Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk Vol 52 No 4; Issue 8
http://socialwork.journals.ac.za/pub doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.15270/52-2-532

FIELD INSTRUCTION: IS THE HEART OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION STILL BEATING IN THE EASTERN CAPE?

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This paper presents part of the findings that emerged from a recent research project entitled "A qualitative evaluation of social work field instruction being offered by universities in the Eastern Cape, South Africa." Field instruction is the heart of social work training. This key component of social work training has been placed under increasing pressure in the Eastern Cape. The findings presented in this paper highlight the strengths and weaknesses of field instruction programmes as well as the constraints facing universities in the Eastern Cape. In conclusion, it was found that the heart of social work education is, indeed, still beating strongly in the Eastern Cape.

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INTRODUCTION

Social work field instruction is the very heart of social work training (Homonoff, 2008:136) and the vehicle through which students have the opportunity to practise the skills, knowledge and values taught in class. In recognising the importance of social work field instruction, the intention of the study is to add to existing local research relating to social work field instruction, while at the same time providing feedback and guidance that might assist in shaping field instruction programmes within South Africa. Field instruction is considered central to social work training programmes, with much time and finances being spent by departments to provide field instruction opportunities to prepare students for the reality of social work practice (Cleak & Smith, 2012:243). While the centrality of field instruction in shaping social work students cannot be denied, it may also be the most challenging part of the social work curriculum, relying on all the parties involved to make it a rewarding learning experience.

One of the greatest challenges currently facing field instruction models in the Eastern Cape is the increase of student numbers in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme. Earle (2008) discusses social work as a scarce and critical profession and refers to the first announcement of social work as a scarce skill by the Minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiya, as reported in a *Mail and Guardian* article on 22 August 2003. One of the measures being implemented by the government to attract prospective students to the profession is the bursaries being offered to students choosing to enter the programme. This puts pressure on social work departments in universities to accept more students while staff numbers may remain constant. Statistics from one university in the Eastern Cape show an increase in total Social Work graduates from 42 in 2004 to 265 in 2010 (Gardener, 2012). A second university stated an increase in quota allocation from 100 in 2008 to 120 in 2012 because of the high number of applicants (Saunders, 2016). A third university, also in the Eastern Cape, had one social work student doing level-four field instruction in East London in 2012 and in 2016 has 69 (Dengana, 2016). Although university graduation statistics were difficult to access, the above numbers as received from supervisors and fieldwork coordinators confirm that there has been an increase in the number of social work students participating in field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape.

Adding to the problem of high student numbers is the pressure for the university to place these students at social work agencies in communities, where they will be able to gain practical experience at all levels of social work intervention. This becomes a real challenge as there are four universities in the Eastern Cape offering the BSW degree. The reason for this challenge is that all of these students need to have field instruction experience but with a limited number of social work agencies being able or willing to

accommodate students. The hesitation among agencies to receive social work students could be the result of various work related and economic pressures (Bogo, 2005:169; Cleak & Smith, 2012:247; McKee, Muskat & Perlman, 2015:2) but also because the ratio of social work agencies to social work students is no longer a viable one in the Eastern Cape. At a national level questions and concerns about the quality of field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape are being raised by agency supervisors, university supervisors, fieldwork coordinators and the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), who are also involved in field instruction in various ways (Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions, ASASWEI, 2011). The resulting effect of the above-mentioned changes to the quality of social work graduates entering the social work profession is also of concern and has prompted debate within the social work field (ASASWEI, 2011).

The aim of the article

This article evaluates the implementation of social work field instruction programmes so as to make suggestions for improvement of field instruction in the Eastern Cape. It does this through addressing the following two objectives:

- Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of field instruction programmes being used by social work departments in universities in the Eastern Cape;
- Identifying possible constraints on implementation of field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape.

It is hoped that this evaluation of social work field instruction programmes will result in recommendations and conclusions being drawn up that can shape future models of field instruction for use in the area.

Significance of the study

The evaluation of the field instruction component of the BSW curriculum provides for a reflective lens through which the effectiveness of current practice can be determined and suggestions made for the future. "The ability of social work education to graduate ethical, competent, innovative, effective clinical social workers is highly dependent on the quality of the field experience" (Bogo, 2015:317). The significance of the research will emerge from its findings possibly being used to refine and adjust field instruction so as to best suit the training needs of students, field instruction agencies, social work departments and communities in the Eastern Cape and other provinces facing similar challenges. This may over time improve the quality of social work graduates leaving social work programmes in the Eastern Cape. The significance of evaluation research for this project lies in society's need to evaluate, because universities require a way of knowing whether their field instruction programmes are of a good quality (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:345). The proposal for the study was approved in 2011 by the Higher Degrees Research Committee of the University of Fort Hare and at that time no further ethical clearance was required for the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptualisation of social work field instruction

Aristotle noted that "For all the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them" (in Birkenmaier & Berg-Weger, 2007:1). Field instruction – learning by doing – is also referred to throughout literature as *field education*, *fieldwork education* or *field practicum*. Field instruction forms an important part of social work training. Bogo (2015:318) discussed field instruction as the part of studying that allows for the practical application of knowledge, values and skills taught in class and as the place where students are taught to think and act like social workers. The field instruction experience allows for social work students to continue developing their reflection and thinking skills, while demonstrating that they are able to take the theory they have been taught and apply it during work carried out in social work settings (Moore & Collins, 2002:172). The value of field instruction lies in the opportunity to practise the theory taught in class. At the same time, it creates an opportunity to reflect upon practice experiences in a supportive learning environment, provided through the supervisory relationship, both at the agency and in the university setting. Tanga (2012:2) agrees that field instruction gives students the opportunity to practice real social work within the safety of a supervisory relationship, with supervision ideally being rendered by a qualified social worker.

Field instruction is based on the principle of progression and it is expected that, as students progress with their theoretical education, so too will they progress in the degree and complexity of their field instruction experiences (Savaya, Peleg-Oren, Stange & Geron, 2003:297). Shaefor and Jenkins (in Savaya *et al*., 2003:297) describe three basic approaches to field instruction: the apprenticeship model, where students observe an experienced social worker before being taught theory; the academic model, where students receive theory in the classroom and then later start with their field instruction; and the articulated approach, which emphasises a partnership between the classroom learning and the field instruction which takes place at the same time. Savaya *et al*. (2003:297) confirm that most schools of social work make use of the articulated approach to teaching.

Experiential learning

"Experiential learning is learning by actual experience … the active and practical nature of experiential learning tends to facilitate deep understanding" (Chan, 2012:405). Deep understanding or learning during field instruction is of particular importance as social work students are encouraged to move beyond just memorising theory. They are expected to search for meaning, explore the implications for practice, link theory to work that is being done, and come up with and evaluate new ideas during field instruction placements (Walker, Crawford & Parker, 2008:40). De Jong, Wierstra and Hermanussen (2006:155) confirm that during school memorising is the main form of learning, while for work-based training learning from experiences is proven to have been more effective. Field instruction, as per the above definition, would then fall under the second approach to learning whereby learning occurs through experience. Experiential

learning thus forms the foundation of field instruction programmes and is emphasised as being fundamental in the shaping of future professional social workers.

Experiential learning is conceptualised as a spiral and is made up of four stages, with learning beginning within any one of these stages (Timm, Birkenmaier & Tebb, 2011:176). The first stage, **the concrete experience**, is where an experience is created so that learning can occur (Hope & Timmel, in Collins & Van Breda, 2010:16) and in social work training can range from a case study or role play during classroom teaching to working with an agency supervisor and having contact with real clients during field instruction placements. Experiences may either be planned in such a manner as to challenge the personal beliefs and values of students (Lay & McGuire, 2010:542), or could be spontaneous and unplanned with experienced lecturers and agency supervisors recognising such opportunities to facilitate learning opportunities for their students. A study by Mumm (2006:86) found that observing an agency supervisor at work and co-counselling were viewed as useful learning experiences by social work students during field instruction. Knight (in Bogo, 2005:175) also discusses the usefulness of reviewing and analysing cases as one of the most influential teaching activities for assisting with the integration of theory and practice during field instruction.

The second stage, **reflective observation**, is where an opportunity is created for the student to reflect upon the experience and what it means to them (Hope & Timmel, in Collins & Van Breda, 2010:16). Initially the university or agency supervisor will assist the social work student in reflecting upon the experience. Questions are asked such as: What has just happened here and how do you feel about what happened here? Supervision, journaling and assignments are useful tools often used by agency and university supervisors to assist in this stage. Ideally, by the time that students graduate it is hoped that they are able to take themselves through this process of reflection, thus producing professionals who are able to reflect upon experiences and their performance independently.

The third stage, **abstract conceptualisation**, is where the student explores what can be learnt from the experience and theory is introduced to facilitate this learning (Hope & Timmel, in Collins & Van Breda, 2010:16). This involves the student asking themselves questions such as: What can I learn from this experience about myself, others, life and the social work profession? Once again the university and agency supervisors, through the use of assignments, journaling, field instruction seminars and supervision, play a great role in assisting social work students to link the experience to theory and knowledge during field instruction.

The fourth stage, **active experimentation**, takes place when the student is able to take the learning and progress with it into the world as a new way of living (Hope & Timmel, in Collins & Van Breda, 2010:16). Active experimentation leads to the student asking him/herself questions such as: What now, where to from here, what does this mean to me, what can I do differently or keep the same? In this way the student continuously develops in knowledge, skills and values. The theoretical framework of experiential learning and its relevance to field instruction programmes is clearly illustrated. The

placement of students within an agency setting immediately implies that there will be experiences that could be useful learning tools and may be meaningful if reflection, conceptualisation and active experimentation are facilitated during the field instruction programme.

Field instruction models

There are various models for field instruction. The more traditional models where students are placed at agencies in the community are still widely used. Royse, Dhooper and Rompf discuss the various field instruction placements and models (2003:8). The most common types of field instruction models are block placements, where the student first completes all coursework and then spends four or five days per week working at an agency, and the concurrent approach, where the student divides his/her time between attending lectures and working at an agency (Liu, Sun & Anderson, 2013:184). Birkenmaier, Curley and Rowan (2012:322) discuss the rotational model of field instruction as an alternative to the traditional placement, stating that the rotational model has been used more often over the last few years. The rotational model serves to broaden the range of experiences social work students receive, with students rotating their placements externally (at different agencies) or internally (within an agency) (Birkenmaier *et al*., 2012:324). The community centre or service-learning centre model has been adopted by some universities, where students work within communities to identify needs and from there develop macro, meso and micro interventions. These centres have developed in partnership with communities and social work agencies and have a strong focus on developmental principles, serving the community while at the same time serving as a base for students' experiential learning (Du Plessis, 2011:6; Rogers, 1995). Group supervision in field instruction has also become an acceptable alternative model to individual supervision, which was more commonly used in the past. The usefulness of group supervision during field instruction includes the mutual aid that students are able to offer each other and the provision of a safe place for students to discuss their concerns and anxieties (Lager & Robbins, 2004). It can thus be seen that there are various models for social work field instruction and it would be important to evaluate the use of these models during focus groups and interviews with participants.

Parties involved in field instruction

In general, four parties are involved in the social work field instruction experience. These are the social work student, the agency supervisor, the university supervisor and the fieldwork coordinator. The social work student is expected to adhere to the social work code of ethics while involved in field instruction, as well as prepare for and attend weekly supervision sessions with both the agency and university supervisors, carry out and submit field instruction assignments, discuss any areas of concern with both supervisors, and devote the required number of hours to the field instruction placement (Garthwait, 2008:12). The role of the agency supervisor is to ensure that orientation of the student takes place, to provide regular supervision, to facilitate learning opportunities for the student within the agency, to participate in training for supervisors and evaluation of the social work student, and to role-model ethical and professional behaviour (Garthwait, 2008:13). The university supervisor is the representative of the university

who consults with and provides support and guidance to both the agency supervisor and the student throughout the placement (Garthwait, 2008:13). The fieldwork coordinator is an employee within the social work department who is responsible for coordinating the field instruction programme, matching students to agencies in the community, providing orientation for students and agency supervisors and sorting out any problems that may arise during the placement (Garthwait, 2008:12). Each of these four parties has an important part to play in ensuring the success of a quality field instruction experience.

Field instruction seminars

Field instruction seminars are discussed throughout literature as being a valuable part of the field instruction programme. In South Africa these seminars are often referred to as university supervision. The literature defines field seminars as bringing students from different settings together to share any learning, challenges or issues encountered during their placements (Bushfield, 2005:222; Garthwait, 2008:14). These seminars are initially used to assist in preparing students for their placements and then at a later stage aim to assist them in integrating theory with the work that they are doing at their placements, and to encourage group support. For the students, having contact with the university fieldwork coordinator and university supervisor also assists in resolving any problems that may arise during their placement.

There are also various discussions relating to the use of technology when facilitating field seminars. Bushfield (2005:226) discusses the use of an online format for the integrative field seminar and states that a web-based course delivery format was thought to be a valuable laboratory to promote linkages between technology, theory and practice. The use of technology would assist South African students greatly as many are placed far away from the university campus and may not even return to campus during their field instruction placement, particularly if the university makes use of the block placement model. Using technology such as Skype may assist such students to maintain contact with the university fieldwork coordinator and other students, despite being placed a long distance away and has proved useful in the past (Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012:801). Each university in the Eastern Cape offers a unique model of field instruction to the social work students whom it trains.

Table 1 describes the programme of each university in 2012.

The four universities who participated in the study each has its own field instruction model, which differs considerably from the others over the 4-year BSW programme.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF THE UNIVERSITIES' MODELS OF FIELD INSTRUCTION (2012)

	Year one	**Year two**	**Year three**	**Year four**
University A	Concurrent classroom skills training and agency observations	Concurrent group and community work practical placements	Concurrent placements at agencies, weekly supervision, report writing	5-month modified block placement, weekly supervision, report writing
University B	None	None	Workshops throughout year for each level of intervention, group discussions, activities, role plays, case studies and report writing	Concurrent 8-month placement at agency, weekly supervision, report writing
University C	Agency visits, role plays, discussions, report writing	Agency observations - 3 weeks block	Concurrent placement at agencies	6-month block placement
University D	Agency observations, written assignments	Concurrent group and community work practical placements, supervision and report writing, journaling	Concurrent rotational model, supervision, report writing, journaling	5-month modified block placement, supervision, report writing, journaling

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative evaluation research design was used in the study. Babbie and Mouton (2001:336) discuss the relevance of evaluation research in South Africa, a developing country that is interested in assessing, for example, "whether efforts at alleviating poverty, improving health care and related interventions, have in fact met their objectives". Using this research design assisted the researcher to identify the strengths, weaknesses and constraints facing field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape and to make suggestions for possible changes in the future. Clarke (2005:vi, 336) states that evaluation is concerned with bringing about improvements; it examines a programme from many different perspectives and explores linkages between activities and outcomes, making recommendations for change. A qualitative approach to the gathering

of data was adopted, as the "data that was needed was descriptive and exploratory and information was required directly from people who were assumed to have the required information" (Hofstee, 2009:132).

The study made use of purposive sampling to gather data from all parties at each university who were involved in the field instruction programme. Purposive sampling can be used in studies that are interested in obtaining rich detail: the researcher may select participants who can purposefully share information relating to the research topic (Strydom & Delport, 2013:390). Social work students and agency supervisors were invited to attend focus groups, where a semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide discussions. The fieldwork coordinators from each university were interviewed individually, also through the use of a semi-structured interview schedule. The same interview schedule was used for all participants and consisted of two sections. The first section elicited some background information relating to the participants and the second section asked open-ended questions in relation to the core components of field instruction as identified by Bogo (2005:163). It was hoped that a discussion of the core components of field instruction would naturally enable participants to share what they enjoyed and the challenges they faced during field instruction programmes. Hofstee (2009:135) notes that some open-ended background questions, asked in a relaxed atmosphere, work well to build rapport, with more factual narrow questions being saved for later on in the interviews. Each of the open-ended questions was followed by "smaller" questions as guidance for the researcher in case of participants not elaborating with sufficient detail to the initial open ended question. Seale and Silverman (1997:379) also support the use of open-ended questions to ensure an authentic understanding of participants' experiences, as ensuring rigour in qualitative research often has more to do with authenticity than reliability. It should be noted that the number of participants who actually participated in the study was quite low (social work students n=30; agency supervisors n=7 and fieldwork coordinators n=3) and thus almost certainly not a good representative sample of the population. It may well have been that the sample who participated in the study had either a positive or negative bias towards field instruction and thus volunteered to participate in the study. The limitation, therefore, is that the researcher has to be very cautious in generalising the findings and the resulting recommendations.

Of the 30 social work students who participated in the study, 24 (80%) were female and six (20%) were male. This is quite reflective of the reality of social work practice and the composition of the social work classroom, with social work being seen as a primarily "female" profession (Earle, 2008:23). Fourteen (47%) of the social work students stated that they were placed at government departments, twelve (40%) were placed at non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and four (13%) were placed at schools for their field instruction programmes. This suggests that the majority of social work students complete their field instruction placements in government departments, with fewer students completing field instruction at NGOs and very few students placed in non-traditional social work agencies (for example, schools).

Of the agency supervisors who participated in the study four (57%) indicated having between 15 and 20 years of work experience, one (14%) indicated having eight years of work experience and two (29%) had between three and four years of work experience. This indicates that more than half of the agency supervisors have been practising social work for more than ten years. It should be noted that this is not always the case, as some fieldwork coordinators indicated that they used supervisors with little experience because of the limited number of placements available. It is also important to remember that even though a social worker may have many years of experience, this in itself does not make them a "good" agency supervisor (Abrahamson & Fortune, 1990:274; Rogers & McDonald, 1992:166). Of the three coordinators who participated in the study, one indicated having less than five years of experience, one had between five and years years of experience, and one had more than twenty years of experience in a field instruction position.

All participants were given the opportunity to participate voluntarily in the study and gave written consent allowing for the data to be used anonymously. Durrheim and Wassenaar (1999:66) say that consent forms should be signed and participation should be voluntary. The researcher also spent some time with the participants after the focus groups and individual interviews when the participants appeared to want to talk about their experiences relating to the research. Durrheim and Wassenaar (1999:67) support the debriefing of participants after interviews as an important part of respecting the participation and dignity of participants.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected and analysed according to the steps intrinsic to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Transcripts of the interviews were written up; these were analysed, themes were identified and connections made between transcripts in order to develop a set of master cross-transcript themes (Houston & Mullan-Jensen, 2011:269). Reliability and authenticity are important in qualitative research and strategies such as recording data objectively and comprehensively, a count of events and the use of audio tapes assist in ensuring rigour and validity (Seale & Silverman, 1997:380). The following six steps (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009:82) provide a detailed description of how the researcher used IPA to ensure reliability and rigour in the analysis of the data after the data had been independently transcribed. **Step one, reading and re-reading** of the initial transcripts was done by listening to the recordings of the interviews and rewriting the transcripts to include more conversational detail. This was then followed by **Step two, initial noting.** This step involved taking the transcript and dividing it up into two columns, one for the actual transcript and the second for research notes and comments describing content, exploring language used and trying to conceptualise experiences as described by participants. **Step three, developing emerging themes** was done by adding a third column to the transcript that was used to identify themes that emerged from both participants and the notes made by the researcher in step two. **Step four, searching for connections across emergent themes** was done by grouping common themes under a superordinate theme according to context, numeration and function. **Step five, moving to the next case** involved moving

to the next transcript and following steps one to four systematically, using the skill of 'bracketing' to ensure that the new analysis was not influenced by data or themes from the last interview. Once steps one to five had been followed for all of the transcribed interviews, **step six, looking for patterns across cases**, started. This step involved looking for patterns across all of the interviews with a master table for main and subordinate themes with word counts and corresponding transcript and line numbers being developed. Following these steps as described by Smith *et al.* (2009:82) was a time-consuming but valuable process in ensuring reliability and rigour throughout the research process. Objectivity was further ensured through providing the reader with extensive sequences of original data, followed by detailed commentary (Mays & Pope, 1995:112). Table 2 summarises the findings from the research.

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Strengths	• Starting field instruction at a second-year level • Use of block model at level four • Use of rotational model at level three • Use of university supervisors during field instruction • Support of agencies and agency field instructors • Learning through field instruction • Use of non-traditional agencies for field instruction
Weaknesses	• Starting field instruction at level four • Limited involvement by university with agency and student during placement • Assessment process not including all parties involved in field instruction • No screening for students studying Social Work • No selection or screening of agencies and agency supervisors being used for field instruction
Constraints	• High student numbers • Geographical location of the university • Limited resources • Lack of resources at agencies used for field instruction

The table indicates the themes that emerged during data analysis with regard to the strengths, weaknesses and constraints facing field instruction programmes at universities in the Eastern Cape. A discussion of these themes will follow.

Strengths of field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape

- **Starting field instruction at a second-year level**

  "The time we were doing our first year we were told to go and observe … for the second year we did group work … (in the) third year we did community work … when we are doing our final year we go for five months to a placement…" (Social work student)

Three of the universities in the Eastern Cape begin the field instruction programme at the second-year level of the BSW programme, which assists the social work students to grow in knowledge, values and skills over the course of the programme.

- **Use of block model at level four**

  "There is just so much work (reflecting on use of concurrent model in the fourth year), even when you compare to other universities, we have too much work, assignments, reports, tests and research, it is oh no (and shakes head) and then to work at the agency too." (Social work student)

  "I had a student having a breakdown … they cannot handle the pressure, they have research at the 4th year with the practical so they are not necessary completely focusing on the practical." (Agency supervisor)

Agency supervisors and students preferred the use of the block model of field instruction so that the students were able to focus on meeting agency and field requirements without the pressure of other academic work. Both agency supervisors and students stated that they did not support the concurrent model where academic requirements were intensive during the time of field instruction, as this distracted the student from being able to focus on the work required by the agency.

- **Use of rotational model at level three**

  "We are not happy [in response to concurrent placements at a third-year level] *with that arrangement. The thing is that the social worker (student) would report early in the morning saying I am not coming. Which is good but the disadvantage is you would organise clients for him/her."* (Agency supervisor)

  "It was the best year. I learnt so much in 3rd year. We had different units and we rotated." (Social work student)

The parties involved in this project expressed a range of opinions with regards to the third-year field instruction programmes. Students indicated learning much and valuing the experience. Some agencies were supportive of the concurrent placement; others were strongly opposed to it because of practical issues of having students in the office only once a week. One university has a strong partnership with an NGO and a government agency, where all their students are accommodated for a field instruction experience on a rotation basis once a week. The partnership between this university and the agencies and the use of the rotational model at the third-year level together serve as a great strength of their field instruction programme.

- **Use of university supervisors during field instruction**

  "I used to want to faint with every situation that came in and the supervision with J (university supervisor) helped me." (Social work student)

  "The one university supervisor comes in once during the placement … we are happy with that...." (Agency field instructor)

Two of the universities that participated in this study indicated assigning university supervisors to all of their students who take part in field instruction – this was identified as a strength by the social work students, agency supervisors and university fieldwork coordinators and it is discussed at length in literature.

- **Support of agencies and agency field instructors for field instruction**

  "At the agency they gave us good orientation and explained all the reports and that helped a lot." (Social work student)

  "My agency is organized … you feel you are not gaining anything when things are unorganized. When you go to an organization that has deadlines and structure, you know already (what is expected), planning ahead for three months, it teaches you when you plan then you have good production…." (Social work student)

  "My supervisor was very committed and always wanted to assist me in everything. She gave me feedback...." (Social work student)

Some agencies used for field instruction placements provide students with orientation and varied learning experiences and this assists in the student having a positive learning experience during the field instruction placement. Many agency supervisors are helpful during field instruction, providing the student with support, opportunities for discussion, feedback and a variety of learning experiences. Having the support of agency field instructors in the Eastern Cape where, at a fourth-year level there are a large number of students requiring supervision by registered social workers is in itself a strength of university field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape.

- **Learning through field instruction**

  "I think it is the most important thing. We are expected to apply the theory. They (the university) *want to know if I can apply everything that I have learnt."* (Social work student)

  "My learning was very good … and it improved my strengths. I could identify my strengths, some of the strengths that I did not even know that I have." (Social work student)

  "The social worker I was under, we used to go through it together, she used to educate me so much. I asked her so many questions and she would reply. Sometimes she would say come to my session and see what I do...." (Social work student)

Most of the social work students who participated in this study were able to reflect upon the usefulness of the learning that occurs during field instruction programmes. This learning takes place in many forms such as: observations, reviewing case files and documents, report writing, presentations, doing work with clients and during supervision.

- **Use of non-traditional agencies for field instruction**

  "It is a more difficult placement and students need the extra support when they don't have a social work supervisor at the agency but it can still work, we try to give these students more attention." (University fieldwork coordinator)

> *"Initially I was not happy … as soon as I got to JB* (school) *I was welcomed and I felt like a part of them. They made our stay very comfortable."* (Social work student)

The last strength was tentatively mentioned by university fieldwork coordinators and social work students during the discussion on the use of non-traditional agencies for field instruction placements of social work students. Two universities in the Eastern Cape are using non-traditional agencies for the placement of social work students. These students are supported through the use of off-site social work field instructors.

Weaknesses of field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape

- **Starting field instruction at level four**

> *"Yes it will be good when they introduce you to the practical … if you can just go just to an agency and you just observe at the organisation, so that when we come to 4th year we don't get that anxiety, we were so lost this year, we were stressing, we have to learn everything at the organisation, we made recommendations at the end of the module and I recommended this...."* (Social work student)

Social work students felt strongly that beginning field instruction in their fourth year of studies was too late in the programme. While this may not necessarily be seen as a weakness in the particular university's field instruction programme, the students felt that having had previous experience would have reduced some of the anxiety and stress that they experienced as a result of not having had previous fieldwork experience.

- **Limited involvement by university with agency and student during placement**

> *"It was going to be better if they* (university fieldwork coordinator) *visited us in our agencies. They will have got an opportunity to interact with our supervisors."* (Social work student)

A second possible weakness of field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape appears to be that not all programmes initiate regular contact between the agency, the agency supervisor and the university during the placement. Some students are placed for field instruction with limited or no involvement by the university. This causes more stress for students, limiting opportunities for support, reflection, feedback and guidance, all of which are perceived as being part of the role of the university supervisor. Universities who do not assign university supervisors for their social work students are missing a very important part of the agency-university-student partnership that is essential in any field instruction programme.

- **Assessment process not including all parties involved in field instruction**

> *"That will contribute in the decisions that they make for our marks, they will see the whole picture of what we are doing, the reflection assignment maybe deserves a 60, but if they visited agencies maybe we were not going to get the 60."* (Social work student)

> *"The agency didn't really give input or look at any of our work ... they gave the feedback to the university. Not really a mark. We never got the feedback ourselves."* (Social work student)

Some students expressed concern that the university was not involved in the mark that was awarded by the agency supervisor. Students also indicated that they would like the university to be more involved by visiting the agency and meeting their agency field instructor as this may have an impact upon their final marks. Students also mentioned not receiving regular or any feedback with regards to work being done during their placements. Not involving students in regular feedback or including the student in the assessment process during field instruction was seen by the students as being a weakness of the model of field instruction being used by the university.

- **No screening for social work students studying social work**

> *"Some people are just doing it for the bursary, they will drop out and leave the profession eventually, also the quality of work that they produce is very poor. Some students don't take the profession seriously; they copy and paste all the work. They ride on others during our group presentations in the first semester. Then in the second semester they are all alone. I know it will catch up to them ... I don't worry about them."* (Social work student)

> *"I have noticed the students that are on bursary, it's like they know they are going to get a job and the ones that are not,* (they) *know that their families are paying. Most of my 3rd year students were not on* (a) *bursary and they worked very hard...."* (Agency supervisor)

> *"It becomes a challenge as a lot of our students struggle with various difficulties, they have problems at home, they come from poor backgrounds, also a lot of our students are on the social development bursary, these problems and issues come out during the fieldwork because they are dealing with problems similar to their own, sometimes they don't cope. It would be good if we could meet the students and interview them, discuss their strengths and weaknesses, try to get a picture of who they are so that we have the right students entering the programme."* (University fieldwork coordinator)

At the time of the data collection the universities in the Eastern Cape determined admission through academic marks only. Agency supervisors, social work students and fieldwork coordinators mentioned some concerns with regards to some of the students who are accepted into the social work programme. Agency supervisors felt very strongly that a weakness of the social work field instruction programmes was the lack of screening and selection for social work students entering the programme.

- **No selection or screening of agencies and agency supervisors being used for field instruction**

> *"Generally it is the case where the agency supervisor is appointed by the organisation and we have to trust their judgment would be accurate. We have*

some cases where the supervisors haven't been suitable. It is not an easy thing to deal with that." (University fieldwork coordinator)

"When you are a student they take it as you are a PA … they give you all the files, you more like a slave there...." (Social work student)

"And the other thing they usually take sick leaves when there are students there, those long 4 months." (Social work student)

"I think for the first day on your placement they don't actually tell you what you expect to do and what not to do, they do not guide you, you find yourself stuck somewhere somehow." (Social work student)

Many agency and agency supervisors' "unhelpful characteristics" were discussed throughout the interviews. Some students expressed frustration with not receiving guidance, orientation or mentoring during their field instruction. Agencies and agency supervisors should be selected to be involved with field instruction because they are interested in mentoring, training and supporting students in integrating theory with practice.

Constraints facing field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape

- **High student numbers**

"There are about 200 students at a 4th year level at the one campus and about 90 at our other campus, and the coordinator has other responsibilities as well, with the other first to third year students." (University fieldwork coordinator)

"We were the first large group. It will be better next year. If we had more supervision it will be better. Our university supervisor had eight students and our agency work is so fast, so the feedback is a different pace." (Social work student)

High student numbers have had a direct impact upon field instruction programmes. University staff may no longer be able to cope with high student numbers and this might have had an impact upon the quality and quantity of supervision being offered by universities in the Eastern Cape. It may also be that the high student numbers have had an impact upon the selection and screening of social work agencies and agency supervisors being used for field instruction placements, which then in turn affects the quality of the placements and may explain the many unhelpful characteristics of agency and agency supervisors being experienced by students during their placements.

- **Geographical location of the university**

"We want to choose our own agencies, it will be too expensive to go anywhere to do the practical, we stay at home and work at the agencies there to save costs … the bursary money for practicals only pays out long after we have finished our practicals … like now we haven't even received the money yet … and it is already long after…." (Social work student)

> *"Basically what we used to do is the students had to contact organisations they were interested in being a part of … which is quite a grown up way of taking responsibility."* (University fieldwork coordinator)

Two of the universities are situated in rural communities of the Eastern Cape. The rural geographical location of these universities is seen as a constraint as social work students are not able to complete their field instruction close to the university. Students from these two universities are allowed to complete their placements anywhere within South Africa and at times internationally. This may explain why some universities do not have a strong partnership with agencies and agency supervisors that are being used for field instruction programmes. The rural context of these two universities also limits the number of agencies and agency supervisors who are readily available and close to the university to assist in the supervision of a high number of social work students.

- **Limited resources**

> *"Sometimes you realize later that you should have done it that way … we always talk about our placement and our experiences* (among one another) *… supervision would be good to talk about all of this … I thought they would have* (arranged this by) *now but because of university finances* (this has not materialised)*"* (Social work student)

Social work students and fieldwork coordinators hinted that there may not be enough financial support within the university to allow for the university supervision of students and site visits to the agencies where they are placed.

- **Lack of resources at agencies used for field instruction**

> *"Another challenge becomes the transport. (The agency) doesn't have vehicles, maybe there are 30 social workers and there are only 3 bakkies and there are people who will be coming that are not related to foster care, it's a person's problem and there is no car. To the clients (it) will look like we don't care about their problems. In foster care we need to do community work (home visits) but it becomes difficult to write reports (because home visits can't be done) so you have to create the situation of a client or ask the client how the background is."* (Social work student)

> *"Like privacy for instance. There is no privacy in those offices. In one office you will find maybe four social workers and four desks."* (Social work student)

Social work students discussed many examples of the impact that the lack of resources within agencies used for field instruction the rendering of services during field instruction programmes. This in turn made it difficult for social work students to uphold the social work values and ethics. The lack of agency resources came through strongly as being one of the constraints facing field instruction programmes in the Eastern Cape and may further contribute to the agency's willingness to supervise social work students.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Development of a strong agency, university and student partnership

One recommendation for universities in the Eastern Cape is that universities work on building and maintaining good partnerships with agencies and agency supervisors who are an integral part of university field instruction programmes. A partnership implies working with others and having regular communication. The use of a detailed field instruction manual, an orientation meeting for all parties and regular site visits or telephonic contact by the university supervisor would greatly improve the quality of the partnership among all parties involved in the field instruction programme. Garthwait (2008:216) discusses the assessment process and states that the student should receive informal feedback and suggestions throughout the placement and that an unfair or inaccurate assessment is made when the student does not receive ongoing feedback, guidance or suggestions. Assessments of students should also include all parties to ensure a fair and accurate assessment. The researchers are of the opinion that involving agency supervisors in developing relevant and indigenous course material such as case studies could also assist in building the partnership between universities and agencies in the Eastern Cape. This may also better prepare social work students to deal with the ethical challenges that they might face during fieldwork as a result of a lack of agency resources.

Exploring the use of non-traditional models of field instruction

The second recommendation is that universities in the Eastern Cape should explore the use of alternatives to the more traditional block and concurrent models of field instruction. The use of the rotational model, where students could rotate between traditional social work agencies and non-traditional agencies, could also be explored. The effectiveness of using non-traditional agencies where no on-site social work agency supervisor is available is debated in the literature. Some authors support such placements as being worth considering (Bellinger, 2010; Ferguson & Smith, 2011), while others (Cleak & Smith, 2012) feel that such placements are not the most effective in the training of social work students.

Many agencies do not have the finances to employ social workers, yet have strong and positive learning environments and might already be involved in work that relates to the social work profession. Such agencies might openly welcome social work students for their field instruction placements. “A number of crucial factors emerge as promoting student learning. First is the presence of strong, positive learning environments in organisations and teams that welcome students and view teaching and learning as mutually beneficial” (Bogo, 2015:319). Field instruction opportunities within these agencies under the supervision of an off-site agency social worker seem well worth considering. The researchers are of the opinion that these less traditional models of field instruction should be explored as alternate placements for social work students in the Eastern Cape.

Training of agency supervisors

Garner (2006:238) lists all the studies over the years that have emphasised the relationship between the agency supervisor and the student as the most important relationship in the teaching/learning process. It would thus make sense to invest, through training, in the professional growth and development of the agency supervisors responsible for agency supervision of the students. Offering formal, structured training linked to Continuous Professional Development Points for agency supervisors would also assist in building the university/agency partnership. McKee *et al.* (2015:3) suggest that the training of agency supervisors begins during the undergraduate programme of the BSW training as today's students are tomorrow's agency supervisors. This suggestion is one that could be built into already existing theory and fieldwork modules of the BSW programme so as to begin encouraging a commitment to becoming an agency supervisor once the student has graduated and gained some working experience.

Selection and screening of Social Work students

It is recommended that department staff members become actively involved in developing selection and screening procedures for students entering the BSW programme. "The goal of quality social work education is to seek out and train students who have the capacity, talent and skill for good social work" (Karger, 2012:324). Selection interviews with written narratives could be used in addition to the student meeting the requirements needed to apply to university. It could be a costly and perhaps time intensive process but would assist in choosing the students with a good belief in themselves and the motivation to work within the social work profession. "Self empowered, competent students achieve satisfaction and happiness in pursuit of goals in any education programme" (Garner, 2006:240). This will in turn raise the quality of Social Work graduates entering the profession.

Development and implementation of a student-staff ratio norm

It is also recommended that student numbers be determined by the number of staff at the university and the availability of field instruction agencies in the surrounding areas. Quality social work programmes will never be cheap; rather, they require a good investment of resources; inadequately resourced programmes put clients at risk as they are served by poorly trained students (Karger, 2012:324). Having a student-staff ratio norm is of critical importance to determine the number of students a social work school can take in relation to existing resources; it is a norm that directly affects quality assurance (Lombard, Harrison & Pruis, 2010:1). In 2008 ASASWEI commissioned research to be done on lecturer/student ratios with 12 universities participating in the study. A formula was developed to represent the ideal ratio and benchmark that South Africa should strive to achieve by 2015, with the study's findings indicating that in general the departments who participated in the study would require "more staff to train their students effectively and to maintain high educational standards" (Reyneke, Nel & Rautenbach, 2009:6). The development and implementation of a student-staff ratio norm was again debated during consultations for the adoption of the draft norms and standards for the BSW degree, with a recommendation that the ratio of number of students per lecturer not exceed 25:1 (SACSSP, 2016:4).

Development and implementation of guidelines for field instruction

ASASWEI has expressed its concern about developing standards for social work field instruction and is in the process of gathering data from all universities (Lombard *et al.*, 2010). The SACSSP also has an interest in the success of field instruction as it is a statutory body which regulates social work education, training and practice (Sewpaul & Lombard, 2004:542). The development of guidelines for field work programmes could give universities a minimum standard from which to work. These guidelines could also assist universities in advocating for more staff and finances with which to support field instruction programmes. As with the student-staff ratio, the development and implementation of guidelines for BSW field instruction programmes are currently being debated through consultations with stakeholders at a national level (SACSSP, 2016:9). The challenge that stakeholders may face as they engage with this issue is finding the balance between setting clear guidelines for field instruction, while at the same time allowing universities to implement field instruction programmes that are uniquely shaped to meeting the needs of their surrounding communities.

In conclusion, the study has identified that the field instruction programmes of universities in the Eastern Cape have many strengths. Fieldwork coordinators and university supervisors have overcome numerous obstacles to create opportunities for social work students to implement the knowledge, values and skills being taught in class. The study has also identified areas for improvement so that field instruction programmes may be further developed to be the best that they can be. Fieldwork, the heart of social work education, was and indeed still is beating strongly in the Eastern Cape.

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