Students’ Experiences of Social Work Supervision in a Developing Country

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This article examines student supervision in social work education using a qualitative multi-case study design. The voices of current and past students at three unique, heterogeneous and diverse field instruction sites in developing South Africa highlight perceptions of varied supervision models, supervisory practices and students’ coping mechanisms when faced with supervision challenges. Insights are provided into challenges experienced by final year students when faced with alleged unethical and unprofessional supervisory practices. This article contributes to debates on the quality, nature, models and styles of supervision, and provides unique insight into student learning styles and coping mechanisms.

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INTRODUCTION

Ongoing research on the supervision of social work students during their field instruction placements has raised concerns about the quality and effectiveness of supervision (Ross and Ncube, 2018). Supervision is arguably the pedagogical training that provides opportunities for students to gain advanced insight into professional social work, apply theories learned in the classroom to practice, and obtain professional guidance and direction from experienced social work practitioners. Reflecting on general supervision of students, Manathunga (2005: 17) argues that supervision is the “private pedagogical space” that supports the transmission of knowledge from the expert to the student, as is evident in social work student supervision.

Social workers who supervise students have an obligation to provide a competent and high standard of supervision to students, and at the same time demonstrate impeccable professional and personal behaviour that can be emulated by students (Engelbrecht, 2014). The supervision process occurs during the process of field instruction when social work students are required to complete field practice as part of the degree. Based on the principle of progression, field instruction education provides opportunities for social work students to
experience increasingly complex knowledge and practice opportunities (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2008). Having successfully traversed the previous three years of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree, South African students in the fourth year of study are faced with an intense workload of theory and field instruction.

The didactic triangle of the student, university and field supervisor is critical to student growth and professional development. The field supervisor is responsible for the onsite student experience, providing professional mentorship and guidance to the student during the placement (Ross and Ncube, 2018; Kiser, 2016). South African policy directs that students may not practice field instruction without the direct supervision of a social worker (SACSSP, 2006). Implicit therefore is that field supervisors have several years of practice experience, demonstrated practice wisdom and competency in understanding, supervising and monitoring students (Wilson, 1981).

This article provides insight into the supervision experiences of students across three universities in South Africa, from a systems perspective. Systems theory allows researchers to examine the relationship between and then interconnectedness of elements (Valentinov, 2012). Systems thinkers propose that actions of elements have an impact on the actions of the other. The use of systems theory as its theoretical lens enabled the researcher to understand students’ perspectives of their relationship with supervisors.

Understanding the field instruction experiences of social work students across South Africa has not previously been brought under scholarly scrutiny from this perspective. The article discusses the experiences and perceptions of student social workers on the nature and type of supervision provided by their field supervisors. This article argues that the quality and nature of supervision, as well as the supervisory styles of supervisors influence the professional growth and development of the student. This argument is evidenced by the narratives of current and previous students across three diverse universities. This qualitative study used a systems-informed framework to analyse the experiences of 46 students. Three key themes which focused on the didactic nature of supervision emerged from the data. This paper contributes to the debates on the quality of supervision rendered to social work students in optimising student learning in social work education.

**Contextualising Student Supervision**

Student supervision is not an easy process. It is made complex by its immediacy, the several roles demanded of the supervisor, together with meeting the learning needs of the student.
The nature of the pedagogy of field instruction places demands on students to complete numerous professional tasks within a designated period of study. Students are placed within human service organisations for designated periods of time, and encounter situations that challenge their intellectual and coping abilities, as well as situations that are beyond their understanding (Simpson and Raniga, 2014). Such situations are best raised during the supervision process. Parker (2006) argues that each supervision session therefore is a well-planned and regular period of time that the student and supervisor spend discussing the student’s work during the field instruction process. Thus, the process focuses on the student’s learning as well as on the student’s progress in the field placement.

Quality supervision, therefore, requires that student-supervisors maximise learning opportunities by taking on supportive, developmental, educational and managerial functions in the supervisory process (Jones, 2009). The supportive function of supervision allows the student to explore and deal with stresses experienced during the field instruction process. However, as Parker (2006) cautions, supervision is not therapy, but a developmental learning process that attends to the student’s needs at an emotional, intellectual, professional and personal level.

Parker (2006) argues that the developmental and educational approach enables the student to navigate from a process of dependence on the student supervisor to one of personal autonomy. Educational supervision develops knowledge, skills and attitudes that are requisite for effective social work by guiding students to link theory, readings, literature and research to what they experience and practice at the placement agency (Bennet and others, 2013). The student’s learning needs are assessed in relation to past experiences, ethical awareness, theoretical knowledge and learning goals (Scragg, 2013). On the other hand, the managerial function of supervision ensures that the student complies with the agency procedures and policies. This function of supervision acts as a quality-control mechanism that ensures that the rights of service providers and the agency are protected (Parker, 2006).

The supervision contact sessions, by its very nature, require that supervisors be knowledgeable of the environment and resultant situations in which students are placed (Budeli, 2018). Quality supervision requires that supervisors use theoretical knowledge, experience and practice wisdom to guide and direct students to overcome fears and encounter challenges in practice (Jasper and Field, 2016). This is the pedagogical role of the supervisor, capacitating students to make informed professional judgements.
The process of supervision, therefore, steers students away from the initial feelings of anxiety and apprehension towards a confident readiness to face the placement (Mathews, Simpson and Crawford, 2014). Providing feedback and encouragement is critical to shaping the student’s focus in the field instruction programme (Carroll, 2010), forming part of the developmental and management roles of the supervisor. Structured and frequent supervisory meetings are essential. Jointly developed learning plans with timely milestones form part of the quality supervision process (Jasper and Field, 2016).

Researchers argue that there are varied models or types of student supervision, a factor that may hinder or optimise student learning. Social work has long moved away from what Doel and others (1996) and (Kiser, 2016) refer to as the apprenticeship model, where students learned skills by observing what workplace practices entailed. Instead supervisors lean towards the use of the growth and developmental model which emphasises the students’ strengths, awareness of self and reflective practices (Simpson and Raniga, 2014). In order to enable students to make the most out of student learning, supervisors may opt for the use of the articulated model (Royse, Dhooper and Rompf, 2012) or a structured learning model where learning experiences are specifically structured to make the most of student learning in the field instruction programme (Beverley and Worsely, 2007; Kiser, 2016). A fourth model of supervision is gaining prominence, that of the social development model. Purporting this model, Engelbrecht (2002) argues that supervision needs to be situation-relevant, based on a competency model and be empowering to students. Against this backdrop, Ncube (2019) argues that supervision is a parallel process where the supervisor embodies the values of the social development model for students to emulate in practice. All of these models appear to support the argument that supervision is a process of education, support and management of the development of the student in line with the outcomes of the training institution.

Whilst the choice of the supervision model is an area for consideration in practice, research indicates that the individual and diverse learning styles of students leave supervisors feeling ill-equipped to render effective supervision (Zeira and Schiff, 2010). Dykes and Green (2015: 577) argue that it was important to understand that students emerged from “an increasingly diverse world of differing ages, abilities, cultures, interests, motivations and difficulties”. Student learning styles are complicated when students enter the placement filled with anxiety.

Although students initially commence fieldwork by being very dependent on the supervisor, they later seem to fluctuate between dependency and autonomy; they are then
seen to develop a sense of self-confidence to the point of seeming overconfidence, and finally progressing to personal autonomy and awareness of the professional self (Parker, 2006; Beverley and Worsely, 2007). These arguments therefore suggest that supervision during field instruction should facilitate opportunities that go beyond theory and practice education to include the development of the students’ professional persona (Dykes and Green, 2015).

Two contrary arguments on the requirements for effective supervision emerged from the literature. First, for student supervision to be effective, the supervisor has to understand the circumstances of the student, the student’s personal environment, and the student’s learning style (Budeli, 2018; Jasper and Field, 2016). Second, students need to understand their own individual and unique learning styles prior to entering the supervision process (Kourgiantakis, Sewell and Bogo, 2018; Parker, 2006). According to Parker (2006), students need to show insight into issues of meaningfulness, perceived relevance and currency of practice, skills and knowledge. However, while the latter argument is particularly significant when taking into account the time-lapse between learning a theory and implementation thereof, these arguments relate to adult learning techniques during the supervision process. Research on adult learning techniques in relation to student supervision by Gardiner (1989) places supervision and learning on three levels—moving from a focus on content of learning at the first level, to a focus on experience at the second level, and finally to the level of meta-learning where the student imbibes various aspects that have been taught to be able to put this into practice.

In order to foster the positive experience of supervision among students, student supervisors should be available, supportive and developmental, have a structured leadership style, be able to facilitate learning from peers, and skilled in balancing personal and shared experiences in a public space. These findings emerged from a qualitative study on the views of graduates at a Canadian university by Bogo, Globerman and Sussman (2004). The study further revealed that the competence of the supervisor was a crucial element leading to the perception of a positive field instruction experience.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research adopted a qualitative approach to understand, identify and describe students’ experiences from their personal perspectives and narratives (Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole, 2013; Levitt and others, 2018). Multi-case designs were utilised to select field instruction systems from 19 diverse field instruction programmes in South Africa. Multi-case designs
provided a systematic and in-depth exploration of field instruction systems (Rule and John, 2011) across a developing country recovering from the inequalities of an apartheid system of education.

Purposive sampling was used to obtain a suitable and relevant sample of field instruction systems that were most characteristic (Strydom, 2015) and captured the heterogeneity (Creswell, 2012) of the BSW population. This was followed by a paradigmatic case sampling method (Flyvbjerg, 2011) that highlighted more general characteristics derived from the population. Another factor that was considered in the sampling process was that the selected model should have been in operation for at least one academic year at the time of the final data collection. Given the varied terrain of South Africa, it was important to select cases from field instruction sites that offered diverse geographical locations, namely, urban, semi-urban, semi-rural or rural. South Africa has ‘previously disadvantaged’ universities, recognised by their geographical location as well as other factors during the apartheid era. Other criteria indicated included the type of staffing structure, as well as whether the programme was reaccredited following an earlier audit process by the Council for Higher Education (CHE) (Table 1). On the basis of the de-accreditation by CHE (2016), two cases were excluded from the sample.

Table 1: Cases Selected for the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>Case_B (1)</th>
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<td><strong>Model of Placement</strong></td>
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<td>Block</td>
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<td>Previously disadvantaged university</td>
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<td>Access to Participants and Documents</td>
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<td>Full or conditional Accreditation</td>
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<td>Unique Staffing Structure</td>
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The non-probability sampling technique as indicated in Table 1 provided a balance of cases based on relevance, diversity and heterogeneity (Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole, 2013). Three cases were then purposively selected for this research (referred to as C1, C2 and
C3). C1, situated in a semi-urban area and regarded as a historically disadvantaged campus (CHE, 2017), had access to field placement resources. It followed a block placement model where students spent the second semester of the academic year at the field placement agency. C2, situated in a semi-rural area, is part of a university that was regarded as historically disadvantaged (CHE, 2017). It had a shortage of field placement resources and followed a block placement model where students spent the first semester of the academic year at the field placement agency. C3, situated in an urban area, is a university regarded as previously advantaged (CHE, 2017). It and had an abundance of placement opportunities in both urbanised and informal locations. C3 followed a concurrent placement model where students spent two to three days a week at the field placement agency across the academic year. C3 was also selected for its unique staffing structure where field supervisors were also involved in day-to-day teaching activities within the field instruction programme at the university, whereas in C1 and C2, the field supervisors were based at the agency.

Participants in this study were current fourth year social work students as well as recent social work alumni. The inclusion of recent graduates from the same programme provided more in-depth reflections on participants’ supervision experiences. There were 46 participants in this section, 21 of whom were current students and 25 alumni. Demographically, 18 males and 28 females were interviewed across three heterogeneous field instruction sites. Semi-structured interview schedules were developed using an iterative process (Struwig and Stead, 2001). Data was collected using single-person interviews and group interviews, as per the preference of participants to be interviewed either alone or with peers. The questions were aligned with the objectives of the study.

All interviews were captured digitally, transcribed and readied for analysis. Data was managed systematically, by using labelling and storing conventions for ease of retrieval (Rule and John, 2011). The identifying details of the research sample were anonymised in order to respect the privacy and rights of the participants and the participating field instruction site. All participants were provided with detailed letters and consent forms explaining the study. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any stage, without penalty (Babbie, 2011; Horn, 2012; Monette and others, 2011).

A systematic process of coding the data was used. Open codes were used to identify an idea, theory, argument, statement or similar content, and in-vivo codes captured the actual words of the student participants (Saldaña, 2009). Thus, 155 open and in-vivo codes were
generated, which were subsequently reduced to axial codes, and thereafter grouped into themes or selective codes (Saldaña, 2009).

Trustworthiness in this study was ensured using the four main dimensions of rigour as purported by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through the process of triangulation using varied members in the unit of analysis as well as documentation from each case. The purposive sampling technique and detailed and thick descriptions of the research methodology supported the transferability of the findings. Dependability was achieved through the use of research tools that went through a pilot process and iterative review to ensure relevance. Finally, confirmability was monitored with the use of an audit trail where all documents and communications were meticulously labelled and filed for easy retrieval, and line by line referencing facilitated tracing back to the audio recordings, where required.

Approval for this research was received from the Faculty of Humanities Higher Degrees Committee and the Research Ethics Committee of the researcher’s university (REC-01-059-2017) and institutional permission was obtained from the participating universities.

DISCUSSION
The findings that emanated from narratives with the participants were grouped under three main themes—models of supervision, participants’ perceptions of supervisors and participants’ coping in situations where structured student supervision was lacking or minimal.

Theme 1: Models of Supervision
The use of the growth and development model of supervision was evident across all three cases. Participants reported about the guidance and opportunities for growth offered by the supervisor. There were opportunities to write reports that were beyond the requirements of the field instruction cases “[My supervisor was] always giving [me] those heads up, saying, ‘Okay in this situation you can do this, and in another situation that is acceptable’”. Supervisors tapped students’ strengths: “My supervisor told me that you need to bring the best of yourself. She said to me: ‘I need to know who you are? What are your strengths and your weaknesses?’”, developmental supervision led to independent thinking: “I was told that I was not here to copy and paste from other reports. [I was told that I] need to read them and
see how they are written. But now, [I] need to bring [my]self out and be able to write those reports [my]self’”.

Supportive Supervision was evident: “She noticed when something was wrong with any of us. She knew all of [13 of] us by name in the group, [even though] we were at different placements”. Perhaps the strongest indication of the growth and development model emerged when a participant had to overcome prejudices and language barriers at the field placement. The student was placed at a home for the elderly where she encountered racial tension and language barriers as she was a young Tswana female who was fluent in Sotho, isiZulu and English, while the inmates at the agency were elderly, white and Afrikaans-speaking.

When my group members wanted me to speak Afrikaans, I thought they were racist but my supervisor assured me that it was not about me [and that I should] hold on because we will find difficult clients in the future and I must start now to understand.

These examples of supportive and developmental supervision typify the relationship between the supervisor and student, highlights the strength of the supervision relationship, and identifies key systems arguments regarding interconnectedness of elements within the supervision process.

Examples of the experiences of supervision depicting the articulated model were also present. Students were encouraged to write professional and statutory reports for presentation at the local Children’s Court: “So I was able to write my own report. I was able to stand in front of the magistrate [Presiding Officer], to present my own case with [my supervisor] at my side. At the same time, the type of supervision received may have been critical or harsh, but had helped to foster progress: “There were a lot of times when I wasn’t really used to getting criticized, but she was extremely honest and that was so helpful”.

The use of the structured learning model was observed across the cases: “[My supervisor] told me that [I] need to bring the best of [my]self”. Supervisors were observed to demonstrate this model as indicated in this narrative:

[My supervisor] said ‘I need to know who you are? What are your strengths and your weaknesses? And the only thing that will tell me [the supervisor] that is when you are writing those reports. You are not here to copy and paste from other reports, you need to read them and see how they are written. But you need to be able to write those reports yourself’.

The knowledge and ability to introduce the student to the many facets of the workplace may be a key factor in student supervision. “I was having a disagreement with the top
management to the point where my supervisor had to [step in] to say that these are the challenges [the student] was facing regarding ethics and sharing of information”.

The empirical evidence presented under this theme confirms the presence of the growth and development model (Simpson and Raniga, 2014), the articulated model (Royse, Dhooper and Rompf, 2012) and the structured learning model (Beverley and Worsely, 2007). Interestingly, participants from rural areas experienced a stronger alignment with the growth and development model, while participants from semi urban and urban areas experienced alignment with the articulated model and the structured learning model of supervision. The use of the growth and development model of student supervision supported students’ abilities to reflect on their field instruction placements, their application of theory to practice, and importantly their reflection on the development of the self within the field instruction programme (Simpson and Raniga, 2014). Social work scholars agree that supervision involves planned and regular periods of time when students and supervisors meet to discuss student progress and the student’s work during the placement (Parker, 2006; Botha, 2002). The researcher was unable to locate evidence of the use of the apprenticeship model or the social development model in this research. The evidence of the growth and development model, articulated model and the structured learning model of supervision forms part of the original contribution of this article to the field, as empirical evidence supporting the application of these models in student supervision has been scarce in the literature, both locally and internationally.

**Theme 2: Perceptions about Supervisors and the Supervision Process**

Supervisors are critical role models in the learning process. This theme reflects on participants’ perceptions of their supervisors, reflecting on observed behaviours and perceived supervision styles. Participants provided descriptions depicting supervisors as “awesome and professional” and “understanding”; “But she was like a mother bear. I was like a little baby bear. She would protect me”. However, perceptions of other participants of their supervisors was not as complimentary. One participant reflected that “[my supervisor] was short tempered”, crossed personal boundaries by sharing personal information and “was lazy. Most of the time I had to stop my school work and do her stuff, her typing. So, I was backlogged”. Participants also found themselves having to organise their supervisors’ offices: “I had to do her work for her, even her office was so deurmekaar [disorganised]”.

Supervisors should be confident as a result of their field experience; however, this did not seem to be the case: “My supervisor didn’t have a back bone. I said to her A is A; B is B”,

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reflecting the timidity of the field supervisor, “I was like an assistant to rescue her out of her workload”. Participants were less complimentary of their supervisors’ styles of supervision, revealing the supervisor as being overly critical: “I couldn’t understand what was I doing wrong?”; “my supervisor wanted 110 %” and [my supervisor] would say ‘your work is not good enough’."

The evidence suggests that while some participants felt that the supervision process was enhanced by the positive attributes of their supervisors, many participants experienced supervisors whose behaviours appeared to be unprofessional and unethical. Supervisors who display positive role-modelling bring forth growth and independence in students (Engelbrecht, 2014). On the other hand, and as indicated in this research, supervisors who do not display positive role-modelling are unable to support constructive learning, leaving students with unfulfilled student experiences in their field instruction (Ross and Ncube, 2018; McSweeney and Williams, 2018).

**Theme 3: Coping with Supervision and Supervisors**

The behaviour of supervisors should epitomise professional conduct; however, this was not always the case. This theme depicts participants’ perspectives on how they coped with errant supervisors: “I did reports for my supervisor but I had to put her name on the report”; “the only time that I had supervision was in the first week whereby I was introduced to how to write process notes and everything - and the rest I had to try myself”; “No one is supervising you. Sometimes we would encounter difficult cases and you struggle to attend to this. You don’t know what to do”; “And then my supervisor would tell me that my work was not good enough. I would be in tears because I am working so hard”. To cope with the “fear” experienced in the power relationship between the student and the supervisor, the student appears to relent and succumb to supervisors who made unprofessional demands. To address their need for learning, participants resorted to seeking professional guidance from other staff members of the organisation: “If I had a problem I had to go to someone else”; “The co-workers [at the agency] always assisted me on how to do case work, how to conduct a case, [and] how to write a report. Her [the supervisor’s] co-workers taught me how to do those things”. On the other hand, some supervisors were hands-on and assisted their student supervisees: “I consulted on everything. I say to my supervisor: ‘I don’t understand this, what should I do? What should I recommend? Where should I refer the client?’”.

Examples of the demands by supervisors was not uncommon. To cope with these demands, students developed their own coping strategies: “Sometimes I would escape and
hide in the boardroom in order to do my reports”; “Until I spoke up. I said to my supervisor ‘I am here to learn. Give me something to do’, and that is when she went to the office supervisor and asked for files for me”.

Examples of being neglected by supervisors was also revealed. Supervisor absenteeism for long periods of time meant that students had to consult with other staff members at the agency: “[The staff] told me that I should go to the chief social worker for supervision but [the chief social worker] is always busy and not always there in the office”; or “I am just doing everything on my own currently… They [the agency] don’t even check my reports”. Another student revealed becoming emotional when responding to harsh criticism from her supervisor. This evidence of lack of support from the supervisor also supports the developmental role wherein the supervisor strengthens the student to reach potential.

The Peer Sub-system
One of the coping strategies that was evident across the cases was the reliance on the peer support sub-system. Participants reported that: “Whenever I could sense I was not coping I would go to a friend of mine and ask ‘how can we go about this?’”; or having peer “case-conferencing” where “we share on how to write reports… for example, about child therapy”. The peer subsystem was “motivational”; and aptly summarised by this participant: “It’s sort of like having those friendships you know when we study together when we create resources, or exchange resources so it makes things a little bit easier”. The peer subsystem as a means of coping was seen within the context of debriefing sessions: “We were even counselling each other because you would come out from an interview with a patient and take all that information personally”. Participants with peer support appeared to lean on each other: “I was lucky to be placed with another student. You feel less intimidated because it is entirely new. To know you have someone you can talk to about the emotional things”.

This theme highlighted the way participants handled the different types of supervision that they experienced. Most participants revealed that they relied on their own resiliency and strengths to manage experiences of poor supervision practices. However, perhaps the most startling revelations emerged about participants was their unwillingness to contact supervisors for assistance and rather rely on peers and forming peer-subsystems to support their field instruction learning. The use of the peer subsystem in social work education has not been previously explored. However, a recent study by Nadesan (2019) revealed that the peers formed an integral subsystem in student learning in field instruction. This article therefore argues that understanding the way students coped with supervision practices and the
involvement of the peer subsystem is critical within the field instruction programme. This theme is one of this article’s original contribution to literature in the area of student supervision.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The quality and nature of supervision, as well as the supervisory styles of supervisors influences the professional growth and development of the student. The narratives of current and past students from three unique field instruction programmes in South Africa regarding their experiences of the supervision and interactions with field placement supervisors, indicate the presence of three distinct models of supervision, a largely negative recollection of supervision experiences, and the reliance on the peer subsystem as a means of support and resilience. The findings on the models of supervision applied in social work education corroborate with arguments that use the growth and development model (Simpson and Raniga, 2014), the articulated model (Royse, Dhooper and Rompf, 2012) and the structured learning model (Beverley and Worsely, 2007). The growth and developmental model appeared to be evident in C1 whereas the articulated and structured learning model appeared prominent in C2 and C3. Thus, the influence of whether previously disadvantaged institutions preferred particular models of supervision could not be established. However, these models are not exhaustive and it is likely that other models were not identified by the researcher. What was significant though was that the evidence of using the social development model was unclear. The social development model of supervision supports a situation-specific model of supervision (Engelbrecht, 2002; Ncube, 2019). Given that each of the cases in this study were uniquely located in terms of their geographical boundaries and resource limitations, the use of the social development model would have ideally supported the factor of being contextually relevant in social work education, thereby corroborating the arguments by these African scholars.

The findings in this research revealed that while some participants received supervision that enabled the development of self-growth, other participants did not receive professional supervision; thus, the application of any of the models of supervision referred above was debatable. Students functioned without professional supervision while some students relied on persons within the agency who were not their allocated supervisors. The Policy guidelines for Course of Conduct, Code of Ethics and the Rules for Social Workers (applying equally to student social workers) of the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), stipulates that student social workers may only practice the profession under the
direct guidance and supervision of a registered social worker (SACSSP, 2006: 5.4.1 (f)). The findings, which are contrary to the policy guidelines, imply an unsupervised practice that could lead to allegations of professional misconduct against the student, agency, university and supervisor.

On a wider scale, unsupervised student social workers engaged in professional tasks, could be a basis of litigation against the university and the agency. The finding of unsupervised students therefore places the profession of social work at great risk and arguably contributes to poor student and public perception of the profession. In addition, this study could not justify perceptions that the geographical location or lack of access to resources influenced the supervision process.

The existence of adverse behaviours of supervisors could be deemed unprofessional. Incidences of allocating tasks beyond the realms of the students’ knowledge and capabilities are examples of abuse of power and manipulation of students. Students should be guided in a structured, professional and ethical manner. Supervisors should set aside time for supervision, ensure regular and well-structured sessions with students and ensure that both the student and supervisor are prepared for each session.

This article highlighted the coping mechanisms of students when faced with a lack of or poor supervision practices. Across all three cases, students were unintentionally and unwittingly placed in situations of risk, either by exposure to poor supervision practices or a lack of supervision. While it may be argued that resilience and adaptation are natural inclinations to survive in environments of risk (Masten, 2014; van Breda, 2018), the requirements of the profession—that students are required to be supervised for all professional tasks—are clear. The factors of resiliency and coping mechanisms are outweighed by factors of litigation and unprofessionalism. The peer support subsystem is inevitable and should be supported. Universities should be able to facilitate opportunities for peer support, which can be achieved by placing at least two students in each organisation for peer support and networking.

The supervision relationship is critical for creating a safe educative context to nurture the student’s professional development (Unguru and Sandu, 2018). Similarly, the supervisory relationship also advances the students’ professional and personal values and skills (Unguru and Sandu, 2018). Furthermore, factors relating to supervisor’s workloads, contextual factors pertaining to the agency and supervisory styles are all critical considerations in a wider scale of research. The relationship between the staffing structure and the behaviour of the student supervisor could not be conclusively established and is an area for further research.
Supervisors should be aware of their shortcomings, reach out to peers when they recognise their shortcomings and engage in ongoing continuing professional development to build their capacity to supervise effectively.

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