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Field Practicum Supervisor Perspectives About Social Work Licensing: An Exploratory Study

Author(s)

*J. Jay Miller, PhD
University of Kentucky*

*Cynthia Conley, PhD
Spalding University*

*Stacy Deck, PhD
Spalding University*

*Molly Bode, MSSW Candidate
Spalding University*

Abstract

This exploratory study examined field practicum supervisors' perceptions about social work licensing. Researchers utilized a convenience sample of field practicum supervisors (N = 158) at CSWE-accredited schools in one southeastern state. An online survey was administered to collect primary data related to variables of interest. This included general knowledge about licensing, value, and impact on the profession. After a brief background discussion, this paper elucidates findings from the study; discusses implications for social work education, in general and field education specifically; and identifies appropriate areas for future research.

Keywords: Social Work Licensing; Professional Regulation; Social Work Education

Few would dispute the influence of field practicum supervisors on social work students. Individuals in these roles often serve as key informants in the socialization process for students matriculating into professional practice (Mosek & Ben-Oz, 2011; Noble & King, 1981; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Urbanowski & Dyer, 1988; Varley, 1963). Field practicum supervisors are tasked with collaborating with social work programs, generally through direct partnership with faculty field liaisons, to ensure that students have adequate learning experiences that prepare them to be adept practitioners. Thus, it is pertinent that the dynamic issues associated with social work practice be examined from the perspective of this influential group (Miller, Deck, Grise-Owens, & Borders, 2015a). Social work licensing is one such issue.

Although some studies have explored perceptions about social work licensing in a variety of educational contexts (Cherry, Rothman, & Skolnik, 1989; Miller, Deck, Grise-Owens, & Borders, 2015b; Thyer, Vonk, & Tandy, 1996), the research literature associated with licensing, particularly as it relates to social work education, is relatively scant (Black & Whelley, 1999; Boutté-Queen, 2003; Donaldson, Hill, Ferguson, Fogel, & Erikson, 2014; Thyer, 2011). Specifically, an exhaustive literature review revealed no studies that examine professional regulation, including licensing, from the perspective of field practicum supervisors. This study seeks to uniquely address this limitation.

This exploratory study examined field practicum supervisors' (N = 158) general knowledge and perceptions related to social work licensing. Specifically, this research sought to ascertain how knowledgeable field practicum supervisors are about laws/statutes that govern social work practice, investigate their values surrounding social work licensing, and assess their thoughts about social work students and licensing. After a brief review of relevant literature, this paper explicates key research findings and discusses implications for social work field education and research.

From the outset, the authors would like to clarify that this paper is not meant to be a treatise or position statement on social work licensing and field education. Many of the historical dynamics and debate pertaining to social work licensing are discussed elsewhere (Bibus, 2007; Bibus & Boutté-Queen, 2011; Goldsmith, 1931; Hardcastle, 1977; Mathis, 1992; Seidl, 2000; Thyer, 2000). Rather, this paper seeks to explore a critical social work issue from the perspective of an important social work education constituency, thus addressing limitations in the current field education and research literature.

Background

Professional Regulation in Social Work

In comparison to other professions, the regulation of professional social work practice is a relatively new phenomenon (Marks & Knox, 2009). Social workers were first registered as practitioners by Puerto Rico in 1934. In 1947, the American Association of Social Workers issued a policy statement affirming licensing practices (Iversen, 1987). Some two decades later, California became the first state to mandate licensing for those engaged in clinical social work practice (Borenzweig, 1977).

In the early 1970s, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) released a statement promoting regulation of social work (NASW, 1974). Swagler and Harris (1977) explained that NASW's motivation for taking this position was the premise that it would improve the quality of services that social workers provide. Many state chapters of NASW expressed support for licensing in individual states throughout the 1980s. During this time, NASW developed a model law that delineated three categories of licensure: Bachelors, Masters, and Advanced Practice (Randall & DeAngelis, 2008). Before this time, efforts had focused on regulating and licensing graduate-level, clinical practitioners. These new delineations, coupled with the push from NASW, prompted a surge in states enacting licensing statutes. By 1988, all but eight states offered some type of social work licensure or registration and 27 states mandated that social workers be licensed (Cohen & Deri, 1992). Today, social work practice is regulated in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and several U.S. territories.

Licensing in International Contexts

The professional regulation of social work has also received attention in several countries outside the United States. For instance, the Social Workers Registration Act of 2003 decreed a voluntary system of "licensing and registration" for social workers in New Zealand (Beddoe, 2015, p. 166). Beddoe (2015) explained that this act established supervision requirements, as well as practitioner competency assessment and models for continuing education. In the United Kingdom, social workers are required to register after they have completed their social work education (British Association of Social Workers, 2017). China put forth its first requirements for licensing regulation in 2008, though not required for all social work practitioners (Li, Han, & Huang, 2012). Social work practice is also regulated in all ten Canadian provinces, Australia, Japan, and in the European Union (Association of Social Work Boards [ASWB], 2016d; Hussein, 2011). Indeed, as Boutté-Queen (2003) aptly concluded, it appears that regulation and licensing has become a "fixture" in the social work profession (p. 166).

Functions of Social Work Licensing

Many have discussed various functions of professional regulation, specifically licensing. Essentially, the literature indicates that these functions can be categorized into three distinct, but interconnected areas: (a) *definition of professional parameters* (e.g., practice scope), (b) *professional accountability*, and (c) *public protection*. ASWB (2016a) asserted that the purpose of licensing is to ensure that service recipients receive safe and ethical social work services. Marson, DeAngelis, and Mittal (2010) and Bibus and Boutté-Queen (2011) further elucidated that licensing establishes legally enforceable minimum practice standards for social workers in various jurisdictions. Several others have made similar assertions (Deitz & Thompson, 2004; NASW, 1975; Randall & DeAngelis, 2008).

Public protection is a seminal theme in the licensing literature. Randall and DeAngelis (2008) avowed that protection is the "essential function" of social work licensing (para. 20). Teasley, Baffour, and Tyson (2005) and Crane et al. (2010) made similar assertions. In most instances, licensing serves to protect the public, not only by ensuring a minimum level of competence, but also by providing a mechanism for clients and

others to report concerns related to inept social work practice (Dietz & Thompson, 2004; Land, 1987).

The Great Debate: To License or Not to License

There are few issues in social work that have been more rigorously debated than social work licensing (Bibus, 2007; Boutté-Queen, 2003; Gandy & Raymond, 1979). Early commentary surrounded the role that licensing should play in professionalizing social work practice. While authors such as Goldsmith (1931) described licensing as “desirable” for the profession (p. 560), others such as Hardcastle (1977) cautioned that vague regulatory standards associated with licensing would harm the profession.

Over time, several authors have raised cultural concerns related to professional regulation in general, and licensing specifically. For instance, Iversen (1987) postulated that barriers to graduate education may impact racial minorities in terms of their access to licensing. Iversen (1987) reported that since regulatory boards would likely be comprised of a “racial majority,” people of color could be negatively impacted (p. 232). Similarly, Mathis (1992) discussed the “deleterious effect” that licensing would have on people of color (p. 59). Mathis (1992) asserted that as a result of requiring social workers to have a license, the scope of services delivered to disadvantaged people and communities would be severely restricted. Further, Mathis (1992) explained that biased testing procedures and inequitable access to higher education could have a disproportionate impact on practitioners of color and/or people with low economic status. Garcia (1990) discussed similar sentiments.

Social work licensing exams are developed, managed, and administered by ASWB, which is a nonprofit, independent organization. In the past, debate has focused on regulatory processes related to the ASWB exams. Thyer et al. (1996) assessed the relationship between licensing exam scores and practitioners’ level of preparedness by administering a version of the practice exam to foundation and advanced standing graduate students. Thyer et al. (1996) reported no statistical difference in their exam scores. Albright and Thyer (2010) concluded that the ASWB clinical examination did not offer a valid assessment of practice. Albright and Thyer (2010) described this exam as “excessively transparent or guessable” and claimed that it is not a valid assessment of adept practice (p. 229). Woodcock (2016) expressed similar concerns. In contrast, Marson et al. (2010) asserted that ASWB licensing examinations are “valid, reliable, and defensible” (p. 98).

Licensing and Social Work Education

The role that licensing should play within the context of social work education has been an area of critical discourse, particularly as it relates to faculty licensure (Liles, 2007; Marks & Knox, 2009). Thyer (2000) and Seidl (2000) debated this issue. Thyer (2010) asserted that faculty who teach practice courses should be “appropriately licensed/certified to practice social work in the jurisdiction in which they teach” (p. 187). Seidl (2000) countered that such a requirement of faculty would be “impractical and unfair” (p. 193). The Council for Social Work Education (CSWE, 2001) issued an opinion statement that social work faculty do not need to be licensed. In a study related to barriers to social work licensing, Boutté-Queen (2003) observed that many faculty “work actively to see that licensure does not become an additional requirement” (p. 148).

This debate aside, social work education programs are becoming increasingly mindful of licensing dynamics, specifically as they relate to their students' pass rates. In some instances, measures such as pass rates have become an outcome metric (Miller et al., 2015b; Thyer, 2011). For example, as part of their benchmarking services, CSWE asks programs to provide data about their licensing outcomes (deGuzman, 2009). Increased attention to licensing may be attributed, at least in part, to the emphasis other professional disciplines (e.g., nursing, education, and law) place on credentialing outcomes, particularly within university contexts.

Despite increased attention to licensing within the context of social work education, research has not kept pace. In what is perhaps the only book dedicated wholly to social work licensing, Bibus and Boutté-Queen (2011) explained that "there are fewer published articles than expected" (p. 11). Donaldson et al. (2014) reported there is "insufficient research" in the area of social work education and licensure (p. 52). In discussing the lack of literature related to social work education and licensing, Cherry et al. (1989) noted that licensing has had "only minimal impact on schools of teaching" (p. 273). Black and Whelley (1999) stated that "limited consideration has been given to the role of social work education in relation to licensing" (p. 66).

The implications from the literature are clear. Debate notwithstanding, social work licensing has become a seminal component of social work practice (Boutté-Queen, 2003; Miller et al., 2015a). As such, social work educators and researchers should pursue a better understanding of licensing from the perspectives of those involved in social work education processes (Donaldson et al., 2014). This study seeks to achieve this aim.

Study Purpose and Context

The purpose of this study was to explore social work field practicum supervisors' perceptions about social work licensing. Variables of interest included knowledge about the licensing structure and processes, values related to licensing, the relationship between social work education and licensing, and perceptions about licensing requirements.

Because social work licensing is regulated at the state level, geographical and political contexts are important. This research took place in a southeastern state that has both practice and title protection statutes. This state licenses social workers at the Bachelors, Masters, and clinical levels and applicants are required to take the ASWB exam to become licensed. As such, throughout this narrative, the terms "exam pass rate" and "licensing pass rate" are used interchangeably. For context, there are 14 educational programs located in this state, and a 2015 CSWE Benchmark Report estimates that there are approximately 318 full and part-time social work faculty members assigned to undergraduate and graduate programs at these institutions.

Method

This study employed an anonymous cross-sectional survey research design. An online questionnaire was administered in Spring 2016 to solicit primary data from a nonprobability sample of social work field supervisors associated with CSWE-accredited social work programs in one southeastern state. Participants were recruited to voluntarily participate via an email solicitation, forwarded from their field director, and those who completed the online survey were offered a chance to win a \$500 cash card. The protocol for this study was approved by a university Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Measure

The authors developed a survey to capture general and demographic information about participants as well as data related to variables of interest for the study. The development of this instrument was based on existing literature related to licensing processes, including the exam. The questionnaire included 26 scaled, Likert-type items. Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with each statement. Response categories were as follows: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. The survey was piloted with a small group of field practicum supervisors ($n = 21$) to ensure item clarity. Data from the pilot phase were not included in the analyses.

Results

Data Screening

Data from the field supervisor survey were downloaded into IBM SPSS Version 23.0 (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL) from an online survey software tool (Survey Monkey™). Data were screened, diagnosed, and edited prior to any descriptive analysis according to procedures outlined by Van Den Broeck, Cunningham, Eeckels, and Herbst (2005). A sample of 158 responses was obtained and used for determining the frequency distributions of the key variables under investigation.

Participants

A total of 158 field practicum supervisors participated in this study. All participants were current practicum supervisors in one southeastern state. Descriptive statistics for the sample are included in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Participants (N=158)

Variable	N (Valid %)
Race (n=145)	
Caucasian	121 (83.4%)
African American/Black	17 (11.7%)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1 (0.7%)
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	4 (2.8%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	2 (1.4%)
Gender (n=146)	
Female	121 (82.9%)
Male	25 (17.1%)
Age in Years (n=139)	
Mean	43.6
Standard Deviation	11.8
Median	42.0
Minimum	23
Maximum	81
Current Licensure Status (n=139)	
Currently Licensed	94 (67.6%)
Licensed in Past	7 (5.0%)
Never Licensed	38 (27.3%)
Level of Students Supervised (n=140)	
Undergraduate	28 (20.0%)
Graduate	66 (47.1%)
Equal Number of Undergraduate and Graduate	46 (32.9%)
Highest Degree Earned (n = 146)	
Bachelor's	13 (8.9%)
Master's	124 (84.9%)
Doctorate	5 (3.4%)
First Professional (e.g. Law)	4 (2.7%)
Primary Work of Agency (n = 137; choose <i>all</i> that apply)	
Micro	63 (46.0%)
Mezzo	48 (35.0%)
Macro	11 (8.0%)
Work spread equally across >1 area	31 (22.6%)
Time Spent as Field Supervisor in Years (n = 135)	
Mean	9.2
Standard Deviation	8.8
Median	7.0
Minimum	0.5
Maximum	46.0

Scaled-Responses

A summary of survey item ratings is presented in Table 2. Ratings for each of the 27 items ranged from 1 to 5 where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Table 2

Field Practicum Supervisors' Perceptions of Social Work Licensing

Licensure Perceptions	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	% Agree
I am knowledgeable about the social work licensing exam.	3.66	1.15	4.0	67.1%
I am knowledgeable about the process for applying to take the licensing exam.	3.89	1.07	4.0	74.5%
I am knowledgeable about the professional regulation of social work.	3.87	1.05	4.0	77.8%
I am knowledgeable about what is required to take the licensing exam.	3.83	1.15	4.0	72.2%
I am knowledgeable about the content of the social work licensing exam.	3.52	1.11	4.0	59.9%
I value social work licensing.	4.28	0.90	5.0	83.3%
Colleagues with whom I work value licensing.	3.77	1.17	4.0	68.4%
The executives/administrators at the agency where I am a practicum supervisor value licensing.	3.70	1.21	4.0	62.0%
The students whom I supervise value social work licensing.	3.90	0.90	4.0	73.1%
Social work professors at colleges/universities value social work licensing.	3.97	.97	4.0	78.5%
Social work field practicum supervisors should have a social work license.	3.65	1.23	4.0	60.7%
I discuss social work licensing with the students that I supervise during field practicums.	3.77	1.11	4.0	70.7%
Students' licensing pass rates reflect the quality of education they receive.	3.36	1.08	4.0	55.4%
Social work educational programs should be evaluated in terms of their licensing pass rates.	3.17	1.01	3.0	37.6%
Licensing pass rates are an indicator of success for social work colleges/universities.	3.26	1.04	3.0	48.4%
Students' licensing pass rates reflect the quality of their field practicum experience.	2.96	1.08	3.0	37.2%
Students at colleges/universities are informed about social work licensing.	3.52	0.99	4.0	56.6%
The social work educational curriculum prepares students to pass the licensing exam.	3.50	0.93	4.0	59.0%
Students whom I supervise at my practicum site will pass the licensing exam on their first try.	3.62	.85	4.0	56.0%
I can advise students on the process for taking the licensing exam.	3.69	1.06	4.0	68.8%
Multiple choice exams can adequately test social work practice competencies.	2.94	1.04	3.0	35.0%
Every social worker should have a social work license.	3.49	1.30	4.0	55.5%

Licensing will have a long-term positive impact on the social work profession.	4.02	0.97	4.0	75.7%
Social work licensure is routinely discussed among employees at my agency.	3.16	1.27	3.0	45.1%
My agency has an adequate relationship with the state board of social work.	3.27	1.22	3.0	46.4%
Social work faculty should have a social work license.	3.72	1.15	4.0	66.3%

Note: Respondents rated each item on a 1 to 5 Likert scale where 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree; % Agree column presents an aggregation of "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" responses.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore practicum supervisors' general knowledge and perceptions about social work licensing. This paper contributes to the literature by addressing current limitations related to licensing and in research that examines field supervisor perceptions about dynamic social work issues. The following discussion briefly outlines salient observations derived from this study. Please refer to Table 2 for specific item rating data.

First, participants overwhelmingly agreed (83.3%) that they value social work licensing. As Table 2 indicates, this item yielded the highest mean rating in the set of survey items (4.28 out of 5) and had close to the lowest amount of response variability in the set ($SD = 0.90$). Further, it was the only item with a median rating of 5. Interestingly, field practicum supervisors perceived others as valuing licensing somewhat less. While 78.5% believed that social work *professors* value licensing and 73.1% said that their *students* value it, only 68.4% agreed that their *colleagues* place a value on licensing and just 62.0% believed *executives/administrators* at their agencies value it. It is plausible that social desirability bias may prompt study participants to report their own perceptions of the value of social work licensing more positively. As an example, Miller et al. (2015a) reported that over 90% of undergraduate students in their study stated that they value licensing. Hence, field practicum supervisors in the current study may have underestimated their students' perceptions of licensing, or alternatively, social desirability bias may have prompted students in the prior study to overstate their feelings. Data from the current study may also suggest that those who are most directly involved in the social work education process are perceived to place a higher value on social work licensing, perhaps because other colleagues, executives, and administrators are not social workers.

Despite field practicum supervisors' general beliefs that they themselves, as well as social work faculty and students, *value professional licensing*, there was considerably less agreement among study participants about *who should be licensed*. Only 55.5% agreed that all social workers should have a license, and among all items in the survey set, this item had the greatest variability ($SD = 1.30$). In contrast, the above-referenced prior study reported that 83% of undergraduate social work students agreed that all social workers should be licensed (Miller et al., 2015a). Only about two thirds (66.3%) of field practicum supervisors in the current study said that social work faculty should be licensed, and just 60.7% agreed that social work practicum su-

supervisors should have a license. These data illustrate the dynamic debate over the role of licensing in social work education as well as in the broader profession, and are congruent with existing literature describing such tensions (e.g., Bibus, 2007).

The data in this study indicated that participants typically perceived themselves as informed about social work licensing. Most reported they were knowledgeable about the professional regulation of social work (77.8%), the process for taking the licensing exam (74.5%), and requirements associated with sitting for the exam (72.2%). This suggests that field practicum supervisors are positioned to at least advise students on the process for taking the exam in order to comply with regulatory requirements. Most (70.7%) reported that they do discuss social work licensing with students they supervise, and over two-thirds (68.8%) agreed that they can advise students on the process. However, substantially fewer reported general knowledge about the licensing exam itself (67.1%) or its content (59.5%).

Field practicum supervisors in this study perceived that their students need guidance with regards to licensing. Fewer than six in ten (56.6%) believed that students are informed about social work licensing. It is even more concerning that only 59.0% of participants agreed that the social work curriculum prepares students to pass the exam, and just 56.0% thought that the students they supervise will pass the licensing exam on their first try. Given ASWB exam data that suggest otherwise, these findings are interesting. According to ASWB (2016b), the first-time pass rates for the national undergraduate and graduate exams were 77.5% and 80.5%, respectively, in 2015.

These findings can be contrasted with the prior research on student perceptions of licensing. Miller et al. (2015b) also found that most students in their study sample (nearly 75%) were confident in their own ability to pass the social work licensing exam after graduation. If one assumes that field practicum supervisors are best positioned to accurately appraise and benchmark students' capacities, the current study suggests that students may approach the licensing exam with exaggerated self-confidence. However, the gap between field supervisors' estimates of first-time pass rates and ASWB's reported pass rates could instead indicate that it is the field supervisors whose confidence is lacking. In either case, future researchers should survey students and their practicum supervisors concurrently so that such conclusions may be drawn with a higher degree of certainty.

Finally, results of the current study indicate that there is a discrepancy between field practicum supervisors' perceptions of licensing in general and their beliefs about the licensing exam itself as a specific indicator of professional proficiency and/or a measure of one's qualification to hold a license. While three quarters of the sample (75.7%) agreed that licensing will have a positive impact on the social work profession, only around half (55.4%) said that students' licensing pass rates reflect the quality of education they receive, and just 48.4% believed that pass rates are an indicator of social work education programs' success. Even fewer (37.2%) agreed that pass rates reflect the quality of students' field experiences; in fact, this item was the lowest rated in the set. About the same proportion (37.6%) believed that social work educational programs

should be evaluated in terms of their licensing pass rates. Further, only 35.0% believed that multiple choice exams can adequately test social work practice competencies.

Some researchers have explicitly linked licensing exam content to CSWE competencies (e.g., Brooks, 2013). However, data from this study may suggest that field practicum supervisors do not see a strong connection of practicum learning to either regulatory practice in general or the licensing exam specifically. Given the espoused importance of field practicum as the signature pedagogy within the social work curriculum (Lyter, 2012), this notion certainly warrants further exploration. Since fewer than half of participants in this study (46.4%) believed that their agency has an adequate relationship with the state board of social work, and about the same proportion (45.1%) said that social work licensure is routinely discussed among employees at their agency, the time appears to be ripe for further debate. Key areas for exploration include reasons that social work professionals value (or fail to value) licensing, their ideas about the most effective measures of professional knowledge and skill, and the strategies they endorse for ensuring accountability and public protection.

Limitations

As with any study, this research has several limitations. This study was exploratory and only collected data on field supervisor perspectives about licensing. Furthermore, analysis was limited to descriptive statistics. These data were collected from field practicum supervisors for CSWE-accredited social work education programs in one state with title and practice protection laws, which may have shaped perspectives and/or impacted reliability. Additionally, participants self-selected into the study, and this may have biased the overall findings in unknown ways. Although the sample size was appropriate for an exploratory study of this nature, participants who chose not to participate may hold different perspectives about licensing. In addition, the sample was overwhelmingly Caucasian and Female, which may have impacted the response set. Data were collected via an instrument that has not been previously tested; thus, threats to validity must be acknowledged. Future studies may examine issues associated with item construction and phrasing. Finally, because the survey invitation came from university-based researchers, social desirability may have biased responses. Based on these limitations, *broad generalizations associated with this study should be considered carefully and critically.*

Implications

Indubitably, field practicum supervisors play an integral role in socializing students to, and informing them about, the social work profession. Given the current regulation of practice contexts (e.g., licensing statutes), this preparation should include informing students about professional regulation in general and social work licensing specifically. With this in mind, the following paragraphs explore implications for social work field education and research. These implications may be of particular interest for educational programs that seek to improve licensing outcomes (number of test-takers, pass rates, etc.).

Social Work Field Education

Findings from this study indicate that while practicum supervisors may be knowledgeable about licensing in general, there are specific areas (such as exam content), where they could benefit from having additional information. Further, data from the current study indicate that there may be dissonance in perceptions about licensure, particularly between students and field practicum supervisors.

Data also suggest that that field practicum supervisors may not view the educational field experience as directly related to dynamics associated with licensing. According to ASWB (2016b), significant portions of all licensing exams are related to “direct practice.” The practicum experience is where students first put concepts learned in the classroom into practice (Edmond, Megivern, Williams, Rochman, & Howard, 2006). As such, the field practicum may play an essential role in helping students grasp concepts that will appear on the social work licensing exams. Still, it appears that practicum supervisors in this study may not be making these connections explicitly.

In this regard, social work educational programs can facilitate discussions about social work licensing. This will allow for program stakeholders (field supervisors, students, etc.) to gain a better understanding of others’ perspectives. Additionally, such discussions may help field supervisors garner knowledge about exam content and gain insight into how the field experience can impact licensing exam performance. One ideal platform for this discussion (or a dissemination of licensing information) is the university’s field practicum supervisor orientation. Being explicit about these connections (and the relationships among licensing, curriculum and teaching) may improve students’ self-efficacy and graduates’ success when they sit for the licensing exam.

There are tools that may help field educators and practicum supervisors to make more specific connections. For instance, ASWB (2016c) initiated a *Path to Licensure Initiative (PLI)*, which involves collaboration with CSWE-accredited social work programs to customize schemes that “meet their own teaching needs,” (para. 5) as applied to professional regulation/licensure. ASWB touts the primary aim of this program as helping students transition into professional practice post-graduation. Field educators may also consider using textbooks that connect course material to licensing processes, particularly the licensing exam. An example of one such text is Nichols’s (2012) *Advancing Core Competencies: Emphasizing Practice Behaviors and Outcomes*.

Field Education Research

Research implications abound. Perhaps most importantly, researchers (particularly those focused on social work education) should continue to examine relationships between licensing and social work education (Donaldson et al., 2014). This should include exploration of the impact of licensing on teaching, the methods for better preparing students for social work regulation, and the factors that impact perceptions of licensing among social work education stakeholder groups. Based on the increasing focus on credentialing processes and pass rates, particularly among other professional disciplines within the academy (law, nursing, etc.), ambivalence about social work licensing seems to no longer be acceptable (Donaldson et al.,

2014; Thyer, 2011).

This study presents several questions that can guide future field education research. Does placement type (e.g., micro, mezzo, or macro) impact perceptions associated with social work licensing? Are perceptions associated with self-efficacy related to passing the exam? Do race and/or gender impact perceptions about licensing? Researchers might examine field supervisors' perspectives on licensing relative to public protection and competent and ethical practice.

Although licensing is regulated at the state level, a national study of field supervisor perceptions of social work licensing may be beneficial. Moreover, a study that examines licensing in international contexts, and comparisons between those contexts, may be valuable. The current study can serve as the foundation for such research, and future investigators should address the current study's methodological limitations.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to shed light on a dynamic social work issue from the perspective of field practicum supervisors, thereby addressing a dearth in the current literature. It is important to reiterate: *This paper does not presume to be a treatise or position statement on licensing and social work education.* Rather, the authors hope that this manuscript can contribute to a continuing discussion about social work licensing and its relationship to field education.

As the literature suggests, social work regulation—including licensing—will be around for the foreseeable future. With increased emphasis on competencies and calls for metrics of accountability for educational programs, it is likely that licensing dynamics will become even more prominent. Social work educators and researchers should continue to explore and discuss licensing within the context of social work education generally, and field education specifically. Indeed, as Donaldson, et al. (2014) aptly concluded, “Not having this conversation is no longer an option” (p. 60).

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