

Learning and teaching in social work education: Textbooks and frameworks on assessment



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Introduction

This review examined two sources of information about the teaching and learning of assessment in qualifying social work education: textbooks and assessment frameworks. Textbooks tend to be criticised for their lack of depth but, because of their wide readership, they are often claimed to be highly influential on students and practitioners. However, over the last decade or so, assessment of people's social services requirements in the United Kingdom has increasingly involved the use of standardised frameworks such as the *Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families*.¹

In fact, both textbooks and assessment documents are now read widely and have the potential to change practice substantially. And although there are significant differences between the two – and between documents of the same type – to some extent they

¹ Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and the Home Office (2000) *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*, London: The Stationery Office.

complement each other rather than acting as alternatives.

Definitions

No single definition of assessment emerged from the review either of textbooks or of frameworks, although identifying and managing risk was seen as a common aim in the latter. Some publications – and particularly those aimed at a more advanced readership – failed to define the term ‘assessment’ at all. In general, textbooks are more likely to discuss the theoretical basis of assessment; frameworks are more likely to include practical guidelines. But there are many exceptions to this rule.

Audience and perspectives

All of the frameworks, and 13 of the 16 textbooks, were written for audiences in the UK or in particular UK countries. Very few included service users’ or carers’ perspectives or discussed clients whose first language is not English. Even among the documents developed for use in the UK, the extent to which current practice concerns were considered varied a good deal. The UK publications also varied substantially in whether and in what depth they dealt with issues of discrimination or the involvement of service users and carers in assessment. Mentions of these concerns were scant or non-existent in the textbooks produced overseas.

Evidence

Only two of the frameworks and none of the textbooks systematically explained what type of evidence supported particular guidelines. Although some textbooks explicitly discussed research findings, many failed to do so altogether.

Transferring knowledge

A final concern of this review was to what extent knowledge can be transferred from one context to another. Three points emerged. Firstly, much of the guidance in the frameworks could be applied to assessing populations other than those for which they were designed, but it is left to readers to work this out for themselves. Secondly, although textbooks reflect when and where they were written, overseas or outdated publications could still be valuable if put in the context of contemporary UK practice. Finally, it should be remembered that different laws in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland mean that guidelines may not apply across borders.

A model for analysis and selection

All of the documents examined had shortcomings in terms of covering key content and/or getting that content across. As readers are likely to be busy students or practitioners,

it is important that the most appropriate sources of information are recommended for a given readership. This review is likely to be of most interest to educators deciding what books or frameworks to use for teaching about assessment, but it also provides a model for analysing and choosing materials for social work education more generally. In addition, it could be adapted for related disciplines such as the health sciences and education.

The approach involved identifying:

- how assessment was defined
- the basis of theory and evidence
- current practice concerns, and the adequacy of information provided about these
- techniques used to improve learning.

Recommendations for all readers

- Legislative, policy and practice contexts change, and textbooks and frameworks may be out of date.
- Some textbooks, especially those published overseas, reflect different contexts for social work. However, such textbooks may still offer useful insights, especially on topics poorly covered in local literature.
- UK readers should bear in mind that there are differences in legislation and practice organisation between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- Reading textbooks and frameworks is just a first step. Undertaking the learning exercises they contain, discussing concepts and practices in supervision, and ultimately putting theory into practice are all further steps in becoming a skilled practitioner.

Recommendations for social work educators

- Again, it should be stressed that students and inexperienced practitioners need opportunities to learn how to apply what they read, ideally in some form of supervised practice.
- You should be clear about your reasons for choosing particular textbooks or assessment frameworks.
- Bear in mind the limitations of the textbooks and frameworks you recommend. In particular, make sure you are aware of any changes in policy, legislation or practitioners' expectations that might outdate or supersede information. You may need to tell students/practitioners about such changes or recommend further reading.

Recommendations for authors

- Define your audience and write accordingly. It is reasonable to assume some prior knowledge as long as you make it clear that you are not giving an introduction to the basics. You could recommend alternatives for beginners.

- Define concepts such as assessment, for which there is no single definition.
- Include case studies and learning exercises to encourage more active learning.
- Explicitly discuss the bases of your theory and evidence. They might be obvious to you, but not to the reader!
- Recognise constraints such as word limits, and suggest recommended further reading on key topics.

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Joan Orme and Pam Green Lister

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