

Rethinking 4th year social work internship in South Africa: Challenges, Implications and Prospects

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Abstract

This paper explored the various challenges faced by 4th year social work students during their agency internship and the possible implications of these hurdles on the quality of social workers who will emerge from such internships. The paper demonstrated that despite the unbridled importance of work related learning, a number of challenges are militating against it thereby undermining its contribution to the refinement of students resulting in half-baked professionals emerging from higher learning institutions. Challenges that indicate the marginalisation of fieldwork include, lack of clarity and criteria regarding the choice of organisations from which social work students may do their internships, lack of subsidised/paid internships, lack of a well-defined internship curriculums, uniformed and unsupported agency mentors who are not privy to the learning needs of the students and lastly lack of regular onsite assessments by university fieldwork instructors. The paper went on to elaborate that these challenges have grave implications on the future of social work as a profession as they cause the qualification and deployment of ill prepared social workers who may fail to competently deliver sustainable services to clients. More than anything else, the paper demonstrated that fieldwork practice as a component of the current social work education is very necessary and authorities need to rethink how it is done. Doing it simply for compliancy with NQF guidelines is retrogressive and self-defeating. The paper closed off with some pertinent recommendations aimed at improving the manner in which internships are conducted. The view of the authors is that improved fieldwork experiences and outcomes will cascade into improved quality of social workers produced by local institutions of higher social work learning.

Key Words: Internship, Field Instructor, Social Work, Fieldwork, University, Students, Agency, Supervision

Introduction

The social work profession is an internationally recognised career which is premised on an intensive academic programme based on specific theory and fieldwork (Gould and Taylor, 2017). The profession have grown from being a field of

practice to becoming a fully-fledged eclectic discipline underlain by vast sets of orienting ethical principles, values, methods, theories and perspectives (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney and Strom-Gottfried, 2016). From its advent, social work education has always advocated for the fusion of theory and pragmatic fieldwork with the aim of improving the thrust and impact of interventions aimed at helping individual, groups and communities to help themselves (Rogowski, 2010). Gould and Taylor, (2017) write that through decades of theoretical and practical refinement, social work has emerged and positioned itself as a very necessary and critical pillar supporting socioeconomic development in modern societies. Inopportunely, while both social work theory and field practice have been described as mutually reinforcing, evidence from literature suggests that the latter is being undermined by a number of organisational and systemic challenges (Payne, 2015). This paper aims to explore the challenges associated with the mandatory final year bachelor of social work fieldwork learning and its implications on the future of the profession in South Africa.

Conceptualising Internships

Generally put, an internship is an official programme of skills acquisition which targets students who intend to gain practical work experience in a particular field of their study or interest (Reis, Renzulli and Gentry, 2014; Royse, Dhooper and Rompf, 2016). In recent years, there has been growing activism by student bodies agitating for government departments and the private sector to open more space for students to acquire necessary experience in the work place and prepare them fully for the eventual job market after completing their studies (MacLean, 2008). This is in response to the growing realization that most employers are no longer interested in hiring graduates who lack on the job experience (Keynes, 2016). This requirement by employers makes it hard for new graduates to find employment regardless of their credentials (Livingstone, 2018). With this realization, Thurab-Nkhosi, Gift, Quamina-Aiyejina and Harvey, (2013); MacLean, (2008); Cappelli, (2012) write that institutions of higher learning have infused internship programmes into their academic programmes in a synergistic manner which allows students to operationalize their

theoretical knowledge in real life situations where they can learn to appreciate work place dynamics and convert their theoretical knowledge into real life work output. Internship has become virtually a precondition for qualification in certain graduate and post graduate programmes (Cappelli, 2012).

Overview of the social work internship in South Africa

Gray and Lombard (2008) postulate that social work practice in South Africa has been on a continual transformation process propelled by a highly responsive and functional educational system. Lombard (2015) writes that the four year bachelor of social work degree was one of the first to be standardized across all higher institutions in compliance with minimum national standards set out in the South African National Qualification Framework (NQF). According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2011), work-integrated learning (internship) is a mandatory component of the requirements for the attainment of a Bachelor of Social Work qualification. The objectives of work integrated learning for a qualification in social work are stated in the *Work-integrated learning: Good practice guidelines. Higher Education Monitor 12*, document published by the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2011).

The structure of social work internships in South Africa vary from one institution of higher learning to another (Dhemba, 2012). Specifically, Schmidt and Rautenbach (2016) mention that Social work institutions in South Africa generally use concurrent and block placements. Concurrent placement entails that students attend fieldwork observation alongside classroom studies (Schmidt and Rautenbach, 2016). According to Dhemba, (2012), the advantage of concurrent placement lies in the immediate application of the theoretical knowledge gained from the classroom into immediate practice. Concurrent placements are usually common during second and third year where students undertake group and community work respectively (Schmidt and Rautenbach, 2016). On the other hand block placements entails that students attend field work for a certain stipulated period to meet the minimum standards; in South Africa, the period is usually six months where the students are attached to an organisation that provides social work services (Dhemba, 2012). Block placements are usually done during the fourth year of the bachelor of social work program with some institutions doing it during the first semester while others does it during the second semester (Schmidt and Rautenbach, 2016).

History and evolution of social work education in South Africa

Generally, social work education holds one of the longest accounts in South African history (Patel, 2005). The evolution of the profession replicates the political and social dynamics which were largely shaped and informed by the Apartheid separate development model which thrived on racial segregation and white supremacy (Smith, 2014). Chetty, (1999) writes that the first ever national conference on Social

work was commissioned in 1936. The conference was a culmination of the Carnegie Commission into the white poverty phenomenon which among other things sought to find ways of assisting the growing number of the impoverished whites who were neither educated to compete for professional jobs with hordes of professionals from overseas who were flooding the local job markets nor physically fit to complete for manual jobs with native Africans (Bottomley, 2016). The 1936 conference endorsed the establishment of a three year social science based training programme for social workers (Lombard, 2015). The initial curriculum focused on social sciences, generic social work theory, fieldwork instruction and social casework with emphasis on restoration and rehabilitation (Lombard, 2015). The initial curriculum was to be transformed and extended in 1987; giving way to the extension of the total duration of study for the social work training for bachelor's degree from the initial three years to four years, defining social work as a professional academic degree with an honors status (Lombard, 2015).

Problem statement

Unremitting systemic and institutional problems associated with work related learning in social work education can result in the production of ill prepared social workers who are not able to competently drive the social service sector efficiently. Despite the acknowledgement that by the Council of Higher Education (2011) that both theoretical studies and work related learning are fundamental and compulsory components for a qualification in social work, evidence from literature suggests that fieldwork instruction is being marginalised. The marginalisation of fieldwork instruction is happening against a backdrop of increased complains by social work agencies, clients and other stakeholders that the crop of social workers being produced by higher learning institutions are ill prepared for the work they are required to do. Analysts have observed that there is no standardised curriculum for fieldwork instruction and this compromises the learning outcomes for students and complicates the mentorship work of agency mentors who are charged with the responsibility of mentoring interns (Gray and Lombard, 2008). Evidence also shows that university fieldwork instructors, who should visit, observe and assess students in terms of specified learning and performance outcomes have not been doing this consistently leading to students being passed on the basis of hear-say evidence from agency mentors who sometimes are not qualified for this role. Moreover, some social work students are doing their internship in ill-equipped agencies where they only get to do one method of social work practice at the expense of the full social work methods spectrum. It is against this backdrop that this paper explores the challenges being faced by students when they undertake fieldwork instruction as well as establish implications of these challenges on the nature of social workers who are produced under these challenges.

Methodology

This paper has used a desktop methodology to explore organizational and systemic challenges embedded within the South African social work education system with particular reference to fieldwork instruction. The paper explores potential implications of these challenges on the nature of social work professionals that emerge from such an educational system which is riddled by multitudes of challenges. The paper went on to elaborate on some recommendations on how the problems of fieldwork instruction may be resolved. Towards, satisfying the demands of these aims and objectives, the paper used books, journals articles, and newspapers among other print and online resources to inform and validate its findings.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL WORK FIELDWORK INSTRUCTION

Poor Choice of Placement Agency

Unfortunately, most higher learning institutions of social work in South Africa still do not have a well-defined selection criteria for agencies from which students may do their fieldwork. According to, Lombard (2015) the decision regarding the nature of agency in which students do their fieldwork in South Africa continue to be informed by considerations of availability, accessibility and convenience rather than meeting specific learning objectives. Crnkovic-Pozacic, and European Training Foundation (ETF), (2009) write that some students end up being placed in unregistered agencies where they do not get adequate exposure and stimulation necessary for their preparation for the eventual job market. This often means that ill equipped social workers are sometimes produced and dumped into the job market where they struggle to make meaningful contributions to their client's wellbeing (Joseph, 2017). Gray and Lombard (2008) thus write that the decision of choosing fieldwork agencies should be based on the learning demands of individual students' rather than be a formality to finish the academic programme as per the NQF requirements.

Further, Schmidt and Rautenbach, (2016) observe that allowing students to choose agencies on the basis of their accessibility, convenience and availability limits students' full exposure to all methods of social work practice (community work, group work and case work). Some agencies do to offer all the methods of social work practice hence the students will not be able to meet the minimum requirements as stipulated by the Council of Higher Education (Dhembha, 2012). This has the net effect of producing substandard social workers who may fail to be attentive and responsive to all of their clients' needs. Lombard (2015) poignantly states that, in order to maintain social work standards, there should be minimum standards requirements for the validation and of the fieldwork placement site, informal or formal signing of memorandum of understanding between education institutions and agencies as well as definition of responsibilities for university fieldwork instructor, student and the agency mentor. Inopportunely, in South Africa, the choice of an agency for field placement

largely rests upon the student and sometimes but very seldom the university field instructor (Schmidt and Rautenbach, 2016; Lombard, 2015). This arrangement undermines the standardisation of the social work qualification as there is no benchmarking of acceptable agencies thus it means, some students may do fieldwork as a formality and not gain any competency from doing it, this is especially true when juxtaposed with the fact that university fieldwork instructors do not always do on site assessment for their students (Dimo, 2013).

Lack of Regular On-site Assessments by University fieldwork Instructors/Supervisors

Field work placements requires the collaboration of the university fieldwork instructor, the internship host agency as well as the agency mentor in order to make sure fieldwork objectives are met. Unfortunately, there are allegations that some university fieldwork instructors in South Africa do not do regular on-site assessments for their students (Schmidt and Rautenbach, 2016). Dimo (2013) views that regular assessments during field work are crucial in drawing progress reports on how far the host agency, the student and his/her agency mentor will be meeting stated fieldwork objectives and resolving any challenges that may arise along the way. According to Kadushin and Harkness, (2014); Wayne, Bogo, and Raskin, (2010) failure to conduct on-site assessments has the effect of nullifying the purpose of fieldwork, it simply means that students will do placement as a formality to fulfil the requirements for attaining the qualification and not necessarily learn anything from it.

Unpaid Fieldwork Placements

In South Africa, the majority of agencies which offer social work placement opportunities do not give a stipend (Schmidt and Rautenbach, 2016). This comes as one major challenge especially for those students coming from humble backgrounds who may not be able to afford the expenses of unpaid daily work over a substantive period (Westerberg and Wickersham, 2011). More often, students get placement opportunities away from their homes and they will have to rent apartments, buy food, and incur daily transport costs and other related costs (Dimo, 2013; Dhembha, 2012). In the absence of a stipend, students end up not showing up for work which ultimately affects the learning process thus leading to poor learning outcomes (Dhembha, 2012). Moreover, there are unsubstantiated claims that some unscrupulous agencies take advantage of desperate student social workers and dupe them into paying for the much sought after internship opportunities (Hoyt, 2013).

Lack of Well Defined Field Work Curriculum

Despite having been standardised across all higher learning institutions in compliance with the minimum national standards set out in the NQF, there are still some irregularities associated with the manner in which social work fieldwork

practice is conducted (Patel, 2005). These irregularities have been identified by Gray and Lombard, (2008) as some of the major bottlenecks stifling the standardization of social work education in South Africa. Lombard (2015) states that although so many inroads has been made in transforming social work practice along the developmental trajectory, lack of a blue print in the form of a well-defined field work curriculum continues to offset the gains of theoretical standardization. Dhemba(2012) writes that just like its theoretical equivalent, fieldwork placement has to have some specific objectives which address themselves to the nature of professions envisioned by the social work education programme. Without a fully-developed and implemented curriculum, fieldwork placement loses its meaning and value, it only serves as a regulatory factor and not necessarily a student refinement process (Dimo, 2013).

Use of Unqualified Agency Mentors

The Department of Social Development (2012) poignantly states that for the purposes of work related learning, students social workers should be supervised by a social worker with a minimum of five years' work experience. Regrettably, vast numbers of social work interns have to make do with agency mentors who are far below the stipulated supervisory work experience requirements (Dimo, 2013). In some worst case scenarios, there are reports that some students are mentored by agency mentors who do not have even the most basic social work qualifications (Mokoka, 2016). The lack of fieldwork curriculum as mentioned above makes it even more difficult for the ill qualified agency mentors to carry out their mentoring responsibility diligently and in a manner that facilitates the achievement of fieldwork objectives. Moreover, without adequate support from university fieldwork instructors, agency mentors resort to doing what is convenient and necessary even when it does not fulfil the learning objectives of the mentored student (Dhemba, 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Indeed, social work education in South Africa has transformed the narrative of psychosocial problems and the manner in which problems are addressed. Great strides have been made in so far the training of social workers is concerned. Payne, (2015) correctly states that the social work profession is in constant evolution and thus requires inquisitive minds which can inform the direction and pace of its change. Undoubtedly, social work has continued to experience some paradigm shifts, from the era of racially biased welfare services (Mark, Trapido and Marks, 2014; Patel, 2005), the equal but separate educational models (Smith, 2014) and currently the integrated developmental state (Lombard, 2008; Smith, 2014). Great professionals who challenged and shaped the narrative of social work practice have been produced and are celebrated across the world (Gray and Lombard, 2008). It is upon this backdrop of an ever improving profession that the authors propose the following recommendations aimed at

refining social work fieldwork and enhancing the current social work education.

Advocate for stipends for social work internships

Student social workers, like any other employees have operational expenses linked to their day to day transport costs, accommodation and food (Hoyt, 2013). It is therefore crucial that agencies which offer internship programmes should be lobbied to give their students a stipend which can assist them to manage their day to day expenses during their internship. This is especially important given the long and back dated history of poverty and inequalities in South Africa, more especially among black students who come from humble backgrounds (Lephakga, 2017). According to Weis (2018) college students constitute some of the poorest population groups. Without financial assistance, students may develop negative perceptions of the work place and may fail to be productive in their line of work as they will be having divided attention. Problems such as absenteeism, low motivation and coming late to work by interns have been linked to unpaid internships wherein the intern has divided attention between his/her work and strategizing for day to day survival (Dimo, 2013). It is understandable that most social work organisations in South Africa are working under stringent budgets, in order to finance paid internships, it is crucial for organisations to include internships in their applications for funding.

Develop, Finance and Fully Implement Fieldwork Instruction Curriculums

The success of field work instruction in meeting its objectives lies in the coordination of the student, the agency mentor, the college or institution, the fieldwork instructor, and the host agency (Lombard, 2015). This coordination can best be done within the confines of a well-defined fieldwork curriculum which spells out the specific inputs, responsibilities, and work outputs obligated for each of the stakeholders in the internship process or programme (Dhemba, 2012). This requires the commitment of all stakeholders who should have consensus on the imperativeness of advancing the goals of the internship rather than self-serving convenience (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014). This implies that universities should commit themselves to financing fieldwork instructors to conduct their mandatory site visitations and assessments which can help to clarify issues and resolve problems. Not only does field visitations and assessments help to standardise field work, but just like any other class attended courses, it also help with progress check on the implementation of the fieldwork goals (Lombard, 2015). On the other hand, host agencies should be willing to open their work places to allow students to learn as much as possible and afford them a living stipend. The students must undertake to contribute to the overall organisational work output and conduct themselves in a manner that upholds the integrity of their host institutions and their training institutions. Lastly, agency mentors should commit to supporting and stimulating the mentees to gain knowledge of the work place dynamics.

Develop a National Data Base of Agencies among Which Students May Choose to Do Fieldwork

New innovative methods and approaches are needed in rethinking and reconstituting the manner in which decision regarding choice for internship host agencies are taken. Allowing students to choose agencies on the basis of convenience, availability and accessibility is retrogressive and is antithesis to the goal of developing a nationally standardised social work profession. Universities that are currently providing the social work education should engage agencies that provide social work services and forge mutually beneficial partnerships which advance the vision of placing students in agencies which provide commensurate educational services and support for social work students during their field work internship. The proposed partnerships can be easily processed through the Department of Social Development (DSD) which provide oversight functions over all social services organisations. All developed partnerships can therefore be unified into a comprehensive data base from which students can choose appropriate agencies which best suit their future career choices. With a comprehensive data base, universities can be able to exercise some level of control of which agencies meet minimum standards for students' field

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practice and also makes it easier for to lobby for stipends for their students.

Conclusion

Social work higher learning institutions in South Africa ought to rethink the value they place on work related leaning with the view of revitalising this crucial component of the bachelor of social work programme. Undermining field instruction is tantamount to subverting the entire education programme and unleashing ineffectual and half-baked social workers to deal with societal problems. This has the potential of undermining and reversing the milestones achieved by the profession of the years. Problems such as poor choice of placement agencies, unpaid internships, lack of a well-defined fieldwork curriculum, lack of regular on-site assessments by fieldwork instructors/supervisors as well as use of unqualified agency mentors demonstrates that social work field instruction in under siege and require urgent and pragmatic solutions. To ensure the best of standards on the quality of social workers produced by local higher leaning institutions, South Africa needs to rethink social work internship and position it as an important aspect of the social work education system.

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