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**Presentation**

**FIELD PLACEMENT AND SUPERVISION IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**  
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**Professor Annika Halén**

focus points

- Social work in Sweden
- The role of field placement in social work curriculum
- Examples of field placement in the Gothenburg curriculum
- The role of the supervisor
- Supporting the supervisors
- The role of the practice teachers
- Assessment/examination

*Social work in Sweden and Gothenburg*

The first school of social work in Sweden started in Stockholm in 1921. During the following fifty years another six schools were introduced, this was of course a result of the developing welfare state and the growth of the public sector. By the end of the nineteen seventies these seven schools were incorporated within the university system and thus social work in Sweden became an academic profession as well as an academic discipline. There are today 16 seats of learning where social work is being taught.

These social work educations do not look the same. Every school is required to fulfil certain goals and standards set by the National Agency For Higher Education. But within the framework of these standards each school has the freedom to construct their own curriculum. As a result different schools focus on different contents; some on social care and elderly, some on international work, some on social pedagogy and some on structural social work etc. The Gothenburg school which I represent, do not have a specific focus, our rather our focus is that we give a general competence in social work. Gothenburg is also one of the biggest of the 17 schools of social work – if not the biggest. Each year we register 320 bachelor students that stay with us for 3,5 years. This means that we have 1100 BA students in the system at the same time. We also have 250 students on advanced level and 40 doctoral students.

*The role of field placement in social work education*

As mentioned above the National Agency For Higher Education sets the standards for social work education. The standards are expressed as a number of learning skills that the students are expected to meet after graduation. These learning skills falls into three different categories:

- knowledge and understanding
- skills and capabilities
- values and attitudes

So, the National Agency For Higher Education acknowledge that in order to practice as a professional social worker, apart from a certain amount of knowledge and understanding you also need certain skills, values and attitudes. However, none of the individual learning skills that are linked to the three different categories above, explicitly mention field placement as a mandatory element in social work curriculum. This does not mean that field placement is optional! All of the 16 social work schools in Sweden include field placement in the curriculum, and historically field placements has always been an important part of the curriculum. Lately there has been a shift towards integrating theory and practice. This has been done in order to strengthen both the academic and practical contents of the curriculum. The outcome of this is that we now see:

- several shorter element of placement integrated in all academic modules
- several academic elements integrated within the major placement period.

One common problem regarding field placement among all schools, particularly when it comes to the major placement period, is finding suitable placements. I will address this from another perspective later on but let me just say here that some schools have had such difficulties finding placements that they have actually contemplated eliminating the major placement period. This has not been tried -as yet- and I do not believe it will actually happen, but there is certainly a high level of frustration among all schools when it comes to placement recruitment.

The general design for field placement in Sweden is one major placement module consisting of 20 or 15 weeks (30ects) and in addition to that several shorter placements integrated within other academic modules. The major placement module is usually set during the fifth term, the only exception being the Sköndal institute in Stockholm where the placement module is set in the seventh term, and thus on advance level.

### *Examples of field placements in the Gothenburg curriculum*

#### *Major placement module*

We have - as I just stated- one major placement module as well as several shorter elements of field placements. I will not take up your time by describing the major placement module in detail, for those of you who are interested I have brought a copy of the syllabus. To summarise it is a 30 credits academic module in supervised fieldwork. In order to pass, there are a number of learning outcomes to be met. There are several elements of academic input during the placement (for instance lectures, seminars and group work on topics such as organization and crisis intervention). The students are placed individually and all have an individual field supervisor (see below). They are also during the span of the placement part of a seminar group (6-8 students) that meet regularly to discuss matters related to the placement. Each seminar group has a supervisor or practice teacher from the school (see below).

#### *Integrated field placement*

Apart from the major placement module there are at least two distinctive elements of field placements integrated in the curriculum. I will give a brief overview of these two.

1) During the first module of the social work programme the major placement students in term five act as hosts for the students in term one. Each seminar group in term five put together a three-day programme for a group of 6-8 first term students. The purpose -and the benefit- of this is two folded. The first term students get to know about different social work agencies, organizations, target groups, etc. The information is given by people on the same professional level as themselves (still students, but a few terms ahead) which makes it easy for the first year students to feel relaxed and to ask questions. The fifth term students have to gather information about their placement and put together a programme in collaboration with the rest of the seminar group. Doing this, and hosting the first year students, facilitates the fifth year students understanding of what they have actually learned.

This is a piece of integrated field placement that has turned out very successfully. An added bonus is that it does not require much in terms of teaching resources. Once we set up the design and found the right administrative routines for it, it is now more or less run exclusively by the students.

2) During the third term the students take a 7,5 credit module in research theory and research methods. Integrated with this module is a 7,5 credit module in academic writing. During the ten weeks that these two modules run the students are doing a two weeks field placement. The idea is that during these two weeks they collect information and material for their thesis, which is one of the assignment of the academic writing module. This placement is done in pairs of two. The students also write their thesis in the same pairs. Each pair of students is awarded an academic supervisor to assist with the thesis, as well as a field placement supervisor. Part of the examination of the academic writing module is that the students present the thesis to staff of the field placement. At the best of times this is a win-win situation; the students get an interesting placement and the agency where the field placement is carried out gets an opportunity to have some part of there organisation examined, observed or assessed.

In addition to the field placement there are a number of elements integrated in singular academic modules that deals with placement issues and/or professional skills, values and attitudes. These elements and modules will not be discussed here.

#### *The role of the supervisor*

The role of the supervisor is, naturally, to guide and supervise the students through the field placement. In our syllabus this applies to both the shorter field placement on term three, as well as the major placement on term five. To act as field supervisor we require a BA in social work or social care and three years of experience as a professional social worker.

The supervisors are not used as examiners or assessors. In the shorter placement we require that the students present their thesis to the supervisor and the rest of the staff where the placement took place. In addition to that we also require a written confirmation from the supervisor that the students actually attended the placement. From the supervisors of major placement students we require

- a written contract (also signed by the student) handed in at the beginning of the placement
- minimum two hours individual supervision a week
- participation of midterm evaluation together with students and practice teacher
- written evaluation of the student handed in at the end of the placement

It does not fall upon the major placement supervisors to pass or fail the students. This is a matter for the practice teacher. But, if the supervisors have doubts about the student's achievement, there is always a discussion between practice teacher and supervisor. At one time or another the students concerned is also part of that discussion.

### *Supporting the supervisors*

In order to act as a supervisor for the major placement, we in Gothenburg has decided that the person in question needs to:

- have a BA in social work or social care
- take part in a academic module in supervision while acting as supervisor

There are a great number of professionals out there who meet our requirements (in Sweden we have approximately 25 000 professional social workers), but most of them are kept busy by their normal workload and does not feel that their employees support them in their role as supervisors. Up until some years ago most schools, including Gothenburg, paid their supervisors an individual fee. This was more of a symbolic sum, but still very costly since there are so many students to place. Now all schools have abandoned this routine. Also, most social work schools share the attitude that taking on a student should not be an individual responsibility. It ought to be the responsibility of agencies, organisations and the local community. So far Sweden has long way to go before we get there. In order to attract supervisors we in Gothenburg –as well as many other schools- have launched a so-called “service-in-return” programme. This programme is partly geared towards agencies and organisations partly towards individual professionals. The agencies that provides us with supervisors gets tailor made seminars, conferences, courses, evaluations etc. Anything that we are good at, and they want (there is a budget!). The individual supervisors get invitations to disputations, public seminars etc. They also get a copy of all the doctoral dissertations produced at the department. We also support the supervisors before and during the actual placement. They get a two days introduction before the placement starts, and they are invited to participate in small group discussion headed by a practice teacher during the placement period. Each supervisor is linked to a specific practice teacher, and can at any time rely on her/him for information.

### *The role of the practice teacher*

At our school we have a specific internal organization that deals with placement issues, such as recruiting suitable placements, keeping in touch with supervisors, organising and running seminars and teaching modules for supervisors, organising and running the follow up seminars for the five term students etc. The staff that work with these tasks are not exclusively engaged in placement work, most of them combine this with other activities such research or teaching at other modules. Though the core of the field placement organisation, five practice teachers, take major responsibility for the recruiting procedures.

The major role of the practice teachers in terms of student contact is to follow up and keep an eye on the students during their placement and to assess them at the end of the module. This is done by:

- supervising a student seminar group of 6-8 students
- individual contact with students with special needs
- mid-term evaluation of the students and the placement
- assessment of academic elements during the field placement
- assessment of the field placement

I will comment these tasks briefly. The student seminar group meet at a minimum of four times during the placement period. The first and last of these seminars is headed by the practice teacher. During the first seminar the students are introduced to the field placement and its requirements, during the last the students are assessed on academic as well as practical elements (see below). In case a student has specific needs caused by illness or other kinds of stress-full events during the placement it falls on the placement teacher the placement teacher to handle this in collaboration with student and supervisor.

During the two-week field placement on term three, the students are not connected to a practice teacher. Here it is the practice teachers responsibility to recruit suitable placements. The persons responsible for the student during this placement are the field- and academic supervisors.

#### *Assessment/examination*

At Gothenburg University we are still using a three-grade scale. The seven-grade scale can be used should the student so require. But, most field placements (regardless of programme) are graded pass or fail. Also, in all academic modules in our programme, apart from the field placement, if the students fail, they can have as many extra examinations as they like. But if you fail the long term field placement you only get one more chance to do the module, and thus to pass. This rarely happens. Sometimes though, we have students leaving the placement before finishing the module. Often this is a joint decision taken by student, supervisor and practice teacher. In doing so the student does not fail in a legal sense and we can start the procedure of placement anew.

In order to pass the long term placement module the student is required to:

- participate in a minimum of four group seminars
- participate in planning and implementing a three-day placement for the first term students
- participate in mandatory academic lectures and seminars
- participate in a mid-term assessment
- participate in an assessment seminar on the academic contents
- participate in an assessment seminar on the placement process
- produce a written contract in collaboration with the supervisor
- produce a written report on the placement process (tasks, supervision, professional role etc)
- produce a written report of the organisation/agency where the placement took place

During the assessment seminars the learning-outcomes of the module are used as focus for the discussion.

I'd like to finish this presentation by pointing out that even though field placement, in any shape, is an important part of the social work curriculum, we should not forget the need for strong theoretical and academic elements and modules. It is my strong believe that by integration theory and practice, and finding new and fruitful ways of doing this social work education will improve in academic brilliance as well as in employability.