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**The role of social work field education programs in the transmission of developmental
social work knowledge in Southern and East Africa**

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a study on the role of social work field education programs in the transmission of developmental social work knowledge in Southern and East Africa. It highlights the challenges in locating developmental social work placements and the creativity shown by social work educators in addressing these challenges and improving learning opportunities for social work students. Both academics and students were found to be committed to developmental social work, within a willing practice environment hampered by knowledge, capacity, and resource constraints. Social work education was found to be playing a transformative role through the teaching of a developmental social work curriculum and the creation of collaborative developmental social work learning experiences. Social work educators trained and supported agency supervisors in developmental social work, while students served as conduits, modelling developmental social work practice. What has yet to be determined in future research is the students' perspective of this developmental educational environment.

Key words: social work education, fieldwork, Southern and East Africa, developmental social work

The role of social work fieldwork education programs in the transmission of developmental social work knowledge in Southern and East Africa

In several contexts across the world, social work has been developed in the absence of a service structure to support fieldwork education and employment upon graduation. Examples include China (Gray, 2005; Leung, 2007; Lin & Chen, 2005), Nepal (Gray & Yadav, 2015), and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Panic, 2016). As Lin and Chen (2005) note in relation to China, of the 10,000 social work students who graduate each year, only 10 per cent find positions in social work. Leung (2007) explains:

The social work community in China ... comprises academics and the top officials of the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Social work teachers often have neither formal pre-service social work training, nor relevant practical experience. At best, they would have received limited on-the-job training in social work practice (Lou, Gu, Kuan & Leung, 2006). It is thus difficult to rely on them to build social work knowledge and to demonstrate their value and contribution to society. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, for its part, has the desire to professionalise its own social welfare services, notably in the care of people with mental and physical disabilities, orphans and older people. But it may show little interest in supporting a generic social work practice (p. 392).

Such circumstances call for innovation, and often students take responsibility to develop fieldwork learning opportunities through the development of community projects. In Southern and East Africa, while many institutions have made serious attempts to provide developmental social work placements (Gray, Agllias, Mupedziswa, & Mugumbate, 2016), in effect, students do play an important role in the transmission of knowledge on developmental social work through the work they do on their field placements. This developmental thrust gives field

education a transformative edge, with the application of useful and useable knowledge being as important as the student's professional learning experience. The challenge for the developmental social work approach, however, is that most organisations, placements, and community projects tend to be located in urban areas when the bulk of the poor live in rural areas (Hall, 1990; Mupedziswa & Kubanga, 2016). To ensure that students are truly embedded in developmental social work, institutions need to create opportunities for them to work in rural communities, alongside development workers engaged in agricultural, water, sanitation, and infrastructural development programs; primary healthcare provision, including child nutrition, maternal and child health, disability, AIDS and HIV interventions; micro-enterprise development; and adult education to enhance adult literacy (Gray, 1996; Midgley, 1996a, 1996b). However, as Hall (1990) noted, 'some students are reluctant to take on placements in rural areas, where conditions can be very demanding' (p. 18). Such an attitude, of course, does not augur well for promotion of a developmental approach. While some institutions have taken deliberate steps to ensure all their students undertake at least one rural placement, others have allowed students to choose where they want to be placed (Mupedziswa & Sinkamba, 2014). Students need to learn to work in multidisciplinary development projects that work through naturally occurring networks, community mobilisation, and small-scale programs around local issues. This requires the development of placements in new contexts, outside of established welfare organisations.

Developmental social work in Africa

Critiques of the relevance of Western social work models to social work practice have long dogged social work education in Africa (Gray, 2016; Gray, Kreitzer, & Mupedziswa, 2014; Ragab, 1978, 1982, 1990, 2016; Shawky, 1972). There is broad consensus among African scholars that Western social work theories and approaches, informed by the remedial welfare

model embedded during colonial times, which followed a residual, service-oriented approach, have proved inappropriate and not relevant to social work in Africa. Hall (1990) explained that the residual approach tended to offer only temporary relief, rather than long-term solutions to social distress. This approach, which was lavishly employed, thus resulted in lack of fit between African traditional norms and Western processes of social welfare (Mupedziswa & Kubanga, 2016). As Osei-Hwedie (1993) noted, this resulted in the profession's dismal showing in terms of impact on its clientele. This apparent failure triggered concerted efforts, over the years, to develop indigenous models of social work practice in Africa (Gray et al., 2014; Mupedziswa & Kubanga, 2016; Osei-Hwedie, 1993, 1995, 1996a, 1996b).

Broad consensus exists that social development is an appropriate and necessary indigenous approach for Africa (Gray & Fook 2004, Osei-Hwedie, 1993; Patel, 2005), given that other approaches to social work have proved inadequate to respond to the needs related to widespread poverty. Social development, as a policy approach, began to influence social work education during the 1990s through the promotion of a developmental social work paradigm (Gray, 1996). Developmental social work moves the focus from personal problems in particular fields of practice to viewing development as an investment in human capital. There were calls for the 'rejection of the pressure towards conformity and of the unequal power balance inherent in individualized social services' (Bak, 2004, p. 84). Developmental social work favours nonremedial social work interventions dissociated from casework, which is at odds with multisectoral, planned, people-centred community development strategies embraced within primary healthcare, adult education, and empowering development more broadly (Sturgeon, 1998; Travis et al., 1999; van Breda, 2015). The approach is preventive and proactive, as the emphasis is on long-term change, and sustainability (Mupedziswa & Kubanga, 2014). However, welfare and development continue to have an ambiguous relationship (Bak, 2004).

Increasingly, in much of Africa, sustainable development projects are those which draw support from international donors and in which nongovernment organisations play a major role, while welfare continues to be state-led. Rather than reliance on state benefits, developmental social work's pivotal features are training and skills development, micro-enterprises, and income generation given real empowerment comes with economic independence and autonomy. Its emphasis therefore is on strategies that target structural inequality and disadvantage (Hall 1990; Mupedziswa & Kubanga, 2016), with the ultimate goal of empowerment and capacity building. Social work education, and especially its fieldwork programs discussed in this paper, play a pivotal role in knowledge transmission and in enhancing the profession's potential to play an influential role in social development (Dhemba, 2012; Green, 1999; Gray & Collett van Rooyen, 2002; Gray, O'Brien, & Mazibuko, 1996; Hall, 1990; Hochfeld et al., 2009; Mamphiswana & Noyoo, 2000; van Rooyen & Gray, 2000). It is to this the discussion now turns.

Transmission of knowledge through developmental fieldwork placements

Social work education has two prongs – classroom instruction and fieldwork practice. The knowledge-practice gap has long plagued social work, especially so in relation to the transition to developmental social work in Southern and East Africa. For example, in their comparative study of South Africa and Kenya, Lombard and Wairire (2010) reported that social workers in both countries had limited knowledge of developmental social work; they suggested the need for retraining in this approach. Patel and Hochfeld (2012) found a disjuncture between the theory and practice of developmental social work and reported that, in South Africa, some social workers thought this approach was leading them into the domain of economics. Gray and Simpson (1998) believed that fieldwork education offered academics and agency supervisors an opportunity to influence the way in which developmental social work was

conceptualised and practised. They emphasised ‘the crucial role social work education can play in preparing students to play a proactive role in ... reconstruction and development [in South Africa]’ (Gray & Simpson, 1998, p. 236). Strydom’s (2011) study showed that agency supervisors believed students brought up-to-date knowledge and information to the organisation and Osei-Hwedie (1993) highlighted the importance of relevant fieldwork placements to the development of culturally appropriate knowledge for practice. Such placements could prepare graduates to contribute meaningfully towards macro-level interventions. Ultimately, this would facilitate greater legitimacy, social acceptability, and efficiency for social work among the social service professions (Gray, 2000).

Methodology

The aim of this research study was to determine the nature of the fieldwork placements on offer to social work students in social work educational institutions in Southern and East Africa, focusing on their alignment with a developmental approach. The core research question was: *Do the fieldwork placements on offer provide practical experience of a developmental approach to social work practice?*

Study design

The study employed a semi-structured interview design, where quantitative demographic data were collected alongside qualitative data. Participants were asked questions pertaining to: (i) demographic information; (ii) curriculum; and (iii) field placement. Open-ended questions aimed to investigate the conditions that continue to challenge the instruction and implementation of developmental social work and those conditions which have shifted across time. Most importantly, the interviews aimed to capture the responses that academic institutions have made to improve and strengthen their social work field programs in response

to these challenges. Ethics clearance was granted from the University of Newcastle's Human Research Ethics Committee on March 23, 2016.

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposive theoretical sampling. Invitations to participate were emailed to the Head of Department (or equivalent) in 54 social work schools/programs across 17 countries in Southern and East Africa. The Head of Department was asked to select the most appropriate person within their program to participate in the interview if they wished to be involved in the study.

Data collection

The initial research design involved the collection of data through phone and skype interviews. However, the interview process was often challenged by poor internet and phone connections. Hence, several interviews required rescheduling and a combination of emails, phone contact, skype, and texting on skype in order to complete the full interview. Data were collected via email only in two instances where repeated audio contacts failed. Interviews were audio taped, and key data were documented, including sections of qualitative data that were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

A constant comparative method of inductive analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data. The researchers read and re-read the data and field notes to establish emergent themes against each question (open coding), before connections and comparisons were made across each topic or section, and then the entire data set (axial coding). Data were analysed for links, similarities, and differences according to variables to identify convergent and divergent themes.

Ethical considerations and limitations

The research required participants to share their observations and perspectives about the field placements offered by their university, but they were not required to identify specific agencies, field educators, or students. Any data that inadvertently identified other parties was de-identified to maintain confidentiality. Agencies, field educators, and students were not consulted in this process, so a possible limitation of this study is that multiple and possibly divergent perspectives were not captured.

Findings

Eighteen participants from 15 institutions were interviewed between April and June, 2016. These institutions were located in 11 different countries: South Africa (n=3), Uganda (n=2), Zimbabwe (n=2), Burundi, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Malawi, Reunion Island, Rwanda and Zambia. Eight participants were the Head of Department (or equivalent) at their institution and seven of these were also involved with the fieldwork program. The remaining participants were directly involved with the field education program (e.g., field education coordinator, field education year coordinator or an academic field supervisor). Interviews focused primarily on the BSW fieldwork program, where this was offered at the institution (n=14 institutions). There were approximately 4300 enrolments in the BSW programs at the time of the interview, with program numbers ranging from less than 100 students to over 500. It was anticipated that around 2,500 BSW students would complete a field placement by the end of 2016.

Data revealed a number of challenges in locating placements that provided a practical experience of developmental social work in Southern and East Africa. Some of these challenges included competition between and within academic institutions for placements, agency supervisors with inadequate or outdated theoretical knowledge, student supervision and

learning that was potentially limited by agency busyness, and the potential for increased student vulnerability and stress in placements where the social work role – and developmental social work – was poorly understood. It also highlighted the dedication and creativity shown by social work programs in addressing these challenges and improving learning opportunities for social work students (see Gray et al., 2016).

This paper reports on a significant but unanticipated finding that emerged from the data. This related to the transmission of theory and knowledge through social work field programs. It documents the ways that fieldwork programs are supporting and deepening developmental social work knowledge through their pedagogical requirements, the creation of placements and learning opportunities and support for agency supervisors. It also documents the ways that social work students appear to be transmitting developmental social work knowledge through supervisory relationships and the work they are conducting on placement.

Academic commitment to developmental social work

Social work is often criticised for not being effective in terms of addressing mainly issues of poverty. ... So this has forced us to, you know, reflect on what social work can do to address issues of poverty ... issues of marginalisation, social exclusion ... It seems social development has the greatest potential (Participant 7).

The commitment to developmental social work was highly evident in the interviews conducted – evidenced by the ideological statements made by individual participants as well as the program commitments and initiatives they described. This went well beyond simply educating the next generation or maintaining relationships with organisations so that placement commitments would be honoured. It appeared to surpass any pedagogical imperative or political mandate that might have been in existence in their institution or country. Rather

programs appeared dedicated to making a difference on the ground, through their connection with placement agencies, the education and training they provided to agency supervisors and through the work that students completed while in the field: ‘There is a whole list of organisations where we feel our department can go in and make a difference, with the support of lecturers and students’ (Participant 11). Participants conveyed a genuine commitment to social development as an important and constructive way to address the social issues – and particularly issues related to poverty – that have persisted in Southern and East Africa. Many stated that developmental social work aligned well with the profession’s ideology, values, and mission. They seemed committed to assisting the transmission of developmental social work knowledge and intervention in their academic and field roles, but they were also cognisant of the incremental nature of this process.

Developmental social work in the curriculum

One of the courses is social diversity and social development ... Then in most other courses we are also trying to make social development a cross cutting issue ... give them the skills, the knowledge to be able to implement a social development approach in their practice (Participant 7).

The participants in this study generally described their program as taking a generalist or integrated social work approach. When asked if developmental social work was a component of their program’s curriculum, all participants answered in the affirmative. The majority said that a developmental approach was a very important element of their curriculum and that they were increasingly examining and incorporating this paradigm into theory courses and fieldwork components. Social development was integrated throughout the majority of courses, although it appeared to be embedded or emphasised more in courses such as community development/working with communities, rural and urban development, social policy, planning

and project management. Four institutions had a specific developmental social work module in their BSW program. A number of participants stated that developmental social work was core to their curriculum because it was formally embedded in the cultural and political context in which their graduates would practice: 'This is the mandate from the government and this is the way we should work ... there is no way around for us thinking of working any way else ... It forms the vision and mission for our department' (Participant 11). Hence, students needed to be practicing competently from a developmental perspective if they were to obtain employment.

Creation of collaborative developmental social work learning experiences

There are fields where we would like social work to intervene but they don't already have some sort of department or service. We would like to have social workers in our schools, in our hospitals but it's difficult to have access because they say 'what are they going to do?' We try to explain what they are supposed to do (Participant 13).

Participants were resolute that social work programs were responsible for training and exposing their students to developmental social work experiences. Many were taking deliberate actions to incorporate and create developmental learning opportunities on campus and often in collaboration with human service agencies. Some used assessment and take home tasks to imbue developmental concepts, others incorporated simulated activities, guest lectures and field visits to impart further knowledge. Some programs were linking students with external agencies to complete particular tasks (although the students might be primarily situated on campus). A number of programs were advocating for the place of social work in non-traditional contexts, with the aim of creating new roles for social workers and sound learning experiences for their students. While most could see the benefits of additional placement opportunities and the expansion of developmental social work knowledge into agencies that might have limited

exposure, this was often resource intensive in terms of establishment and maintenance of the placement and support for students and agency supervisors. For example, some social work programs had established ongoing placement arrangements in schools:

[Schools] don't understand the developmental approach. ... We're coming in and just trying to do community work in the school, we want to form a task team and we want to get educators involved, and they say, 'but we don't have time'. It is meeting some of our requirements – without them we would be lost because we don't have enough agencies to take our students ... but there's a lot of constraints (Participant 1).

Training and supporting agency supervisors in developmental social work

We need to do more with established organisations when we can, and have more discussions about the developmental approach to social work because it is not just managing case to case, or having this group and off I go, so there needs to be CPD [Continuing Professional Development] with developmental social work as a focus and how this could be embedded in practice (Participant 8).

A number of participants stated that their programs offered supervision training and continuing professional development to social workers in the field, many of whom were unfamiliar with current theoretical orientations. Sometimes this was a condition of taking a student on placement, but in other instances, programs were responding to agency supervisors' interests (often sparked by student requirements):

We do find that organisations are open to [social developmental work] ... and practitioners will contact us and say 'will you come and do a workshop with us?' They are hearing this from students and become interested (Participant 8).

Obviously, the initial or subsequent training provided by social work programs also has the potential to influence broader organisational ideologies and practices, and some also suggested that the capacity to offer CPD credit for courses supported this aim. Some stated that ongoing training contributed to important collaborative conversations about developmental social work where academics and workers could exchange information and ideas about the theory to practice nexus. Outside of these formal conditions, a number stated that academic visits to students and agency supervisors often provided a sound opportunity to informally discuss the requirements and the ways that students might work from a developmental perspective in the specific agency context:

When we have conversations [with social workers] we try to encourage them about the exposure students need when they go out, we do focus on those developmental areas you know in terms of fund raising proposals, writing financial management and lots of other areas (Participant 8).

Students as conduits for developmental social work theory

Sometimes these agencies don't understand what developmental social work is, even though they are doing it indirectly. So when our students are attached to the organisations the students try to remind them of what they're required... Take for example, the hospital. Most of them do not understand what developmental social work is until when our students go with the requirements (Participant 9).

It appears that – given the right conditions – student fieldwork can be an ideal conduit for agency supervisors and staff to learn about developmental social work (and presumably other pertinent perspectives or models). As Participant 7 stated: '[Agencies and practitioners] may be doing, but not understanding that what they are doing, they are doing social development'. However, the engagement with a student can often initiate curiosity about new theories or the

desire to support the student in their learning objectives. A number of participants stated that their fieldwork curriculum required students to demonstrate competency in specified developmental social work tasks, such as a community assessment or, in one instance, an appreciative inquiry. In addition to students, some participants also noted that new graduates were potentially influential in the developmental agenda: '[which] is often encouraged and almost enforced by the younger graduates going into the field' (Participant 8). While new graduates were often prevented from supervising a student on placement, they had the potential to influence and support students informally, and one program was encouraging agencies to engage new graduates in mentoring roles with students.

Students modelling developmental social work

Many organisations will say, 'are we developmental?' ... So it is our responsibility through our students to help remind that thought process each time. So for example that march against human trafficking was a wonderful example of reminding and encouraging the developmental (Participant 11).

Participants named a number of developmental projects that were successfully initiated or primarily led by students on placement. Most importantly, participants gave examples of interventions that were robust and sustainable (see Case example 1). It appeared that a number of these initiatives would never have occurred in the day to day practice of the organisation. Indeed, students often had the time and incentive to engage with individual clients, groups and communities in ways that agency staff may not have had the capacity to. It appeared that students had the potential to bring new ideas and a fresh set of eyes (or perspectives):

We have had students identify problems that the agencies are not that much aware of, so our students are able to sit with the communities and draw up a plan of action because our students also have the knowledge about how to develop project proposals ... projects

that ultimately need funding [and they work with the community members to secure funding] (Participant 6).

The learning requirements of the social work program and the subsequent work that students completed potentially served as an example or prototype of developmental best practice.

Finally, it is important to note the fine line that academics needed to tread in the transmission of developmental knowledge, where resource allocations and balancing the needs of the agency, their clients and the learning needs of the student all needed to be considered. Some highlighted the important – but often time-consuming – role that social work programs could play in meeting with potential and existing placement agencies or organisations to explore the ways that students could contribute to reducing their workload, improving the lives of clients and enhancing the profile of the agency:

Because we really encourage [the students] to be integrated in the organisation, many of the programs or the group work series that are implemented are very finely aligned with the organisational needs and the national mandate, so [the organisations] utilise that, it is often part of their statistics (Participant 11).

Case example (as described by Participant 6)

[The placement was located in] a rural community ... which is riddled with a myriad ... social problems such as unemployment, high poverty levels, early school dropout, alcohol abuse, early marriages, gender based violence, HIV/AIDS etc. Whilst attached

to the Ministry ... one of the students worked with the community members to address the problem of school dropout among children. Many children from poor families in this area were unable to continue with their education due to financial constraints, which resulted in early pregnancies and marriages among young girls, alcohol abuse and idleness. She prioritised this area of intervention and held several meetings with the parents and children to sensitise them on the importance of education. Whilst working with the children and families, she liaised with the school authorities to find ways on how they could be involved to resolve this problem. She wrote a project proposal to support the children and their families which was later funded. Today she runs a Foundation ... in this community supporting 430 children which started whilst she was a student with only one child who was sponsored during its inception. Hitherto, the school remains one of the key stakeholders in identifying the most vulnerable children in the community, including the headmen and the parents. She has attracted more people who are also sponsoring the children to attend school.

Discussion

The findings illustrate social work education's role in knowledge transmission via student fieldwork placements. The participants rarely defined their role in this transmission of knowledge in any deliberate, formal, or structured arrangement, possibly since the dissemination of developmental social work theory and knowledge was not the primary focus of this research, and participants were not questioned directly about this topic. It is, therefore, highly likely that these findings underestimate the actions that are taken towards this end. Both academics and students were found to be committed to developmental social work, within a willing practice environment hampered by knowledge, capacity, and resource constraints.

Social work education was playing a transformative role through the teaching of developmental social work in the curriculum and creation of innovative fieldwork placements. The creation of collaborative developmental social work learning experiences was a key feature of the innovative approach taken by academics. They trained and supported agency supervisors in developmental social work, while students acted as conduits, modelling developmental social work practice. One might, therefore, postulate that there are several possible channels for the transmission of the values, knowledge, and skills underpinning developmental social work through fieldwork practice. When students join agencies on their field placements, they learn about the methods being (or not being) applied to achieve developmental social work. Drawing on classroom knowledge of developmental practice, students offer suggestions for improvement, becoming actors in the process of knowledge development at the agency level (Gray, 2002). Agency supervisors provide knowledge and theories through induction, evaluation, and supervision sessions or meetings (Jacques, 1993). This includes knowledge on the values and theories underpinning social development and the inadequacies of welfare approaches. Social work academics, too, are a conduit for transmitting knowledge to the supervisor and the placement agency through supervision sessions with students and the training of agency supervisors. The agency, in turn, transmits this new knowledge to the community members and communities with whom its social workers (and development workers) are intervening. Since ‘developmental social work requires them [social workers] to get out of this box [the agency] into the neighbourhood and local community and to begin talking to clients as partners who know the solutions to the challenges they encounter’, the agency also learns from the communities served (Gray, 2002).

The process does not end here, however. Students learn the realities of developmental social work and begin to question and test their classroom knowledge. The fieldwork placement

provides an opportunity for students to mould knowledge and ‘adapt it to the real world that they encounter in their practice’ (Gray, 2002, p. 14). As Jacques (1993) highlighted, ‘attitudes may need to be learned or modified’ (p. 40). The result is a balance between classroom knowledge and field practice. Carelse and Dykes (2013) found that the student participants in their South African study had experienced a huge gap between what they had been taught in the classroom and what they had encountered in a ‘real-world’ context. Some students felt ill-prepared for fieldwork practice and most expressed a preference for experiential, interactive, and cooperative learning, like role plays and group activities, over didactic teaching. Within an experiential learning environment, students were able to present their work to their peers through oral presentations and shared written reports by placing them in the library. Academic fieldwork educators, also, learnt how classroom teaching on developmental social work methods and the complexities of practice was transferring to the field through student assessment visits and, in turn, could improve their teaching of developmental interventions. Fieldwork might thus be seen as a collaborative process of developing and transmitting appropriate developmental social work knowledge and skills between the university, agency, students, and community. To summarise, knowledge transmission could take place through eight possible channels:

1. Agency to student
2. Student to agency
3. Community to agency and student
4. Agency to community
5. Student to other students
6. Academic educator to agency or agency supervisor
7. Academic educator to student

8. Student to academic educator

Finally, there were ethical considerations involved in students acting as agents of knowledge transmission, given they were not yet fully professional. In field education, this is partly addressed through supervision, where students are made aware of ethical codes of conduct. Placement agencies accepted students knowing they were still in-training and clients and communities were aware that students were on placement and thus were informed participants in their engagement with them. The placement agencies' credibility with clients and communities was well-established and most were used to working with students on placement. Nevertheless, there were ethical concerns in resource-poor communities, which often lacked professional services but these applied equally to novice social work student practitioners, valued for their new knowledge, and experienced practitioners needing to keep up to date with professional social work models and practices.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on the findings of the role of social work field education programs in the transmission of developmental social work knowledge in Southern and East Africa. It highlighted the challenges in locating developmental social work placements and the creativity shown by social work educators in addressing these challenges and improving learning opportunities for social work students. What has yet to be determined in future research is the students' perspective of this developmental education environment.

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