocacy for those who are oppressed by systemic factors. They may be influenced by the felt responsibility to support students and ensure that the setting itself was not the cause of or a contributor to students’ issues. The school of social work in this study may have had a structure that further exacerbated the sense of difficulty and conflict. While individuals in the role of faculty field liaison provided support to field instructors on a case by case basis, the structure of the academic program and the priorities of the program were not seen to be consistent with or supportive of ensuring competence in the field. There were no school-based final over-arching assessment processes that included direct observation and evaluation of students’ practice competence. The only evaluation of students’ actual abilities to practice was conducted in their particular field settings.
Schools of social work are committed to ensuring that the graduates of their programs become professionals who are able to provide ethical, competent, high quality service to the public. Much of the attention of academic programs within the schools focuses on ensuring that students understand and embrace social work values which dictate respect and valuing of differences between individuals, focus on strengths and empowerment of vulnerable individuals, direct advocacy for the rights of individuals against organizational and societal constraints, and focus on the therapeutic alliance or relationship as a conduit for support and change. Field evaluation processes in social work attempt to define competency for practice, identify the observable skills and behaviors that exemplify competency, and establish means to determine whether students demonstrate competencies in their practice. In this context, field instructors are expected to be impartial evaluators. What is missing from this model of evaluation is that field instructors are committed to the same social work values taught to students in the classroom not only for services directed at clients, but also in relation to their students who are in subordinate and vulnerable positions. A paradox is then created in which the skills and behaviors required to be a good evaluator may be at odds with the deeply held values of the social worker.

Students presenting with attitudes and behaviors inconsistent with social work are an ongoing concern for educators. While the problems of these students may be exhibited in a variety of contexts, it is frequently the field practicum in which they are most evident. Field instructors are therefore placed in the position of being gatekeepers for the profession by providing corrective feedback to the student, providing negative evaluations as required and failing students who are not suitable for the profession. This role is not necessarily what field instructors envisioned when they volunteered to provide a practicum.

This study illuminated the challenges experienced by field instructors in providing corrective feedback related to their own professional values, the nature of the student supervisor relationship and the context in which the instructor and student both work. Given the findings it is imperative that schools of social work provide mechanisms for training and support of field instructors that address these central issues in the evaluation process. The emphasis on defining outcome criteria and developing reliable and valid standardized tools, while commendable, does not address these crucial process issues which will ultimately limit the value of any formal evaluation instrument (Regehr et al., 2007). Assisting
Field instructors in their evaluation role provides some immediate assistance but does not address the overarching issue of the responsibility of schools of social work to ensure their graduates are competent to practice. Educational outcomes are assessed in classroom courses largely through written products while the assessment of actual practice competence is relegated to the field. It is essential that schools of social work take back the responsibility for evaluation and gatekeeping that currently falls on field instructors. New models of evaluation are needed and social work educators might examine approaches used in related fields. For example, assessment of educational outcomes in a range of health professions such as nurses, pharmacists, and physiotherapists use a range of evaluation approaches beyond sole reliance on clinical instructors’ reports. The need for new approaches to field education and the preparation of students for practice has recently received renewed attention (Lager & Robbins, 2004; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). The findings from these studies and the challenges presented in our current gatekeeping practices reinforce the need for change.

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