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Fieldwork in Social Work Education and Training: Issues and Challenges in the Case of Eastern and Southern Africa

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1 Introduction

Social work is an international profession and similarly social work education internationally has always embraced both academic and practical components. Social work education comprises of a theoretical component taught in the classroom and field- based education involving integration of the academic aspect and practice. Fieldwork, which is also known as field instruction, field placement, field education, practicum or internship is therefore an integral component of social work education.

Though the definition of social work seems to be a contested terrain, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2004) convey, its basic meaning quite concisely. They contend that,

The social work profession promotes social change, problem- solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environment. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

From this definition it is clear that social workers follow a formal procedure in helping clients to cope with their life tasks and to realise their aspirations. This involves developing their ability to deal with their problems more effectively at any given point in time and also in the future. Furthermore, social work intervention helps people connect with needed resources and to negotiate problematic situations which might also involve changes to existing structures where these present blocks to human growth and development.

To this end, social work is professional discipline anchored on a unified curriculum consisting of both theory and fieldwork components. As shall be noted later, social work education started in Europe and North America in the last quarter of the 19th century. Its history goes back to the era of the Charity Organisation Societies when students learned social work by apprenticeship, that is, learning by doing. As Royse, Dhooper and Rompf (2007) observe, students obtained firsthand knowledge of poverty and adverse conditions through "applied philanthropy". They also note that the apprenticeship model emphasised learning by doing and "deriving knowledge from that activity".

By the end of the 19th century, social work gradually evolved from the apprenticeship method with the launching of the first social work training in 1898. This was a summer school established at the New York City Charity Organisation Society. Six years later, in 1904, the Society established the New York School of Philanthropy, which offered eight months training in social work. Further to these developments, George, (1982) cited in Royse, et al

(2007) contents that Mary Richmond, an early social work practitioner, teacher and theoretician, advocated for complementing field learning with academic education. Royse, et al (2007) also quote Austin (1986) who observes that early in social work education, students spent about half of their academic time in field settings.

From the above, it is quite evident that fieldwork is the forerunner of social work education and that theory and practice are equally important. Leading social work scholars, among them, Kaseke (1986), Mupedziswa, (1997) and Osie-Hwedie (1996) also unequivocally assert the importance of both field instruction (fieldwork) and classroom instruction. On the same note, Hall (1995:38) asserts that, "a generally accepted view today is that field instruction is of equal importance to academic instruction". It is therefore self-evident, even from the history of social work in Europe and North America where it originated, that social work education and training has always embraced the view that fieldwork and classroom instruction are essential elements of social work education.

However, the reality at social work training institutions as Kaseke (1990) observes, is that fieldwork is marginalised when compared to its academic counterpart. Kaseke asserts that, "there is very little written on this subject matter, thus leaving social work educators, students and field supervisors without any meaningful and comprehensive guide to field instruction". Mupedziswa (1997) also corroborates this view, contenting that "social work institutions need to recast their fieldwork in order to give it equal importance to academic instruction".

This study assessed the fieldwork programme at three social work training institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa, namely the Institute of Social Work (ISW) in Tanzania, National University of Lesotho (NUL) and School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe. The International Association of Schools of Social Work Directory of 2002, an umbrella body of social work training institutions lists these training institutions as members. NUL and the School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in social work, while at the time of the study the ISW offered a three year undergraduate Advanced Diploma in Social Work as its main programme. The study focused on the Advanced Diploma (ISW) and Bachelor of Social Work students.

2 The role of fieldwork in social work education and training

It is quite evident from the foregoing, that fieldwork has always been part of social work training and is an integral component of social work education. As Hepworth and Rooney and Larsen (2002) observe, fieldwork engages the student in supervised social work practice and provides opportunities to marry theory and practice.

A widely used definition of fieldwork is one by Hamilton and Else (1983) who view it as, "a consciously planned set of experiences occurring in a practice setting designed to move students from their initial level of understanding, skills and attitudes to levels associated with autonomous social work practice."

As the social work curriculum is based on both theory and practice, the provision of sound theory is critical as is fieldwork experience. It is critically important for social work students to acquire, in a classroom environment, practice principles, values and ethics and the scientific basis for practice. Equally important is the need to apply the theoretical content covered in the classroom, to real life situations as part of a student's preparation to become a professional social worker. It takes more than academic fitness, but also evidence-based

knowledge, field- tested skills and a wealth of hands-on-experience to become a fully backed social worker. As Shardlow and Doel (1996:6) observe,

"..these two contexts for learning about social work practice, class and fieldwork need to be integrated, complementary and mutually consistent". They further point out that the challenge for the student and agency supervisor, is to make this a reality".

Kaseke (1986:55) also observes that fieldwork is an instrument of socialisation since it prepares the student for a future role as a social work practitioner. He further asserts that, "a meaningful fieldwork placement is one that enhances the students understanding of the social work profession and the nature of the problems the profession addresses itself to". Learning therefore takes place at various levels, that is, intellectually, emotionally and practically.

Furthermore, fieldwork is an opportunity for aligning theoretical knowledge and learning, with the needs of society and the market place. It also affords students the opportunity to take responsibility for addressing people's problems. Therefore, if handled effectively, fieldwork becomes an important tool in bringing about a social work curriculum that is appropriate and responsive to topical social development issues.

Fieldwork also develops in students, skills that will enable them to respond appropriately to the needs of clients. Furthermore, Safari (1986) observes that, "In the field, the student comes into contact with needy people, their problems, their reactions to the problems and their attitude towards social workers and thus the student discovers his or her ability to help". It is through observation and doing the job and feeling responsible for the job of helping people to cope with their problems, that social work students acquire skills. Likewise, fieldwork is designed to give the student exposure and experience on the functioning of social welfare agencies and social welfare provisioning.

The general purpose of fieldwork is therefore, to acquaint students with actual social work situations, in preparation for professional social work practice. It is an instrument that is used to initiate students into the profession through among others, inculcation and assimilation of social work ethics, principles and values.

It is widely accepted that it is a basic requirement of all professions to have a knowledge base, principles, values and ethics that guide and inform practice. Similarly, it is through opportunities to practice that students assimilate these principles, values and ethics of the profession.

Statement of the problem

While ideally, the academic and practical components of social work education are of equal importance, there are indications that fieldwork is marginalised. Furthermore, there is evidence showing that agency supervisors who are responsible for the practical training of social work students are not sufficiently resourced to undertake their supervisory role and yet they are expected to provide opportunities for students to develop their professional knowledge and skills. Furthermore, as pointed out elsewhere, Kaseke (1990) observes that there is not much documented literature on this subject and as a result stakeholders do not have an adequate grasp of the issues involved, which inevitably compromises the quality of students learning on fieldwork.

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Justification of the study

Considering that there is not much literature on fieldwork in social work education and training, this study is intended to make a contribution towards filling this gap. The study builds on existing knowledge on fieldwork, including but not limited to the fieldwork curriculum, the management of fieldwork and the needs and challenges faced by students, agency supervisors and training institutions.

General objective

The aim of this study was to examine the nature, form and challenges experienced in the management of fieldwork at social work training institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Specific objectives

The specific objectives of the study were:

- to establish the nature, form and content of fieldwork practice at selected social work training institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa
- to ascertain whether fieldwork is treated as being equally important to its theory counterpart (classroom instruction) at the selected training institutions.
- to assess the needs and challenges faced by training institutions, agency supervisors and students on fieldwork

Methodology

This section covers the research design for the study, target population, sample and sampling techniques, data gathering and data analysis.

Research Design

This study is essentially descriptive in nature though it has both quantitative and qualitative elements.

Target population

The study covered fieldwork coordinators, agency supervisors and students on block fieldwork placement from the Institute of Social Work (ISW) in Tanzania, the National University of Lesotho (NUL) and the School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe. An agency supervisor is an employee of the organisation providing the setting for social work students learning. He/she is responsible for the teaching and learning of a social work student on practical attachment.

Study sample

A sample of 10 students and their agency supervisors participated in the study from the Institute of Social Work, where the author was on sabbatical leave in 2004. At the National University of Lesotho, a total of 78 fourth year students and six agency supervisors were covered in the study in 2009 and at the School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe, a

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total of 16 second and third year students and their supervisors also participated the study in 2007 and 2008. Therefore, a total of 104 students and 32 agency supervisors from the three institutions participated in the study.

Sampling Techniques

Students and agency supervisors

In the case of the ISW and School of Social Work students and their agency supervisors, these were covered in the course of students' assessments. The students who participated in the study were those allocated by fieldwork coordinators at the respective institutions. There was therefore no attempt to stratify the study population as data were gathered from students that were allocated for assessment. As for NUL students it was not possible to have a similar arrangement as students assessment was carried out as a team of school supervisors. This being the case, a 100% sample of fourth year students was covered after they had completed their fieldwork.

Agency supervisors

Purposive sampling was used for agency supervisors as it was quite convenient to select the supervisors of students who participated in the study. In the case of NUL only six agency supervisors were selected for the study also on the basis of convenience and willingness to be interviewed. Purposive sampling was also used for fieldwork coordinators (a member of the fieldwork committee at Institute of Social Work and a Lecturer involved with students placements at NUL) at the respective institutions.

Data gathering techniques

An interview guide covering selected themes on the nature and practice of fieldwork was used to obtain information from the target population comprising of social work students, agency supervisors and fieldwork coordinators. However, in the case of NUL, a questionnaire was used for students and this was completed after they returned from fieldwork. Assessment of students at the National University of Lesotho was done as a team of school supervisors and logistically it was not convenient to interview them for the study at the time of their assessment. Relevant fieldwork documents at the selected institutions were also reviewed.

Data analysis

Data was analysed on the basis of selected themes, including the nature and form of fieldwork, duration of fieldwork, agency and school supervision, and challenges experienced in the management and practice of fieldwork among others.

Presentation and discussion of findings

The purpose of this study was basically to unravel the nature and form of fieldwork and challenges in the management of fieldwork at the Institute of Social Work in Tanzania, National University of Lesotho and the School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe. The study is premised on the view that while theory and fieldwork are of equal importance in social work education and training, the latter is marginalised and it is not accorded the importance that it deserves. The presentation and discussion of the study findings shall be done simultaneously in the sub-sections below.

Forms of fieldwork

Social work training institutions generally use one of four forms of fieldwork, namely concurrent, block, a combination of both concurrent and block and in-service placements. The block placement arrangement is used at the three institutions. However, the ISW uses both concurrent and block placements. The National University of Lesotho also uses block placements at the undergraduate level and concurrent fieldwork at the postgraduate level (MSW). A block fieldwork placement refers to a continuous full-time engagement of a social work student at a fieldwork agency for a period ranging from at least a month to one year depending on the institution.

The School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe, uses the block placement system with fieldwork occurring in the second and third year for a period of three months and three weeks. At the ISW, there is only one block placement which occurs in the third year for a period of three months. At the National University of Lesotho, the block fieldwork occurs in the second year for a month and in the third and fourth year for two months respectively.

Concurrent fieldwork at the ISW occurs at the second year level. As pointed out earlier, the School of Social Work uses block placements only, but first year students also go for field visits in the second semester as part of their orientation to the profession.

Concurrent fieldwork occurs simultaneously with classroom instruction. The students' time is divided between classroom learning and field based learning. Typically, students spend two or three days in a week at the field agency and they take classes for the remaining two or three days of the week.

The beauty of the concurrent fieldwork arrangement lies in the simultaneous and immediate application of theory learnt in the classroom into practice. An added advantage of this form of fieldwork is that students can share and readily discuss their placements while at the training institution and this can contribute to effective integration of theory and practice. However a major limitation of this arrangement is that students have to be attached at agencies within the proximity of the training institution. Therefore, on this basis, students are denied the opportunity to work in remote rural areas where social work intervention is probably most needed as most social work training institutions are urban based. Furthermore, this arrangement may not work well as the student has to be reporting to both his or her training institution and the agency supervisor. In support of this view, Hall (1990: 31) states that,

" the disadvantage is the possibility that the fieldwork experience becomes more fragmented and students are unable to do justice to either theory or practice because of the overlapping expectations of workplace and school".

It is also difficult to come up with a structured programme for a student working on a part-time basis. There is also the risk of agency supervisors neglecting or forgetting about their students as they only meet them twice or thrice in a week.

It appears the rationale for using concurrent placements initially at first or second year levels or both levels and then blocks at higher levels is to offer students an opportunity to gradually acquaint themselves with the profession. This is so considering that in the first or second year of the course expectations are not very high. Students are required to observe the supervisor in action and to perform tasks befitting their level. Placements at this level are therefore of an

exploratory character with the student carrying out tasks that are not too complex. However, at higher levels the student is expected to be active at a practical level, carrying out tasks that have considerable scope for increasingly independent execution of duties and skills.

While the block placement allows students to immerse themselves in the work of an agency and is more conducive to the pursuit of intellectually and professionally stimulating tasks, it also has its weaknesses. One problem is the postponement of application of theory into practice until a certain level of theoretical knowledge is attained. Additionally, there is a clear separation of the timing and context in which theory and practice take place as students are away from the training institution for a period ranging from one month to a year.

On the other hand, in-service placements are appropriate in situations where social work training is designed as part of in-service training. Students go back to their places of employment, for fieldwork experience in the context of their existing jobs. Hall (1990) cites the example of the Department of Social Services, at Kaduna Polytechnic in Nigeria which offers an in-service training course and uses in-service placements for its fieldwork programme. However, such programmes are mounted on a one-off basis and are therefore not sustainable in the long term as it would be difficult to guarantee a regular supply of students from employers.

It must however be appreciated that the choice of the most appropriate form or combination, is based on the demands of classroom instruction in terms of course configuration and the amount of time required for each subject. Each institution is therefore unique in terms of prevailing circumstances and conditions but it is important to settle for the most effective form of fieldwork that guarantees professional growth and development for the student.

Nature of fieldwork

In describing the nature of fieldwork at the institutions covered in the study it is important to refer to the IASSW and IFSW (2004) Global Standards on Social Work Education and of special interest are standards relating to duration of fieldwork, expectations and requirements for agency supervision, the fieldwork curriculum. These shall be examined in the sections below.

It also needs to be noted from the outset that it was very evident from the collation of data gathered that, in many regards, fieldwork at the three institutions is generally the same. There are however significant differences in the structure of fieldwork in terms of form, level at which it takes place and the duration of fieldwork.

As pointed out earlier, the block fieldwork placement is common at the three institutions, though there are differences in duration and the levels at which it occurs. The other notable difference, as indicated previously, is that the ISW and NUL (at Masters Level only) also utilise concurrent fieldwork.

Duration of fieldwork

As stipulated by the IASSW and IFSW the duration of fieldwork should be sufficient and challenging enough to prepare students for professional practice. Cumulatively, the total fieldwork time for block placements at undergraduate level (at the social work training institutions covered) is as follows:

Institution	No. of block placements	Total duration
Institute of Social Work	(one block placement)	3 months
National University of Lesotho	(3 blocks at second, third and fourth year)	5 months
School of Social Work	(2 block placements at Second and third year)	6 months, 3 wks (27 wks)

It is clear from the table above, that if one considers block placements only, the total fieldwork time is longest at the School of Social Work, where it is 6 months and three weeks. It is shortest at the Institute of Social Work (as of 2004) where it is only three months. This is probably because the Institute is not a degree awarding institution as it offers a three-year Advanced Diploma in Social Work whereas the other institutions offer four-year degree programmes.

The majority of the agency supervisors and students from the Institute of Social Work were of the view that three months of fieldwork is rather short. Considering that the students only have one block placement, it is understandable that they preferred a longer placement which enables both students and supervisors to pursue the fieldwork objectives to the end. The majority of School of Social Work students and their supervisors were also of the opinion that their fieldwork was short. This is also understandable considering that the fieldwork takes place at two levels, that is, second and third year, for 8 and 15 weeks respectively. Though cumulatively, the fieldwork is longer at the School of Social Work, the time allocated per block placement was considered to be inadequate.

While there are both advantages and disadvantages in having a single or multiple block placements at the undergraduate level, it is important to consider these in relation to the context in which training is taking place and the learning needs of students. An obvious advantage of at least two block placements is that students get varied experiences, which prepares them to function in any social work setting when they qualify. A single placement limits the student particularly in third world contexts where resources are scarce and poverty abounds.

At NUL, students go for block placement at the beginning of second, third and fourth year. Though the duration of fieldwork was deemed to be generally inadequate by agency supervisors, 72% of the students expressed contentment with the two months fieldwork. Fewer students indicated that the fieldwork was too long. The main reason given for this position was that social work students do not have holidays, unlike students in other

programmes. Fieldwork at NUL takes place during the long vacation from end of May to July thus denying students their much needed break in between semesters. Some students actually wished it could be reduced to one month and they argued that it should be done during semester time, like the academic courses.

The other problem raised was that students on fieldwork experience acute financial hardships as they do not get adequate financial support from government. One student summed up the problems pointing out that,

"We endure so many hardships as a result of inadequate financial support when doing fieldwork. It is actually a mystery that some of us last the two months. Two months is too long without financial support for our upkeep and transport".

Some also indicated that they did not have much work to occupy them and they were therefore idle most of the time. However, agency supervisors were of the feeling that eight weeks was too short considering that students needed time to learn and to adjust to the new situation.

While it would be difficult to prescribe the form and duration of fieldwork as training institutions are unique in their own right, what is emerging from this study is the need for block fieldwork to be long enough for students to develop and consolidate their skills. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (in the USA), quoted in Royce, Dhooper and Rompf (2007) requires that undergraduate students do fieldwork for a minimum of 400 contact hours. This translates to a minimum fieldwork period of three months. Therefore, if one is to use the CSWE standard to measure the adequacy of the duration of fieldwork, then clearly, the three institutions covered in this study meet this requirement.

Fieldwork curriculum

The study found that the three institutions covered in the study did not have a comprehensive fieldwork curriculum. At best, the fieldwork curriculum at the institutions is fragmented. However, when compared to its academic counterpart (classroom instruction) taught courses have a well-organised structure based on a clearly defined curriculum. This makes the learning and teaching manageable and focused.

Shardlow and Doel (1996:79-80) suggest the following advantages of having a fieldwork curriculum:

the requirements of social work practice can shape the content of what is learned by students through a practice curriculum

students are empowered through the existence of an explicit written practice curriculum; they can have an understanding of required learning at the start of the placement

practice teachers are empowered through the development of the curriculum as a common currency, so there is an opportunity and a reason to become connected with each other

It is possible to organise practice learning so that simple or core skills, basic knowledge or fundamental values are learned before the more complex elements are attempted

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It is possible with a practice curriculum to know when learning has been achieved in given areas, and then to move on to other components of the curriculum or to find ways to compensate for deficiencies in the learning environment – if, for example, live practice with clients is not generating appropriate learning experiences, other methods of learning can be used

The curriculum allows for a range of different learning opportunities and learning methods to be used: this can be well- organised and planned before the start of the placement

The examination of practice competence can be structured and harmonized to fit with the pace of learning.

An analysis of the fieldwork course materials at the institutions reveals that the only documents in use are fieldwork placement forms, that is, background information forms, assessment forms, guidelines for writing fieldwork reports, contract forms in the case of the School of Social Work, and letters of introduction for students.

Of concern was the lack of Fieldwork Manuals at two of the institutions. Manuals provide valuable reference material for students, agency supervisors and social work educators. Though the School of Social Work has a fieldwork manual, which probably needs updating as it is a 1990 publication, agency supervisors indicated that they did not have this manual.

Commenting on the state of fieldwork at one of the training institutions one fieldwork coordinator had this to say,

"Agency supervisors sometimes phone us wanting to know the expectations for fieldwork. To be honest with you we are also at a loss as to what to tell them. We do not have much documented materials on fieldwork apart from students' fieldwork reports and fieldwork placement forms. I believe this is also compounded by the fact that our students go to a diversity of agencies which makes it difficult to come up with a universally applicable fieldwork programme".

Criteria used in the choice of fieldwork agencies

Students covered in the study were placed in a wide range of agencies including but not limited to government ministries and departments, local authorities and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), indicating flexibility in the criteria used to select fieldwork agencies. Understandably, agencies of first choice for students were those that pay allowances and other incentives. As most students did not get allowances for fieldwork, the need to minimise costs on transport and other expenses prompted them to choose agencies within close proximity to their places of residence and not necessarily those with the greatest potential for provision of learning.

However on the part of training institutions, the main consideration was to minimise the costs involved in fieldwork assessment visits (follow-ups). Based on this reality, most placements were in urban settings. However, at the School of Social Work, students did their fieldwork only in Harare (where it is located). Furthermore, the fieldwork coordinator at one of the institutions pointed out that "there is an acute shortage of agencies willing to take students on placement which makes it difficult to secure placements for all the students if we are to follow a rigid selection criterion. We have to be flexible if all students are to be placed".

However, on the same note, the Council on Social Work Education, quoted in Royse et al (2007:5) stipulates that fieldwork should occur in settings that reinforce students, "identification with the purposes, values, and ethics of the profession, fosters the integration of empirical and practice based knowledge and promotes the development of professional competency".

Quality of agency supervision

Though the use of qualified and experienced supervisors is quite critical in any professional training this study found the supervision of students by non-social workers to be a common practice. The study revealed that,

52.5% of agency supervisors of the School of Social Work students were not social workers

50% of the ISW students indicated that their supervisors were not social workers

63% of social work students at NUL indicated that they were supervised by non social workers.

These findings are perhaps not surprising considering that there is an acute shortage of suitable fieldwork agencies and in the case of the School of Social Work in Zimbabwe this was also compounded by the massive exodus of qualified social workers during the period 2002-2009 as a result of political and economic challenges facing the country then.

Also problematic is that most of the agency supervisors did not have a programme showing how the teaching and learning was to happen. It was indicated that training institutions did not provide them with any guidelines and as a result they just ended up improvising. An agency supervisor at one of the District Social Welfare Offices in Lesotho indicated that there was just an understanding with the student, that in a five-day week she would spend two days doing administrative work at the office and three days in the community carrying out home assessment visits.

Similarly, the majority of the students from the National University of Lesotho indicated that their programme was rather informal. Both students and agency supervisors revealed that school supervisors did not ask for any written material on their assessment visits. On this basis, it is clear that without a guide or programme (curriculum to follow) it is difficult to achieve the objectives of fieldwork, let alone provide quality learning and mentoring for students, particularly in the case of unqualified supervisors.

Support given to agency supervisors

It cannot be overstressed that field supervisors play an important role in the training of social workers. They are partners in the training process with responsibility to manage the transition from the classroom to the field and this requires support and continuous dialogue between the training institution, the agency supervisor and the agency. It is probably in recognition of this fact that the IASSW and IFSW spell out the need for training institutions to provide fieldwork manuals and orientation to agency supervisors. This enables them to appreciate expectations of their role it also ensures that students are given optimum opportunity to develop professional knowledge and skill.

Notwithstanding the recognition that the role of agency supervisor is ever more prominent and important, this study found that there is no clear exposition of the process and nature of the teaching and learning required on fieldwork. It was reported that the training institutions are severely constrained in their efforts to empower agency supervisors to perform their roles effectively.

As pointed out earlier, the majority of the agency supervisors were just groping in the dark as they did not have a clear understanding of the nature and type of learning to provide students on fieldwork. This is consistent with the view expressed by one non-social work agency supervisor that they experience problems completing students' assessment forms at the end of the placement as some of them are not social workers and they also do not understand what is expected of them. "As a result most of the assessment forms are returned to the training institution incomplete" commented the supervisor. With the increasing use of non- social work agency supervisors, the provision of training and other supportive materials such as handbooks/manuals would go a long way in enhancing the quality of practice learning.

Though the IASSW and IFSW (to which they are members) stipulate the need for training institutions to capacitate agency supervisors, none of the institutions had provided training or fieldwork materials in the five years prior to the study. In spite of the School of Social Work having a fieldwork-training manual, agency supervisors indicated that they did not have the manual, an indication that there is probably not much interaction between the institution and agency supervisors.

Ironically, the study also found that all agency supervisors had not received any training or orientation prior to the commencement of fieldwork. Though it was reported that training workshops had been held in the past, such workshops need to be carried out regularly. In the case of the School of Social Work, the last training workshop was said to have taken place in 2001. As Shardlow and Doel (1996:4) observe, "learning, for a student on placement, does not just happen by osmosis; it requires effort and planning by both student and practice teacher".

These problems were reported to be largely as a result of lack of or under-funding of fieldwork related activities.

Challenges in the management of fieldwork

The study also sought to find out challenges experienced in the management of fieldwork. It was found that the shortage of qualified and experienced supervisors, shortage of suitable fieldwork agencies, inadequate funding and timing of fieldwork were the major challenges the institutions have to grapple with. These challenges are examined below:

(a) *Shortage of qualified agency supervisors*

The shortage of qualified and experienced agency supervisors was found to be a common problem. Invariably, qualified and experienced social workers should handle practical training in social work. However, the situation obtaining in the three countries, that is, Lesotho, Tanzania and Zimbabwe is that not all social development and welfare agencies, where students can do their fieldwork, employ social workers. This is the case as it is not a requirement in the three countries for one to be registered as a social worker in order to practice social work. Resultantly, there is an infiltration of the profession as some of the

social welfare agencies are employing workers from other disciplines to carry out social work roles. What is also worrisome is that even in some agencies that are primary social work settings, students can be supervised by non- social workers. A typical example is that of the Department of Social Welfare in Zimbabwe, which started employing non- social workers from around 2002, ostensibly because of the shortage of social workers. Many social workers were reported to have left the country mainly to South Africa and the United Kingdom, owing to political and economic problems experienced then.

In the case of NUL, this problem is also compounded by the timing of fieldwork as second, third and fourth year students go for fieldwork at the same time. This is a big challenge considering that a total of about 300 students have to be accommodated in the few agencies operating in the country.

However, as social work is practiced in a variety of settings, it is inevitable that non- social workers will have to supervise social work students. Furthermore, in spite of this crippling shortage of qualified agency supervisors, it needs to be acknowledged that non-social work agency supervisors have contributed significantly to the survival of the fieldwork programme at institutions covered in the study.

(b) *Shortage of suitable agencies for fieldwork*

Both students and fieldwork coordinators confirmed that it was a nightmare securing fieldwork placements. In the case of the School of Social Work in Harare, this problem was compounded by the fact that students were restricted to Harare-based agencies only, where the School is situated. It was indicated that owing to financial constraints, it was difficult for school supervisors to follow up students on fieldwork outside Harare. Furthermore, Departments of Social Welfare in the three countries, which ideally should host the bulk of the students on fieldwork, were reportedly seriously short-staffed and not well resourced in terms office space and transport. Resultantly only a limited number of students could be absorbed.

Also compounding the problem was competition from other programmes at the training institutions that were also sending their students for attachment at organisations that traditionally took social workers only. Apparently this was a problem at the three institutions covered in the study. Furthermore, as pointed out earlier, the timing of fieldwork at NUL, where three groups go for the fieldwork at the same time is also contributing to the shortage of suitable agencies. The challenge is placing about 300 students at one go.

Financial support for students on fieldwork

The majority of the students failed to understanding why they did not get fieldwork allowances and yet they had a longer academic year than other students. While third and fourth year students at NUL and at the ISW received allowances for fieldwork, the amount was considered to be very little and not even enough to cover their transport costs. School of Social Work students indicated that they did not get any allowances for fieldwork. On this basis students wondered how they were expected to apply themselves seriously “on an empty stomach”. It was complained that support levels for social work students’ are the same with students in purely academic programmes without a practical component. This is also an anomaly, if one considers that the academic year for social work students, unlike students in

other programmes is extended by two to three months and that they also have to contend with transport and subsistence costs while on fieldwork.

Lack of visitation by school supervisors

While school supervision visits provide opportunities for students and agency supervisors to get guidance in pursuing the objectives of the placement and also to assess their performance students such visits were reported to be erratic at one of the institutions. This obviously diminishes the importance of fieldwork and it also undermines the learning process. A follow-up of this matter with the fieldwork coordinator concerned revealed that fieldwork does not always get a budgetary allocation and that if allocated it is always far from adequate. "Sometimes school supervisors use their own resources for supervision and obviously there is limit to which they can subsidise fieldwork" commented the fieldwork coordinator.

Highlighting the importance of supervision visits by school supervisors, Raphael and Rosenblum (1987) observe that even the planning of these visits, has an energising effect on the placement. They assert that:

"Knowing that a faculty member who represents the School will be coming on a specific date to review progress stimulates the field instructor and student to assess their progress. The heightened energy available at such times should be consciously used to facilitate change for educational purposes" (1987:158)

Failure by school supervisors to assess students on fieldwork can have a very damaging effect on the morale of the student and agency supervisor and the placement in general. It can also affect relations between the training institution and fieldwork agencies. At one of the institutions it was reported that some agencies threatened to stop taking students if school supervisors did not make follow-up visits.

3 Conclusion

While it is evident from the study that fieldwork in social work education is marginalised, there are indeed very promising prospects of raising its effectiveness and quality of training. Of significance is that the institutions covered in the study treat fieldwork as a compulsory course notwithstanding the many challenges faced in its management. Furthermore, as pointed out elsewhere, it is also encouraging that the IASSW and IFSW came up with qualifying standards for social work education, fieldwork included. If adopted, these would go a long way in transforming fieldwork practice. Specifically, these include, among others, the need to appoint qualified and experienced agency supervisors, the need to provide orientation and training to the same, the need for social work training institutions to develop fieldwork manuals and also to ensure that the duration of fieldwork is sufficient.

Furthermore, while the challenges confronting the fieldwork component in the training of social workers require intervention at the highest level, that is government and management at training institutions, it is also necessary that those involved in fieldwork execute their roles and responsibilities effectively. Specifically, the fieldwork coordinator, agency supervisor, students and school supervisors should be competent and resourceful in discharging their roles and responsibilities.

Suggestions on strengthening fieldwork

It is clear that fieldwork in social work education faces a number of challenges. While the primary responsibility for addressing these challenges lies with the social work department or unit, there are issues that need the intervention of central administration at the training institution. Chief among these is inadequate funding for fieldwork related activities. Second is the lack of a clear learning content for fieldwork. Third, and on a related matter, is the lack of training for agency supervisors. In order to develop fieldwork to its fullest potential and to enhance the quality of learning, it is necessary to adopt the following measures:

There is need to allocate and to increase the budget for fieldwork

Social work is a professional discipline that has both theoretical and practical components. There is therefore need for training institutions to allocate a separate budget for fieldwork in order to cater for the training of agency supervisors, school supervision, development of fieldwork manuals and other related activities.

Development of fieldwork manuals

It is imperative that schools of social work develop their own fieldwork manuals, covering the teaching and learning content for fieldwork. This is particularly important considering that each institution is unique in terms of the prevailing socio-economic conditions, challenges and experiences, the social work education curriculum in a given country. Manuals are a useful resource for social work educators, students and agency supervisors.

Introduction of a taught course on fieldwork theory and practice

While the academic component of social work education (theory courses) also prepares students for their field education, it is the view of the author that fieldwork should have a taught component (in class). This will address two concerns. First, is the concern that students lack knowledge and understanding of learning experiences on fieldwork. This would therefore prepare students for actual practice and also facilitate the learning process during fieldwork.

Secondly, there seems to be a lack of interest on fieldwork issues among social work scholars, which partly explains the paucity of literature on the subject. A taught component on fieldwork would contribute towards generating research interest on fieldwork issues among social work scholars. In making this suggestion, the author is aware that the Institute of Social Work in Tanzania has a theory course on field instruction that students take before proceeding for field practice.

Total duration of block fieldwork

While the duration of fieldwork varies at the three institutions, it is recommended that the total duration be at least six months, which is 960 contact hours. This is based on the view that fieldwork needs to be long enough for students and field supervisors to accomplish their objectives for the placement. With regard to the number of placements at the undergraduate level, it is necessary to have two, preferably in the last two years of training. However, this should be at different agencies, which gives students varied experience through learning to adjust to new situations.

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