

SECONDARY ASSESSMENTS

**A REVIEW OF THE NSCSW
CANDIDACY MENTORSHIP PROGRAM**



2023

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WHO WE ARE

The Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) exists to serve and protect Nova Scotians by effectively regulating the profession of social work. NSCSW establishes, maintains, and regulates standards of professional practice. Our role is to ensure that Nova Scotians receive the services of skilled and competent social workers who are knowledgeable, ethical, qualified, and accountable to the people who receive social work services. The NSCSW believes the people of Nova Scotia are entitled to receive the highest caliber of care from their social workers. To ensure this we provide membership services to support Registered Social Workers in maintaining the highest standards of professional competency, enabling participation in a broader provincial social work community.

We engage with members, government, employers, community groups, and citizens to build a stronger social work community, and to advance the social work profession in Nova Scotia. We believe social workers provide an essential service to support Nova Scotians lead healthier, happier lives. The NSCSW engages with Nova Scotia's social work community in advocating for Improvement to social policies, programs, and social justice.

We provide responsive, accountable leadership to ensure the highest standards of social work for Nova Scotians. We work in solidarity with Nova Scotians to advocate for policies that improve social conditions, challenge injustice and value diversity.



LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT



The NSCSW is in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq, whose inherent rights were recognized in the Peace and Friendship Treaties that were signed from 1725 to 1779. This series of treaties did not surrender Indigenous land, resources or sovereignty to the British Empire, but instead established rules for an ongoing relationship between nations. The treaties were later reaffirmed by Canada in Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, and remain active to this day.

The NSCSW joins our members and our communities in the labour of reconciliation, and we are grateful to live and work together as treaty people in Mi'kma'ki.

REFLECTION & REPAIR

Decolonizing ourselves and our practice includes learning to recognize the ways in which we are each affected by the various systems within which we live and work. Each of us, depending upon our social location and intersectional positionality, may be simultaneously privileged and oppressed.

For example, all of us with non-Indigenous origins continue to benefit from being able to live on unceded Mi'kmaw land. But this privilege is tempered by the fact that many Black Nova Scotians have ancestors who were uprooted from their homelands in Africa and brought to Mi'kma'ki against their will. And every generation since their arrival has also seen waves of newcomers seeking refuge after being displaced by imperialist violence and its consequent disasters.

Our origins intersect with other elements of our identities to create the social context of our lived experience. Race and gender interact with class, age, dis(Ability), ethnicity, and more.

Developing deep and nuanced understanding of how our positionality affects the work we do, as well as naming and confronting the larger systemic forces at play (e.g. white supremacy, colonialism, neoliberalism) is essential to ensuring safer practice.



INTRODUCTION

This paper delves into the application of secondary assessments in the registration process for professional social work. It particularly zeroes in on a preliminary review of the NSCSW secondary assessment, known as the Candidacy Mentorship Program (CMP).

In professions like social work, medicine, dentistry, psychology, and nursing, there is a core expectation of professional accountability and responsibility, which is essential for ensuring quality service and protecting public interests. Professional suitability is defined by a comprehensive understanding of profession-specific knowledge, skills, and values, along with the competent application of professional behaviours in practical situations (Tam et al., 2013).

Educational achievement alone may not be enough to fully gauge a professional's suitability and competence. However, secondary assessments can provide additional evaluation of a candidate's abilities, extending beyond theoretical knowledge to assess practical skills, ethical decision-making, and adaptability in real-world situations. Incorporating these additional layers of assessment ensures a thorough evaluation of a professional's suitability and preparedness for their chosen field (Tam et al., 2013).

This paper offers a preliminary review of the Candidacy Mentorship Program, its function, and its effectiveness as a secondary assessment in the registration process for professional social workers in Nova Scotia.

EVOLUTION & EFFECTIVENESS OF LICENSING EXAMS

Licensing exams have long been a staple in various professions, serving as a crucial secondary assessment to ensure that practitioners possess the necessary skills and knowledge. However, recent research has raised concerns about their validity, reliability, and overall effectiveness, prompting calls for innovation and reform.

Validity & reliability concerns

The validity and reliability of various licensing exams have been at the forefront of academic discourse, with multiple studies drawing attention to potential issues with these assessments.

Bobos et al. (2021) found limited evidence on the measurement properties of Physiotherapy Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (PT OSCEs), revealing a low internal consistency and weak correlation between clinical performance and OSCE scores. This raises questions about their ability to accurately assess the readiness of physiotherapy graduates for professional practice. Similarly, Apgar and Luquet (2023) confirmed a weak connection between the content outlines of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) examination and the educational competencies for accreditation by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE EPAS). Moreover, there is no evidence suggesting such exams protect public safety either; Albright & Theyer (2010) determined that practice tests provided by ASWB (which articulate questions that could be asked in the exam) are seen as too transparent or guessable, making them an inadequate assessment of competency.

Predictors of professional conduct

In contrast to these concerns, De Champlain et al. (2020) found that performance on the Medical Council of Canada Qualifying Examination (MCCQE) Part I and II could predict future professional behaviour. For example, lower scores on the MCCQE Part I were associated with increased patient complaints, and low scores on the MCCQE Part II were linked to risky opioid and benzodiazepine prescribing behaviours. These findings suggest that the MCCQE could serve as an early indicator of potential professional issues, although further research is needed.

Additionally, Tamblyn et al. (2007) found that scores on the Medical Council of Canada Examinations (MCCE), specifically those related to patient-physician communication, were significant predictors of complaints to medical regulatory authorities. This indicates the importance of assessing communication skills in medical training and suggests that remediation of communication problems could potentially reduce complaints.

Equity

Concerns about equity in professional licensure examinations have been raised in numerous studies, particularly in relation to the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP). Callahan et al. (2021) highlighted the significant disparity in passing rates between underrepresented Black or African American and Hispanic applicants and their majority counterparts. This raises concerns about potential biases and systemic barriers within the exam that could unfairly disadvantage certain demographic groups. To address these issues, Callahan et al. recommend relinquishing exclusive decision-making control over the EPPP and making examination data available for independent review. Such measures could lead to a more transparent and inclusive examination process, potentially reducing disparities in passing rates and promoting greater equity.

Similar concerns about equity have been raised in relation to the Mathematics Proficiency Test (MPT) in Ontario, Canada. Eizadirad et al. (2021) examined teacher candidates' experiences with the MPT, voicing concerns about the use of high-stakes tests as

gatekeepers to the teaching profession. The authors suggest that such tests may inadvertently create barriers for candidates from diverse backgrounds, thus contributing to a lack of diversity within the teaching profession.

These studies highlight the importance of continually evaluating and refining licensure examinations to ensure they are fair, valid, and equitable. This may involve adjusting examination content to better reflect the diversity of professional practice, reviewing scoring procedures to eliminate potential biases, implementing supports to assist candidates from underrepresented groups, or considering alternative forms of secondary assessment.

Critique of standardized tests

Standardized tests have a complex history that has led to present-day challenges. The inception of these testing systems can be traced back to the First World War, when eugenicist Carl Brigham developed a method to classify soldiers into battalions based on their race and test results. This experience laid the foundation for his subsequent contributions to educational assessment.

Brigham perceived America's student population as increasingly diverse due to immigration from non-white countries. He hypothesized that standardized aptitude tests could help maintain societal boundaries among different classes. His ideas culminated in the creation of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), which was originally designed to evaluate psychological aptitude rather than solely academic performance. Over time, the role of standardized testing has drastically evolved. Initially employed to separate those deemed "desirable" from the "feeble-minded," it is currently used as a mechanism to identify academically gifted students irrespective of their backgrounds (Gates, 2019).

Despite the fading memory of its controversial past, the legacy of standardized testing continues to influence professional regulation. It often privileges certain groups while disproportionately disadvantaging others.

Shifting focus to dynamic assessments

Markovic (2022) proposed the idea of focusing on experiential pathway programs as an alternative to conventional bar exams. This proposition suggests a move towards more dynamic assessments that could better mirror professional practice and emphasize ethics training. Tamblyn et al. (2007) also suggested incorporating communication skills evaluations at various stages of medical education, such as during candidate selection for medical school or identifying trainees who may need more focused skills training.

A recurring theme across these studies is the call for a transition towards more dynamic, real-world assessments. Phelps and Sykes (2020) suggested using Content Knowledge for Teaching (CKT) assessment tasks and performance assessments to demonstrate

competencies like lesson planning and reflection on instructional goals in teaching licensure. Smirnova (2022) advocated for discontinuing the MCCQE Part II in favour of the MCCQE Part I and developing strategies to identify potential challenges for both international and Canadian medical graduates. She also discussed other methods to ensure physician competence, including Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs), portfolios, and workplace-based evaluations.

Whitehead et al. (2022) identified critical components for a successful transition from registered nurse to nurse practitioner, which include structured candidacy roles, supportive environments, suitable mentors/preceptors, and regular evaluations.

Marcus-Blank et al. (2019) conducted a study to determine the relationship between first-year resident performance and their scores on structured interviews and licensure exams. The findings indicated that United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step 1 and 2 Clinical Knowledge scores were significantly correlated with cognitively oriented competencies. Furthermore, structured interview scores were valid predictors of performance on three non-cognitive competencies. The results revealed that structured interview scores added incremental validity over USMLE scores in predicting patient care, professionalism, and interpersonal skills. The authors concluded that structured interviews offer a reliable tool for evaluating applicants' non-cognitive skills and should be used in conjunction with USMLE scores for optimal prediction of resident performance.

In short, while licensing exams play a crucial role in various professions, their effectiveness has been called into question. As we navigate the future of secondary assessments, literature reflects the need to enhance validity and reliability, focus on equity, and shift from summative assessment to dynamic assessment.

CANDIDACY MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

The NSCSW has utilized the CMP as a secondary assessment since 1993, with significant revisions to the program occurring in 2019.

The CMP is a strategic initiative for graduates of accredited social work schools. It aims to provide a supportive and educational environment for professional development, grounded in adult learning principles. By pairing new graduates or those returning to practice (candidates) with seasoned practitioners (mentors), the CMP helps new registrants assimilate knowledge, apply skills, and put ethical principles into action during their initial years of practice.

Throughout their 2500 hours of practice experience, candidates benefit from regular, structured meetings with their mentors. These meetings provide a platform for candidates to develop a professional identity, handle ethical dilemmas, address professional concerns related to their practice experience, integrate theory and practice, enhance self-awareness, and fine-tune a unique practice framework.

Aligned with the NSCSW's mandate to protect the public, the CMP works to ensure that new Registered Social Workers possess the skills, competence, and good character required.

The CMP adheres to several guiding principles:

- 1 It is rooted in the values, ethics, and principles of the social work profession.
- 2 It ensures all Registered Social Workers in Nova Scotia are competent and ethical, thereby protecting the public.
- 3 It offers mentorship in a supportive environment to explore complex ethical issues and foster lifelong learning.
- 4 It acknowledges the diverse strengths and needs of each candidate, supporting various paths to achieve learning objectives.
- 5 It fosters an understanding of the professional social work identity and the complexity of social work practice.
- 6 It promotes the unique voice of social work in broader systemic change and social justice.
- 7 It aims to be consistently available to all practicing social workers in a regular, structured manner.

The CMP is guided by two key documents: the NSCSW Standards of Practice, and the NSCSW Code of Ethics. Upon completing the CMP, a candidate will demonstrate an understanding and application of both documents, integrating their content and spirit into their day-to-day social work practice.

The CMP aims to ensure that new graduates possess the skills, competence, and good character to practice social work in Nova Scotia. This mentorship process is designed to reduce professional stress and provide nurturing conditions to promote success and self-efficacy. It is distinct from the administrative supervision typically received from employers. Candidates receive structured support through regular mentor meetings. All reports are digital and linked to the candidate's member profile with the College. The program includes a monitoring and evaluation framework, and constructive feedback on the learning agreement and reports.

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Candidates must complete 2500 hours of social work practice experience within five years, starting the candidacy process within six months after registering with the College. They are expected to meet with their mentor for two hours per month for full-time work, or one hour per month for part-time work. Three reports – a learning agreement, a midterm report, and a final report – must be completed. When the program was updated in 2019 a dedicated CMP website was launched to support candidates and mentors throughout the program.

By emphasizing practical experience, mentorship, and adherence to core social work values, the CMP can address some of the limitations and concerns associated with standardized testing, such as cultural bias and disparities in pass rates among different racial groups.

A dynamic assessment tool, such as the CMP, offers a fresh approach to evaluating candidate potential and readiness. Unlike traditional standardized testing methods, the CMP strongly emphasizes practical experience, mentorship, and adherence to core social work values. This methodology allows for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of a student's capabilities, which can lead to more accurate and equitable outcomes.

One of the key advantages of the CMP is its ability to address cultural bias, a common critique of standardized testing. Standardized tests often fail to consider the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of students, leading to potential misinterpretations and inaccuracies in the results. The CMP, however, is designed with a cultural sensitivity lens, ensuring that assessments are fair, inclusive, and representative of diverse candidate experiences.

Moreover, the CMP's focus on mentorship provides an avenue for personalized guidance, feedback, and support. This one-on-one interaction allows mentors to identify and cultivate individual strengths, while also addressing specific areas of improvement, which is not possible with standardized testing.

Additionally, disparities in pass rates among different racial groups—a recurrent issue with standardized tests—can be mitigated through the CMP. Focusing on core social work values, the program encourages an equitable learning environment that fosters success.

RATIONALE FOR CANDIDACY AS SECONDARY ASSESSMENT

Given the present political, social, and economic environment in Nova Scotia, the social work profession struggles to maintain a clear professional identity, affecting professional suitability (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). Practitioners often grapple with a complex interplay between social work values, ethics, standards, and workplace demands. This is largely due to the rise of neoliberal ideologies that emphasize privatization, deregulation, and reduced social spending (Harlow et al., 2013). Neoliberal policies have led to restricted resources, increased workloads, and a shift toward managerialism that challenges social justice aims (Morley et al., 2019). As a result, social workers face pressure to conform to market logic and managerial controls, undermining their professional autonomy and social justice orientation (Rogowski, 2012). This neoliberal shift has created an identity crisis, as social workers struggle to reconcile their values and ethics with new practice realities (Baines et al., 2014). In this context, the CMP offers mutual support among social workers in Nova Scotia to reinforce their professional identity amidst shifting practice landscapes.

The CMP is intended to align with the NSCSW's mandate to safeguard the public. The program helps mitigate risk to the public and to social workers themselves by providing mentorship and oversight during the transition from student to practicing professional (Beddoe et al., 2013).

Some key goals of the CMP are to mitigate risk, ensure good character, and expand professional networks. By pairing new registrants with experienced mentor social workers, the program aims to identify and prevent potential issues early on. Mentors can share practical knowledge and guide candidates in applying ethical decision-making (Donnelly, 2014). Meeting regularly helps reinforce social work values and identity. Additionally, connecting candidates to the professional community builds support and learning opportunities. Overall, the CMP is a protective mechanism for clients and social workers navigating the critical initial years of practice.

Many newly registered social workers are new graduates, and some are applicants returning to the profession or moving from one province to another. Making these types of professional transitions can be effectively supported by candidacy (Bogo, 2015).

As a dynamic assessment tool, the CMP presents a novel method for assessing student potential and readiness. This tool differs from traditional standardized testing methods by prioritizing practical experience, mentorship, and adherence to fundamental social work values. This shift in methodology facilitates a more holistic and nuanced appraisal of a student's abilities, potentially leading to more precise and fair outcomes (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002).

Dynamic assessment

Standardized testing has been criticized for its cultural bias, often overlooking the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of students, which can result in inaccuracies and misinterpretations (Artiles et al., 2005). In contrast, the CMP is developed with a focus on cultural sensitivity, ensuring that assessments are equitable, inclusive, and reflective of varied student experiences.

Furthermore, the CMP underscores the importance of mentorship, offering a platform for individualized guidance, feedback, and support. This personalized interaction enables mentors to recognize and nurture individual strengths and address areas needing improvement, a feature absent in standardized testing (Allen et al., 2007).

Disparities in pass rates among different racial groups — a persistent problem with standardized tests — can be alleviated through the CMP. The program's emphasis on core social work values promotes an equitable learning environment that cultivates success for all students, irrespective of their racial background.

Risk mitigation

The CMP focuses heavily on risk mitigation, with an emphasis on public protection (NSCSW, 2021). When candidates begin the program, one of the first steps is developing a learning agreement outlining goals that connect their practice to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (Bogo, 2015). This serves as a risk mitigation strategy, ensuring candidates integrate ethics into real-world practice while strengthening their professional identity. Key program initiatives like this aim to mitigate risks like ethical violations and occupational stress injuries that can impact social workers and the public (Donnelly, 2014). Overall, risk mitigation through strategies like education, training, and mentorship is crucial for reducing harm and enhancing professional conduct. The CMP provides a framework to equip new social workers with the skills and mindset needed to practice ethically and safely.

Differentiating mentorship from supervision

Mentorship differs from supervision. Workplace supervision is provided by employers to support their staff – this is an important aspect of working as a social worker (Beddoe et al., 2013). Mentorship is not supervision. Most mentors have no direct control over their candidate's work but instead possess character traits, knowledge, and experiences that a candidate desires to develop (Bogo, 2015).

The context of mentorship is rooted in a trusting and supportive atmosphere where the mentor can provide an outlet for their candidates to voice their opinions without fear of retribution, to explore their ideas without fear of judgement, and to discover their strengths and limitations without fear of failure (Donnelly, 2014). The mentoring relationship fosters

learning and growth for both the mentor and candidate and it is grounded in a mutually respectful relationship.

The NSCSW encourages applicants to avoid selecting a workplace supervisor as their mentor. This is to ensure that the candidate has an environment to complete the program that will not negatively impact their employment relationships (Bogo, 2015).

One of the NSCSW's observations is that ethical dilemmas experienced early in practice often are caused by the employer themselves. For a candidate to then challenge and grapple with these situations could put them in an awkward position if their mentor and their workplace supervisor were the same person (Donnelly, 2014).

MENTORSHIP AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL

Candidacy assessments provide additional evaluation of a candidate's ability, extending beyond their theoretical knowledge gained through academic institutions. Candidacy assesses practical skills, ethical decision-making, and the application of skills in real-world situations.

After a candidate and mentor are approved by the College to start the program the pair works to develop a learning agreement which then serves to guide their time together. The learning agreement is designed to meet the goals of the new social worker and must be grounded in both guiding documents - the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics (Bogo, 2015).

The types of goals vary. Common goals highlight a desire to develop communication skills, establish appropriate professional boundaries, improve documentation skills, focus on self-care, and build professional identity.

When the NSCSW reviews a learning agreement, what is most important is that the candidate can clearly articulate their goal and explain how it connects to the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics.

For example, a candidate's goal might be: "I will establish and maintain appropriate boundaries with clients to assure professional integrity and responsibility. I will ensure the client-clinician relationship serves the client's needs respectfully and ethically. I will achieve this by communicating, clarifying my role and responsibilities and remaining client-centered at all times." They would then link this goal to our guiding documents, such as Value 4: Integrity of Professional Practice and Standard 3 on Professional Relationships.

Assessments of a professional's readiness and suitability for practice are critical components in the journey towards becoming a competent professional. These assessments, conducted at both mid-term and final stages, are typically carried out by the candidate, the mentor and a representative from the NSCSW. This process is designed to ensure that the candidate is adequately prepared to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world situations (Beddoe, et al., 2013).

One of the primary objectives of these assessments is to evaluate the candidate's ability to reflect upon and articulate their learning experiences. This involves demonstrating an understanding of how they have integrated the core principles and concepts they have learned into their practice.

Furthermore, these evaluations assess the candidate's understanding and application of the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. These ethical guidelines and standards serve as the foundation for professional behaviour in the field, guiding practitioners in their interactions with clients, colleagues, and the broader community (Reamer, 2013).

The assessment process also provides an opportunity for candidates to receive feedback on their performance, enabling them to identify areas of strength and areas where further development is needed. This feedback can guide their ongoing learning and professional development, helping them become more effective practitioners (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

A reflective thematic analysis approach was used to review and extract key themes from available documents. Thematic analysis serves as a method for analyzing qualitative data to discern emergent themes. This process involves familiarizing oneself with the data, coding text, and identifying keywords that frequently appear, ultimately leading to the recognition of patterns. By examining these patterns, themes can then be extracted from the data.

Final candidacy reports

A preliminary review of the CMP was conducted using a reflective thematic analysis of completed candidacy records from 2019-2022. The goal of this review was to evaluate whether the program has been meeting its core objectives.

A random sample of 25 anonymized and redacted candidacy records was analyzed. All identifying information about candidates and mentors was removed. The records were assigned coded identifiers to allow for qualitative analysis while protecting confidentiality.

Each record was read in depth for inductive coding of salient points, clustering codes into conceptual categories, and deriving analytic themes from the qualitative data. The themes specifically related to candidate feedback on the program's effectiveness in integrating ethics, strengthening professional identity, and addressing occupational stress. Candidate perspectives provided insights into the program's strengths as well as areas for continued improvement.

Review of complaint records

A second analysis focused on closed complaints. The primary resource used for this analysis was the final decisions issued by the Complaints Committee. However, the original complaints and responses were also reviewed for clarity in certain instances, and for more complex cases, the investigative reports were examined.

The analysis incorporated the registration status of the social worker who received the complaint, the social work values and standards under consideration, and outcomes regarding dismissal or remediation. Themes were derived from patterns evident in the substance of the complaints and the guidance provided by the Complaints Committee within remediation.

CORE FINDINGS

Final candidacy reports

1

Integrating ethical practice:

68% of the final reports indicated that candidates strengthened their ability to think critically and engage in critical self-reflection about practice decisions and the impacts of their social position, power dynamics, personal beliefs, opinions, and values.

68% of the final reports indicated that candidates discussed and navigated the ethics of confidentiality and consent.

60% of the final reports indicated that candidates discussed ethical tensions they experienced with systems and policies.

56% of the final reports indicated that candidates talked through ethical dilemmas they encountered in practice

Quotes From Final Reports:

“The candidacy program allowed me to gain further insight into the Code of Ethics that help guide our practice as professionals. Although my candidacy is coming to a close, I still plan to maintain a strong relationship with my mentor as to seek guidance on my practice from a professional outside my current place of employment.” - Anonymous Member

“The support of my mentor has helped support my learning objectives through this program. I have learned to seek guidance from others, practice self-care and demonstrate knowledge and insight on best practices for the communities I serve a social worker. Although the candidacy program has helped me grow my insight into social work, it has also taught me to continue to develop goals and critically reflect on my practice. I want to ensure that I am demonstrating competence and confidence in my practice, and I think the program allowed me to begin to develop these skills for my career.” - Anonymous Member

2

Developing a professional identity:

52% of the final reports indicated that candidates felt meeting with their mentor increased confidence and helped them find their professional voice, including forming their own opinions and ideas, and challenging policies and systems they encountered within their practice

48% of the final reports indicated that candidates spoke about solidifying the importance of their own commitment to ongoing education and professional development

48% of the final reports indicated that candidates discussed and reflected on honing their professional values, lenses, and approaches with clients

44% of the final reports indicated that candidates engaged in discussion around becoming advocates and how to advocate effectively for clients and social justice

Quotes From Final Reports:

“I felt empowered because of the discussion I had with my mentor and I felt the need to advocate for my clients. I stood up and politely and respectfully addressed the barriers our clients have experienced during the intake process and inquired on how people in my position can help coach our clients on what services to ask for to ensure they are able to be connected to a care coordinator and thus access services.” - Anonymous Member

“Throughout the mentorship I have come to realize I do not have to fit in. I stopped believing there was one way of thinking and of acting like a social worker. I could not assimilate because I am who I am and that means I am different. This thinking comes from my ability to be empathetic to clients’ circumstances and being a black woman. I have come to embrace my differences and accept who I am as distinct, loud, bold, diverse, direct and unique. Since I do not need to assimilate into a ‘box’ of others.” - Yolande Grant #8307

3

Protecting against occupational stress injuries:

64% of the final reports indicated that candidates discussed OSI prevention strategies and/or implementing strategies into their practice

60% of the final reports indicated that candidates discussed self-advocacy, and creating and holding professional boundaries around their work

52% of the final reports indicated that candidates made connections between OSI prevention (such as self-care) and ethical practice (i.e. competent social work practice)

44% of the final reports indicated that candidates discussed how to make their social work practice sustainable long term

Quotes from final reports:

"I have also recognized the importance of engaging in self-care as part of ongoing practice. With the hardships of this past year and the feelings of helplessness that could creep up, I recognized that trying to reduce the effects of compassion fatigue/burnout by engaging in self-care was very important. I debriefed often with my mentor and my colleagues when available."

- Mallory Perry #8259

“My mentor and I had a discussion around office politics, level of supervision and the importance of voice. My interaction with coworkers and the accountability my supervisor places on me. We examined my feelings around the level of supervision I have been receiving. My supervisor has cancelled several biweekly supervision meetings due to unforeseen crises occurring with other social workers. She would state I don’t need her support as much as the younger social workers, due to my maturity and knowledge. The lack of supervision was showing in my work through lack of understanding and low productivity.”

- Yolande Grant #8307

Review of complaint records

The analysis suggests that Social Worker Candidates constitute a disproportionate percentage of individuals involved in complaints. Despite only forming about 17% of the college's overall membership in Nova Scotia, they accounted for 34% of all complaints received and processed over the past three years.

A closer examination of these complaints reveals that those lodged against candidates often led to some remedial action. Furthermore, it was found that most candidates who faced remedial action were not actively participating in the Candidacy Mentorship Program at the time they received the complaint.

| 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|
| SWCs were implicated in 38% of all complaints | SWCs were implicated in 32% of all complaints | SWCs were implicated in 29% of all complaints |
| 20% resulted in remediation | 71% resulted in remediation | 75% resulted in remediation |
| 80% of the implicated candidates were not actively engaged in the CMP | 71% of the implicated candidates were not actively engaged in the CMP | 62% of the implicated candidates were not actively engaged in the CMP |

This data seems to suggest that Social Worker Candidates are more likely to have a complaint filed against them. Engagement in the candidacy process appears to reduce this risk for both the clients and the social workers. This conclusion is supported by the disproportionate representation of candidates in complaints and the high percentage of those candidates who were not engaged in the mentorship program at the time of the complaint.

While being new to practice might naturally increase the likelihood of receiving complaints, it seems that inexperience alone cannot explain these findings. It potentially indicates that active engagement in the CMP serves to protect not only the public but also the candidates themselves.

DISCUSSION

The candidacy program provides a valuable space for new social workers to engage in critical reflection around privilege, values, and ethics. As Taiwo (2021) notes, critical self-reflection focused on social justice is often not prioritized in direct practice due to time constraints, discomfort, or fatigue. The program offers opportunities outside daily practice to unpack complex topics like power, privilege, and unintended harms. Developing reflective skills builds competence in recognizing how one's social location and assumptions shape practice. This advances ethical decision-making grounded in social work values.

Learning applied ethics is also essential yet challenging for new graduates. The program allows mentees to process tricky issues like confidentiality, consent, and boundary setting. As shared in anonymous feedback, discussing real-life ethical dilemmas demystifies how to uphold duties in complex situations. Given confidentiality issues are a top complaint, this practical knowledge is invaluable. Mentor guidance empowers new social workers to confidently navigate ethical challenges and provide quality care.

Furthermore, the program helps mentees develop a professional identity and skillset aligned with their practice interests. Social work encompasses diverse roles and specializations. Candidates appreciate mentors sharing niche expertise and helping them articulate professional strengths. Processing experiences of self-doubt and "impostor syndrome" also builds confidence that candidates have the skills needed to fulfill their responsibilities competently and ethically. This suggests the mentorship model effectively nurtures emerging social work identities.

Social workers are vulnerable to acute and chronic employment-related stress due to the inherent nature of their work and the severity and chronicity of social problems (Wooten et al., 2011). Current research indicates that post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rates among social workers is twice that of the general population (Bride, 2007). PTSD results from direct exposure to an event or series of events that involve the threat of death, serious injury or sexual violence. It is hallmarked by heightened anxiety, sleep disturbances, depression,

intrusive thoughts, and avoidant behaviors (Figley 1995, 2013). If we look at child welfare social workers, who make up a large portion of the profession across Nova Scotia and the country, we know that 29-50% meet the criteria for secondary traumatic stress (de Boer et al., 2023) which presents with symptoms similar to PTSD.

Research also indicates 30-60% of child welfare workers have high to very-high levels of burnout. Burnout is considered an occupational stress injury hallmarked by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished feelings of personal accomplishment. This results in the deterioration of the quality of care or service provided (Maslach et al., 2001). This includes the loss of the emotional resources to cope at work, and the development of negative attitudes, insensitivity, and cynicism toward service users (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Research also indicates that employment-related stress and OSIs are a reason many social workers exit their jobs and sometimes the profession altogether. OSIs can also impact a worker's ability to make sound decisions on the job.

The CMP mitigates risk by educating new social workers about identifying early signs and symptoms of occupational stress injuries, and about protective strategies, and creates a community of care where social workers can look out for their colleagues as well as themselves. CMP also provides a safe space for debriefing following a crisis or traumatic event in the workplace. The value of this cannot be understated in the current social climate.

The role of CMP in social work regulation is intricate and multi-layered. While it's apparent that newcomers to the field might be more prone to receiving complaints due to their relative lack of experience, attributing this entirely to inexperience oversimplifies the issue. The correlation between inexperience and increased complaints potentially suggests deeper underlying problems that extend beyond mere unfamiliarity with the profession (Eads et al., 2023).

Furthermore, CMPs may serve a dual protective function. On one side, they safeguard the public by ensuring that Social Worker Candidates are sufficiently prepared and competent, thereby able to provide high-quality service to the community. On the other side, they also protect Social Worker Candidates themselves. By creating a supportive environment where candidates can learn, develop, and even make mistakes, CMP can help reduce the risk of complaints, mitigate the impact of such complaints, and boost the overall professional development of the candidates.

However, it's also important to underscore that while a CMP can contribute to reducing complaints and enhancing candidates' competence, they are not a cure-all solution. Other factors, such as organizational culture, workload, and support systems, among others, can also influence the likelihood of complaints. Thus, a comprehensive approach that includes, but is not limited to, the CMP is necessary to ensure the competence and growth of social work candidates and the protection of the public.

LIMITATIONS

Reports are submitted to the Regulatory Candidacy Manager who approves candidates to move forward. This power dynamic could influence the submitted information. Candidates are also required to submit a learning agreement for approval with learning goals that connect to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice; these goals act as a guide for the subsequent monthly meetings between mentors and candidates.

These records were pulled from the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a time of increased stress within our profession, which could influence the focus on certain themes.

Latent coding of qualitative data can be considered subjective as it is meant to extract meaning of the data, and – in this specific case – whether the effect can then be linked to the CMP (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The use of multiple evaluators can mitigate this in future evaluation and/or research.

CONCLUSION

The CMP has been shown to be an effective tool in preparing new practitioners for their professional roles and assessing professional suitability. While inexperience might naturally place these individuals at a higher risk for complaints, the data suggests that this doesn't entirely account for these results. Instead, the importance of engagement with mentorship programs like CMPs is underscored, providing protection for both the public and the social work candidates themselves (Beddoe, et al., 2013).

The program's effectiveness, however, could be enhanced through several recommendations. Firstly, although the program is predominantly volunteer-based, professionalization could further improve its efficacy. This could involve providing more structured training for mentors, ensuring they are fully equipped to guide their mentees.

Secondly, finding meaningful ways to compensate mentors could also enhance the program. Compensation not only provides motivation but also acknowledges the significant time and effort mentors put into the program. This could involve financial remuneration or other forms of recognition such as professional development opportunities.

Third, future research could also examine the role of CMP as a secondary assessment in professional regulation. This would provide insights into how the CMP complements other assessment methods in ensuring the competency of new practitioners.

Lastly, a race-based analysis of complaints and the Candidacy Mentorship Program could provide valuable insights into racial disparities in the profession. This could inform targeted

interventions to promote equity within the program and the broader profession (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002).

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For those interested in experiencing the rewards of being a mentor, we invite you to visit candidacy.nscsw.org/mentors to learn more.

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