

9. From being 'caught in the middle of a war' to being 'in a really safe space' - social work field education with external supervision

Ines Zuchowski

Department of Social Work and Human Services, James Cook University, Douglas.

email: Ines.zuchowski@jcu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Social work placements are vital to the students' learning regarding the application of theory to practice. Placements with external supervision are becoming more prevalent, but may be considered to be less desirable than placements with internal supervision. Literature on student placements with external supervision emphasises the importance of establishing and maintaining the triad relationship of student, on-site and off-site supervisor and the provision of continued support. This article reports on a recent study exploring student perspectives on placement involving external supervision. The study shows that students identify a range of experiences, challenges and opportunities in placements with external supervision. From the students' point of view placement preparation, the matching of students to placements and supervisors, the potential benefits of receiving supervision external to the agency and the lack of relationships between the parties involved may need to be considered more carefully in placements with external supervision.

INTRODUCTION

Social work practitioners and organisations are exposed to global, economic, social and political changes that impact social work education and practice including the provision of student placements (Barton, Bell and Bowles 2005). The current context of practice is framed by workplace ideologies and neo-liberal market principles that put strain on social workers and their ability to support field education programs (Agllias 2010). Social work field education is the practice arm of an academic degree where what has been learnt in theory is applied in practice (Zuchowski 2011). Social work educators see field education as a 'culminating and vital component' of social work education (Unger 2003, p. 107), pivotal for the integration and practice knowledge (Barton, Bell and Bowles 2005), and 'a cornerstone for social work education' (Abram, Hartung and Wernet, 2000, p. 171). Similarly, students have identified field education as the single most important factor of social work education (Wayne, Bogo and Raskin 2010) and a critical transition point to professional practice (Patford 2000).

Field education in Australia was developed around the apprenticeship idea of learning, with students allocated to individual social work supervisors who act as role models and provide students with the opportunity to engage in learning by doing (Camilleri 2001; Cleak and Smith 2012). However, this model is under strain in the current context of social work practice because '[g]enerating enough field education placements relies on the voluntary participation of industry to accept students for field education and provide educational resources' (Egan 2005, p. 37). Student placements in Australia need to be supervised by a qualified social worker (AASW 2010), yet, due to a range of factors, including the current economic climate, it can be difficult to find student placements supported by social work practitioners working in the placement organisation (Abram, Hartung and Wernet 2000; Barton, Bell and Bowles 2005; Unger 2003).

This study investigates student placement arrangements that are conceptualised as 'outside the norm', albeit an acceptable alternative. Students undertake their social work field education with a social work supervisor that is external to their placement, mostly because there is no social work qualified, in-house supervision available. It is generally assumed that socialising students into the profession involves transmission of professional knowledge, values and skills ideally via a field education model that includes an onsite qualified social work supervisor (Abram, Hartung and Wernet 2000). However, the Australian Association of Social Work allows for student placements with external social work supervision 'where the host organisation has no suitable social work educator' providing that arrangements are made 'that the appropriate professional formation and supervision takes place by a qualified social work field educator' (AASW 2010, p. 16). Little research has been conducted in regard to external supervision in field education.

FIELD EDUCATION: CENTRAL, CRUCIAL AND CHALLENGING

Social work field education is intense and complex, providing both opportunities and challenges for students. Field education is a place of holistic learning which 'involves the exploration of a complex web of factors: personal, relational, cultural, political, and organisational. Learners access and utilise knowledge, emotion, behaviour and prior

experience in the learning context' (Chinnery and Beddoe 2011, p. 129). Field education provides a range of learning opportunities for students, including regulating strong emotions, reconsidering the commitment to social work, and operating solo (Patford 2001). For students, field education is often a dual experience of significant professional learning and coexisting associated stress (Maidment 2003, 2006). The complexities of students' lives where many juggle work, studies and family life impact on the field education experience (Ryan, Barns and McAuliffe 2011). Field Education itself is complex, demanding and can potentially expose students to unsafe and/ or challenging situations. It is the context in which the student's capacity for practice leaning and development in the professional social work role is tested. Here students' learning and their fitness for professional practice is examined. Field education is 'the place where significant issues pertaining students' abilities and competencies for professional practice become evident', and thus it plays a gate-keeping role for the profession (Razack 2000, p. 196). Furthermore, field education takes place in service sectors that have been recognised 'as being at increased risk of violence' (Bowie 2002 cited in Gair and Thomas 2008, p. 44). The experience of violence has been reported by social work placement students (Gair and Thomas 2008; Tully, Kropf and Price 1999).

Moreover, students' sense of self and personal identity is challenged in field education (Lam, Wong and Leung 2005; Ornstein and Moses 2010). Ornstein and Moses argue that the relationship between the field educator and student becomes a focal point of the field placement learning experience. Ornstein and Moses (2010) highlight the complexities and ambiguities that are part of supervisory relationships and encourage continued negotiation and dialogue around matching students and supervisors, or, as they term it, 'the goodness of fit' (p. 102) issues.

FIELD EDUCATORS: FACILITATING LEARNING

Field education introduces social work students to the concept of professional supervision (McAuliffe and Sudbery 2005). The student- supervisor relationship is recognised as facilitating social work learning on placement (Cleak and Smith 2012) and students want field educators to 'provide opportunity to be observed, and facilitate professional development' (Barretti 2007, p. 51). Students want supervisors who are 'available, respectful, responsive, supportive, fair, objective, and that are knowledgeable and able to directly communicate their knowledge and provide feedback' (Barretti 2007, p. 50). These desired characteristics connect with the idea that students can learn directly from field educators (Zuchowski 2011). The reality of current workplaces however is that internal supervision is not always possible and moreover, even in models with onsite supervision, field educators are not always available to be observed (Barretti 2007), or accessible for supervision (Patford 2000). Many placement supervisors experience high workloads in crisis driven workplaces with high staff turnovers that impact their ability to meet the educational requirements of placement students, often resulting in student supervision being more task focused and limiting the opportunities of integrating theory into practice (Chinnery and Beddoe 2011).

Field Education: External Supervision

The significance and complexity of social work field education consequently invokes questions about social work field education with external supervision. The research discussed here takes up a focus on external placement supervision experiences. The research question posed is ‘What are the experiences of all key stakeholders in field education with external supervision?’ The aims of the research are to review what is known about supervision for social work students on placements, to ascertain the experience of students, task supervisors and field educators in social work field education with external supervision; to explore, in particular, the four-way relationship of external supervisor, internal supervisor, student and liaison person; to investigate what external field education brings to field education; and to develop a model/ framework or principles of external supervision on field education.

Literature about external supervision in field education highlights the importance of the triad relationship (Abram, Hartung and Werne 2000) between the student, the external field educator, also referred to as external supervisor, and the on-site supervisor, generally referred to as task supervisor. Literature suggests that extra support is needed for field educators, task supervisors and students in triad relationships (Clare 2001; Henderson 2010). In this research study, the learning and teaching relationship is conceptualised as a four-way relationship which includes the student, the external field educator, the task supervisor and the University liaison. Research identifies that supervisors in general, and students particularly when problems arise, value regular contact with the university liaison person (Cleak and Wilson 2013). Universities generally have assessment and reporting requirements that are monitored by liaison persons (Carthwait 2011). Thus the university liaison person becomes part of the placement and this research is interested in exploring the relationship between the four parties.

Literature on placements with external supervision identifies the potential for power imbalances between the on-site and off-site supervisors (Henderson 2010), the need to look at the differing responsibilities of the supervisors (Karban 1999) and the characteristics that external supervisors should bring to field education (Maidment and Woodward 2002). Some models for practice in this area are identified (Clare 2001; Maidment and Woodward 2002). Placements with external supervision are often seen as a last resort (Abram, Hartung and Wernet 2000), and while this outlook has been challenged (Abram, Hartung and Wernet 2000; Plath 2003; Zuchowski 2011), a recent comparative survey suggests that students are generally ‘more satisfied across all aspects of their placements where there is a strong onsite social work presence’ (Cleak and Smith 2012, p. 256). Cleak and Smith (2012) identify social work identity, learning opportunities on placements and feeling competent as key issues for student satisfaction in placements with internal supervision.

This article provides interim findings exclusively focusing on the experiences of students in placements with external supervision. Placements with external supervision in this research encompass social work field education where students have received social work supervision from a qualified social work supervisor external to the placement agency. Future publications will consider the experiences of other key stakeholders, the interconnectivity between those stakeholders and models for practice.

METHOD

The data reported here has been collected as part of the author's PhD research. This research is framed by a feminist paradigm, with phenomenological (Creswell 2007; Moustakas 1994) and social constructivist (Schwandt 1994) underpinnings. In line with feminist thinking the aim is to position the participants as experts. Equally, the research needs to be conscious of the importance of process, any inherent biases, and be willing to be instrumental in achieving change (Klein 1994). Ultimately, it is envisioned that, through the insights of and with input from the students, external supervisors, task supervisors and liaison persons, a model for practice will be developed.

In the larger PhD research project semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 32 participants exploring their experience as students, field educators, task supervisors and/or liaison persons involved in social work field education placements with external supervision. There was no relationship between these participants, with all participants exploring unrelated experiences within field education. The interviews were conducted in 2011/2012. The data discussed in this paper specifically considers the participants' experiences as students.

Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive method of sampling (Creswell 2007) was used to invite participation in this research from social workers, university staff, placement agencies and students via Australian universities and through national social work conference presentations. Participants in this research were associated with a number of social work programs in Australian universities in Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia, Victoria and South Australia. Of the thirty two interviews, 13 involved participants who either identified as having experienced the role of student only in the context of this research (9) or they had experienced a number of roles including that of student (4). In the latter case participants talked about a number of roles and combination of roles in addition to their student perspective, including the role of external supervisor, liaison person, and task supervisor. Only the parts of the interview that clearly related to their personal experience as students on placement with external supervision were considered in the data analysis here.

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences and views about field education placements with external supervision, using a recursive approach to interviewing (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008). All of the participants who talked about their experiences as students were female, although males participated in the larger study.

Data Analysis

All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Participants were provided with copies of their interview. During the data analysis process consideration was given to recurring themes within individual interviews and across the collective interviews (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008). Data analysis involved a process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Neuman 2006), utilising the function of 'memos' in NVivo to explore themes and their links. Data analysis in line with phenomenology was undertaken with a process of 'reducing the information to significant statements or quotes' combining the statements into themes and developing textural and structural descriptions (Creswell 2007,

p. 60). In the process of creating pseudonyms for participants the gender of the participant, their experience, background information and their role has remained unaltered.

Limitations

Qualitative research relies on the recollection and reflection of subjective experience, and the interest of this study is not 'on finding out the truth per se but rather the truth as the informant sees it' (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008, p. 111) in line with social constructivism (Schwandt 1994). This study is based on a small number of participants who have self-selected into the study and have chosen what they want to share in the interviews. The data presented here is only one aspect of the range of experiences discussed in the broader interviews and larger research project. This article privileges the students' voices to allow reflection on their experiences before exploring the broader context of field education with external supervision. My own position as an insider in this research impacts the choice of focus, the interviews and the analysis (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008) and as feminist researcher I need to acknowledge the subjectivity of the interviewing and meaning making (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008), although I have tried to come at this with fresh eyes in line with phenomenological research, by attempting to bracket my own experiences and positions (LeVasseur 2003).

Findings

In this section, insights into the rich data that emerged from the student voices will be provided. Themes included students' general experience in field education, their experiences and expectations in placements with external supervision, the challenges and opportunities of placements with external supervision, the four way relationships and ideal placements.

General Experiences: Struggles, Power, Lack of Choice and Being Lucky

For a number of participants completing field education itself was a struggle. Participants talked about the need to give up employment to undertake placement, a lack of child care, and the multiple roles of working, raising small children and the massive investment of time that placement required in their lives. A number of students said that they felt chaotic or worried about their sanity, as this quote exemplifies:

...and if I put myself back completely in context I ...had two small children and my husband worked away and I was working full-time, ...completing my degree, and I was probably semi-insane by that time. (Shelly)

Some participants experienced power struggles, the bullying culture of an organisation and receiving put downs related to gender, echoing research that placement can expose student to violence and feeling unsafe (Gair and Thomas 2008).

...we are students in this environment and we want to fit in a very comfortable space, so... I think we are mindful of that and the power imbalance (laughs) I suppose with students... (Laura)

...a bit of name calling and all of that stuff went on...(Jennifer)

...he took me in the kitchen and gave me that whole lecture about, men and women's brains and how, ...we regurgitate, we are like cows chewing apart, we do this, we chew all over it, we vomit it up, whereas men are action people, they make the plans and they do it, that's why I have to listen to him and just do as he says (laughs). (Jamie)

Some participants pointed to their lack of choice about the field of practice and supervisors, and to the limited placements and supervisors as reasons for staying in unsafe situations.

...we hear a lot of how hard it is to get supervisors and how ...placements... and that kind of censors us a bit, God, I am so thankful to have somewhere. (Laura)

If it had been actively promoted that, ok, ...that is the nature, you know, not everybody in the industry puts their hand up for a student, no matter, we want to provide that safe space for you for you to do that, this is important, still let us know, then I would have spoken up much sooner. (Denise)

A prominent concept used in all but two interviews regarding the student experience on placement was 'being lucky'. Participants referred to the ways things worked out, to getting another placement quickly, to having a good supervisor or to others stepping in to support them.

I remember feeling very anxious to start with, but I was lucky that [co-worker] was there... and she kind of really took me under her wing. (Kelly)

Experiences and Expectations of Students with External Supervision

From the students' perspective the experiences and expectations of what the external supervisors and the internal task supervisors needed to bring to their placement experience were different. While there were common attributes that they thought the different parties should bring, such as being available and supportive, participants had many more concrete expectations of external supervisors and were more detailed about their experiences with them. Though asked specifically to comment on the qualities the different parties should bring to supervision, only one student, who had a particularly negative experience with her external supervisor, further expressed concrete expectations for internal task supervisors. Yet, all participants but one outlined that external supervisors needed to bring experience and knowledge, and generally, participants wanted external supervisors to be able to link theory to practice, have contextual knowledge and help and guide them to develop their own practice. Participants identified a range of interpersonal skills that external supervisors needed, including the ability to establish relationships, listen and communicate. They wanted them to be motivated, warm, caring, encouraging and challenging.

able to listen and certainly learn about the context of which the student is doing their placement ... to be able to contextualise the setting and so on, because from that the supervisor is able to build and extend the student's thinking... it's having a core understanding of where they are... looking for the strengths within the student and what they bring. To get to know the student is really important. (Belinda)

Some but not all participants had supervision with both supervisors. A number of participants felt that the task supervisor lost interest or had no real input in their placement. Other participants who had supervision with their task supervisor commented on receiving supervision around specific skills, organisational issues and the provision of practice opportunities. Most participants explored the outcomes of their supervisory relationship with the external supervisor in the interviews and these included gaining perspectives and new layers of learning, the ability to critique and explore practice and skills as well as value and ideological positions. Laura highlights the experience of receiving support from more than one source.

I think the whole package has kind of worked quite well, because she [task supervisor] just makes time and sees the importance of that... and I have a motivated external supervisor, ...I feel quite supported in my learning which has been great and also knowing that I have a liaison person ..., who ... is incredibly available as well, so (laughs) I have been absolutely blessed or just maybe it's working. (Laura)

Challenges of Placements with External Supervision: Access, Burden, Differing Ideas and Limitations of Supervision

Participants highlighted some of the specific challenges of placements with external supervision. One concern was the limited access to the social work supervisor and the inability to debrief immediately with them. Overall, however, this was not presented as the major challenge. The concerns about external supervision were expressed more in terms of the quality of the supervision: the external social work supervisor's lack of understanding of the context of the work of the agency, the limitations of task supervision and the differing ideas between supervisors. Participants expressed that they felt burdened by the responsibility of coordinating the communication between supervisors.

Seven participants raised the lack of contextual knowledge of the external supervisor as challenging, highlighting the lack of insight into the organisation and the field of practice as impacting their placement, supervision and assessment.

I guess some of the challenges were at times, because the external supervisor didn't have a knowledge of the agency, besides what I gave them, so their background clashed a little bit with what the task supervisor might want. (Stephanie)

And my experience with her... was not very good..., she didn't have any real insight into homelessness and that proved a big barrier to... me being able to ... discuss my learning and plans and goals, and... generally sort of base my ideas around theories and things like that. (Denise)

Six participants raised concerns specifically about task supervision. These concerns included lack of task supervision, task supervisors not holding social work values and a resulting concern of not being able to develop social work competence. Many participants thought that task supervisors did not value supervision.

I would look at it from the task supervisor, she has a lot of background in case management, and... you know, ... so I get to almost do it, how she is, or how I think it should be done, and then sometimes I look back and oh, is that done like a social worker? (Kelly)

A further challenge raised by participants was dealing with differing ideas between two supervisors and feeling that the supervisors were not on the same page. Samantha stated

I felt I had to make the decision, it was being left to me because I couldn't get, I was like caught in the middle of a war. (Samantha)

Six participants relayed a sense of burden that the onus of making placement work was on them, that they had to push the learning forward and connect everybody.

I guess it was more stressful,... just to arrange things and sometimes you think well, it would be easier if everybody just worked in the organisation or was involved more, or was around more. (Kelly)

I think that it made me feel a bit like the placement was entirely my responsibility to make work. And I had had a little bit of experience in my third year placement when I, ... gone to the uni to say that ... there may be some issues and this isn't working very well. It was just made very clear to me, when I left the uni that day, that, ... you are on your own. (Shelly)

Opportunities of Placements with External Supervision: Supervision, Safe Space, New Layers of Learning, Objectivity and Developing the Field

Most participants highlighted the advantages of receiving supervision separately from the organisation. This related to a number of concepts including safe space, a separate space to sit and reflect, scheduling time specific for supervision, an independent look at issues, keeping an eye on things, providing a new layer of learning and exploring issues of concern outside the agency.

Laura, for example, talked about how external supervision provided an extra layer of learning to her placement that she might not have got otherwise. She considered how external supervision provides a safe space where she can pull things apart, and how she was challenged and stretched in supervision.

to me the external supervision is a really safe space, a 100%, where I can really pull it apart, and really... go for it, I suppose... whereas it is a lot more contained, I feel a lot more contained within the organisational context. (Laura)

Other participants talked about how external supervision has meant that they could complete placement, or helped them withdraw from an unsafe one. Receiving external supervision had enabled them to identify and name the violence they experienced in the workplace.

the professional supervisor said, do you want to continue with this placement? And I hadn't even considered that that was an option for me, that this was actually not ok to be treated like this... (Jamie)

The ability to take issues of concerns outside the agency was discussed by six participants, often multiple times. This related to the ability of being honest and open, sitting with their own sense of social justice, getting a clear perspective, including encouraging them to look at what they were responsible for, and how this exploration can flow back into the organisation. In this context some student raised that they did not want to upset others.

There is that sensitivity around this is where someone has chosen to work and in my case, my task supervisor has been in here 8 years and, you know, why would you explore certain things ... it is easier to critique a workplace if, when you not challenge someone who works in it (laughs), that's probably hard. (Shelly)

Participants highlighted that placements with external supervision can bring about changed attitudes, both for non-Government organisations that do not have social workers on staff, but also the flow-back that undertaking a placement in this sector can have for the Government sector. Denise, for example, points out that her knowledge of and experience in the non-Government sector facilitated colleagues in the Government sector gaining an understanding of that sector and facilitated collaboration with non-Government organisations that did not exist previously.

when I finished that placement my line manager was really interested in asking for social work qualification when she did future employment. And that was a shift for her, because she saw the value in that....and I found the same when I got into the hospital system.... I have seen a bit of a bridge build there, and in terms of referrals to the community sector... I went across to the Government sector and now they increasingly seem to go out to the community So I saw a little bit of a benefit both ways... , I have actually taken away my learning from that community organisation and brought it with me as I have travelled through... (Denise)

The four way relationship: A disjointed picture

A specific query was made with participants about the relationships and the interconnectivity between the different parties, with the aim of exploring the four-way relationship. Very little information was forthcoming about this topic and the majority of participants talked about relationships that were not close, were fractured or disjointed.

It's just that it is sometimes ...disjointed to me in that way, ... there hasn't been a time where the four of us have sat down, the manager, the task supervisor, the field educator and myself ... I sit with the task supervisor, I sit (laughs) with the manager, I sit with the social worker, social worker talks to the manager... (Kelly)

Participants at times were not sure about who had been involved in the placement and that people were only getting together at the meetings and then not always all parties. Only two participants talked positively about a strong four-way relationship.

they are quite committed and flexible at times, and it comes together quite well and certainly the energy, I suppose, at meetings have been one of support and one of working together as a team. (Laura)

It appears that there was not much to be said about a four way relationship from a students' perspective, because it seems that many did not experience a coherent four way relationship. Yet, students did refer to the three other parties when talking about their experiences in placements with external supervision. They refer to the relationships they have with their external supervisor, their task supervisor and their liaison person, and the relationships the supervisors and/ or liaison people had between them. These individual relationships have been described according to how the students experienced or observed them, varying from supportive, reciprocal, strong, positive and wonderful to antagonistic and detrimental, but they are mostly described as two way relationships rather than relationships that include all parties.

Ideal Placement: not about external or internal supervision?

When asked about the ideal placement, students did not necessarily foreground the external or internal supervision. Rather, participants talked about good placement preparation, the importance of matching students to placements and supervisors and that you can learn from any placement.

Seven participants pondered that placements with external or internal supervision could be ideal, depending on the circumstances and their learning needs.

as a first experience of a placement it could have been a really totally negative thing, but it hasn't been because of this field supervisor's skills and stuff around supporting me in my learning, but also about helping me to focus on other things that were going well or my ability and resourcefulness to go and seek help from others. So that was good. (Carmen)

Five students expressed that the ideal placement would be with internal supervision, and participants noted that it would need to be with trained field educators. Participants reasoned that the context of the work would be clearer and it would make things flow better.

I think the ideal placement is actually to have a field supervisor ... in the organisation, but ... an experienced field educator that had the training, that goes to the university and finds out what the university wants from their students and the skills that they want to have developed. (Carmen)

Five participants discussed placements with external supervision could be ideal, reasoning, for instance, that they provide distance to reflect and students can get double supervision. This was qualified with the proviso that people have connections and supervisors have contextual knowledge.

I think, just that particular set-up, where the supervisor had a very good working knowledge of the organisation, the supervisor ... was a lecturer at university, ... he has worked in the field, ... I actually found, and I do find external supervision a really, really positive, ... experience. (Jennifer)

DISCUSSION

The voices of the participants who have experienced external supervision as students in social work field education suggest that one of the messages students are hearing from social work educators is that social work placements and social work supervisors are difficult to secure and that therefore placements with external supervision are set up as an alternative. Participants shared their sense of being 'lucky' that they had positive placement experiences or that they survived this placement or that nothing worse happened. Yet, there were a number of students who experienced unsafe placements, which is consistent with the research literature on health and safety issues impacting field education. (Gair and Thomas 2008; Tully, Kropf and Price 1999). While external supervision seemed to have assisted them in leaving unsafe placements, students talked about staying in unsafe placements, just putting their head down and getting through this experience as they believed they may not get another placement. This 'should be grateful' tenet of placement may need closer examination by social work educators, if messages of 'hard to come by placements' are keeping students in unsafe placements. As Denise points out above, students need to hear that no matter how difficult it is to find placements, 'we still want to provide that safe space for you'.

A further point to ponder is that social workers in professional practice often choose external supervision in light of increasing managerialism and 'the dominance of compliance and surveillance activities with public sector regimes of audit and quality management' (Beddoe 2012, p. 204). For social work graduates accessing external supervision, supervision that is away from their workplace, is a choice and a purposeful strategy (Beddoe 2012; Ung 2002). Yet, not only do participants in this study reported that they did not have a choice about being in placements with external supervision, when this choice was made for them, they also perceived that a sentiment existed that this was seen as less desirable for field education. Alternatively, however, placements with external supervision could be seen as opportunities to model supervision strategies for future professional practice. It seems to be the case that external supervision is only 'outside the norm' for field education, but not for graduate supervision. This anomaly seems worthy of further research and discussion.

Several participants highlighted that external supervision provided them with an opportunity to explore placement issues safely, away from the workplace. Students did experience power struggles, put downs and harassment and on a number of occasions the external supervision helped them to either finish placement or to leave an unsafe situation. External supervisors helped them to put things in perspective, highlighted when behaviour was not acceptable and supported students when bullying or harassment was present in the workplace thus identifying students' vulnerability to 'supervisors and senior staff members who simultaneously socialize and silence them' (Gair and Thomas 2008, p. 50). Participants in this study identified the importance of the safe space and support that external supervision can offer, corresponding with the major argument for external supervision in professional practice, 'that it provides an opportunity to offer emotional support that is untainted by power relations and issues of confidentiality' (Beddoe 2012, p. 205).

The study identifies that some participants did report concerns about the mismatch and inappropriateness of the external field educators. This supports the assertion by Wayne,

Bogo and Raskin that 'though field experiences have a powerful influence on a student's education, there is a less rigorous process for selecting field instructors than classroom teachers' (2010, p. 335). Participants did not have a choice who would be their supervisor, which at times mattered as the relationship between them and the external supervisor did not always work out. In other placement arrangements, students generally meet their supervisor in the replacement interview, whereas here students might have met the internal task supervisor, but then the other supervisor would generally be matched and appointed through university processes. This lack of choice seems to go against the grain of relational approaches to field education that facilitates a respectful exploration of the interpersonal world (Ornstein and Moses 2010). Selecting suitable external field educators and then matching them to students would seem important because the supervisory relationship is central in supervision (McMahon 2002) and field education (Karban, 1999; Ornstein and Moses 2010).

In conceptualising the idea of an apprentice model to field education (Cleak and Smith 2012), one would wonder how students in placements with external supervision would fare, considering they would likely spend most time with the task supervisor and learn from them. Yet, what seems to emerge from the data is the centrality of the external supervisor to their placement. While participants described the task supervisor's impact and contribution to their placement to some extent, not all of the task supervisors were actively engaged in the placement, and external supervision provided avenues for reflection on professional practice. Most participants were much clearer about expectations towards external supervisors and much more clearly articulated the qualities they are looking for in external supervisor. This needs to be explored further. One possible explanation is that task supervisors' contributions to social work education may not be seen or presented as critical to students' placement preparation, assessment and reporting. Some students in this study actually expressed concern that the task supervisor's input was not sought at the point of assessment. Is the value of the task supervisors' contributions to the student placement not recognised enough in social work education?

Cleak and Smith's (2012) recent survey indicated that students were more satisfied in placements with internal supervisors, yet, participants in this study did not generally put the internal/ external supervision placement structure in the foreground when considering the ideal placement. Rather they highlighted that it depended on what they wanted to learn, how they and their task and external supervisors were prepared for this placement, what they were bringing to the placement and how it was supported.

This is illustrated in Laura's experience, and here the last word will be left to her. Her first placement was supervised internally and was a positive experience. She talked about how the expectations were that this was the ideal placement, so when she found she had external supervision she was disappointed, but thought she could make it work. She was pleasantly surprised to experience the placement with external supervision as valuable, and adding a new layer of learning to her placement experience. She reflected that

I like to think that these people were handpicked (laughs), I think that can be really useful ... I did request my liaison person and... I am really aware that she would really keep my

focus on my... practice and my ideology and that I can really expand my knowledge around that and ... it would be lovely to think if that could happen for everyone, that ... people were supported in areas that they needed to be supported in (Laura)

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to present the voices of the participants who have experienced external supervision in their social work field education as students. Their contributions highlight the importance of the processes of matching, supporting and promoting placements for diverse experiences in field education. It is a reality that placements with external supervision are part of the diversity in Australian social work field education. As social work educators we need to be cautious about inadvertently devaluing placements with external supervision and presenting it as such to students. Rather we need to ensure best practice in this area and it seems that more has to be done to develop this. Considering best practice could be conceptualised as 'best fit' of preparation and support in the specific context.

External supervision has a number of challenges and we need to ensure that the students do not feel burdened and left alone to deal with these challenges. Students in this research describe and use the opportunities that external supervision offers. Our understanding of the positive elements of external supervision would benefit from further exploration. Importantly, external supervision could be embraced as a tailored, contemporary model for field education that reflects current practice in graduate supervision, but this should not come at a cost for students.

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