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## **Getting to know the context: The complexities of providing off-site supervision in social work practice learning**

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### **Abstract**

Field education is central to social work education, facilitating the development of practice skills, professional identity and a professional practice framework. External supervision in social work field education is becoming more prevalent due to economic, social and political changes at a global level and is likely to continue to be a feature of field education. This article provides findings from current Australian qualitative research exploring ‘social work student placements with external supervision’, focusing on the experiences and views of external field educators. It explores the research findings in light of international social work education research, particularly with reference to experiences and contexts in England, UK. A range of themes emerge from this study, including a focus on supervision, relationships, roles, placement preparation and assessment. Findings suggest that knowledge and understanding of the placement context is a dominant consideration in social workers’ reflections on their experience of providing external supervision to social work students. External supervisors apply a range of strategies to build the understanding of the context of the students’ experience and the nature of host agency policies, practices and culture. This can lead to an active engagement of students in their learning, but has implications for resourcing.

Keywords: Context; Field education; Practice learning; Off-site supervision; Student supervision; Relationships;

## **Introduction**

Social work field education relies on experienced social work practitioners supervising students in human service organisations. Increasingly, students are undertaking their field education in agencies where their day to day supervision is provided by a non-social work qualified task supervisor and their professional development is supported by a qualified social work supervisor who is external to the agency. This paper examines the experiences of external field educators/ practice educators who provide off-site social work supervision to field education students.

The experiences reported in this paper represent a subset of data drawn from a larger research project which examined the experiences of key stakeholders involved in social work placements supported by off-site professional supervision. The experiences of other stakeholder groups involved in this research are the subject of forthcoming publications. This paper seeks to illuminate the specific views, concerns, interests and strategies shared by the social workers who identified as external supervisors. As used in this study, 'external supervisors' are qualified social workers who have been appointed by the university to supervise and support the professional formation of students in field education placements where a qualified social worker is not available and in accordance with the requirements of the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW), the accrediting body for social work and social work education in Australia (AASW, 2012). The corresponding terminology used in England is off-site practice educators or supervisors (Curtis *et al.*, 2012). In this article links to social work education in England are drawn, where social work practice and learning is guided through the College of Social Work (The College of Social Work, 2012, 2014).

## **Background information**

### Field education

Field education has been described as the single most important factor in social work education (Wayne *et al.*, 2010) and a critical transition point to professional practice (Patford, 2000). Traditionally, field education is based on the principle that students can learn by doing and engaging with social work supervisors who act as role models (Camilleri, 2001; Cleak *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, social work placements need to be supervised by a qualified social worker in Australia (AASW, 2012) and England (The College of Social Work, 2014). However, social workers employed in the human service industry are under increasing pressure in many workplaces as a result of neo-liberal ideologies and market principles, which diminish their capacity to support field education programs (Barton *et al.*, 2005).

Neo-liberal approaches place increasing pressures on the industry (Morley and Dunstan, 2013). New public management processes, a culture of audits, risk aversion, and austerity have become the driver of change that has reshaped human services (Chenoweth, 2012). As organisations drive for efficiencies rather than effectiveness, social workers may have little support and high case loads, leading to stress, and low staff retention and pressure on social workers (Chiller *et al.*, 2012; Chinnery *et al.*, 2011). Organisations and supervisors may focus on constraints and efficiencies, limiting the placement opportunities they in turn offer to

students (Barton *et al.*, 2005). Those social workers supporting field education face heavy workloads as they combine their responsibilities as practice educators and as employees (Moriarty *et al.*, 2009). Providing placement opportunities for social work students with social work qualified supervisors on site is therefore becoming more difficult (Abram *et al.*, 2000; Barton *et al.*, 2005).

Neoliberal contexts also impact the workplace practices that social work students are exposed to in practice learning. Consequences of neoliberalism include the devaluing of social work skills and knowledge, a reduction of practitioner autonomy, the positioning of workers as experts, a focus on procedural solutions rather than structural analysis, and an overall loss of meaningful social work identity that is linked to emancipatory social change (Morley and Dunstan, 2013). Thus, students' learning and growth into the social work profession could be undermined by workplace practice that is contrary to the professional aims and values, if the placement learning is based around a model where the student is seen as a passive recipient of knowledge (*ibid*), following and copying the expert social worker (Bellinger, 2010a).

Morley and Dunstan (2013) highlight that students often feel tempted to focus on the acquisition of technical skills and competencies to gain what may be seen as the 'real social work identity' of a neoliberal social worker, viewing this as emblematic of practice in the 'real world' and critical education as irrelevant. Competency and fitness for practice discourses in higher education risk constructing practice learning as a training ground for efficient employees rather than as an important process for producing social workers critically educated for the profession (Bellinger, 2010b).

Educating social work students for the profession through practice learning consequently requires students to critically engage with the practice context (Morley and Dunstan, 2013). Therefore the pedagogical culture surrounding the placement is important in assessing the quality of a placement if students are to be enabled to be responsive to current practices and social change (Bellinger, 2010a). Quality practice learning environments involve a generative process, where practice is not prescribed but constructed, and students are engaged as active contributors and learners, facilitating a dynamic connection between academic and practice learning (*ibid*). Assessing the quality of the learning experience becomes more than considering the on-site presence of a social worker or the relevance of the practice sector (*ibid*).

In the English context an increasing number of field education supervisors, also known as practice assessors, are non-social work qualified (Moriarty *et al.*, 2009). Standards requiring practice educators to be social work qualified and accredited practice teachers were introduced in 2012 and in the future will require all practice educators to be qualified social workers and registered in England (The College of Social Work, 2014). While non-social work supervisors will be able to continue to support students in practice learning a qualified social worker will need to contribute to the final assessment of a social work student (Department of Education, 2010). In Australia and England, supervision by a qualified social worker is mandatory, but can be provided by a social worker external, or off-site, to the placement setting if there is no qualified social worker available on site (AASW, 2012; The College of Social Work, 2012). In England, 27.7% of social work placements utilise off-site supervisors (Curtis *et al.*, 2012). The numbers in Australia are potentially lower, for example, in Cleak *et al.* (2012)'s study 14% of the 263 respondents were in placements with off-site supervision.

## Supervision in Field Education

The supervisory relationship is a focal point of the field education experience (Tedam, 2014) and supervision in field education is key factor in student satisfaction with their practice learning (Domakin 2013). Supervision and the supervisory relationship are impacted by internal and external factors. Effective supervision considers the context and diversity of learning as the students' and educators' own personal, social and cultural backgrounds impact the interpretation of experience and meaning making (Fook, 2001). Supervision needs to build a pedagogical culture that actively engages students in their learning (Bellinger, 2010a). However, workload pressures impact the provision of effective practice learning (Domakin, 2013). Moreover, the supervisory relationship is also shaped by the fact that students in field education are also being assessed by their field educator in regards to their competencies and strengths (Tedam, 2014). Field educators need to find ways to make the student's work visible and assessable beyond student's self-assessment that may be filtered through the student's experience, values and theoretical orientation (Maidment, 2000). Consequently, observation of students' practice is required for assessment in both English and Australian field education (The College of Social Work, 2014; AASW, 2012).

## Social Work placements with external Supervision



The significance of social work field education and supervision invokes questions about social work field education with external supervision. Placements with external supervision are often seen as a last resort, and while this outlook has been challenged (Bellinger, 2010a; Abram *et al.*, 2000; Plath, 2003; Zuchowski, 2011), a recent comparative survey suggests that students are generally ‘...more satisfied across all aspects of their placements where there is a strong onsite social work presence’ (Cleak *et al.*, 2012, p. 256). The development of a social work identity, learning opportunities on placements and feeling competent were key issues that led to higher student satisfaction in placements with internal supervision (Cleak *et al.*, 2012).

However, social work placements with external supervision can have advantages for social work students as well as for the discipline as a whole (Bellinger, 2010a). They can provide placement experiences in a non-traditional emergent field, allow for multi-disciplinary work, illustrate the value of social work skills and knowledge where no social work discipline focus is present and provide job opportunities (Abram *et al.*, 2000). Placements with external supervision can result in employable and flexible graduates (Plath, 2003). They can help develop the field by opening up new fields of practice, growing social workers in areas where they are scant, and providing culturally relevant supports (Zuchowski, 2011). They could be set-up with culturally relevant supervisors to ‘...consciously explore power relationships, dominant paradigms, cultural contexts, resource available...’ to challenge disempowering experiences and build safe learning environments (Zuchowski, 2011, p.391).

Nevertheless, field education with external supervision has challenges, including the lack of clearly defined social work roles for students to observe, the potential for the skills of on-site

supervisors to be undervalued, and the complexity of a four way process of assessment and reporting (Plath, 2003). Internal task supervisors might provide the main support to students throughout their placement and yet be unacknowledged and devalued in the overall placement arrangement (Henderson, 2010). External social work supervisors may also be spending more time than internal social work supervisors on supporting students, with a recent English study highlighting that internal supervisors estimate that they spent up to 191 hours per 100 placement days on supervision and preparation time for social work placements, whereas off-site supervisors estimated that they spent up to 265 hours per 100 days of placement (Curtis *et al.*, 2012).

The relationship between the professional and task supervisors is a key factor in a successful student placement with external supervision (Abram *et al.*, 2000). Information sharing, professionalism, authenticity, rapport building and cooperation are important ingredients for the success of placements with external supervision (Karban, 1999). The different responsibilities of the supervisors (Karban, 1999) and characteristics of each supervisor (Maidment *et al.*, 2002) need to be explored and made explicit. Research suggests that extra support is needed for field educators, task supervisors and students in triad relationships (Abram *et al.*, 2000; Henderson, 2010). Little is known about the experiences of external social work supervisors in field education, and this paper reports on research into their experiences.

## **Methodology**

The research discussed here is part of a larger PhD research that explores the question ‘What are the experiences of all key stakeholders in field education with external supervision?’. The aims of the research are to review what is known about supervision for social work students in placements with external supervision, to ascertain the experience and relationships of key players, to investigate what external supervision brings to field education, and to develop a model/ framework or principles for field education with external supervision

In the larger research project semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 32 participants exploring their experience as students, field educators, task supervisors and/or liaison persons involved in social work placements with external supervision. The interviews were conducted in 2011/ 2012. The data discussed in this paper specifically considers the experience reported by 15 participants in their role as external supervisors of social work students. The study was approved by the University Ethics Committee, and participants provided written consent for the interviews and use of data.

This qualitative research is framed by phenomenology (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) and social constructivism (Schwandt, 1994). Relevant to phenomenology the researcher aims to gain the experiences and attributed meanings of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994), this article foregrounding the meaning making and views of the external social work supervisors. The research questions extrapolated experiences of participants, and the data analysis is explored the participants’ presentation of what was discussed.

Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive method of sampling was applied (Creswell, 2007). Information about the study was distributed via Australian universities and through national social work conference presentations. Participants in this research were associated with social work programs in Australian universities.. The final sample reported on for this article consisted of 15 social work qualified participants identified as having supported social work student placements as external supervisors. All participants had supervised social work students as both internal and as external supervisors. Two of the participants drew on only one experience as external supervisors, while the great majority of participants drew on numerous experiences.. Of these 15 external supervisors, 10 were female and 5 male. The participants' work experience in the social welfare sector ranged between 5 and 40 years. In the process of creating pseudonyms for participants the gender of the participant, background information and their role has remained unaltered.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences as external supervisors in social work field education and to document their views about placements with external supervision. A recursive approach to interviewing, which uses an interview guide, but follows the lead of the participants in the interview, enabled the gathering of rich data (Minichiello, Aroni *et al.*, 2008). Interview questions aimed at prompting participants to reflect on their experience in placements with external supervision, the relationships with the student, liaison person and the external supervisor, and their vision of the ideal placement.

## Data Analysis

During the data analysis process consideration was given to recurring themes within individual interviews and across the interviews as a whole (Minichiello *et al.*, 2008). This paper has been developed based on the recurring theme of ‘context’ that ran through the supervisors’ discussion although no specific question was asked about this. Data analysis involved a process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Neuman, 2006), utilising the function of ‘memos’ in NVivo to explore themes and their links. Data analysis in line with phenomenology was undertaken with the goal of ‘...reducing the information to significant statements or quotes...’ combining the statements into themes and developing textural and structural descriptions (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

## Limitations

Qualitative research relies on the recollection and reflection of subjective experience (Minichiello *et al.*, 2008). Participants in this study have self-selected into the study and have chosen what they want to share in the interviews. Their self-selection may be based on a special interest and awareness of social work placements. The data presented here is only one aspect of the range of experiences discussed in the broader interviews and larger research project, and limits the discussion to the experiences of external supervisors rather than looking at external supervision more holistically. The number of participants is small, and they are associated with social work programs across Australia. While generalisations cannot

be made on the basis of this small and localised sample, the data presents a snapshot of the experiences of external supervisors not limited to one program or region.

### Researcher's Positioning

The researcher's position as an insider in this research, having had experiences in placements with external supervision as a student, external supervisor and liaison person, has undoubtedly shaped the choice of focus, the interviews and the analysis (Minichiello *et al.*, 2008). Nevertheless, the intention of this researcher has been to approach this issue with fresh eyes in line with phenomenological research, by attempting to bracket the researcher's own experiences and positions (LeVasseur, 2003). Thus, the researcher summarised and reflected on her own experiences prior to interviewing, and in the data analysis approached each group of participants separately with the intention of focusing on their voices.

### Findings

The findings are reported using the themes identified from the interviews with external supervisors. Overall, participants commented on the nature of their own experience as external supervisors, their approach to supervision, and the manner in which they negotiated their roles and relationships with others. In discussing these areas, participants repeatedly identified the importance of understanding the context in which they provide the external supervision. The significance of understanding context was raised in relation to the student,

the organisation, 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, and how an understanding of this context impacted the manner in which they structured and negotiated supervision and the strategies they used to gain an appreciation of the placement context.

### The importance of understanding the context

Seven participants pointed out that knowing the agency was key to a positive supervision experience, suggesting that this was useful for communication, understanding the agency's work and regular contact. Participants stressed that understanding the agency served to improve supervision, making it easier and noted that without such understanding, '*you are blind and have no clue*' (Matthew).

Participants suggested that they struggled when they did not know the context of where the student was placed or did not know the task supervisor well.

You tend to only briefly meet the field work [task] supervisor and all of those specifics about the agency you don't know, whether there is conflict or harmony ... you don't have that understanding of the agency environment. And that can be difficult.... (Robert)

Understanding the agency environment was seen as useful for supervision, but would also be important in understanding the assessment made by others. Field education can be a place

where students observe and experience violence (Gair and Thomas, 2008) and racism (Gair, *et al.*, 2014). Supervisors' insight into the conflict or harmony of a placement setting thus would be important in guiding and assessing students' learning. This is explored further later on.

## Supervision

Participants were devoting regular time to formal student supervision, generally more than one hour a week, up to three to four hours for one participant and many conducted preparation for supervision. Providing external supervision to students was identified by participants as time intensive, a dynamic also recognised in English research showing that external supervisors spent more time on student supervision and preparation than internal supervisors (Curtis *et al.*, 2012). Discussed elsewhere, external supervisors in this research focused supervision on promotion of the students' professional growth within the discipline, the development of a social work framework and providing the social work input to the field education experience (Zuchowski, 2014).

Participants outlined that if they did not know the context it was hard to know what to focus their supervision on and how to best facilitate student learning.

It's quite tricky, because it might be not until the first meeting that I actually get to look inside the agency. ... if there's a space issue... you may not be able to meet there, so you don't get a flavour of what happens around you. So you are essentially supervising without context until it dribbles in with little bits of information directly from the student. (Iona)

Often you do not know a lot of the agency in which the student is placed... so some of it is the student giving me the information about the agency and how it operates and



it's structure and where they have been placed in that structure in terms of the actual task supervisor they are working with and what level of hierarchy is the task supervisor..., because that does make some difference to how much you can help the student ... in getting some of the learning things they may want to do. (Georgina)

The participants in this study repeatedly highlighted the significance of knowing the placement milieu including the agency environment, atmosphere and culture in order to provide effective external supervision. This is consistent with Ung's (2002) assertion about supervision for professional workers, which noted that external supervision without contextual understanding risks becoming a mere theoretical exercise. Linked to this contextual understanding, nine participants also talked about getting to know the student, where they were coming from, how they were learning to guide supervision and expressed concern that as external supervisors they could not always observe their students' practice.

... if we want to provide a contextual matter around the student as a professional worker... it makes it difficult if you haven't got that context to actually know.... where you need to focus your supervision at... (Matthew).

## Assessment

A number of participants noted that not having visual observations of their own made supervision tricky and meant that they had to rely on what the student and the agency told them. This made it difficult to provide concrete examples in feedback and left a gap in their understanding and made it harder to match their understanding to the student's. Participants recognised that actually going to the organisation and meeting the people involved in placement was important.

To particularly go to the agency and be in and meet people has made a difference to my understanding, but I think it has made a big difference to the student, to be able to discuss their practice knowing that I have a greater understanding of things. (Karen)

Observation of the student's work has long been part of the requirements for field education in Australia (AASW, 2012). Whether observation of student practice in field education consistently takes place in reality is doubtful. As outlined above, a crisis driven environment puts pressure on supervisors (Chinnery *et al.*, 2011), thus students find it difficult to access supervisors (Patford, 2000) or to observe their supervisor's practice (Barretti, 2009). Yet, purposeful observation of the student's work by the field educator can help performance assessment, assist the integration of theory into practice and facilitate critical reflection (Maidment, 2000). While participants in this research recognised the importance of understanding the agency context for their supervision and assessment of student, only a few identified direct observation of student practice as something they would always do.

But I suppose what was missing for me, was not seeing any of that student direct practice,... I think largely that worked well, but I think I was really aware that I only had the student's perspective of what was happening and nothing for me to see, physically to see her in action. (Anna)

I mean students can tell you anything really. Unless you actually see them and it is not that I don't trust the student, and I think that most of them would say, too, that they would like me to sit in and watch them, because then they know that they are on the right track, you know, that kind of can be reassuring for them as well. (Maria)

Participants noted that task supervisor's observations could help inform assessment, learning and supervision processes. Some participants talked about joint work in assessment and supervision, and others about seeking feedback from task supervisors. Participants outlined that they would need to understand the context of the task supervisor's feedback. They wanted to have a good understanding of what the task supervisors are bringing to the field education process, what the setting was and how task supervisors would be forming their opinions. For off-site supervisors to be able to use the feedback of other people they would need to be able to gauge the context of the observation and feedback.

I remember having long conversations with the on-site supervisor ... about a very shy young man, who she felt wasn't engaging with the team very well, and he wasn't talking, ...when I ...got there... the agency was in an old house and they had him in a separate room all by himself. (Iona)

Increasingly placements in England are supported by non-social work qualified professional with external social work practice assessors (Moriarty *et al.*, 2009). Student observation of practice is prescribed in England but was then often conducted by non-social work staff (Humphrey, 2007). Given this, Humphrey (2007) questions the validity of the observation and recommends further exploration of observation and assessment models and the training of staff in practice learning and teaching. Similarly, participants in this research reflected that while others contributed in valuable ways, as social workers they were responsible for the final assessment and the social work input was different and important.

And, I just don't think it is the same... When other people do it when non-social work professionals do it. That doesn't mean that it is not valuable and they don't learn from it, ...I don't think it is just about identity. I think it is about ... values and social work context and the way that we have that shared understanding of practice. (Iona)

## Strategies for building understanding of context

Participants employed various strategies to get a clearer picture of the students' performance and the setting in which they were placed. Some requested that the student dissect or role play the interaction for reflection. Others reflected that they channelled supervision around wider issues, such as the values that were impacting on practice, or student motivations for entering social work.

You normally take a part of ... the experience ... Whereas, when you are external, you don't have that, so you actually say, ok, so you met this person, and then the relationship ended at some point, walk me through that whole interaction. (Matthew)

She was working in child protection, ...and I had no experience in child protection...So ... we channelled it around what were her values, ..., what was her goal in the way that she wanted to work, what change was she looking for? Why did she come into social work? (Tanya)

Participants also talked about preparation for supervision, providing readings to students and asking them to do process reports. They utilised various methods to compensate for the lack of direct observation of the students practice, in order to build a picture that could guide their supervision and assessment and help them facilitate student learning. Building relationships and clarifying roles were key aspects of understanding and considering the perspectives of other parties in these placement arrangements.

## Building Relationships to share the journey

The importance of building relationships both with students and the task supervisor has been highlighted in the literature (McMahon, 2002; Abram *et al.*, 2000;). Supervisory relationships are seen as a building block for learning (Cleak *et al.*, 2012). Participants in this study talked about building relationships with students and task supervisors as part of their role.

The aim is to reach them. How do you get that rapport, that bridge building up, because unless you establish that, and of course you now are working for Herod basically. (Paul)

This is particularly important in light of the importance students place on this relationship. Lefevre (2005) found that trusting, collaborative relationships with their supervisors facilitated students' experience of the learning environment and their ability to expose their practice to the field educator's scrutiny. Moreover, reaching and getting to know the student and the other supervisor is important for understanding how their personal, social and cultural backgrounds impact the interpretation of experience and how meaning is made from it (Fook, 2001), producing helpful insights for supervision and assessment. Participants recognised that fostering relationships built their understanding of the agency, the student and the task supervisor and therefore facilitated learning on placement.

I think ... that whole presence of building relationships with other people in the agency, it ... sets... an arrangement where they feel they can contact you. ... I actually think that it means that they look after the student a bit better ... if I build relationships and I am there for the student, .. I set the scene a little bit. (Iona)

Participants appreciated that not knowing the task supervisor and having a limited relationship restricted what they would get to know about them and the placement.

If I don't know them... it can create some difficulties in the sense that, yes, I can go and meet and introduce ourselves and just have a bit of a yarn about whatever, but the issue is, is that we might ...still be dancing in that relationship and be very tentative about what we share. And ... therefore I may not get to know ... the stresses and strains, and or the capacities of the task supervisor in their position and what they can give to their student. (Matthew)

## **Discussion**

A number of discussion points can be raised from the findings. External practice educators identified that for them the contextual understanding of the student's placement was crucial. As external practice educators they utilised a range of strategies to understand the context of the placement, the agency, the other supervisor and the student. This engagement to get to know the context can lead to the creation of more collaborative learning experiences and critical reflection on the nature of social work practice. However, it is important to consider the resource implications that result from the complexity of the work of off-site supervisors and the time required to do external supervision well. Moreover, the term 'external' supervisor needs to be revisited to explore the conceptualisation of this role.

Exploring the context to create a quality learning environment

Based on the views expressed by participants in this study, external supervision, while challenging, may actually be a beneficial means of providing professional supervision for students on placement, with a number of positive features identified. Literature highlights that quality social work education needs to do more than simply preparing social work students to be work ready for employers. It needs to prepare students to be ready for the complex world of professional social work practice (Bellinger, 2010b), equip them to respond to changing contexts and challenges, and prime them to keep the profession's core values at the centre of their practice (Morley and Dunstan, 2013). Critical reflection skills and considering the context of the placement experience are therefore seen as essential for quality education (*ibid*). The supervisory relationship can facilitate space for critical reflection and exploration of the learning experience, however, the supervisory space is not 'politically innocent' (Adamson, 2012). Learning is complex and diverse and the meaning making of students and supervisors are fertile topics for discussion.

The practice educators in this research described supervision processes and strategies that they employed to understand the context of the student's experience and learning to prepare students for professional social work practice (see also Zuchowski, 2014). Establishing the context of the experience involved critical engagement of the student in describing and reflecting on their learning, potentially creating a more generative learning experience for students (Bellinger, 2010a). In this sense, external supervision can potentially be a space where students explore the synergies and disjunctions of their experience. For example, including the context of the experience in the supervision sessions meant that supervision was focused on discussion of professional social work practice, rather than limited to an exploration of assessment tools and organisational procedures and uncritically socialising students into the culture of the organisation (Domakin, 2013). Professional bodies might presume that the presence of a social worker on site is key to quality learning environments

for the development of professional social work practice (AASW, 2012; The College of Social Work, 2014). However, this might simply reflect an adherence to traditional learning models of students following expert social workers uncritically and without being able to step outside potentially oppressive learning environments (Bellinger, 2010a, Morley and Dunstan, 2013). External supervisors, by establishing context and engaging students to bring, describe and explore their placement experiences in supervision, might actually necessitate students being active contributors and learners (Bellinger, 2010a). This process could facilitate the development of social work practice that is focused on emancipatory change, that identifies and names oppressive practices and facilitates students' critical reflection and practice learning about the skills and competencies necessary for practice in the field (Morley and Dunstan, 2013; Domakin, 2013). Further research is needed to explore to what extent practice learning with off-site supervision can make the academic and practice learning less disjointed (*ibid*), and produce critical reflective social work practitioners ready to work in human service organisations.

#### Providing Quality supervision with limited Resources

Participants were committed to providing quality external supervision that focused on student learning, assessment, integration of theory and student support. They moreover worked to build relationships and clarify roles with others to support the student placement, altogether, focusing on facilitating positive pedagogical cultures (Bellinger, 2010 a). External supervisors in this study were remunerated minimally, prompting Robert to describe the work as 'practically pro bono', and echoing Morley and Dunstan's (2013) concerns about the marginalisation of field education. New public management paradigms leave workplaces and educational institutions under strain and look for efficiencies and incomes rather than



expenditure. Budgetary cuts leave universities dependent on private sector partnerships, resulting in an emphasis on research and relegating learning and teaching as secondary (*ibid*). In such an environment field education is perceived as a resource intensive activity, impacting how staff interacts with the field (Morley and Dunstan, 2013). Curtis *et al.*'s (2012) study into the cost of qualifying social workers highlighted the extra time off-site supervisors spent on supervision with the associated cost amounting to £3475 on average per placement. This is significantly higher than what Australian universities would expend on external supervision. However, more resources will be needed to support social work students through a range of field education models, including appropriately resourcing of external supervision. Placements in organisations without social workers on site can be beneficial, but need higher levels of support (Bellinger 2010b).

The need to carefully consider terminology

The use of the word external in describing placements which are supported by an off-site social work supervisor is worth examining. In the England the terms 'long-arm supervisors' (Humphrey, 2007) and off-site practice educator (Curtis *et al.*, 2012) are in use, and the AASW actually speaks of the 'professional external field educator' but requires the appointment of a 'suitably qualified co-field educator' (AASW, 2012), the latter implying an interactive working relationship. The concept of 'external' conjures a sense of separation, disjointedness, being involved from afar, yet, the 'external' supervisors interviewed here highlighted that they in fact need close working relationships with students and task supervisors and an intimate understanding of agency context for supervision, and assessment.

Karen reflects on the use of this term

I think the main thing I have changed ... to not remain external to the point that I am not engaged with the task supervisor. ....I have looked back and reflected on my original experience in trying to work out where I got those messages from ...and perhaps it has got something to do with the word external. You know the use of that word, it means separate, too, like looking from a distance rather than actually being part of. (Karen)

Clearly the use of ' external' in describing external supervision is worth examining. At the same time the description of 'external supervision' is commonly used for supervision for graduate social workers, and could create a sense of familiarity and recognition, encouraging graduating social workers to engage with supervision external to their work upon completion of their studies.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study provide an insight into important aspects of the role and function of social work practice educators and their experiences in supporting placements through external supervision. The challenges, understanding and opinions of external social work supervisors need to be considered to re-examine the assumptions of social work placements and necessary pedagogical culture and supports surrounding these. Off-site supervisors can support students to critical engage with their practice learning by exploring the synergies and disjunctions of the experience. Placements with off-site supervision could assist social work students to develop their professional practice. Further research is needed to explore the pedagogical frameworks and learning of students in placements with off-site supervision. Are

these placements successfully preparing students for professional social work practice? Do they lead to critical reflective practices?

External supervisors highlight that they need to gain a contextual understanding of the placement, the agency and the parties involved in field education to provide quality supervision, feedback and assessment. External supervisors stress the importance of building relationships and clarifying roles and apply a range of strategies to gain an understanding of different aspects of the placement experience. External supervision in field education is time and resource intensive. These findings need to be noted and utilised by schools of social work as external supervisors need to be appropriately resourced; a challenge when resources are tight and the focus of academia is on research outputs and attracting income.

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