



# Field Education with External Supervision: Supporting Student Learning

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## **Abstract**

The importance of field education in preparing social work students for professional practice is globally acknowledged. At times considered less desirable than placements with internal supervision, current workplace and tertiary education contexts see an increase in field education with external supervision. This paper reports on qualitative research that explored the experiences of key stakeholders in social work field education with external supervision in Australia. Findings highlight that field education with external supervision, like other social work practice learning opportunities, is focused on learning about practicing social work. Potential and inherent challenges of placements with external supervision are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Field education is recognized as central to preparing social work students for professional social work practice (Abram, Hartung, & Wernet, 2000). It is generally discussed as the heart of social work education (Beddoe, 2000; Homonoff, 2008) or a signature pedagogy (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). In Australia, social work students are required to complete 1000 hours of placement in a human service organization where their learning is guided, supported and assessed by an experienced social worker within the agency (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2012/2015). Internationally, the social worker supervising the practice learning is referred to as the field instructor (Wayne et al., 2010) or the practice educator (Domakin, 2014). In an Australian context, the qualified social work supervisor is referred to as the field educator (AASW, 2012/2015). Placements can be set up with external supervision, where a qualified social worker external to the setting provides weekly supervision (AASW, 2012/2015). This article reports on qualitative research exploring the experiences of key stakeholders in social work field education with external supervision.

## **Background**

Field education has been an essential part of preparing future social work practitioners since the beginning of social work education (Barretti, 2007). The theoretical conceptualization of learning

in social work field education has moved from a pure apprenticeship model, where the students followed and copied the expert social worker, to a model where students are seen as active participants in their learning experience (Barretti, 2007). According to Maidment (2013), field education is a time in which students “[...] learn how to practice one’s discipline” (p. 4). Moreover, it offers opportunities to learn about procedures, practices and the connections between theoretical learning and practice settings. Field education is an opportunity to incorporate a core value of the social work profession: a social justice focus (Havig, 2013). It is a time for students to understand social work roles, advance their competencies and skills and develop a professional identity (Cleak & Wilson, 2013).

Learning by doing is a key focus of social work field education (Pack, 2011). Generally, students are placed with a qualified social worker in a human services organization, and much of the learning in field education is seen as being mediated through the supervisory relationship (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Research highlighted the value of role-modelling and observation in field education (Beddoe, Ackroyd, Chinnery, & Appleton, 2011; Havig, 2013). Students want to learn from observing the field educators’ practice and be guided by their expertise (Barretti, 2009). Thorough observation of students’ practice can assist in normative and formative supervision (Beddoe et al., 2011). Supervision in field education can be an avenue for students to: critically reflect on practice issues and tensions, untangle their thoughts, explore the connections between their personal and professional self, learn to practice independently and develop skills for practice (Hooyberghs, 2012).

Social work education prepares social work students for the realities of practice. Researching and reflecting on practice knowledge, transferring knowledge and skills to new contacts and using them creatively are important abilities for students to develop in professional practice (Fook, 2001). Educating social work students for the profession through field education consequently requires them to critically engage with the practice context (Havig, 2013; Morley & Dunstan, 2013). Therefore, in assessing the quality of a placement, it is important to consider its surrounding pedagogical culture (Bellinger, 2010).

The significance of social work field education and supervision invokes questions about social work field education with external supervision. The Australian accrediting body for social work education, the Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], permits placements with external supervision where there is not a suitable social work supervisor in the host organization. However, AASW (2012/2015) asserts that “[...] arrangements must be made to ensure that appropriate professional formation and supervision is provided by a qualified social work field educator” (p. 7). Placements with external supervision are often discussed as less than ideal (Abram et al., 2000; Cleak & Smith, 2012). Students generally valued the presence of a social worker in field education as facilitating social work identity and competence for practice (Cleak & Smith, 2012).

Nevertheless, research has identified benefits of placements with external supervision include fa-

cilitating students' participation in social work practice and broadening experiences in emerging community organization (McLaughlin, Scholar, McCaughan, & Coleman, 2014). Such placements can offer increased job opportunities and exposure to generalist social work practice (Unger, 2003). The limited literature available about field education with external supervision highlighted the importance of the triad relationship (Abram et al., 2000), the support needed for field educators, task supervisors and students (Clare, 2001; Henderson, 2010) and the need to clarify the responsibilities of each of the supervisors (Karban, 1999). The relationship between supervisors is a key factor in a successful student placement with external supervision (Abram et al., 2000).

Current contexts, such as fierce competition for placements (Hanlen, 2011) and increased student numbers (Lefevre, 2005), impact the ability of placements to provide qualified social work field educators on site. Issues such as lack of support for field educators (Torry, Furness, & Wilkinson, 2005), high workloads (Moriarty et al., 2009) and the lack of social workers in certain geographical areas (Unger, 2003) are factors contributing to an increase in placements with external supervision. Placements with external supervision seem to be understood as a response to a crisis driven environment. Little is known about the experiences of key stakeholders in placements with external supervision. Social work education and the social work field have much to gain from a better understanding of those experiences.

## **Method**

A qualitative research framework informed by phenomenology and social constructivism was applied to explore the experiences of external supervisors, task supervisors, liaison persons and students in placements with external supervision (Schwandt, 1994; Vagle, 2014). Semi-structured interviews focused on participants' experiences in field education with external supervision, what they thought worked well and what not, their experience of the four way relationship and what they thought an ideal placement set-up might be. A recursive model of interviewing was utilized, involving an interview guide and the researcher following up leads emerging in the interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). The study was approved by the University Ethics Committee.

## **Sampling and Participants**

A purposive method of sampling was applied to invite people with experiences in placements with external supervision to participate in this research. Invitations to participate were sent to Australian field education units and the need for participants was advertised at conferences (Creswell, 2007). Thirty-two (32) participants were interviewed once, face to face or over the phone. Participants were associated with a number of social work education programs across Australia. A number of participants had experienced multiple roles in field education with external supervision. In the interviews, participants were asked to respond to questions from the position of one role at a time. Pseudonyms were created to protect participants' identity, however the gender of the participant, their experience, background information and role has remained intact as they were related in the interviews.

### **Students**

Thirteen (13) participants identified as having experienced the role of student in placements with external supervision. Nine (9) of these participants had only experienced external supervision as a student and four (4) had experiences across a number of roles including that of student. All of the student participants were female. Six (6) of the students were in their final year, having just completed or were completing their final placement at the time of the interview.

### **Task Supervisors**

Nine (9) participants identified as having supported social work student placements as task supervisors. The participants held a range of qualifications, all relevant to work in the social welfare sector. Three (3) participants had social work qualifications but were not eligible to supervise social work students. Two (2) of the participants drew on only one experience as a task supervisor while the other seven (7) drew on numerous experiences. All task supervisors were female, and their work experience in the social welfare sector ranged between 5 and 27 years.

### **External Field Educators**

Fifteen (15) participants identified as having supported social work student placements as external supervisors, appointed to provide social work supervision to students on placement without a social worker on site. The participants were experienced social workers, having worked in the social welfare sector and/or social work education between 5 and 40 years. There were 10 female and 5 male participants. The great majority of participants drew on numerous experiences as external supervisors of social work students.

### **Liaison People**

Eleven (11) participants identified as having supported social work student placements with external supervision as liaison people. Nine (9) of the liaison people were female and two (2) were male. The participants were experienced in the role of liaison person, and most of them also had provided external supervision to students at some stage.

## **Analysis**

A thematic analysis of the data was conducted in line with phenomenological research. The aim was to explore the data with fresh eyes, by attempting to bridle the researcher's own experiences and positions (Dahlberg, 2006; LeVasseur, 2003; Vagle, 2014). Relevant to the phenomenological framework adopted in the research (Vagle, 2014), data analysis involved exploring each set of data separately, reporting on it before then recommencing data analysis of the other groups and then finally, analysis of the data as a whole. This has resulted in a detailed discussion of the themes that were identified in each set of data and these findings are published elsewhere (Zuchowski, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b). Working to bridle those discussions, each new set of data was approached with renewed curiosity (Vagle, 2014).

Presented here are the findings from the secondary data analysis that involved a thematic analysis of the interviews of all 32 participants. Of particular interest in the data analysis, in line with post-intentional phenomenology and social constructivism, was how meaning and understandings were shaped by the interactions with others and social contexts (Creswell, 2009; Vagle, 2014).

## Findings

The findings are reported around themes that were identified as participants reflected on their experiences with and in placements with external supervision guided by the open questions in the interview guide. The themes discussed include learning about practicing social work, student focused learning, learning environments and relationships, and current contexts impacting field education. Overall, while no direct question about learning was asked, participants discussed their experience in placements with external supervision focused on the learning about social work, the learning for the student and the learning context.

### Learning about social work practice

The first theme highlighted that the learning in placements with external supervision was focused on learning about social work. Participants talked about learning in field education with external supervision as social work focused. They discussed learning about theories and the usefulness of time away from a busy placement context to discuss theory and personal practice frameworks. In discussing field education opportunities with external supervision, participants outlined that students were participating in placement in the organization to learn about social work. However, participants further pointed out that whether this learning was always achieved in the placement with external supervision needed to be monitored and the learning facilitated through supervision.

Overall, participants highlighted the importance of the social work focus to the placement, and that role-modelling played a part in student learning on placement. Engagement in supervision provided an important vehicle to discuss social work identity, roles and theories and students approached their external supervisors to discuss the social work aspects of the placement. It appears that external supervision set-ups meant that students approached people trained in social work to develop their social work identity. Kelly, as a student participant, for example, discussed: "So I guess I pick my people, if I discuss 'social worky' stuff I would speak to the social worker or the liaison person."

Similarly, Regina, as a task supervisor, recognized the importance of the social work input that the external supervisor provided: "The professional supervisor [...] would be very much centered [on] the social work part of the placement. Like where your experience ends and what you are learning on the job sits [...] with the social work degree and expectations and ethics and all of those things."

Participants pointed out that supervision with the external supervisor provided opportunities to consider the bigger picture issues, frameworks and perspectives. It allowed a step aside from the

discussions about the daily issues and concerns. The usefulness of supervision away from the actual experience to explore questions of relevance to social work theories and social work identity is also highlighted specifically by many students and external supervisors. As an external supervisor Shelly, for instance, outlined: "I think that there is a tendency if you are the internal supervisor to sometimes get caught talking about tasks. Rather than [...] the theories that could be applied, even talking about [...] your values and your ethics and how [...] there is a rub here because [...] in your world children shouldn't be taken away from their parents and in this world they are [...] all that sort of thing."

It was speculated by the participants that external social work supervision allowed a focus on social work, that, if provided internally might have remained secondary or at least impacted by discussion around organizational and case management matters. This speculation reflects the concern that in current climates supervision can be focused on tasks and risks (Chinnery & Beddoe, 2011; Green, 2007) and identifies that the concern could potentially be mitigated in placements with external supervision. Students who receive supervision externally can become active contributors to their learning in supervision discussions that focus on social work practice, values and ethics (Bellinger, 2010), rather than receiving primarily task focused supervision that might limit the integration of professional knowledge into practice (Chinnery & Beddoe, 2011). External supervision as identified above by the participants can allow student to step aside from the immediate tasks to participate in social work learning that critically engages with the practice context (Morley & Dunstan, 2013).

Developing a sense of self in practice is seen as an opportunity of field education (Lager & Robbins, 2004). Participants highlighted that field education with external supervision offered students the opportunity to learn about their professional self in practice and to develop a professional practice framework. Georgina, in reflecting on her role as the external supervisor, explained that through external supervision students could develop their own professional practice framework: "Looking at what they are doing every day and how they are going about it and putting frameworks around that and helping them to get encouraged and them putting their own frameworks around why I am doing that? Why am I doing [this]? What am I learning out of this? What I have learned in the classroom I am translating into the face to face contact with the client?"

Exploring the professional framework and identity was seen as core to the external supervision session as evidenced by this comment from Matthew, an external supervisor: "You want that person to develop as bold professionally and personally, so that as they can be an effective practitioner." The ability to reflect on placement experiences with a supervisor that was not enmeshed within the agency was raised by a number of participants as a positive aspect of placements with external supervision as students sought to develop their practice.

### **Student focused learning**

The second theme identified was 'student focused learning'. Learning was seen as needing to be

relevant to the students' learning needs and requirements. It can be argued that this is an obvious result as a student field education opportunity would be focused on student learning. In this context it needs to be noted, however, that no direct question was asked about learning or placement outcomes, nevertheless the majority of participants stressed the importance of developing field education around the students' learning needs and their abilities, ways of learning and interests. Responses referring to learning particularly emerged when participants were asked about ideal placements. This finding supports the idea that the pedagogical culture of the placement is more important in determining the quality of a placement than whether the supervision is provided internally or externally (Bellinger, 2010). Student focused learning recognizes students as active learners rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Barretti, 2007; Bellinger, 2010).

Participants highlighted the importance of students having opportunities to participate in practice in useful and supported placements. Almost unanimously participants talked about the importance of getting to know the students and their learning styles and needs. Comments of participants highlighted the importance of creating the best learning opportunity through a matching process, but acknowledged what was best was different for every placement. Karen, for example, who had experiences as a liaison person and as an external supervisor in placements with external supervision pointed out: "I don't think there is an ideal set-up. I think placement agencies are so varied, students are so varied, I don't think there is one way that would fit everybody. I think we do need to remain open to be flexible to see how things can work."

### **Learning environment and relationships**

The third theme explored the learning environment and relationships. External supervision set-ups provided a number of challenges due to the particular learning environment and the relationships. Key aspects discussed were the importance of understanding the context, the involvement of the task supervisor and the complexities of the relationships.

Overall, participants discussed the importance of a placement environment that was supportive of the students' learning and the need for students and supervisors to get to know each other in order to create a positive learning environment. A challenge of placements with external supervision identified by the participants was 'understanding the context.' This worked two fold. First, it was necessary for external supervisors to have or gain an understanding of the agency context. Second, it was important for the on-site supervisors to have or gain an understanding of the learning context of the placement. Many of the student participants raised the lack of contextual knowledge of the external supervisor as challenging, highlighting the lack of insight into the organization and the field of practice as impacting their placement, supervision and assessment. At times this could mean that they were receiving differing messages from their supervisors as a student. This is exemplified by Stephanie's comment, for example: "I guess some of the challenges were at times, because the external supervisor didn't have a knowledge of the agency, besides what I gave them, so their back-

ground clashed a little bit with what the task supervisor might want.”

Similarly, external supervisors and liaison people raised the significance of understanding the context in regards to the student, the organization, supervision, the ideal placement, assessment, relationships and roles. Participants talked about the importance of knowing and understanding the context in which the student acted, worked, responded and made decisions. They reflected how understanding of this context impacted the manner in which they structured and negotiated supervision and outlined the strategies they used to gain an appreciation of the placement context. Participants argued that if they did not know the context it was hard to know what to focus their supervision on. Iona, an external supervisor, highlighted: “I am sometimes allocated a placement that I haven’t had a student in before. It’s quite tricky, because it might be not until the first meeting that I actually get to look inside the agency. So you are essentially supervising without context until it dribbles in with little bits of information directly from the student.”

A number of students proposed that it would be helpful if the task supervisor attended training or received detailed information about social work field education. Jamie, for instance, suggested: “I think the [university] might be encouraging task supervisors to be aware a bit more and involved with the field ed unit [...] to prepare them for stuff, I don’t think many people do that, and they could even meet people and get an idea.”

This echoes Henderson’s (2010) research in which task supervisors themselves reported an initial lack of knowledge about social work and that they were less confident in their role. Overall, this indicates that extra support and training is needed for supervisors in placements with external supervision (Abram et al., 2000; Henderson, 2010), and that roles and responsibilities need to be clarified during the planning stages of the placement (Parker, Hillison, & Wilson, 2003).

Concerns about a lack of involvement of the task supervisor in the assessment were expressed by a number of students and task supervisors. Concurrently many external supervisors reported that it was difficult to assess the students’ performance and provide feedback to them without seeing their actual practice. Some participants in their role as external field educators talked about joint work in assessment and supervision. Paul, an external supervisor, explained: “I always say to the student on placement that when I am making that assessment with you as a joint operation, you will prepare your report, I will prepare my report, we will prepare and they can double together, but essentially [the task supervisor] is going to be a part of that as the day to day task supervisor. She will put in a small input.” However, overall, the responses of participants reflected a lack of clarity of understanding of how the task supervisor’s observation and feedback is recognized in assessment. It seems difficult to discern whether the task supervisors’ supervision input and guidance is taken up in the overall placement assessment and whether their work is recognized and valued. Yet, research has shown that the success of field education with external supervision depends on collaborative relation-

ships (Clare, 2001), clearly defined roles and an understanding and valuing what each party brings to the placement (Maidment & Woodward, 2002).

The complexities and importance of relationships in placements with external supervision is highlighted in the findings of this research. Prior research suggested that field educators are core to the field education learning experience and that if the relationship between student and field educator was lacking this led to placement disruptions (Parker, 2010). This is confirmed by participants in this study who identified the importance of the relationship for the supervisory relationship and the placement process. Denise as a student, described how the different relationships with key people in her placement supported or hindered her learning: "I would say, my relationship with my manager was a very supportive one and reciprocal, we both got something out of that. The relationship with the university liaison officer felt very supported, and specifically about my learning and getting my degree. The relationship with my external supervisor was distant, unproductive, negative and actually detrimental to what I was doing."

Participants talked about the importance of building relationships between the student and each supervisor, but some also expressed that they had to build relationship between both supervisors. In the interviews participants were specifically asked about the four-way relationship between students, task supervisors, field educators and liaison people. Few participants discussed this connection, rather, most explored their individual relationships with other parties. Karen, for instance, stressed the importance of these relationships: "So it's about having these relationships and conversations happen and we are walking closely, you know, not right beside each other, but we are not going completely in different directions."

The AASW (2012/2015) expects that the external and task supervisor work together to facilitate students' learning in field education, naming them 'co-field educators.' A quarter of the participants used expressions of team, tandem and joint work when describing their relationships with others in the placement, and a further quarter of the participants talked about 'working together'. Loretta, a task supervisor, outlined: "Another external supervisor that I didn't know at all [...] has rang me quite a few times and discussed things with me and discussed progress with me and I find that very helpful. If he says to me this isn't happening, we have got work together to make it happen. I think we are part of the team."

While the majority of the participants identified the importance of collaboration, a significant number of participants discussed supervisors that did not collaborate. This is concerning in light of research that identified effective communication, clarification of roles and expectations, division of labor and supports as important ingredients of successful placements with external supervision (Abram et al., 2000; Karban, 1999; Parker et al., 2003).

### **Current contexts impacting field education**

The fourth theme identified was that current contexts are impacting field education and therefore the context and delivery of placements with external supervision. Participants raised a number of concerns in regards to the structural and professional contexts of field education and placements with external supervision. The limited availability of placements and associated concerns about the quality of external supervisors and key players juggling responsibilities were prominent in the discussions. Participants highlighted that it was difficult to find placements, supervisors and liaison people. Denise, a student, was aware that her university was struggling to find placements: "What has happened with [my university] is, they were struggling, I believe, struggling to find enough places for [...] student placements that had a social worker on-site to be able to supervise the student. So they contracted external supervisors who were somewhat not known to them."

Other participants commented that it was difficult to find external supervisors and liaison people. Iona, a liaison person, highlighted that the process of hiring staff can be burdened when universities are under pressure to find enough supervisors to support placement: "There is a real issue around the process, I think [...] we have just opened up the flood gates, here you go, apply. We haven't had an interview process [...] we accepted a number of social workers and then allocated [them] to students and don't know anything about their work, really. I don't think that is really good process, we are not looking after the students as well as well should be."

Many participants recognized that the busy schedules of key players impacted the learning opportunity. It was expressed that limited availability of key players impacted the students' learning and limited the opportunity for supervisors and liaison people to support the placement learning. The research and field education textbooks highlight the importance of the guidance of supervisors and liaison people in field education (Armenta & Linseisen, 2015; Cleak & Wilson, 2013; Parker, 2010).

## **Discussion**

Four points are explored in the discussion. First, placements with external supervision can be valuable learning opportunities focused on social work. Second, the establishing of context and the space away from busy workplaces can be an opportunity to focus on professional practice and identity. Third, the danger is that the space away from the workplace could mean that supervision becomes a theoretical exercise and, fourth, relationships and collaboration in placements with external supervision need to be planned carefully.

Placements with external supervision in this research were discussed as focused on learning about social work. For some participants this came as a bit of a surprise, potentially echoing the idea that placements with external supervision might be seen as second best (AASW, 2012/2015; Abram et al., 2000; Cleak & Smith, 2012). A focus on learning about social work in placements with external supervision would be consistent with the requirement by the Australian Accreditation body that

contemporary pedagogical processes and knowledge are utilized to develop “[...] core attributes and for building students’ commitment to, and an identity with, professional social work” (AASW, 2012/2015, p. 9).

The findings of this research highlight that placements with external supervision can be valuable learning experiences, offering opportunities to discuss practice away from busy work places and focused on developing students’ practice and practice framework. The separate space for supervision can be a potential bonus. It may facilitate a space for critical reflection and thinking to explore practice and the dominant constructs and ideas that shape professional practice and social work identity (Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Noble, 2011; Schön, 1991). Moreover, establishing the context of the experience in placements with external supervision involved engagement of the student in their learning. In order for the external supervisor to understand the context and provide supervision, students need to explore and describe the context of their practice, potentially creating a more generative learning experience for students (Bellinger, 2010). For participants in this research it meant that supervision was focused on discussing professional social work practice, rather than limiting supervision to exploring assessment tools or organizational procedures and uncritically socializing students into the culture of the organization (Domakin, 2014).

However, the separate supervision space potentially can also mean that critical reflections are not informed by intimate knowledge of the agency and practice context apart from what the student brings to the discussion, especially when there is little collaboration with the task supervisor. If the supervisor has no insight in the actual practice of the supervisee the danger could be that “[...] any discussion can become merely a theoretical exercise” in supervision (Ung, 2002, p. 100). According to participants’ responses, relationships were complex and did not always involve close relationships between supervisors. While the usefulness of stepping aside from the immediate to focus on social work perspectives and frameworks is acknowledged through this research, further investigation is needed to determine whether and how external supervision facilitates critically reflective practice.

Participants in this research shared that it was hard to get people together, and that there was a lack of clarity in how key stakeholders would work together and to what purpose. It would appear that this is noteworthy for placement planning and support. Field education is meant to be a joint effort between the university, the organization, the field educator and the student (AASW, 2012/2015). The success of field education with external supervision is contingent on collaborative relationships (Clare, 2001), an understanding and valuing what each party brings to the placement and clearly defined roles (Maidment & Woodward, 2002). The question thus arises, how effective is the joint endeavor if the relationships are disjointed? One example from the data that can be deliberated in this respect is the significant number of task supervisors who had limited relationships with external supervisors and who seemed to infer that their role was an unacknowledged factor in placement. This practice highlights questions about the positioning of task supervisors, power relationships and how

their input is sought for assessment triangulation. Similarly, a number of participants commented that different practice frameworks of supervisors may create confusion for students. Building relationships, collaboration and having good structures in place would be crucial to deal with potential difficulties in field education (Parker, 2010). What seems apparent from the findings of this research is that transparent processes of joint discussions, careful planning and supporting a valuable multi-directional group relationship would be useful (Clare, 2001; Henderson, 2010).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A number of strategies were applied to enhance the trustworthiness of this research. Transcripts and findings were shared with participants for member checking and transparency. However, qualitative research involves interpretation (Creswell, 2009). Efforts were made to explore the meaning of the experience from the participants' position and bridling the researcher's on assumptions and experiences (Vagle, 2014).

Limitations of the study include participants' self-selection into the study and a limited sample size. Participants in this study have also consciously chosen what they want to share in the interviews and what to omit. The participants' reality is explored through their words, recollection and reflection (Minichiello et al., 2008). Awareness of and special interest in social work field education or external supervision would have impacted participants self-selection into the study. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all placements with external supervision, but can offer insight into the experiences of participants who have been involved in similar placements with external supervision. Further research applying an articulated learning model could result in more definite insights about learning in placements with external supervision.

The multiple roles of various participants can be seen as a further limitation. Participants were asked to talk about these roles separately when they identified that they had experience in multiple roles. While participants were able to provide responses from the separate positions, nevertheless, multiple positioning needs to be acknowledged. One could argue, though, that other experiences, contexts and histories are continually influencing people's experiences and views of experiences, and in this research attempts were made to make this explicit.

### **Conclusion**

The findings highlighted that participants in this study discussed some of the concerns noted in available literature about placements with external supervision. For example, the potential that students could be getting differing messages from their supervisors if there is little collaboration about the placements between key players emerged from these interviews and is reflected in the literature. However, the findings also indicate that other concerns, for example the ability of students to acquire a social work identity, may need to be researched further. The discussions of the participants confirmed that placements with external supervision, like other social work placements, are focused

on learning about practicing social work. A large part of the participants' discussions was focused on student focused learning rather than whether the supervision was provided internally or externally. An ideal placement, as discussed by participants in this research, is not primarily centered on the question whether supervision is internal or external.

The implication for social work education is the importance of continuing to develop field education models around pedagogical outcomes rather than as responses to difficult times. Field education with external supervision needs to be more than the last resort for placements lacking resources. Rather, it needs to be carefully planned around the students' learning needs, focused on social work practice and supported by building and maintaining collaborative relationships and communication processes.

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