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# Failing a social work practice placement: Differences between male and female students across Ireland

Davy Hayes<sup>1</sup>, Audrey Roulston<sup>2</sup>, Erna O'Connor<sup>3</sup> and Caroline Shore<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** Primary analysis of data gathered on social work students who failed a practice placement in four Irish Universities during 2015-2019 highlighted an over-representation of males but did not examine gender differences (Roulston et al., 2021). This paper reports findings from secondary analysis, which explores the differences between male and female students who failed a practice placement. The findings are limited in explaining the disproportionately high rate of fails for male students but do highlight differences in terms of reasons for failure. Firstly, males had significantly fewer recorded reasons for failure than females. Secondly, the combined reasons for a failure differed between males and females. Moderately significant associations, for example, were found between failing females and poor written work and poor reflection, compared to males who were more likely to fail due to poor professional conduct. The authors conclude that further research is required to improve our understanding of why males are more likely to fail social work placements than their female counterparts.

**Keywords:** social work; students; practice placement; gender; failure

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## Introduction

Similar to other professional disciplines, social work education and training across most international jurisdictions comprises of both academic and practice placement elements. Whilst taken as a whole, these programmes provide students with the opportunity to develop knowledge, values and skills for the profession, with practice placements specifically encouraging students to apply theory to practice (Bellinger, 2010; Boitel and Fromm, 2014; Hemy et al., 2016). As well as the importance placed upon experiential placements by professional registration and accreditation bodies (e.g., CORU, 2019; Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2019; Social Work England, 2021), research has shown that practice placements stand out in the memories of social work graduates (Doel and Shardlow, 2005). Furthermore, student attitudes towards working in different areas of practice, are influenced more by their practice placement experiences than by any other aspect of their social work education (Redmond, Guerin and Devitt, 2008). Indeed, it is argued that through the practice placement experience 'students are socialized to think and act like a social worker' (Bogo, 2015, p. 318). Despite the undoubted value and significance of the placement experience for student professional formation (Domakin, 2014; Maidment, 2000; Schulman, 2005), these can also be sites of complexity and tension for students and educators alike (Flanagan and Wilson, 2018; Lewis and Bolzan, 2007).

Whilst the practice placement has probably been the focus of greater scholarly inquiry, compared to any other aspect of social work education (Bogo, 2015), the experience of practice placements being classified as disrupted, incomplete or a fail has received less attention (Parker, 2010; Roulston et al., 2021; 2022). Data on the number of students who are subject to failing placement is limited. Basnett and Sheffield (2010) reference one UK based institution, which averaged a 3% fail rate over a three-year period, and Roulston et al., (2021) reference an Irish-based study reporting a 2.3% placement fail rate over a five-year period. However, it is important to acknowledge that these numbers do not accurately reflect the total number of students who do not successfully complete a practice placement, as some students will voluntarily withdraw prior to formally failing, or will take a leave of absence for health or personal reasons (Finch and Taylor, 2013). Although the proportion of students who fail may appear small to the observer, the impact of the decision-making processes involved when working with struggling or failing students, is highly emotive for all parties (Finch, 2017).

The authors of this study recently published findings from a study of

social work students, recruited across four participating universities in Ireland, who failed an assessed practice placement during 2015 to 2019. The study consisted of two stages, firstly the collection and analysis of anonymised quantitative data on 63 failed students (Roulston et al., 2021) and, secondly qualitative interviews with 11 students who failed a placement within the specified period (Roulston et al., 2022). Full ethical approval was given by the School Research Ethics Committee in each of the four universities, prior to data collection (Ref: EC/256).

One significant finding was that male students, disproportionate to their representation on the programmes overall, have a higher placement failure rate than their female peers. This paper seeks to explore these differences, through an analysis of the intersection between gender, student and placement site characteristics, and reasons for failure.

Although quantitative data was originally collected in respect of 63 students, there was limited information in relation to 10 students (7 females and 3 males), most notably in relation to reasons for failure. The data in respect of these 10 students, therefore, was excluded from the current analysis.

## **Background**

Social work is unquestionably a gendered profession (Furness, 2012) with females consistently outnumbering males internationally. In Australia, the workforce in 2006 was 83% female (Healy and Lonne, 2010), in the United States of America in 2008 the workforce was 79% female (Sakamoto et al., 2008) and in England, 77% of all registered social workers in 2009 – 2010 were female (GSCC, 2010). In a recent study of students registered on social work education programmes in six institutions both North and South of the Irish border, over 83% of the 240 participants identified as female (McCartan et al., 2020). These statistics are reflected in social work education and training programmes (GSCC, 2010; Parker and Crabtree, 2014; Pease, 2011). The low number of males entering social work education has previously been linked to the relatively low average salary for males (Moriarity and Murray, 2007) or lowly status in comparison to other professions (Christie, 2006).

Despite the predominance of women in the profession, a ‘gendered hierarchy’ within employment and promotion patterns has been noted

by researchers since the 1970s (Kirwan, 1994, p. 139) with men tending to occupy far more management positions than their female counterparts (Campanini and Facchini, 2013). Social work can therefore justifiably be described as, 'a female majority, male-dominated profession' (McPhail, 2004, p. 325). Reasons for this gender disparity have been widely discussed within the literature (Cree 2001; 2002; Christie, 2006; Harlow, 2002; Lazarri, Colarossi, and Collins, 2009; McPhail, 2004) both directly related to social work, and to the broader field of female majority professions. Simpson (2004) found that men benefitted from being the minority gender in these sectors partly because perceptions of men's status in the workforce contributed to greater opportunities for career improvement.

In this context of observable male career 'success', one might query whether the success rates for male performance on assessed student placements would display a similar pattern. The original findings of our study (Roulston et al., 2021), however, do not evidence such a pattern but echo those of Furness (2012) almost a decade previously. The available literature is limited in scope to explain why male students may be disproportionately more likely to fail the practice placement element of their social work education in comparison to females as, despite the stark numerical imbalance between the genders entering training programmes, there is a paucity of research into their comparative experiences.

Almost half a century ago, Pfouts and Henley (1977, p. 57) observed, 'there is a general agreement in the literature that women perform better than men in social work schools'. The authors attributed this outcome to cultural identification of social work as women's work. In their empirical study of graduate level social work students at one university in the USA, females were found to achieve higher grades for fieldwork components of their education, than their male peers. No particular explanation for this gender difference was proposed. An Israeli-based study (Levinger and Segev, 2018), exploring the characteristics of student social workers who did not progress to complete their degree, found that men were disproportionately represented in those who struggled with the placement component of the programme. Their analysis suggested that male social work students may feel marginalised in these predominantly female environments, whilst also feeling 'conspicuous' and potentially judged in the context of male 'discrimination against women' and in comparison, to 'traditional men' (2018, p. 15).

As an educator over many years, Furness (2012) observed that male students were more likely than their female peers, to fail, or fail to complete,

their social work training. In her subsequent UK-based research study, she explored the possible reasons for this disproportionate failure rate, with experienced practice teachers. Findings from this small-scale study, identified lack of awareness and openness to learning as criteria, which led to the practice teachers recommending a fail judgement in respect of male students. Failure to identify risk, not completing tasks, lack of confidence, disguised anxiety, poor time management and record keeping, all led to poor practice and to eventual student failure. Furness' findings suggested that due to societal expectations around gender roles, male students may have struggled to articulate their fears and worries or to discuss personal issues which may be impacting their learning and performance, to female practice teachers, or to admit to gaps in their knowledge.

Parker and Crabtree's UK study (2014) of male, undergraduate social work students during 2007 to 2010, found that the experience of being the minority gender during their professional training engendered a sense of unity and cohesion amongst the men present. In addition, role modelling of positive male identities and traits was regarded as valuable in challenging potentially negative and marginalised perceptions of men in social work (Christie, 2006; Kosberg, 2002; Scourfield, 2003). However, for some respondents, being male in the predominantly female spaces of some placement agencies, led to experiences and feelings of exclusion, whether from certain conversations, or even from some practice experiences such as domestic violence work. Some male students felt there was a degree of judgement or 'suspicion' of men choosing to work in the social care sphere (Parker and Crabtree, 2014, p. 319). The requirement to engage in reflective enquiry as a core criterion for successfully completing practice placement (Ruch, 2005), was also perceived as more challenging by male students, primarily due to socially constructed expectations around the gendered nature of expressing feelings.

We previously noted that there was an over-representation of males in our sample (Roulston et al., 2021) but did not examine gender differences in detail. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore differences between male and female students who failed a practice placement in terms of characteristics such as age, placement setting, placement stage, and reasons for failing.

## Methods

### Data collection

In respect of the quantitative data, members of the research team extracted this from Practice Teacher reports and minutes of Programme Assessment Panel meetings relating to failing students. The anonymised data collected at this stage included age of student at time of failing placement, gender, placement details (programme of care, setting, service user group), placement stage (first or final placement and whether it was a first or repeated attempt), and the outcome recommended by the Practice Teacher.

With respect to qualitative data, on receipt of written consent from 11 social work students, progress reports written by Practice Teachers/Practice Educators were accessed and the students were invited to participate in a qualitative interview. This explored their experience of failing placement, who was involved in the decision-making process, how the outcome was communicated and the reasons for failing placement. Other questions focused on the impact of the outcome, support accessed and preparation for repeating placement.

### Data analysis

The quantitative data was analysed with the assistance of the software package *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 27* (SPSS v. 27). Descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions and cross-tabulations, were used to summarise the data and inferential statistics were also used to develop the analysis and explore the relationships between gender and age, placement setting, placement stage, and reasons for failure. The reasons for failure listed in Practice Teacher reports and other documentation were analysed using framework analysis, outlined by Gale et al., (2013). The process involved familiarisation with the data, coding, developing a framework, applying the framework, charting data into the framework, and interpreting the data (Aveyard et al., 2021). This enabled the authors to generate the following domains: knowledge, skills, values, and personal issues.

Qualitative interviews were professionally transcribed and analysed using an adapted version of Braun and Clarke (2006). The original analysis, which is reported elsewhere (Roulston et al., 2022), identified themes including the impact of personal issues; importance of working relationships; use

and misuse of power; assessment and decision-making processes; and developing insight and useful feedback. This paper focuses on the reasons underpinning the ‘fail’ outcome from the student’s perspective.

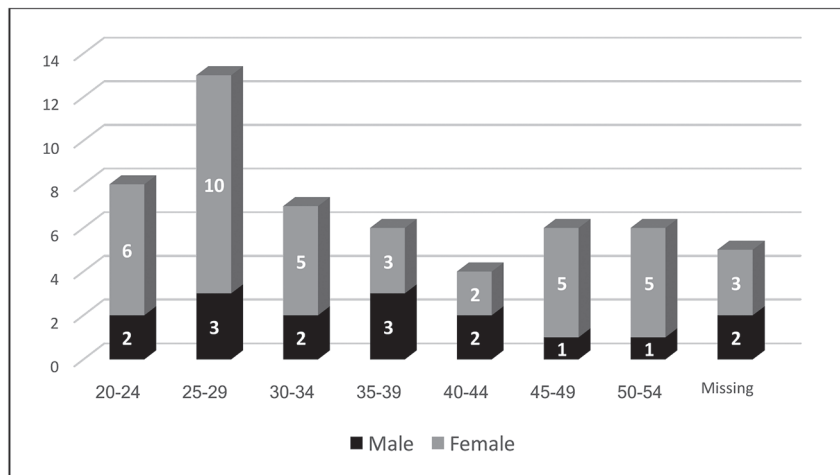
## Results

### Characteristics of the sample

The overall sample for phase one comprises 53 students who failed a placement in one of the participating universities during the five-year period from 2015 to 2019, representing 2% of the total number of registered students ( $n=2,696$ ). As displayed in Figure 1, there were 37 females (69.8%) and 16 males (30.2%) ranging in age from 20 to 54 years (mean=34.13 years) at the time of failing placement. The mean age of males was 34.21 years (range 21-50 years) and for females it was 34.09 years (range 20-54 years) with no significant association found between gender and age at time of failing placement ( $t=.038$ ;  $p=.970$ ).

[

Figure 1: Distribution of Sample by Age and Gender



For the qualitative interviews, we recruited 11 participants (9 females, 2 males) with a mean age of 33 years. Seven failed their final placement and eight participants (6 females, 2 males) were registered with university disability services. Four females and two males had mental health issues



including anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder and two females were diagnosed with dyslexia.

As outlined in Table 1, 20 students (40%) failed a placement in adult services (i.e., mental health, older people, learning disability, physical health and disability, and criminal justice) and 30 (60%) failed a children's services placement (i.e., family support and intervention, fostering and adoption, looked after children, youth justice, and education welfare). Cross-tabulation revealed no significant association between gender and failing either an adult or children's services placement ( $\chi^2=.277$ ;  $p=.843$ ). Most students were placed in community-based teams ( $n=37$ ) with smaller numbers in hospitals ( $n=5$ ), residential settings ( $n=5$ ), family centres ( $n=2$ ), and day care facilities ( $n=1$ ). The majority, as outlined in Table 2, were placed in statutory sector organisations (84.0%;  $n=42$ ) and the remainder were in voluntary sector agencies (16.0%,  $n=8$ ). Chi-square significance tests were not calculated in relation to gender and placement sector because one cell had an expected frequency of less than five.

Table 1: Sample by Gender and Service User Group

	Male	Female	Total
Adult Services	6 (46.2%)	14 (37.8%)	20 (40.0%)
Children's Services	7 (53.8%)	23 (62.2%)	30 (60.0%)
Total	13* (100%)	37 (100%)	50 (100%)

\*Data missing for 3 male students

Table 2: Sample by Gender and Service User Group

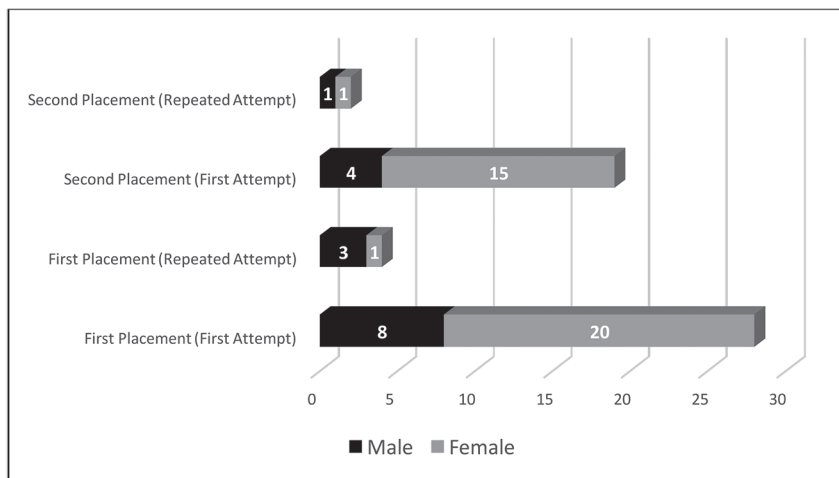
	Male	Female	Total
Statutory Sector	12 (92.3%)	30 (81.1%)	42 (84.0%)
Voluntary Sector	1 (7.7%)	7 (18.9%)	8 (16.0%)
Total	13* (100%)	37 (100%)	50 (100%)

\*Data missing for 3 male students

## Placement level and outcome

Figure 2 outlines that 32 students (60.4%) failed their first placement (28 on their first attempt and 4 on a repeated attempt) and 21 (39.6%) failed their second, and final, placement (19 on the first attempt and 2 on a repeated attempt). A slightly higher proportion of males than females failed a first placement (68.8%; n=11 compared to 56.8%; n=21) and a slightly higher proportion of females than males failed a second placement (43.2%, n=7 compared to 31.3%, n=16). Cross-tabulation, however, found no significant association between gender and failing either a first or second/final placement ( $\chi^2=0.672$ ;  $p=0.608$ ). In terms of the outcomes recommended by Practice Teachers, 42 students were allowed to repeat as a final attempt (64.3% of males; n=9 and 89.2% of females; n=33), 2 were permitted to repeat as a first attempt due to their individual circumstances (1 male and 1 female), and 7 were required to permanently withdraw from social work training (4 males and 3 females), with data being missing for 2 male students.

Figure 2: Sample by Gender and Placement Level



## Reasons for failure

Practice Teacher reports listed a total of 248 reasons for failing placement in respect of the 53 students in the sample. The number of reasons for failure ranged from 1-8 with a mean of 4.68 reasons. 11.3% (n=6) of students failed for 1-2 reasons, just under one-third (32.1%; n=17) for 3-4 reasons, nearly

one-half (49.1%; n=26) for 5-6 reasons, and 7.5% (n=4) for 7-8 reasons. The total number of reasons for failure recorded for males was 60 (range=1-6; mean = 3.75) whereas for females 188 reasons were identified (range=1-8; mean=5.08) with a significant association found between gender and number of recorded reasons for failing placement ( $t=-2.768$ ;  $p=.008$ ).

Figure 3: Reasons for Failing Placement by Gender

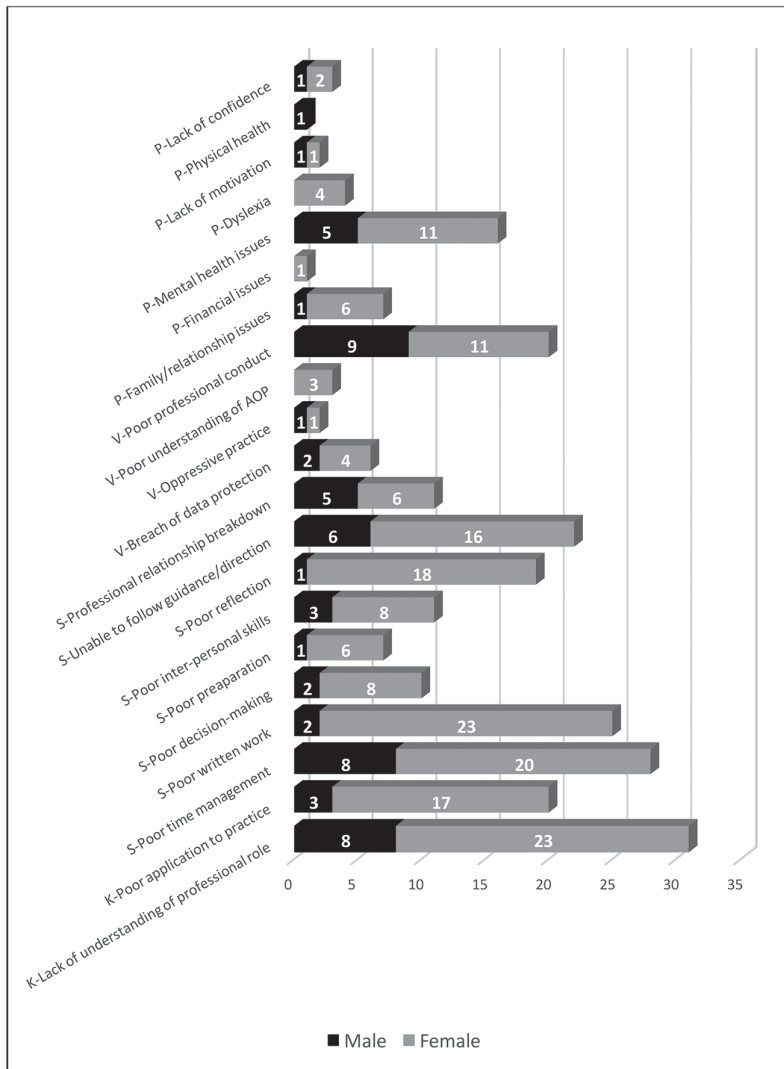


Figure 3 outlines the individual reasons recorded for placement failure broken down by gender. As discussed in the methods section, reasons for failure were categorized into knowledge, skills, values, and personal domains and these are denoted on the chart by the letter K, S, V, and P respectively.

Low expected cell counts precluded the calculation of Chi-square significance tests in relation to all but seven of the reasons for failure and these are displayed in Table 3. As illustrated, the top four reasons for failing placement overall were:

1. Knowledge: lack of understanding of professional role (58.5%; n=31)
2. Skills: poor time management (52.8%; n=28)
3. Skills: poor written work (47.2%; n=25)
4. Skills: unable to follow guidance/direction (41.5%; n=22)

Table 3: Comparison of Main Reasons for Failure by Gender

Domain and Reason	Male	Female	Total	Significance
Knowledge: Lack of understanding of professional role	8 (50.0%) [2]	23 (62.2%) [1]	31 (58.5%) [1]	$\chi^2=.681$ ; p=.602
Skills: Poor time management	8 (50.0%) [2]	20 (54.1%) [2]	28 (52.8%) [2]	$\chi^2=.074$ ; p=1.000
Skills: Poor written work	2 (12.5%)	23 (62.2%) [1]	25 (47.2%) [3]	$\chi^2=11.055$ ; p=.002 V=.457
Skills: Unable to follow guidance/direction	6 (37.5%) [3]	16 (43.2%)	22 (41.5%) [4]	$\chi^2=.152$ ; p=.932
Knowledge: Poor application to practice	3 (18.8%)	17 (45.9%)	20 (37.7%)	$\chi^2=3.516$ ; p=.117
Values: Poor professional conduct	9 (56.3%) [1]	11 (29.7%)	20 (37.7%)	$\chi^2=2.649$ ; p=.186
Skills: Poor reflection	1 (6.3%)	18 (48.6%) [3]	19 (35.8%)	$\chi^2=.8731$ ; p=.008 V=.406

[1] denotes rank order

There was some variation in the ranking of these top four reasons between males and females. In the knowledge domain, for example, lack of understanding of professional role was the most common reason, joint with poor written work, for females (62.2%; n=23) but was the second most common reason, joint with poor time management, for males (50.0%; n=8).

When interviewed, one male participant (ID7) who had been placed in an integrated care team reflected on his limited understanding of the professional social work role as follows:

*'I understand my anxiety did impact on my ability to do things to the best of my ability because it affects your confidence and it affects your decision-making, especially if you are not too sure of your role and stuff. I sort of knew what I had to do, but I couldn't execute it. I always felt anxious, that I was being judged or watched. It was a fast-paced environment and the social work processes were often explained in a rushed and hurried manner, and you were expected to know it' (ID7, male, adult services placement).*

One female student, who was diagnosed with dyslexia, and whose parent was in intensive care during placement, reflected on how miscommunication and stress impacted on the quality of her written work and her ability to meet deadlines.

*'I had done the work, I had it all waiting for [practice teacher], she was off for a week... However, she said she had wanted me to email it to her because she was working from home. I wasn't aware and I should have emailed it on, because she had a date for it to be emailed, but I was thinking she was off. I was of the opinion she was failing me based on my written work, that I wasn't including whatever she wanted, even though I thought I was. It wasn't just the written work. If my written work had been the standard, I think it maybe would have been a different story. I said I was doing the work because it needed done, but I don't think I was putting the effort or thought into it. I didn't have time to go to the library and research before writing it. I was just doing whatever I had the chance before I went to bed at midnight' (ID9, female, children's placement).*

Another female student, diagnosed with dyslexia (ID8) reflected on her anxiety about failing placement due to poor written work, and failure to meet the required standards:

*'My placement was a very valuable experience, as the work with families enhanced*

*my understanding of issues and the impact these have on each family member. At the mid-point review meeting, I knew there were concerns, but I thought I could improve my written work and pass placement. One or two weeks later, after handing in two more pieces of work, I was told I had failed. The practice teacher could have supported me better by informing me she had no intention of looking at a second draft of work, as I had repeated a number of pieces of written work, hoping to get further feedback, which I didn't. ...I am in contact with disability services to ascertain if I am entitled to support with my dyslexia, prior to repeating placement' (ID8, female, children's services placement).*

One male student, who failed placement due to poor time management reflected on how his anxiety and limited typing skills contributed to his difficulties:

*'I wasn't getting the work done quickly enough. Not so much academic work, it was the agency work. There's a great visual thing when you're not able to keep up, when you're not able to type quickly, that's very visual and I think you become self-conscious. [Children's disability] was a fast-paced team, I had statutory obligations to meet and if I'm truthful, my supervisor seen [sic] my lack of confidence and my inability to type quickly as a weakness and genuinely, from there, it was breakdown' (ID6, male, children's services placement).*

In the skills domain, poor written work was, as noted, the joint top reason for failure among females but was not in the top four reasons for failure among males (12.5%; n=2) and a significant association was found between gender and poor written work as a reason for failure ( $\chi^2=11.055$ ;  $p=.002$ ). Being female, therefore, appears to be significantly associated with having poor written work identified as a reason for failure although the strength of the association is moderate (Cramer's  $V=.457$ ).

In the skills domain, poor reflection was not identified within the top four reasons overall, or for males, but was the third most common reason cited for failure amongst females (48.6%; n=18). Again, a significant association was found between gender and poor reflection as reason for failure ( $\chi^2=8.731$ ;  $p=.008$ ) and being female, therefore, also appears to be significantly associated with poor reflection being cited as a reason for failure. The strength of the association is also moderate based on the Cramer's  $V$  value of .406.

A female student (ID9, children's services) indicated that her practice teacher and personal tutor provided feedback at the midpoint review

about the need to be more 'critically reflective.' The student said she was trying to do this, but it did not match the practice teacher's expectations, and she attributed some of this to a poor working relationship with the practice teacher, which limited opportunities to ask questions or reflect in supervision. A male student (ID7, adult services placement) recognised that his decline in mental health, relationship breakdown, a family bereavement, his own 'pig-headedness' and perceived 'awkwardness' with team colleagues impacted on his ability to critically reflect on practice.

Although no other statistical associations were found, three other findings are of note. Firstly, in the knowledge domain, poor application to practice was more frequently given as a reason for failure in relation to females (45.9%; n=17) compared to males (18.8%; n=3). Secondly, poor professional conduct (values domain) was the most common reason for failing a placement amongst males (56.3%; n=9) although it was not in the top four reasons overall (37.7%; n=20), or for females (29.7%; n=11). Finally, being unable to follow guidance/direction (skills domain) was the third most common reason for failure among males (37.5%; n=6) but was ranked fourth overall (41.5%; n=22) and was not in the top four most common reasons amongst females (43.2%; n=16).

In the qualitative interviews, several students reflected on the challenges and fitness to practice issues that arose during their placement and contributed towards the 'fail' outcome. One student (ID1, female, adult services) indicated that she found the practice teacher's expectations too high but acknowledged that she had 'missed risks a few times' or not dealt with them effectively. Another student (ID2, female, adult services) failed to adhere to the agency policies and procedures when she showered and toileted day centre members, despite not being trained in manual handling or personal care and being told it was not a social work role. A female student (ID4, children's services) used her personal mobile phone to text a service user, which prompted a fitness to practice investigation due to a breach in confidentiality. A male student (ID7, adult services) disclosed difficulties making professional decisions when responding to a 'chaotic' adult safeguarding visit, where he encountered 'carers who were quite verbal and quite aggressive' and identified potential financial abuse of an elderly man, which he did not pursue in line with agency policies and procedures. In all cases, the students indicated that they were struggling with anxiety, depression, or personal issues, which impacted on their professional decision-making ability.

The identification of poor professional conduct as the top reason for

failure amongst males, especially in interaction with the other main reasons (lack of understanding of professional role, poor time management, and being unable to follow guidance/direction) may provide some indication as to why, as reported earlier, Practice Teachers recommended that one-quarter of the males in the sample (n=4) be required to permanently withdraw from social work training compared to only 8.1% of the females (n=3).

## **Discussion**

This paper, which draws on data from across the island of Ireland, contributes to a growing body of research into gender as a variable in failed social work placements. Having previously noted an over-representation of males in our sample (Roulston et al., 2021), we set out to explore differences between male and female students who failed a practice placement in terms of characteristics such as age, placement setting, placement stage, and reasons for failing. As noted, the available research is limited in terms of explaining why male students are disproportionately more likely to fail the placement element of their social work education in comparison to females and the current study sought to contribute to an understanding of this concerning trend in social work practice education.

Although our findings highlight some differences between males and females in terms of reasons for failing placement, they are limited in relation to explaining the disproportionately high failure rate amongst male social work students. We did not, for example, find any significant association between gender and age at time of failing placement or between gender and whether the student was on a first or final placement. Furthermore, the placement sector (adult or children's services) did not appear to have an impact on the likelihood of failure amongst males or females. A significant association was found, however, between gender and number of recorded reasons for failing placement, with males failing for fewer reasons than females. The cause of this gendered difference in the number of reasons given as to why male and female students failed placements did not emerge in our study and requires further research and elucidation. It may, however, be connected to the specific reasons for failure reported by practice teachers and the findings point to different combinations of reasons underpinning a fail recommendation, pertaining to male and female students. Poor



professional conduct was the most common reason for failing a placement amongst males, although it was not in the top four reasons overall or in the top four for females. This may potentially be viewed as a more 'serious' reason, sufficient itself to justify a fail recommendation, particularly due to the direct impact of conduct on service users or carers, and, perhaps, explaining the disproportionate number of male students emerging from failed placements with the least favourable outcome (i.e., being required to permanently withdraw from social work training). Further research, with a larger sample, and in a range of cultural contexts is required to better understand both why male students are more likely to fail placements and are less likely to be afforded the opportunity to repeat placement.

Overall, the top four reasons for males failing placements in this study (poor professional conduct, lack of understanding of professional role, poor time management, and being unable to follow guidance/direction) concur with findings from Furness (2012) who identified lack of awareness and openness to learning, failure to identify risk, non-completion of tasks, disguised anxiety and poor time and record keeping as among criteria informing fail outcomes for male students.

The most frequent reasons for a fail outcome amongst females were lack of understanding of professional role, poor written work, poor time management, and poor reflection, with moderately significant associations found between being female and having poor written work and poor reflection cited as reasons for failure. This challenges the assumption that males are more likely to fail due to the need to reflect on practice as a core requirement (Ruch, 2005) and the findings reported by Parker and Crabtree (2014) in relation to capacity for reflection. They suggested that the requirement to engage in reflective enquiry was perceived as more challenging by male students, primarily due to gendered expectations around expression of feelings.

Finally, the prevalence of mental health issues and other disabilities in our sample of students who failed placement was significant. Of the 11 participants (9 females, 2 males) in the qualitative phase of the study, eight (6 females, 2 males) were registered with university disability services. Four females and two males had mental health issues including anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder and two females were diagnosed with dyslexia. During interview, students talked about how these issues underpinned poor communication, missing deadlines, their ability to understand the social work role and, their capacity for reflection. We also found that poor written work was a more

frequent reason for failure amongst females compared to males and this was highlighted in interviews by two female students, both diagnosed with dyslexia who did not feel sufficiently supported. The incidence of mental health and other disabilities among our sample prompts us to question if reasonable adjustments on the grounds of disability were sufficient and suggests that supports and contact from university disability services should be maintained or enhanced during placement, to ensure that the transferability of reasonable adjustments to practice placements is realistic.

## **Limitations**

The study draws on a relatively small sample both in the quantitative phase (n=53) and the qualitative phase (n=11). The associations found between gender and number of reasons for failing placement, poor written work, and poor reflection are therefore indicative rather than definitive and further research is required to ascertain their validity. It should also be noted that, in relation to reasons for failing a placement, the study relied on what practice teachers recorded in their reports, which contributed to the fail outcome but may not reflect all of the issues that students struggled with during placement. Undertaking interviews with practice teachers, students and personal tutors may have provided a more comprehensive insight into the reasons why students failed placement during the time period.

The original study population was limited to students who failed a practice placement, and did not include those regarded as 'struggling' or those who voluntarily withdrew prior to formally failing and are classified as 'incomplete' (Finch and Taylor, 2013; Finch, 2017). It would be interesting to explore trajectories for such students towards pass or fail grades on subsequent placements. The ethnicity of failing students was not captured during data collection, which the authors note as a limitation and the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity would be an important consideration in subsequent research. Finally, the study examined failing students in four universities in Ireland and is specific to this context meaning that caution needs to be exercised in generalising the findings to the experience of students in other countries.

## Conclusion

This study focused on gender as a key variable in failed placements and contributes to the literature in providing evidence of the over representation of males among social work students. The findings highlight some differences between males and females in terms of reasons for failing placement which have implications for social work education and suggest the need for a gender informed approach on qualifying courses for both students and practice teachers. The data generated by the study, however, does not shed much further light on the reasons for the disproportionately high rate of failure by male students. Further research, with a larger sample of students across different countries and cultures, is required to understand this sensitive experience more fully.

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