



TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION: NEW INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

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ISBN 978-1-77385-440-3

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Social Work Field Education Experience with Non-Social Work Field Supervisors in Community Senior Service Setting

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There has been an ongoing debate over the years on whether social work students should be matched with non-social work field supervisors during their placements. This study contributes to the resolution of this debate for its findings should be significant to social work field education, especially during COVID-19, as this is one of the most challenging times to match a social work field student with a supervisor.

There are several reasons why a social work field student might be matched with a non-social work field supervisor. First, there are not enough social work field supervisors (Maynard et al., 2015; Strom, 1991). This has been a long challenge in social work field education. Moreover, this challenge has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many social work field supervisors also have limited capacities to take field students as the impacts of COVID-19 have increased their workload or changed their practice, thus increasing the need to explore social work field placement opportunities with non-social work field supervisors. Second, social work field students may want to be placed in settings where there are no social workers (Maynard et al., 2015). Therefore, if they want to do their field placement in these settings, their supervisors will be non-social workers.

There are benefits for social work students to be matched with non-social work supervisors. The first advantage is that the field students can have richer and more varied education experiences by learning different approaches and perspectives from supervisors with backgrounds other than social work (Chipchase et al., 2012; Maynard et al., 2015; Strom, 1991). Another benefit may be that working with and learning from supervisors from multidisciplinary backgrounds stimulates field students to think outside the box and have more creative thinking (Maynard et al., 2015; Strom, 1991). Last but not least, some field students also consider that it is valuable to work with both a non-social work supervisor in the field agency and with an off-site social work supervisor (Maynard et al., 2015), which helps them build their confidence. There may be an additional benefit to the profession when social work is introduced to a student through a setting that has not traditionally employed social workers, for this may open the possibility for expansion in this area.

However, there are also concerns for social work field students if they are matched with non-social work field supervisors. The first concern is that students will have fewer, and possibly insufficient, opportunities to experience and be socialized within the profession (Chipchase et al., 2012; Maynard et al., 2015; Rogers & McDonald, 1989). A reason for this is that non-social work field supervisors may have a limited understanding of social work (Strom, 1991). They may also be less clear about the roles of a social worker and, therefore, they may not know how to support field students to develop their social work knowledge and skills (Maynard et al., 2015). Consequently, they may ask the social work students to do tasks unrelated to social work or outside the profession's scope of practice (Strom, 1991).

Generally, social work field students who are matched with non-social work field supervisors are provided some social work supervision support. For example, they may have as a secondary supervisor a social worker who is either in the field agency (Chipchase et al., 2012) or external to it, in the university setting or in a private social work supervision agency (Maynard et al., 2015). While this can help alleviate the issues just raised, there can also be problems that counteract that support. For example, the student and non-social work field supervisor are physically distant from the social work supervisor outside the field agency (Maynard et al., 2015).

As such, the social work supervisor may not have a complete picture of the field agency and how the student is doing in their field practice on a daily basis (Maynard et al., 2015). The student and social work supervisor outside the field agency may also be quite professionally distanced from the non-social work field supervisor due to different professional backgrounds. Specifically, they may lack shared theories and languages (Strom, 1991). This may impede communication and understanding between the student, non-social work field supervisor, and social work supervisor outside the field agency (Maynard et al., 2015). They may also be less clear about their own and each other's roles (Maynard et al., 2015; Strom, 1991). In some circumstances, there may also be a split between the two supervisors, creating a situation where the student is caught between the two (Maynard et al., 2015). This can be counterproductive to the student's learning. Further understanding about the dynamics of being supervised by a non-social worker may help address some of these concerns.

Research Methods

The research method used in this chapter is based on a case study from my Master of Social Work (MSW) program field placement. The field placement was a part of service enhancement study project on seniors' access to technology in a senior community service setting. Two non-social work field supervisors oversaw my work. The placement occurred between May and August 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will apply critical self-reflection to my field placement experience using the framework developed by Lay and McGuire (2010), which was specifically developed for social work education. At the core of the framework is a process of critical self-reflection using reflexivity. Reflexivity means that the person does not only reflect but also considers themselves and the people surrounding them, the power relationships, and the context within which they are operating. The goal is to challenge existing assumptions and/or think of alternative viewpoints. Although in traditional academic writing authors usually identify themselves by third-person pronouns (Tang & John, 1999), in this chapter I will use first-person pronouns "I," "me," and "mine" to identify myself, as this was my experience, instead of third-person pronouns "she," "her," and "hers;" I also want to bring myself into the chapter and thus engage with the readers more effectively (Tang & John, 1999).

A field placement refers to practical training for students in education to be prepared to work in the field after graduation (Egan et al., 2020; Gelman, 2004; Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Spector & Infante, 2020); it is also meant to serve as an opportunity to integrate classroom learning into practice. There are many different terms for this type of training and learning opportunity; however, to maintain consistency and reduce confusion, I will systematically use “field placement.”

Research Context

My Field Placement

During the time spent in my placement, I consulted 28 participants from senior community services across British Columbia about their experience with information and referral services. I also attended, observed, and, when possible, participated in relevant service provision sessions, meetings, and conferences. I took field notes, critically reflected, and analyzed the data in the process. I wrote a report and an academic paper with my field supervisors to disseminate the findings. The report was aimed at service users, service providers, and the public audience, while the paper was written for academic users. Owing to social distancing guidelines during the pandemic, I did my field placement remotely. I consulted the participants and I attended, observed, and participated in sessions, meetings, and conferences via video calls, phone calls, and emails.

My Field Agencies

I found placement in two agencies. My primary field agency was a community senior service centre in Downtown Vancouver. It was established over 40 years ago and was well-known for its information and referral services in the province. The agency had a small staff, but a large volunteer population and many volunteers were also service users, aiming to promote senior-led service provision. I worked in this agency as a program coordinator from 2016 to 2017, so I knew my primary supervisor and many of the staff and volunteers before starting my field placement.

My secondary field agency was a university research institute on aging and technology that had knowledge translation as one of its mandates. A primary goal of the institute was the transferring of research learnings to practice through active collaboration with community agencies. One of

them was my primary field agency. My primary and secondary agencies had a few collaboration projects. One of these had the objective to understand information and referral services in the province, and how the services could be delivered at the community senior service centres and remotely by technology. I was the only social worker in either organization.

My Field Supervisors

My primary field supervisor was the executive director of my primary field agency, the community senior service centre. Although she did not have a social work degree, she had extensive community service experience. She provided regular supervision to me by emails and a one-on-one supervision session by phone or video call every week. She connected me with people who were from grassroots community senior services. She engaged me to think by way of concepts related to community services such as human rights, social justice, and intersectionality. She had previously worked with social workers, so she knew the strengths of social workers. She helped me understand how I could contribute as a social worker in this project-based placement. For example, she encouraged me to be a facilitator of intersectionality communication and collaboration based on my social work training.

My secondary field supervisor, a professor of gerontology specializing in ageing and technology, was the director of the institute. He provided me with regular supervision through emails and a one-on-one supervision session by video call every two months.

The two field supervisors worked closely together. The three of us met together by video call, when needed, regarding my work and progress.

My Field Education Coordinator

My field education coordinator at my school, a social worker, worked in the field education office. She collaborated with me, along with my primary and secondary field supervisors, before I started the field placement to see if we would be a good match and if the potential placement would contribute to my social work education. The school valued the extensive experience of non-social work supervisors and was open to match social work field students and non-social work field supervisors.

My Faculty Liaison

My faculty liaison, a professor at my school, was also a social worker. She was my social work supervisor outside my field agencies as well. As my faculty liaison, she made sure that I received appropriate and sufficient social work supervision. Once every two weeks, she provided by video call group supervision to me and other social work students doing their field placements with other field agencies. In addition, she provided me with individual supervision by emails and video calls. She reviewed every two weeks the reflective journals I kept on my field placement experience. In this capacity, she guided me to reflect on my roles and significance as a social worker in my field placement. My faculty liaison, my primary supervisor, and I met every two months by video call. They also jointly reviewed my field placement progress to see what I learned from my field placement.

Myself as the Field Placement Student

I had previously completed two field placements for my Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), and I had paid practice experience. After graduation from my BSW and before entering the MSW program, I practised for three years in senior community service and long-term care. I was already a social worker prior to starting my graduate degree and I had a strong social work identity. I felt ready to be supervised by non-social work supervisors because of my previous experience working in an interdisciplinary team with diverse professionals. Because of this experience, I knew how to access the social work support resources when necessary.

Additional Support

My primary field supervisor connected me with a provincial group promoting information and referral services to senior citizens in British Columbia. I was invited to observe their work in meetings. I was also connected with their members who were providers of information and referral services for senior communities. I was invited to be their trainee and I created an inventory about information and referral services across the province, which I completed alongside my field placement project.

My secondary field supervisor connected me with a national organization promoting technology supporting ageing in Canada and recommended me to be their trainee. The organization consisted of academics,

professionals, service providers, seniors, and caregivers involved in a program that offered coaching and support to trainees on ageing and technology (e.g., mentorship, networking, scholarship, webinars, and courses.)

My school further connected me to a national organization promoting social work field education in Canada. It consists of academics and professionals interested in social work field education and it provides training to students in social work field education. For instance, I joined the digital storytelling program. I learned how to create a digital story of my experience being matched with my field placement. This project was showcased in a social work field education conference where I received positive feedback from the audience. It was an excellent opportunity to think about what I would like to get out of my field placement.

Discussion

Comparison with the Literature

I analyzed my field experience by comparing it with the literature on benefits and concerns in regards to matching social work field students with non-social work field supervisors.

Benefits of Having Non-Social Work Supervisors. Overall, my graduate placement experience echoes the literature that supports using non-social work supervisors. I found that I learned to collaborate with supervisors who come from non-social work backgrounds and I built confidence in such collaboration (Chipchase et al., 2012; Maynard et al., 2015; Strom, 1991).

Before my field placement, I had experience collaborating with professionals from disciplines other than social work, but their disciplines were still within the scope of healthcare and social services, such as nursing, occupational therapy, and counselling, which were closely related to social work. However, this field placement also provided me with an opportunity to collaborate with my secondary supervisor who came from a technology background. Because I had already collaborated with professionals from backgrounds other than social work before, this field placement strengthened my confidence in doing so.

I believe that my field supervisors also learned from my social work discipline. For example, there was an occasion when my supervisors and

I discussed technology as a necessary resource for seniors, and I called attention to the many discussions on access to and re-distribution of resources in the social work discipline. My secondary supervisor found this very interesting, and it helped me understand that my non-social work field supervisors and I learned from each other in the process, and the learning was mutual.

A topic less discussed in the literature is the necessity to raise awareness among field agencies to learn from and to collaborate with social workers. For example, being the first social worker at my secondary agency, I introduced the concepts of human rights on seniors' access to technology. The agency found the perspective of social work on ageing and technology inspiring. This raised their interest in listening to more social work perspectives in the future. As a social worker, I reflected upon the fact that an important part of my role was the social work perspective I brought to the table so that important social work values, such as social justice and human rights, could have a positive influence on the development of the agency.

Challenges of Having Non-Social Work Supervisors. I did not encounter the challenge of having fewer opportunities to engage in social work learning or socialization as suggested in the literature (Chipchase et al., 2012; Maynard et al., 2015; Rogers & McDonald, 1989). The main reason was that there was a close collaboration and frequent communication among all parties involved, including the field supervisors, field education coordinator, faculty liaison, and me, as the field student, to ensure that I had appropriate and sufficient social work education elements in this field placement. For example, and although she was not a social worker, my primary supervisor constantly guided me to consider social work concepts, such as social justice. My faculty liaison also guided me to think of my role as a social worker in this field placement. Finally, my field education coordinator ensured that my field placement was suited for my social work education.

I did not encounter any challenges either in clarifying my roles. All parties involved had numerous and thorough discussions about my roles in my field placement before I started it, and we set up a detailed plan based on these discussions. During my placement, my primary supervisor, faculty liaison, and I constantly had conversations about my roles. I reflected

and put down my thoughts on my roles in my reflective journals for my faculty liaison to review and give feedback. I also had discussions about my roles in my placement with other social work students in my group supervision sessions through the university. I listened to other social work students sharing their roles in their placements. I compared the similarities and differences in our roles as social workers in our field placements, and this comparative process helped me understand and clarify further my roles in my placement.

I did not encounter communication challenges either (Maynard et al., 2015). I knew my primary supervisor before my placement. My primary and secondary supervisors also knew each other well before my placement. All parties involved in my placement constantly communicated prior to and during my field placement.

The last reason why I did not encounter the above challenges mentioned in the literature was because my supervisors, field education coordinator, and faculty liaison were all experienced and had knowledge and skills in interdisciplinary collaboration. For instance, although my supervisors were not social workers, my primary supervisor was experienced in community services and working with and supervising social workers. My secondary supervisor was also experienced in teaching and supervising students from diverse professional backgrounds. My field education coordinator and faculty liaison were experienced in supporting social work field students with non-social work field supervisors, as well as communicating and collaborating with their supervisors.

Things for Consideration

I am aware that my field placement was exceptionally time and resource intensive, and each party contributed a great deal to my education opportunities. All parties involved spent a lot of time meeting and communicating with each other. The communication was of such high quality that I did not encounter the types of challenges suggested in the literature. However, not every field placement could be as time and resource intensive as my field placement.

Also, I am aware that although my supervisors were not social workers, they were exceedingly experienced in supervising students or trainees from professional backgrounds different from their own. However, not

every field supervisor is as experienced as my field supervisors. It could be a challenge for other non-social work field supervisors to supervise social work field students, and they might need additional training and support.

Myself

It has been noted that what the students brings to their placement plays a crucial part in the success of the field placement (Street, 2019). My previous field placement experience in BSW and my post-BSW practice experience helped me understand what I wanted to learn and achieve from my MSW field placement. Thus, I could define and discuss with people involved in my field placement my roles without anxiety. This accords with what has been noted in the literature: Students who have prior experience in social work field placements do not need a lot of hand-holding, and they can take responsibility for their learning and a suitable placement with non-social work supervisors (Maynard et al., 2015).

In my opinion, social work field students matching with non-social work supervisors should be more suitable for MSW than BSW field placement. As suggested, one challenge of having non-social work supervisors is that field students are not sure about their roles as social workers. This should not be a problem if the students are already BSW-level social workers. They do not need the same level of socialization into the profession and they already have a grounded understanding of their roles as social workers. Unfortunately, it would appear that field supervisors without a social work degree are more likely to supervise field students at an entry (BSW) level (Rogers & McDonald, 1989). We may need to re-think whether this is appropriate.

Implications for Social Work Field Research

There are a couple of outstanding questions that I think need to be addressed regarding this issue, and both of which are somehow interconnected. The first is how can we know whether a non-social work field supervisor is ready to supervise a social work field student? For example, we would like to know whether the non-social work field supervisor has a certain level of understanding of social work in order to supervise a social work field student. The second is how can we know whether a social work field student is ready to be supervised by a non-social work field supervisor? For instance, we would like to know whether the social work field student has

a certain level of communication skills to communicate with supervisors whose backgrounds are not social work. Answering these questions before matching non-social work field supervisors and social work field students is important. Ideally, both sides should be ready. Future research may consider addressing these questions.

Conclusion

This study is a critical self-reflection of my graduate field placement. It is a single case example based on my personal experience, and as such it is not generalizable. I believe, however, that my example may be of benefit to others, at the very least, a starting point to weigh the benefits and challenges of using non-social workers as field supervisors.

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