The Quest for Relevance: Rethinking Strategies for the Practical Fieldwork Component of Social Work Education and Training in Africa.

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Acknowledgement

- I wish to begin by thanking the organisers of the event: I understand the following were involved:
- Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa (ASSWA);
- African Social Work Network (ASWN);
- East Africa Social Work Regional Centre (EASW);
- International Federation of Social Workers – (IFSW) Africa region .

Introduction

- Social work education has two prongs – classroom instruction focusing on theory, and practical training in the field. I have chosen to speak on field education.

- That field education is as important as theoretical learning is undisputed in the literature (Parker, 2007; Rai, 2004; Jennings, 2001; Rambally, 1999; Skolnik, Wayne & Raskin, 1999). However in reality it is often treated as a poor cousin

- In much of Africa arguably field work training has a lower status (poor cousin) than theory in educational institutions and therefore receives less attention than theory (Bar On, 2001; Jennings, 2001; Rai, 2004),

The issues to ponder

In 2009, collaborating researchers from 3 Southern African institutions, conducted a study focusing on the developmental approach to social work education and training (Hochfeld, Selipsky, Mupedziswa, Chitereka, 2009).

The 3 institutions whose staff participated in the study were: University of Johannesburg, University of Botswana and the National University of Lesotho.

The study sought to establish the extent to which institutions in Southern and East Africa had embraced the developmental social work approach to education and training.

The Troubling Finding

- An analysis of the study findings seemed to suggest that most institutions claimed that they were <u>promoting the developmental paradigm</u> to social work education and training.

- An equally interesting finding was appeared to be an apparent **mismatch** between the <u>theory</u> component (classroom) and <u>practice</u> component (field) in some of the institutions.

- While these institutions asserted that they were promoting the developmental approach, the reality on the ground seemed to remain rather fuzzy.

- Apparently while the <u>theory component</u> in these institutions appeared to be moving in the direction of the developmentalist paradigm, the <u>field practicum</u> component (of some of them) remained fixated in the remedial/residual orientation/mode.

Developmental social work defined

- Developmental social work, which has also been termed the social development approach to social work, emphasizes the importance of social investment in professional social work practice.

- The investments are meant to meet the material needs of social work's clients and facilitate their full integration into the social and economic life of the community (Midgley and Conely, 2010).

Why some institutions remained fixated in remedial type placements

- 1. Limited appreciation of the concept of developmental social work on part of some agencies.

- 2. Shortage of qualified field supervisors, or supervisors with a clear appreciation of key tenets of the developmental approach.

- 3. **Shortage of appropriate field placements for students.**

Rethinking Fieldwork Options.

- "**Making fieldwork education relevant**", (to the developmental orientation) is the focus of my remarks.

- It does not make good sense for an institution to say they are promoting developmental social work, while sending students to placements that are essentially remedial in orientation.

- There is need for social work institutions in Africa to begin to **think outside the box**; to be <u>innovative</u> and <u>creative</u>, in an effort to offer meaningful field practice.

Examples of Innovative placements

(1) The 'workshop' placement

Kendall talked of the <u>workshop type of field placement</u> which was tried out in Latin America. This strategy involved groups of students with one or two staff members being assigned to 'non-structured', open field placements, to work with groups.

According to Kendall, the locale for such placements might be a squatter slum, a centre for agrarian reform, a cooperative, a particular neighbourhood, a social movement, an industrial complex, a village, etc. This helps detect community challenges (**e.g. gender-based violence**)

Examples of placements (Contn)

(2). Floating placement:

Kendall (1974) alluded to what she termed the 'floating' placement, which apparently was tried out in the Philippines .

Like the workshop placement, the strategy involved groups of students with one or two staff members being assigned to' non-structured', open field placements.

The floating element suggests the students might not be stationed in one place, but might move from area to area.

Innovative placements (continued)

(3) "**Village camping' field placement**

- Bogo and Herington (1986) described a somewhat similar idea to that of Kendall's - what they termed 'village camping' type of field placement.

- They indicated that the strategy involves selecting on the basis of some criteria (e.g. poverty state), one or more villages at which a group or groups of social work students can camp for the duration of their placement.

- Activities could range from family therapy to individual, group or community research.

- Students on such a placement could also get involved in community improvement activities such as adult education programmes, including literacy training.

Innovative placements (continued)

(4) "**Working with communities" placement strategy.**

The approach involves students working with communities as part of their social work education and training.

- Ankrah (1986:67) states that, "Whether in the traditional agency……
…..the clear formulation of expectations and objectives seemed to pave the way for familiarity, or participating in, more development-aimed programmes than experienced hitherto."

- Ankrah (1986) reports that this innovative idea had been tried out at Makerere University in Uganda with considerable success.

Innovative placements (continued)

- (**5) "Group block" approach**

- Jennings (2001) describes a field instruction which involves an eight-week '**group block**' field placement in a community where students live, eat, and work together with the training team.

- Students are required to undertake a range of different activities, and they work and learn as members of smaller teams comprising other students, community members and professionals.

- The model's success depends on carefully designed field experiences being "grounded in community practices, coordinated by well-established *community curricula for the classroom experience, and includes greater balance between prevention, development and remediation*" (Jennings, 2001:3).

Innovative placements (continued)

(6)'**Long arm' practice supervision (LAPS)**

- This is yet another an innovative strategy for practical fieldwork training (Furness & Gilligan, 2004)and it has been practiced in such institutions as Christ Church University.

- LAPS refers to an arrangement in which a supervisor is located at a distance to the practice site (e.g. a remote village). (Useful where there is shortage of placements.

- The supervisor still takes responsibility for <u>supervising and supporting</u> the student (NHS Education for Scotland, 2013).

- The supervisor is expected to use own <u>professional judgement </u>when selecting appropriate learning opportunities for the student.

Advantages of innovative strategies

- In the context of innovative, (developmental) approaches, for theory (classroom) and fieldwork (practical) experiences to be properly aligned, there would be need for proper and careful planning.

- Innovative placements have to be very carefully thought through, with **objectives** and **outcomes** clearly spelt out, a point Mupedziswa (1995) has stressed.

- Kendall (1974) notes that such placements are <u>rooted in life as it exists</u> in the community, and are mainly aimed <u>to address '**macro**' issues</u> with the main emphasis being the promotion of social change at the locality level.

- The carious examples of placements are **consistent with the developmental approach**) and the advantage with such placements is they do not require the services of a field supervisor.

Advantages of innovative strategies (Continued)

- Emphasis is on '**self-directed learning**' on the part of the students. Staff (Faculty) member(s) visit the students in the field only occasionally, affording them (students) room for *creativity, originality* and *innovativeness*.

- Supervision is done by staff members at the institution. The supervisor may choose not to remain in the field at all times, but **occasionally visit** the students to determine progress.

- **Critical Approach** (Rogers and McDonald, 1992) – field instructors ability to think critically is essential for fieldwork training, particularly in such contexts.

- Jennings (2001) states that unless the tension between focusing on individual change and working as an advocate for development and social change is acknowledged and addressed, the complexity required by a community orientation will ensure it remains secondary to a remedial approach.

Conclusion

- These suggested solutions are predicated on the need to consider innovative strategies to the field work placements component of social work education, to make it more relevant to the developmental approach.

- Such placements may or may not include a field practice teacher. While it is generally true that, "The role of the practice teacher remains central to...qualifying social workers...[Practice teachers] act as gatekeepers for entry to the profession and safeguard the interests of service users and employers alike" (Furness and Gilligan, 2004:468), some of the strategies suggested in the paper actually preclude use of agency based field supervisors.

- In the context of some of the suggested innovations, this role can be played by someone based at the social work training institution. Such an individual will keep in touch with the students, and may occasionally visit with students in the field.

- Such placements would be consistent with the expectations of developmental social work education.

Thank You