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The expansion of developmental social work in Southern and East Africa: Opportunities and challenges for social work field programs

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that examined how fieldwork education in Southern and East Africa was responding to the developmental social work agenda. The study used semi-structured qualitative interviews with key informants from 15 social work programs in 11 different Southern and East African countries. It investigated whether the social work fieldwork placements on offer provided practical experience of a developmental approach to social work practice. The study showed the creativity and enthusiasm with which social work educators were embracing the goals of developmental social work education, despite the pitfalls and limitations of doing this within fieldwork resource constraints.

Key Words: Fieldwork, developmental social work, Southern Africa, East Africa, social work students

The expansion of developmental social work in Southern and East Africa: Opportunities and challenges for social work field programs

This paper reports on a study that sought to examine how fieldwork education in Southern and East Africa was responding to the developmental social work agenda. The shaping of relevant, culturally appropriate, and socially responsive social work practice in Africa rests crucially on the extent to which future practitioners understand the context in which their work is conducted. Developmental in this context is a form of social work practice that has emerged – and continues to grow – in Africa in an attempt to respond to poverty in all its manifestations, including food insecurity, economic disparities, health inequalities, and poor services by standards in the Global North. Starting in South Africa in the 1990s, and subsequently moving northwards, developmental social work practice was shaped by the macro, policy perspective of social development, which purported to offer an alternative to the post-war welfare model imported to Africa during colonial times. Its introduction to Africa coincided with changing policies on foreign aid and development to shift countries in Africa increasingly towards privatised neoliberal social interventions. It is a multifaceted, multisectoral approach that aims to discourage welfare dependency and promote the active participation of people in policy formulation and program development through partnerships between government, nongovernment, and private providers (Gray, 1996). For most African countries, even after independence, state-provided welfare programs have proved difficult to dislodge and most governments have a mix of welfarist and social development policies. In fact, in South Africa, state-provided pensions and grants are seen as an integral part of its developmental welfare model. Against this policy backdrop, developmental social work is seen as an indigenous form of practice best suited to intervening in situations of poverty and

under-development, within which community development, rather than casework, is seen as its most apposite method of strategic intervention.

For many countries in Africa, the neoliberal shift to social development began at the World Summit on Social Development held in Copenhagen in May 1995, with a commitment to eradicate poverty that led to the development of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Governments were tasked with developing national poverty plans and strategies in line with global poverty-reduction initiatives, such as the World Bank and IMF's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and MDGs, which acknowledged people's right to development (Bretton Woods Project, 2003; Gray & Ariong, 2016). This required that national governments give up their dominant role in the delivery of social services and move to multisectoral, sustainable development. Development was seen as a democratising – decentralising – strategy that transferred power to local communities via the privatisation of services and channelling of aid to nongovernment organisations. High on the agenda was results-based accountability to reduce corruption and increase efficiencies in aid-funded development programs (Gray & Ariong, 2016).

Developmental social work in Africa

Developmental social work affirms the social work profession's commitment to the eradication of poverty, recognises the link between welfare and economic development, and construes welfare as an investment in human capital rather than a drain on limited government resources. It is a type of nonremedial social work which diverges from the residual, service-oriented approach directed at special categories of people in need to multisectoral, planned, people-centred development strategies. It means basically shifting

from casework to community development as a major intervention strategy as embraced within primary healthcare, adult education, and development more broadly. Due to the concentration of poverty in rural areas, it requires that social workers work alongside those involved in agricultural, water, sanitation, and infrastructural development programs; primary healthcare, including child nutrition, maternal and child health, AIDS and HIV interventions; and adult education to enhance adult literacy. In theory, developmental social work is people-centred, participatory, transformative, and rights-based; it focuses on prevention and awareness through education, and favours populist forms of intervention. Most importantly, it is a form of multidisciplinary engagement in development. In practice, developmental social work works through naturally occurring networks, where social workers attempt to mobilise communities through organised, small-scale programs around local issues. This brings social work into contact with multisectoral development initiatives, such as water and sanitation projects, and agricultural and micro-enterprise development programs. Social workers may act as facilitators or brokers bringing community groups into contact with service providers, in this way helping them to gain access to resources and empowering them to negotiate on their own behalf. Through community development, social workers unleash people's collective capabilities to enable them to organise themselves around common concerns. Increasingly, sustainable projects are those which are economically viable and draw support from international donors. As a result, training and skills development, micro-enterprises, and income generation have become pivotal features of developmental social work given real empowerment comes with economic independence and autonomy. One way in which social work has attempted to enhance its developmental potential is through social work education, and especially its field education requirements that formed the focus of this study. It is to this that the discussion now turns.

Knowledge about fieldwork in Southern and East Africa

In the Southern and East African literature, fieldwork and academic, campus-based learning have long been understood as mutually beneficial and integral to social work education (Bar-On, 2001; Beytell, 2014; Chitereka, 2009; Dhemba, 2012; Earle, 2008; Engelbrecht, 2001; Lombard, 1997; Maxwell, 1999). Hochfeld et al.'s (2009) study revealed that the vast majority of those surveyed – generally department heads or senior staff members – were positive about the fieldwork opportunities offered to their students. However, they found that less attention had been paid in research and curriculum development to the practical fieldwork component (see also Bar-On, 2001; Beytell, 2014). Indeed, Bar-On (2001) argued that, universally, fieldwork was based on the underlying assumption that all of the players involved understood its importance, were dedicated to its principles, and had the capacity to fulfil their requisite roles. However, there were challenges in integrating the theory and practice components, to make them compatible and beneficial for students (Dhemba, 2012). There were also claims that the practice of fieldwork in Africa was often constrained by external factors leaving it subordinate in status to, and less rigorous than, on-campus academic activity (Dhemba, 2012; Kaseke, in Bar-On, 2001). For example, studies consistently found increased competition between academic institutions for, and an acute shortage of, relevant placements (Chitereka, 2009; Dhemba, 2012; Dziro, 2013; Hochfeld et al., 2009; Hoffman, 1993; Shardlow, Scholar, Munro, & McLaughlin, 2011). With only limited placements available – as well as financial constraints for students and social work programs – fieldwork opportunities were often geographically limited, possibly resulting in compromised learning (Chogugudza, 2009; Dhemba, 2012; Dziro, 2013). Financial constraints also affected the ways in which some academic institutions organised and supported fieldwork, including the level of staff employed to organise placements and the number of hours allocated for field-related tasks (Chitereka, 2009; Dhemba, 2012; Earle,

2008; Hoffman, 1993). It also potentially affected the frequency and quality of interaction between the agency and academic supervisor, fieldwork coordinator, and student (Dhemba, 2012; Earle, 2008). An acute shortage of social workers, professionally trained social work staff, and other suitable agency supervisors was a significant problem, and one which contributed to potential issues for student learning and professional role modelling (Bar-On, 2001; Chitereka, 2009; Chogugudza, 2009; Dhemba, 2012; Engelbrecht, 2006; Ferguson & Smith, 2012; Hochfeld et al., 2009).

There have been calls for the inclusion of more rural fieldwork opportunities and an increasing emphasis on social development focused placements for more than two decades (Engelbrecht, 2001; Hoffman, 1993; McKendrick, 1998; Mupedziswa, 2001). However, the placements available, and the fieldwork experience provided for students, has not always reflected the realities of social work in rural contexts or the goals and standards being set by social work programs (Chogugudza, 2009; Hochfeld et al., 2009). A significant challenge to the social development transition appeared to be the capacity for students to engage in authentic and relevant social development practice opportunities during fieldwork placements (Chogugudza, 2009; Kaseke, 2001). For example, Kaseke (2001) observed that:

The pursuit of a developmental thrust in social work education assumes the availability of fieldwork agencies that are relevant for this purpose. The reality in Zimbabwe, however, is that such agencies are not readily available. The few that are available do not employ social workers and are therefore difficult to access. Consequently, the majority of students are denied the opportunity to experience developmental work (p. 107).

There have been repeated suggestions over the years that placements offering opportunities to experience and learn developmental social work practice remained elusive in Zimbabwe (Chogugudza, 2009; Dziro, 2013; Mhiribidi, 2010). Referring to South Africa, Earle (2008) stated that:

Despite being trained in the developmental approach, the reality for most social workers in welfare agencies was an overload of statutory work, with very little time or resources available to work in a developmental manner, and that a lack of training in the developmental approach among the older social workers who worked in these agencies resulted in a support vacuum for students taking their practice education there (p. 67).

The Southern and East African social work literature also provided some evidence that social work programs wanted to offer a diverse range of government and nongovernment agency placements and were flexible about locating and creating learning opportunities (Dhemba, 2012; Earle, 2008; Hoffman, 1993; Maxwell, 1999 Mupedziswa & Kubanga, 2016). Innovative developmental placement options included ‘floating’, ‘open’, and ‘workshop’ placements, where groups of students were allocated to one or two staff members, and where student learning was a self-directed response to the issues and needs of people in a particular locality (Mupedziswa & Kubanga, 2016). There was mounting evidence that different placement settings and sites were being discussed, trialled, and evaluated (e.g., Beytell, 2014; Ferguson & Smith, 2012; Hoffman, 1993; Mupedziswa, 2001). Creativity and innovation had resulted in developing and placing students in non-traditional settings (Lombard, 1997), including social action and community-based placements (Ferguson & Smith, 2012; Gray & Simpson, 1998; Travis, McFarlin, van Rooyen, & Gray, 1999), while developmental models were trialled in some conventional settings (Neilson & Gray, 1997). Some social work

programs had developed on-campus entities that served a public purpose, while providing placement opportunities (Hoffman, 1993; Shardlow et al., 2011; Simpson & Sathiparsad, 2011). Others had established fieldwork units in external social service agencies that might be funded to some degree (Hoffman, 1993) and in community settings (Gray & Simpson, 1998).

Methodology

The research aimed to explore the nature of the fieldwork placements on offer to social work students from institutions offering social work education in Southern and East Africa, with a view to establishing their fit 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

A semi-structured interview design was used, where quantitative demographic data were collected alongside qualitative data that captured more complex and nuanced information about social work field placements in Southern and East Africa. Participants were asked questions in three categories: (i) Demographic information; (ii) Curriculum; (iii) Field placement and developmental social work. Open-ended questions aimed to investigate the conditions that continue to challenge the instruction and implementation of developmental social work and those that have shifted over time. Most importantly, the interviews aimed to capture the responses that academic institutions have made to improve and strengthen their social work field programs (so that these might be adapted to and or replicated in other programs). Ethics clearance was granted from the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee on March 23, 2016.

Sampling and recruitment

Purposive theoretical sampling was used to recruit the most appropriate participants to answer the research questions. Hence, emails were sent to the Head of Department (or equivalent) in 54 social work schools or programs across 17 countries in Southern and East Africa, inviting them to participate in semi-structured interviews regarding their fieldwork program. Each Head of Department was asked to select the most appropriate person within their program to participate in the interview.

Data collection

The researchers initially intended to collect data through phone and skype interviews. However, the interview process was often challenged by poor internet and phone connections, which contributed to inaudibility, calls dropping out, and delays in contact. A number of interviews involved rescheduling and a combination of emails, phone contact, skype, and messaging on skype in order to complete the full interview. Data were collected via email only in two instances, where repeated audio contacts failed. Field notes were kept during the interviews, where key themes or possible questions arose in the data. Interviews were audio taped. Demographic data were documented and key sections of qualitative data were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using a constant comparative method of inductive analysis. Initially, the researchers read and re-read the data and field notes to establish emergent themes against each question (open coding). Then connections and comparisons were made across each topic or section followed by the entire data set (axial coding). Data were analysed

for links, similarities, and differences according to variables such as country, type of academic institution, student numbers, and the duration of the social work program. In this way, convergent and divergent themes were identified.

Findings

Interviews were conducted with 18 participants from 15 institutions in 11 countries between April and June 2016. Participating social work programs were located in South Africa (n=3), Uganda (n=2), Zimbabwe (n=2), Burundi, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Malawi, Reunion Island, Rwanda, and Zambia. Semi-structured interviews lasted from between 29 and 84 minutes. Eight participants were Heads of Department (or equivalent) and seven of these were also involved with the fieldwork program. The remaining ten participants were directly involved with the field education program (e.g., field education coordinator, field education year coordinator, or academic field supervisor).

Participants represented well-established social work programs, as well as programs that had recently commenced. Thirteen social work programs were located in a larger institution, such as a university, while two were stand-alone institutions. Interviews focused primarily on the BSW fieldwork program where this was offered at the institution. Fourteen of the participating programs offered Bachelor of Social Work Degrees (12 qualifications were four-year or honours degrees and two of these qualifications were of three years' duration). One participating program offered postgraduate certificates and diplomas in social work only.

There were approximately 4,300 enrolments in the BSW programs at the time of the interviews, 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 (and this did not include other placement-like tasks and activities as described later in this paper). There appeared to be a range of fieldwork structures being used in the BSW programs that participated in this research, with 10 programs using block placements, three using concurrent placements, and one using a combination of these two structures at different year levels. Total placement days ranged from approximately 40 to 260 days across the BSW programs, with the average student completing approximately 124 days across their degree. The BSW programs offered between 1 and 4 placements as follows: 1 placement (n=2), 2 placements (n=7), 3 placements (n= 4), and 4 placements (n=1).

The following section documents the challenges inherent in the development and maintenance of an effective social work field program in Southern and East Africa, including the acquisition of placements that provide a practical experience of developmental social work. This is followed by a discussion of the creative responses that social work programs and fieldwork staff have instigated to address these challenges and improve – particularly developmental – learning opportunities for social work students.

Challenges in providing a practical experience of developmental social work practice.

Participants cited a number of generic issues affecting the provision of placements that met the needs of the professional association, the social work program, and the student. For example, availability was affected by competition between and within academic institutions and agency reluctance to offer student placements due to high workloads or poor understanding of the social work role. In some instances, there were shortages of social workers available to take students on placement, which was felt most acutely in countries

where this situation intersected with – sometimes relatively new – professional requirements stipulating that supervision must be provided by a qualified social worker. All participants said they were able to locate sufficient numbers of placements to fulfil their requirements, but there were indications that not all the placements were ideal. Many were concerned about the quality of supervision and student support, particularly when busyness and heavy workloads interfered with the frequency of supervision or students were encouraged to cover service gaps: ‘Agencies are often understaffed and students need to be careful that they are remaining in the role of student’ (Participant 11). Some were concerned about the depth or currency of agency supervisors’ theoretical and practical knowledge, and this was exacerbated in placements where agency supervisors were not social work trained.

When asked about the availability of placements that provided students with the opportunity to test out their learning about developmental social work, participants suggested opportunities were either *readily available* or *somewhat available*. For example, Participant 6 responded: ‘Most of the work that they do [at these organisations] takes a developmental approach’. Other participants suggested that mandated work, busyness, and sheer workload pressure restricted the broader developmental goals espoused by some agencies (and government policy):

In reality we find that most agencies get so bogged down with statutory work that even when our students go in they are really not doing a developmental approach, they are really doing very much statutory work (Participant 1).

Many suggested that students were more likely to engage with developmental concepts in organisations where community or social development approaches were primarily encouraged or permitted:

In fact, it's probably NGOs [nongovernment organisations] and CDOs [community-based organisations] that are much more developmental in their approach without even intellectualising it that way, so there's more room and more flexibility for students to test out [their knowledge of developmental social work] (Participant 1).

There was also strong consensus that rural and remote placements usually offered students significant opportunities to work with communities from a developmental perspective, and a number of programs encouraged their students to return to their villages or home towns for placement.

Most participants suggested that 'developmental social work' pertained to the conceptualisation of social issues and was a particular approach to intervention, regardless of the clientele, field of practice, or agency mandate:

We don't think in terms of developmental and 'other'. The responsibility lies with the university to see that whatever the students are engaged in is developmental social work (Participant 11).

It seemed that the nature of the issues students' encountered more often than not required a developmental approach. Hence, most social work programs expected that students would practice from this perspective and that they would be proactive in finding opportunities to do so:

When something is not there [students] need to bring it up as an innovation to those organisations ... They are change agents so they need to leave the organisation

different. So if the organisation does not have something on social development, then they will prompt that organisation and let them know that this is what it is for a better future (Participant 9).

As a result, participants named and described a suite of significant developmental interventions and projects initiated and enacted by social work students while on placement. They also acknowledged that the issues in many of these communities or settings were complex and highly challenging for students. It followed that some students, and particularly those in more remote locations or agencies where the role of social work was emerging or poorly understood, were required to respond to service gaps from a developmental position. In some instances, they might be required to explain or justify their intervention to the agency. Students were required to be highly self-directed on some placements and some participants acknowledged that not all students were capable of adapting to this type of uncertainty. Unfortunately, some of the students' proposed interventions could be limited or rendered as unsustainable due to resource limitations. Additionally, the unstructured or emerging nature of these placements often placed higher demands on academic programs to support them. For example, one participant said that academic staff had to become involved in writing child protection reports because students were exposing abuse while on placement, but there was no on-site social worker to write the reports.

Overall, resourcing appeared to make a significant difference to the placement opportunities afforded to students. A number noted that sound developmental social work opportunities were forfeited due to the additional time and costs associated with establishing and supporting them. In some instances, academics were conducting fewer site visits to support or assess students on placement due to resource issues (and this was particularly so if students

were some distance from campus). Additionally, the workload associated with fieldwork positions – often held by more junior staff members – was considered demanding. As one participant said, ‘we often have creative and new ideas but time often determines whether it will be possible or not’ (Participant 5).

Creative and relational solutions to complex challenges

A significant theme in this research was a strong commitment to the incorporation or improvement of developmental social work theory and practice across the curriculum. Despite the challenges, social work programs were addressing these issues with clarity and creativity. Some were taking deliberate measures to enhance the status of fieldwork in their programs, such as renaming field education roles to recognise their academic value, balancing field and academic workloads, and mandating the involvement of all staff in fieldwork: ‘All lecturers go to the field so that they also know what students are learning and doing in the field’ (Participant 9).

Some social work programs had made territorial-type agreements or recently restructured their programs in order to address limited placement availability. Others were actively creating placement opportunities and advocating for social work roles in existing agencies:

We have had to go from traditional welfare agencies ... and place students in communities in NGOs and CDOs ... they don’t understand what is expected of social workers and so it is often a challenge of advocating for where social work fits into this agency (Participant 1).

Placement creation often involved considerable work in establishing the placement, and showing agencies how they – and their clientele – might benefit from such an arrangement.

Some social work programs had developed significant partnerships with schools allowing for a number of students to be placed simultaneously, conducting activities such as assessments, providing group and community education, awareness campaigns, and developmental projects. Social work programs with resources could employ external social work supervisors, thus using placement agencies where social workers might not be available (but sound learning opportunities were). Technology was being used to supplement face-to-face contact with students when academics could not visit in person.

There was also some evidence of a general shift towards more fieldwork classes or modules across social work programs. Some had semester-long fieldwork or practice classes that were of similar duration to theory classes. While most programs were providing *orientation to field* classes and workshops, others employed a number of on-campus sessions throughout placements as a way of checking in and supporting student learning and welfare. Of course, concurrent placement arrangements made student contact more frequent, and some programs were using these contacts to provide – sometimes additional – supervision opportunities.

A number of universities had created placement-like opportunities in an effort to expose students to the complexities and realities of social work practice early in their degree, to prepare them for placement, and to supplement learning opportunities that might not be available on placement. For example, *take-home* tasks, like the completion of a situational analysis or community profile were designed to enhance students' engagement with contextual and reflective practice. Some programs required that students complete voluntary work in the first year of their degree, while others used guest lecturers and excursions to specific agencies:

And we take them on excursions into the community where we try to introduce them to developmental social work in the community. After such excursions, they have to reflect on what they have seen and make the linkage to what they've been taught [on campus] (Participant 11).

Students might be linked to particular agencies where they were able to gain practical experiences outside of the formal placement structure. For example, they might be engaging in activities with social workers or staff in schools or key agencies, but completing the work primarily on campus (e.g., writing up a report on cases they have been involved with). In other instances, practical activities were able to be simulated on campus.

Finally, the creation and maintenance of sound working relationships between all fieldwork parties appeared fundamental to the quantity and quality of placements offered, and many of the aforementioned activities would not have been possible without long-term mutually beneficial relationships:

We have to be close to the territories so that they know what we need. Also to be aware what the territories need. These needs are always changing, always developing ... So we have to be always adapting and close to them (Participant 12).

Some said that they relied heavily on repeat placements and sound relationships with particular agencies meant that they offered placements on a regular basis. Core contributors to sound working relationships included increased training for agency supervisors, the provision of clear documentation pertaining to university expectations, acknowledgement of the value of the partnership, and institutional resourcing that gave university staff the means to locate, establish, support, and monitor particular placements.

Discussion

The sample of social work programs in this study were all committed to a developmental social work approach, regardless of whether it was a relatively new concept or one that was well established in their program or country's social policy agenda. Indeed, Mupedziswa's (2001) vision of an emerging developmental orientation across the theory and practice curriculum appears to be coming to fruition, despite numerous challenges. It also appears that this commitment has come with benefits and challenges. It may have alleviated some old issues and exaggerated or created others.

First, social work programs continued to be challenged to find enough sound placement opportunities for their students due to competition, agency capacity, as well as resource and geographical limitations, which was consistent with previous studies (Dhemba, 2012; Dziro, 2013; Hochfeld et al., 2009; Shardlow, Scholar, Munro, & McLaughlin, 2011). While participants stated that they always found enough placements for their students, this was often due to the persistence of fieldwork staff and even program restructuring in some instances. Additionally, and consistent with previous research, the availability of placements did not always guarantee the ideal setting for learning and implementing practice that was consistent with the goals espoused by the relevant social work program (Chogugudza, 2009; Hochfeld et al., 2009).

It appeared that placement shortages, combined with a desire to provide students with more developmental social work opportunities, had resulted in a number of social work programs venturing into new territories and instigating new placements for social work students. This innovative focus tended towards 'pedagogical innovations' and 'collaborations with other

agencies, groups and individuals in the community' (innovative categories identified in international research by Cwikel, Savaya, Munford, & Desai, 2010). Social work programs seemed highly aware of the difficulties some students had in the translation of theory to practice in the field (also highlighted in Beytell, 2014; de Jager, 2013). Many were making concerted efforts to prepare students through a range of experience-based, practical, on-campus activities, excursions, and projects where students were linked with key agencies. Some also believed that these activities were particularly important when the reality of placement experiences was different to the developmental agenda set by the social work program.

There was also a potential tale of caution. There is no doubt that the issues facing social workers in Southern and East Africa are complex, confronting, and sometimes traumatic. Interventions may be conducted in less-than-ideal working conditions, where inadequate remuneration, poor resourcing, and large caseloads have the potential to undermine effectiveness and practitioner wellbeing. Many of these issues had the potential to affect the availability and quality of student placements. Consistent with previous findings, agency busyness, unqualified or inexperienced agency supervisors, and resourcing issues that reduced academic visits all appeared to culminate in a situation that was not ideal for some student placements (Chogugudza, 2009; Dhemba, 2012; Ferguson & Smith, 2012; Hochfeld et al., 2009). There appeared to be an ongoing concern about the quality of supervision and the emotional and learning support that students received while on placement. Previous concerns that the conceptualisation of a developmental curriculum would be hampered in certain contexts also resonated in this research (Chogugudza, 2009; Dziro, 2013; Earle, 2008). This was particularly so in countries where social work – and particularly developmental social work – was relatively new, where students were being supervised by

non-social workers, and in agencies where busyness and the immediacy of statutory requirements potentially altered the learning and practice trajectory.

In an effort to provide more placements and practical experiences, programs had begun working in collaboration with organisations and entities that may have had little understanding of the social work role or the needs of the student. While these environments often offered considerable benefits to the students and their clientele, students could be exposed to situations that they were too inexperienced to address. In turn, this had the potential to create undue vulnerability and stress requiring academic support and intervention. Many had heeded the call to increase access to rural placement opportunities, where it had been suggested that students were more likely to acquire developmental experience (see Engelbrecht, 2001; McKendrick, 1998; Mupedziswa, 2001). While participants in this study appeared to agree that rural placements offered highly worthwhile experiences, they also acknowledged that placing students in more remote areas sometimes limited the academic and agency support available.

Self-directed, experience- and problem-based learning have been increasingly recognised as important ways to increase critical thinking and theory to practice integration in the classroom, and to prepare students for fieldwork and practice (Howarth & Thurlow, 2004; Lam, 2004). However, there has been little formal investigation into the student experience of field placements that require a significant amount of self-direction and problem solving. Self-directed learning requires motivation, management, and discipline that students may need to develop across time in order to build confidence and competence (Ayyildiz & Tarhan, 2015; Kicken, Brand-Gruwel & van Merriënboer, 2008). Hence the onus lies with social work

programs to develop and provide – what might be more resource-intensive – scaffolding experiences prior to placement if they are to prepare students for these types of practice realities. Research from the classroom shows that not all students will have the same capacity to benefit from self-directed learning activities, where students with particular competencies and traits benefit most (Ayyildiz & Tarhan, 2015; Bhata, Rajashekar, & Kamatha, 2007). In the fieldwork context, where students are developing and implementing real-life social work interventions, there might also be a risk that they become more focused on task completion and success than processing and evaluating their associated learning (which is the primary goal of fieldwork). When these factors are combined, social work programs must be vigilant about student vulnerability. They need to establish that students are not assuming too much responsibility for their learning and the wellbeing of the clients and communities they are servicing. Social work programs need to balance the possible benefits of placing students into less-structured placements where they are required to be more self-directed, with the resources available to prepare and support the student.

This research also reiterated previous studies and commentaries about the undermining of commitment, creativity, and best practice due to limited resources (Dhemba, 2012; Earle, 2008; Hoffman, 1993). Participants stated that they were getting much done, but they were also aware there was more to do. They were clear that increased attention to the fieldwork component of social work programs, alongside the increased resourcing of staff, students, and agencies, would relieve the pressure from academics involved in the fieldwork program, provide more supervision and support for students on placement (including those in rural locations), allow for the engagement of more non-traditional and developmental type organisations, and support the valuable educational role of agency supervisors. Inroads were being made steadily in these areas, but there remained more to do.

Findings might also illustrate the ongoing debates and evolving conceptualisation of 'developmental social work'. The majority of participants in this study agreed that developmental social work was the application of developmental theory and principles to practice with individuals, groups, and communities. However, there was a general consensus that students were more likely to experience and understand these concepts in a community context, which was interesting considering this was a context where the developmental perspective was less likely to be articulated as such. This might support Patel and Hochfeld's (2012) claim that 'conceptual clarity continues to remain a barrier in the theoretical development of the approach including a lack of clarity about its methods and its domain' (p. 694). It might be more difficult to translate and demonstrate the broader scope of developmental social work in more traditional and remedial contexts, which calls for further pedagogical thought and application (e.g., van Breda's 2015 discussion of developmental social casework).

Finally, the student voice is absent from this study. Previous research that was conducted with social work students in Southern and East Africa suggested that students were exposed to a range of new and challenging experiences, including new contexts, concepts, work practices, terminology and discourse, ethical dilemmas, and confronting human conditions (Beytell, 2014; Ferguson & Smith, 2012; Orton, 2009; Sanford, 2007). However, some students, and even new graduates, reported being inadequately prepared for the reality or 'culture shock' of placement, and the application of social work theory to practice (Beytell, 2014; de Jager, 2013; Dhemba, 2012; Ferguson & Smith, 2012; Strydom et al., 2009). Combined with the findings from this study, a targeted investigation of student perceptions and experiences of preparedness, stress, and vulnerability is warranted. This is particularly so

in non-traditional environments, where learning was highly self-directed and where developmental social work roles were absent or emerging.

Conclusion

Regardless of the challenges identified in this study, the hope for the future appears to be in the academic work already completed and the work currently underway to educate and support students, supervisors, and placement agencies in developmental social work. Participants offered numerous examples of the ways that programs were creatively supporting students to experience developmental social work, through enhancing their practice curriculum, orchestrating practice opportunities, and creating new placements. The good news from this research is that the pedagogical commitment of social work programs in Southern and East Africa appears to have resulted in a continuation – and perhaps an enhancement – of the creativity and ingenuity identified in earlier studies (Ferguson & Smith, 2012; Lombard, 1997 Shardlow et al., 2011; Simpson & Sathiparsad, 2011).

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