

Exploring Formal Supervision in Social Work Field Education: Issues and Challenges for Students and Supervisors

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a qualitative study examining processes and issues for social work field education supervisors and social work students engaging in formal supervision. The study is a collaborative partnership between two major hospitals in Western Sydney and The University of Sydney.

Collaboration between social work field supervisors and universities as field education partners is important in the provision of placement experiences for social work students and for supporting field educators in provision of quality learning experiences. Field supervision is a key feature of social work placements and forms a compulsory component of all accredited social work degree programs in Australia. Effective supervision assists students to draw links between theory and practice, to develop critical reflection skills, to understand the complexity of ethical practice and to promote professional growth and identity.

The findings provide some insight into both students' and supervisors' experiences of supervision. It is anticipated that the results will assist social work and university field educators to better prepare both supervisors in the field as well as students in social work practice learning.

Keywords:

Social work field education, Student supervision

LOCATING OUR INTEREST IN SOCIAL WORK FIELD SUPERVISION

Field education is a crucial juncture in creating “ethical, competent, innovative, effective clinical social workers” (Bogo, 2015, p. 322). Collaboration between social work field supervisors and universities as field education partners is critical in maximizing the quality of placement experiences for social work students and for supporting field educators to provide quality learning experiences. During field placement students engage in formal and informal supervision where learning is identified, deconstructed and developed and yet, in our experience, students often report varying understandings of how best to engage in supervision. As well, field supervisors often feel differently equipped to provide social work supervision (Bogo, 2015).

Regular formal supervision during field placement is a compulsory and assessed component of all social work degree programs in Australia and, moreover, is a core practice standard for social workers (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013; Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards [ASWEAS], 2012). Effective supervision assists students to draw links between theory and practice, to develop critical reflection skills, to understand the complexity of ethical practice and to promote professional growth and identity (AASW, 2014).

Although best practice in student social work supervision has been variously expressed (Cleak & Wilson, 2013; Davys & Beddoe, 2010; Hawkins, Shohet, Ryde, & Wilmot, 2012; Noble & Henrickson, 2011), less is known about the content, processes and pedagogical practices utilised in social work field supervision. For instance, how do social work field educators and students prepare for, utilise and experience supervision sessions during placements; what challenges might they face and how are these managed?

Most social workers will begin supervising students with little or no training and yet the role is perceived as, “... a powerful influence in terms of mentoring, supporting and challenging students ...while encouraging significant professional socialisation” (Maidment, 2015, p. 96). Furthermore, in most social work contexts, there are few formal requirements required to qualify as a supervisor except for AASW qualification and field experience pre-requisites. Despite this, it is well recognised that supervisors benefit from awareness of contemporary theories with which students engage throughout their degree (Cleak & Smith, 2012).

This article describes a qualitative exploratory study examining the key processes and issues facing both social work field education supervisors and social work students within formal supervision, specifically in health practice contexts. The research aims to inform social work education providers and field supervisors more broadly by exploring these supervision spaces to develop our understandings of social work supervision in the field and to consider how supervision models may be enhanced. The study is a collaborative partnership between the social work departments in two major teaching hospitals in Western Sydney and The University of Sydney field education team.

REVIEWING CURRENT ISSUES IN SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION SUPERVISION PRACTICE

Social work field education is an important part of the curriculum for social work degree programs in universities worldwide and is the moment in courses where students learn theory and practice integration, experience real-world contexts and develop a professional skill base for practice. Although it is a requirement in Australia that social work students undertaking a field placement, engage in formal supervision (1½ hours per week) with a qualified social worker (AASW, 2013), the content of supervision sessions is necessarily variable according to the practice context. Additionally, supervisory experiences differ in terms of students' preparation, expectations and past experiences as well as field supervisors' expertise, theoretical influences and training. In the provision of supervision, social work educators and social service organisations seek to ensure deep learning opportunities for students inclusive of micro skill development, critical reflection and reflexive theory/practice application as well as context-driven knowledge and skill insights. Understanding how field educators and social work students currently experience supervision on placement and its challenges has been a springboard for this project.

MODELS OF SUPERVISION

Traditionally, one-to-one supervisory models have remained the most popular approach in practice (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Specifically in the field of hospital social work practice, but in social services generally, this model in the context of higher demand for service and rationalised service delivery is an increasingly challenging framework. The need for alternative approaches has been identified as a potential area for inquiry for researchers (Beddoe & Maidment, 2015). Concurrently, and as a result of diminishing resources in social services, increasing workload demands, constant restructuring and uncertain future funding (McKee, Muskat, & Perlman, 2015), university field education programs experience greater difficulty in placing students including locating supervisors (Cleak & Wilson, 2013). Similar to Canada, in the educational context, Australia experiences social and political challenges that have impacted on the ability of service providers to offer placements for social work students. The context includes the growth of tertiary social work degrees and an increasing emphasis on work experience for a range of professions thus adding to the competitive sphere for social work (McKee et al., 2015). In Australia, some alternatives for supervision have been explored especially given higher student enrolments and include "task supervision, group supervision, external supervision, and shared supervisory arrangements" (Cleak & Smith, 2012, p. 247).

Beddoe (2015) has considered models for supervision for social workers who are already in practice. Specifically, group and peer supervision as well as interprofessional frameworks have benefits as well as potential disadvantages. For instance, group/peer supervision can provide a forum to discuss and share challenges and knowledge, enhance collegiality, but also ameliorate isolation (Beddoe, 2015, p. 89). Given the gradual decentralisation of *social work only* teams and a firm move toward interdisciplinary teams in practice, especially in health contexts, Beddoe (2015) suggests that interprofessional supervision has the benefit of strengthening teamwork and collaborative approaches to service delivery as well as exposure

to a range of relevant practice knowledge (Beddoe, 2015, p. 91). These models can have applicability for social work students, and are particularly relevant in hospital environments.

In terms of clinical social work, Bogo (2015) discusses four key concepts emerging from current research that are informative in fostering optimal student learning. They are:

... the presence of strong, positive learning environments in organizations and teams that welcome students and view teaching and learning as mutually beneficial... the presence of collaborative relationships with field educators—relationships that provide strong support and have high expectations for students' being actively involved in their own learning ... opportunities to observe and debrief with experienced practitioners ... and multiple opportunities to actually practice with clients. (2015, p. 319)

Certainly these features have been affirmed as key aspects of constructive supervisory experiences.

WHAT MAKES FOR QUALITY SUPERVISION?

Social work field education for students has been described as a “guided journey” (Doel, 2010, p. 100) and broadly includes elements that are educative, supportive and managerial in nature, with overarching goals that are linked to assessment regimes (Doel, 2010).

Typically, social work students work and learn alongside practitioners in the field in order to progress knowledge and skills as well as evolve a professional identity (Noble, 2011, p. 3). A constructive and functional professional relationship created between the student and supervisor has been highlighted as a significant aspect in the learning experience taking into consideration factors such as power, past experiences, present personal circumstances, sound communication, level of knowledge/experience, cultural identifications and the organisational context (see Connolly & Harms, 2013, pp. 374–375; Davys & Beddoe, 2010, p. 198).

Moorhouse, Hay, and O'Donoghue (2014), in their study of seven final-year social work students, found the quality of field supervision was associated with:

The understanding of the purpose and process of supervision that participants, and in some instances their supervisor, possessed • Their assertiveness to insist on their supervision needs being met • Their supervisor's experience and skill, in practice and in fieldwork supervision • The relationship and perceived compatibility between them and their supervisor • Luck. (2014, p. 42)

As a result, they suggest students' preparation for placement must include learning that focuses on the nature and process of supervision as well as understandings regarding respective roles and the negotiation of power. Field supervisors must also be sufficiently prepared to develop relevant skills and manage the supervisory relationship. To this end, social work field programs have an integral role to ensure the development of adequately supported students and field supervisors.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SUPERVISION

Rather than simply a functional exercise, supervision must also gauge wider social and political social contexts in ways that seek to know the impact on social service provision and, importantly, on citizens, whether at individual, group or community levels. Understanding contemporary neoliberal contexts of social work practice and the impact on service provision and social inequality is embedded in the profession's commitment to social justice (AASW, 2010).

In adopting critical approaches to practice, critical reflection and critical reflexivity as theoretical tools (Fook & Gardner, 2007) is an increasingly important feature of social work supervisory practice and education. A critical approach to social work supervision is essential to addressing current social disparity given the decline of the welfare state partnered with rising social inequity and decreasing confidence in the capacity of social work as a profession to address these trends (Noble, 2016, p. 40). Additionally, Noble (2016) explains that a critically informed approach to supervision includes critical reflection/reflexivity to explore the assumptions and interpretations that may be held about the supervisory relationship, the content of supervision sessions, as well as those of the organisation (Noble, 2016, p. 45).

Morley and Dunstan (2013) demonstrate how critical reflection can be a powerful learning tool in supervision to explore students' assumptions of the neoliberal context and social service provision. Their research reveals how students' previously held assumptions based on "participation in neo-liberal discourses" (Morley & Dunstan, 2013, p. 153) can be transformed in order to resist dominant and unhelpful constructions in practice.

In another example of critical approaches to field education, Hosken, Ervin, and Laughton's (2016) venture to develop a set of critical social work practice principles in field education is instructive with regard to how a critical approach to social work supervision from an educational perspective could be accomplished. They suggest building strong awareness of the ways in which organisational processes, policies and particular theoretical perspectives including field education regulatory documents normalise "neoliberal-informed values" (Hosken et al., 2016, p. 180).

DECIDING TO EXPLORE SUPERVISION SPACES

This project has been driven by a desire to be inclusive of perspectives of those who may arguably have the least power and *voice* in social work supervision processes being students, and those whose insights most likely contain practice knowledge and skill, and who are positioned as *gatekeepers* (Bogo, Regehr, Power, & Regehr, 2007; Sussman, Bailey, Richardson, & Granner, 2014) in field education, being social work field supervisors. Underlying our motivation and intentions in developing the research project is a commitment to the collaborative construction of theory/practice knowledge between field education partners and, at its heart is the recognition that, in understanding social work practices, theory/practice is not a binary enterprise but rather, is more helpfully conceptualised as phronetic. This is in acknowledgement of the complexity in theory/practice and how it emerges "within and without" in practice (Fook, 2012, p. 44).

As researchers in this space, our lenses of inquiry are fashioned from our own past experience in education and practice, our values and our commitments, and importantly our positioning as researchers. Our commitment is, in part, to bridge the imaginary divide between theory and practice and between practice and research by collaborative partnerships between social work education systems, field supervisors and students. The study began from critically reflective discussions between the respective social work teams at the hospitals and The University of Sydney about how students seemed underprepared for supervision in placement alongside supervisors' reflections on the challenges they encounter in providing supervision.

We have attempted to position ourselves within a community of learners and to share our insights from the project to our broader community of learners in social work. It is also reflective of our joint commitment to supporting continuing conversations and new generations of practitioners.

EXPLORING SUPERVISION SPACES IN SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION

Social work supervision is both “an event and process” (Brown & Bourne, cited in Beddoe & Egan, 2013, p. 372) and so too, we would argue, is social work research. The design of the study reflects a *moment* in a particular practice context exploring the spaces in social work supervision between students and social work practitioners. However, for a more comprehensive purview, similar studies may undertake to consider a range of contexts or designs in consulting students and supervisors' perspectives (see for example, Moorhouse et al., 2014).

Two hospitals, both with significant social work programs across an array of programs including adult acute and chronic health units, adolescent medicine and sexual health facilities were selected as sites for the research. The study sought to identify how key elements in supervision such as the integration of theory and practice, the development of critical reflection skills and ethical practice as well as the evolution of professional identity (AASW, 2014) were cultivated within the supervisory relationship. Students who were undertaking their first or second placement at either hospital and social workers who were supervising these students were invited to provide their perspectives. Ethics approval was granted by the Western Sydney Local Health Ethics Committee.

In 2015, 20 students enrolled in a range of social work undergraduate degrees in NSW completed a questionnaire anonymously at the end of the first two weeks of their placement and again within the final two weeks of completion of their placement. Student participants were divided between those completing their first placement (eight) and those who were in a second placement (12).

The questionnaires explored students' understandings of the role of supervision in their developing professional identity, preparation for engagement in supervision in their respective university degree programs, expectations, ways in which they engage with their weekly supervision and how they anticipate and negotiate the challenges and issues that arise in supervision as well as strengths of the sessions. Specifically, the study sought to understand how students' experiences and learning opportunities in supervision evolved throughout placement.

The respective social work supervisors (20) were interviewed twice, once at the commencement of placement and also at the end of the placement. The aim was to explore issues such as their expectations of being a supervisor and of students on placement, past experiences of student supervision, challenges and issues as well as how they are supported as social work field educators. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by a schedule of questions.

At times in student social work placements, supervision is conducted by social work practitioners external to the agency, particularly when a qualified social worker is unavailable. For this study all supervisors were employed at the hospitals and were therefore agency based. The supervisors who participated in this study held varying levels of experience in student supervision. Four of the supervisors were supervising their first student, 10 supervisors had supervised between two and five students previously and the remaining supervisors had supervised over 10 students in the past (of which one had supervised 20 students). Collectively, this group of social workers had been working as practitioners from between two and 30 years. Additionally, each social worker was working in a variety of hospital programs including intensive care, the emergency department, adolescent medicine, sexual health, women's health, general medical, oncology and geriatrics.

The interviews with social worker supervisors were audio-taped and transcribed. Thematic analysis of the student questionnaires and the field supervisor semi-structured interviews was conducted with a view to develop several key themes. Via a process of coding and clustering, global themes and some specific perspectives were drawn.

DISCOVERING THEMES IN SOCIAL WORK FIELD SUPERVISION

Key themes for students

Almost all students were pleased to be able to engage in supervision and saw it as an opportunity to: reflect on issues, particular cases and theories; debrief; manage daily challenges; practise self reflection; enhance learning and wellbeing; increase competency and skills; reflect on accountability issues; create a supportive environment given the sometimes difficult nature of social work practice and organisational contexts; work in anti-oppressive ways; maintain integrity; and develop ethical practice. Specifically we discuss their responses to preparation, expectations, as well as the difficulties and value of supervision on placement.

Preparation for supervision

From responses received to the questionnaires, students felt differently prepared for supervision citing university materials and processes such as field education manuals, field placement classes and lectures, guest speakers and tutorials as sources of information. One student described their preparation as being based on "brief information in student handbook and previous supervision at last placement," whilst most others felt the preparation to be more substantial, for example:

Supervision is constantly discussed at university. It is part of our curriculum with lectures, tutorial, reading and guest speakers being utilised to develop learning on what supervision entails.

Yes I feel my university's strong emphasis on supervision and critical reflection prepared me for supervision.

Overall, students' expectations on how to prepare for supervision included: engagement with writing in weekly journals; direction regarding the completion of set tasks; working with an agreed learning plan; preparing an agenda for supervision sessions beforehand; and producing a record of learning instances for the session alongside a record of set issues or tasks to discuss.

The majority (81%) of students who responded to this question (Q3) described how the combined input from placement classes at university, previous classes spent on supervision or seminars, their own research, and information from field educators had been informative. However, some responses suggested that, while the structural aspects were well covered, a deeper understanding of what supervision actually entails was missing and noted a distinct gap in assistance to understand the transition from theory and practice and the connections:

The supervision I have had looked nothing like the supervision described in the resources or previous topics that I have completed.

Many students commented on the value of orientation at their respective hospital placements which included sessions specifically relating to the nature of the supervision they would receive, noting that supervision was:

... covered in some detail throughout orientation at [xxxx].

Interestingly, for students who were undertaking their second placement, most drew on their previous placement experience of supervision as the most helpful indicator for what they might expect:

My preparation comes from my experience in my past placement and how my supervision occurred there. Also, I asked about it in my interview for this placement and we had a discussion around what it would be like.

Expectations before and after placement

Students' responses in relation to their expectations were all very similar and included perceptions of supervision as a supportive interaction which is non-judgmental, and which provides a space for debriefing, working on their learning plan or linking theory to practice. Other expectations included being able to reflect on placement experiences, guidance in critical reflection processes, instruction on administrative tasks and an opportunity to be challenged about beliefs and attitudes. For instance:

I'm expecting it to provide a small period of time each week where I can have my supervisor's undivided attention to ask as many questions as I need to, to reflect on the work I am doing and how I can improve, as well as reflect on ethical dilemmas and values. Importantly, I expect supervision to provide opportunities to discuss applying theory to practice.

The nature of supervision, according to students, is related mainly to provision of support or guidance and constructive feedback in a respectful, trustworthy, approachable and encouraging context. The nature of supervision was important to students, and should

reflect “genuineness, openness, positive regard,” and be “empathetic, non-judgmental, trustworthy.” Specifically, as stated by one student, supervision would have the “ability to adapt to my learning styles and needs, ability to assist me in linking theory and practice, feedback about me and how I practice, not becoming overwhelmed by case discussion or issues that I raise.”

When asked about their post-supervision experience and whether expectations were met, almost all students (bar one) were satisfied with their supervision experience and felt they engaged well with the process. Benefits gained included: the ability to discuss issues; approaches to practice; theories; enabling resilience; learning to be critically reflective; preparation of particular case accounts; and questions/reflections on theory and learning plan goals,

In relation to supervisors, most found their respective supervisors met or exceeded their expectations in being supportive, reliable, and providing assistance with administration and education:

I think supervision was better than I thought it would be. It was a very open and positive experience.

Difficulties/challenges/Issues raised in supervision

In their responses, many students highlighted potential challenges in supervision including time constraints, conflicts of opinion especially differences in professional and personal values, creating trust in the relationship, and managing different styles, age-gaps and backgrounds. Students anticipated a conflict in theoretical perspectives such as those that arise between a bio-medical model of practice and a social determinants’ perspective on health.

Two main challenges were apparent at the conclusion of placement and include the structural difficulties associated with having more than one supervisor which created continuity issues and time constraints leading to issues over support:

I had two supervisors who alternated each week in relation to who I met with for supervision.

One of the main challenges I found with supervision was time management. It is difficult to find time to prepare for supervision and to critically reflect when managing a caseload, learning, and adjusting to a new working environment.

An organisational dilemma for one student occurred when she/he did not feel able to raise interpersonal issues in respect of other workers at the placement due to the relationship the supervisor had with those people.

Strengths/advantages/value

Consistently, a high degree of satisfaction was reported by students in formal supervision sessions (and, incidentally, overall by field educators who expressed feeling positively motivated in their supervisory role). Many students responded in positive ways to the nature of the supervisor’s discussions with them, their expectations, and the learning about

professional practice. The creation of a safe environment for discussion was identified as a global theme:

I was surprised at how much genuine effort and time my supervisor dedicated to me during supervision. I have never been challenged nor pushed to excel as much in my life. There were times when I felt like giving up, but I am grateful I stuck with it because I now feel worthy to call myself a social worker as a result of the excellent supervision received.

Key themes for social work supervisors

Social work supervisors typically provided their reasons for taking students on placement as being linked to: maintaining involvement in theory and research; “giving back” to the profession; professional commitment; the advantages associated with learning alongside someone else; and having time to be reflective or to be challenged. Some supervisors viewed the opportunity to supervise a student as inspirational, connected to professional development, the opportunity to share knowledge and skills, develop their own practice and gaining satisfaction in witnessing students grow throughout the duration of placement.

I enjoy mentoring the new generation of social workers. I enjoy imparting my practice wisdom. Social work is a relational discipline and student education is extremely relational.

Challenges and strategies

Challenges to supervision were most often clearly related to the organisational context of practice including delays or interruptions to planned supervision sessions. Supervisors reported the need to often prioritise organisational responsibilities over students’ learning needs. Significantly, supervisors and students both conveyed an awareness of these intrusions and the resulting frustration. In most responses, regardless of the question, the reference to time restraints was another global theme.

I was spreading myself too thin. I felt like I was failing the student as a supervisor, I was not around as much as I should be.

I did not have the time to sit down after each intervention and break it down, which is what the student needed in terms of learning.

Time was an issue. We had a lot of people on leave and I had to cancel supervision when clinical work needed to be done.

Some supervisors who were sharing the supervision workload acknowledged similar concerns to the students regarding having more than one supervisor:

One of the difficulties is every second week having a different supervisor. This week I have not had a handover.

Additional themes for supervisors were recalling issues such as the lack of adaptability and openness of students with timely communication. Many supervisors commented on students’ unsuitable performance in relation to readiness for placement for example, a lack of awareness in professional boundaries, appropriate dress or behaviour:

I had concerns about professionalism and boundary issues – student eating food off patient's tray, not wearing shoes to the ward.

Another indicator of lack of readiness related to academic skill:

Academic writing was a problem.

Compounding the issue in this cohort of students, it seemed that one student may have had specific learning needs related to writing.

More generally, supervisors commented on the lack of organisational awareness in the particular context of a hospital, but also a lack of interpersonal skills such as starting conversations, or poor motivation and initiative, various understandings of reflective practice and different expectations regarding the daily routine:

Students who struggle to follow directions. Some students appear to resent this. Some students want to be in the driver's seat from the get go, they forget the label of "student."

Student who wanted to be all action, but no reflection. The student did not want to be reflect[ive] and resented it when I asked for it. She did not like it.

No two students are the same. Some are motivated, others are less so. Some students are sound communicators, others, particularly BSW first placement have found adult professional communication difficult.

It is hard for students to know how to apply critical reflection. For example, "how do you think it went?" "It was really good", "What was good about it?"; "Oh all of it" I find it difficult to draw them out. If we keep it superficial, they can't learn.

Strategies were described by the supervisors to address some of these concerns included: raising concerns in supervision and informally; revisiting expectations; communicating with their own team and colleagues; exploring anxieties; changing learning goals; providing constructive feedback; relying on the growing relationship to gradually work through issues; reducing tasks; providing immediate feedback; debriefing with other social work field supervisors; and using a critical reflection framework. The issue of time constraints was mostly addressed by the adoption of a group supervision process.

I think we have to look at ourselves and what we have to offer for students when they come to do placement. Maybe we are asking a lot of them to fit in what we are providing and sometimes we need to be more considerate of what we are giving them to practice.

Supports

Supervisors were also asked to comment on how they, themselves, were supported as field educators. Their responses were instructive and included reliance on their teams and team leaders for support, and the use of learning style questionnaires with students. Most of the supervisors discussed the value and usefulness of the field educator courses/workshops/seminars provided by respective universities:

Maybe I would have liked doing the supervisor supervision course that has just started. I think it might give me ideas or you know have a chat about what is going on and see what other people are doing.

Field educator sessions were good ... talking about the experience was very useful.

University partnerships

The research methodology for this project has been underscored by the recognition of the importance and significance in university and field educator partnerships and consequently we were especially keen to hear from supervisors about their reflections on partnerships with universities. There were varying levels of satisfaction in a spectrum ranging from the university being largely “absent” (with the exception of liaison visits) prompting these comments:

Would not take students from [xxx], no support whatsoever. Students from [xxx] did not seem as organised. Could not get hold of liaison officers, a real problem.

I would have liked more structure from University. Something I could have taken ideas from.

Collaboration is very important if they want us to keep taking students.

Some supervisors, however, had a different expectation from university support processes such as the following viewpoint,

I don't think the University has a big role here, they trust the supervisor so we are more of the University “face” for practice learning students. They should be giving supervisors more control.

As well, many supervisors were content and pleased with the support they had received:

I got emails from the coordinators so they are following up with me.

Positive experience with academic staff.

The interviews with supervisors also explored future suggestions for how support might be offered to field educators such as online forums, and improved matching of students and supervisors. Significantly, the desire for universities to offer more professional training, whether that is face-to-face or online training was discussed by most respondents. More generally, suggestions included greater accessibility to university staff, the provision of greater exposure to the field and preparation for students prior to starting placement, and enhanced communication processes with supervisors.

Continuing to enhance student supervision in the field

Our study explores some key considerations in the preparation of students and field educators for field education. Given that field education mostly comprises one year of an undergraduate degree in Australia, attentiveness to this space requires awareness of the current challenges and of course, favourable and effective aspects.

Social work graduates have expressed “a strong wish for more time in contact with the field” (Tham & Lynch, 2014, p. 704) given that, oftentimes, students feel unprepared in commencing their professional journeys. Concomitantly, our study found that supervisors experience students as being underprepared in some respects and that a greater exposure to the field could be a strategy to address this challenge in the future. Perhaps further consideration in allocating additional attention in the curriculum preparing students for placement and especially for the supervisory experience is justifiable.

In Canada where similar social and political challenges to the Australian context exist, initiatives such as greater integration of field practice into the curriculum via strategies such as field educator panels, web-based training, accredited seminars presented by field practitioners during early phases of degrees (including supervision) promote closer working partnerships between the field and educators but also embed field supervision for students as future social workers as an ongoing commitment to the profession and an essential area of knowledge and practice (McKee et al., 2014). Specifically, whilst the effectiveness of embedding preparation for supervision in the curriculum for students on placement has received some research attention (see for example Fierro, 2000), largely, supervision practice is focused on the processes and content for field supervisors. Further inquiry in the preparation for students for various practice contexts and supervision and as future supervisors may also be important in the Australian context.

Despite universities offering a range of seminars and workshops for new and continuing field educators, our study suggests that consideration be provided to exploring formalised and innovative approaches to field supervision of students. Applying the spirit of partnership has been a motivation for this study in recognition that “we need each other” (Bogo, 2015, p. 321), and likewise the development of placement experiences together might deliver models such as the rotational practicum developed in gerontology by the Hartford Practicum Partners Program (Zendall, Fortune, Mertz, & Koelewyn, 2007) or, indeed, greater curriculum synergy with respect to particular areas of practice and pedagogical input (see LeGeros and Savage Borne [2012], for an example regarding integration of social work knowledge and practice in the field of domestic violence). The innovative use of technology in the form of web-based learning and support for students and field educators (Rosenfield, 2012) is a parallel consideration in developing improved placement experiences.

Finally, but most importantly, our study reveals the difficulties experienced in the field that is connected to the continuing impact of neoliberal policy. In 1997, Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar and Strom described this “changing context” and unfortunately, similar trends continue some 16 years later (Morley & Dunstan, 2013). Perhaps most challengingly, partnerships between universities and field partners must include advocacy to ensure that supervision and student placements firmly remain an integral part of social work roles in service delivery. Herein lies the quintessence of field and university partnerships. We agree with Bogo (2015, p. 322) who states that, “commitment for partnerships must be made between individuals at the most senior levels of both organizations as they have the authority to bring about change.”

Unquestionably, quality supervision supports student’s preparation and development of skills and competencies in readiness for workplace social work. Given the need for

improved partnerships between universities and social work field educators, this study provides further insight into both students and supervisors experiences of supervision. It is anticipated that the results of this study will assist social work field educators and university field educators to better prepare both social work supervisors in the field as well as students in this critical and significant component of professional social work learning.

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