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## WORKPLACE LEARNING IN THE CONTEMPORARY SUPERVISION LANDSCAPE: THE CASE OF SUPERVISION IN A SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANISATION

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### ABSTRACT

The blurring of the boundaries and interconnectedness between learning and work are features worth exploring in the contemporary supervision landscape. Grounded on transition-experiential learning theories, the study analysed a social service organisation as a context for learning and examined how this context facilitated or inhibited supervision learning experiences for first-time supervisors. It draws on the qualitative findings of thirteen in-depth interviews whose data were analysed using the thematic analysis. This study found that the transitioning of first-time supervisors into the new role took place through their active participation in an organisational context. It concludes with the notion that workplace learning is a context-specific and interactive process. The social service organisation, with its unique features, serves the purpose of providing an environment for learning, with first-time supervisors afforded the opportunity to learn within the context and through interaction with other role-players. In summary, the study recommends a need for fostering of communities of practice, designing and management of workplace learning programmes, and ensuring the creation of sustainable and healthy workplaces.

**Keywords:** social service organisation; organisational context; supervision practice; workplace learning; social service professions

## INTRODUCTION

Strengthening supervision in social service organisations is critical in the provision of an ethical and improved workplace learning environment. Cacciattolo (2015:243) provided a simplified view of the blurring and interconnectedness of working and learning, and described workplace learning as involving “the way in which skills are upgraded and knowledge is acquired at the place of work”. In line with this view, it is worth noting that workplace learning involves the interaction of key role-players within the organisational context, with supervision practice gradually becoming a phenomenon worth engaging with in the contemporary management landscape. Although supervisors and practitioners are not the only role-players in supervision practice, they always serve as essential parties in the process. Karvinen-Niinikoski, Beddoe, Ruch and Tsui (2019) asserted that professional social service supervision provides practitioners and supervisors with the time and space to refine and develop professional identity, knowledge and skills, and for reflectively examining the challenges faced in everyday practice.

The unique nature of the Department of Social Development as a social service organisation is mainly based on its inherent role of rendering of social services to vulnerable groups in a non-profit making enterprise (Skhosana, 2020). Social work, as one of the key social service professions, is described as “practised within a range of settings and is increasingly undertaken as part of integrated service delivery systems” (Mishra & Bandela, 2015:14). Social work supervision, in particular, “is underpinned by professionally defined notions of ‘competent’ and ‘accountable’ practice” (Noble & Irwin, 2009:346). Learning to become a supervisor brings a wide range of new experiences into a context of this nature, with a shift of focus from individual to collective functioning.

This article starts by analysing the social service organisation as an organisational context in which supervision learning is taking place. Furthermore, it examines the role of the social service organisation in facilitating or inhibiting supervision learning among first-time supervisors. In the main, the article argues that workplace learning is an essential feature of first-time social work supervisors’ transitioning into the new role, through playing either a facilitation or inhibiting role. In the process, the incumbents are found to play an interactive role within the social service organisation as the context for their learning. In this regard, the social service organisation serves as the learning space for first-time supervisors as they transition into the supervisory role. Workplace learning may be characterised in different ways, with two aspects in particular worth noting: the development of the enterprise, and the capacity building of individuals. Situated learning is crucial in developing insight into and understanding of the meaning of workplace learning. Supervision learning is affected not only by the culture of the agency and the broader cultural context, but also by the interactions between the supervisee, supervisor and client, among others (Dirgélienè, 2016). Therefore, it is essential for first-time social work supervisors to develop this capacity through workplace learning or “learning on the job”, which recognises the learning occurring within the workplace. The emergence of workplace learning and the changing nature of the world of work can be attributed in part to the blurring of boundaries between learning and work (Bourn &

Hafford-Letchfield, 2011). The literature further highlights that various forms of workplace learning emerge alongside the formal and informal work patterns, which indicates the plurality and diversity of ways of learning (Conner, 2013).

Social service organisation is the context within which social service professions operate and the space where social work supervisors, in particular, learn the supervisory roles. It is worth noting that most approaches to learning do not exist in a vacuum, but that they are influenced by their immediate environments. Manuti *et al.* (2015) identified various elements responsible for driving the impact and the success of workplace learning; these range from the nature of the work environment to the individual's and organisation's perception of learning. In contrast to formal learning in the classroom situation, workplace learning entails shifting from traditional classroom-based learning to the kind of learning integral to an individual's job and occurring within the workplace and even during working hours. A general premise underlying workplace learning is that learning is no longer confined to formal activities in classrooms, but that it entails informal learning rather than formal education and qualifications (Cacciattolo, 2015).

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

How supervisors assume and learn the supervisory role in a social service organisation is a matter worth noting. The unique nature of social service organisations is an essential aspect to consider in supervisors' preparation for the supervisory role. This article seeks to provide insights into how the social service organisation as an organisational context can provide support or inhibit the supervision learning. Workplace learning manifested through experiential and contextual learning processes becomes critical, particularly when it comes to supervision learning. It is worth devoting attention to first-time supervisors transitioning into the supervisory role, investigating how they develop supervision skills in this context. Having earned a new level of responsibility and authority, first-time supervisors often face challenges in assuming their new role. First-time supervisors in social service organisations are often assumed to be ready to take on their role, despite inadequate preparation for it. While previous knowledge and skills may have been the primary basis for the appointment of the first-time supervisors, the literature suggests that the expertise they have acquitted may not always be adequate to enable them to assume and adapt to the new role (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2006; Karvinen-Niinikoski *et al.*, 2019). Hence this article extends and advances the role of the organisation as a context for learning.

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

This study is located within transition and experiential learning theories. The combining of the two theories is based on the view that were found to be compatible in providing an understanding of and explanation for supervision learning within the social service system as the organisational context. Transition is described as occurring in an integrated manner and that people are more often than not involved in one or more forms of transitions at various stages of their lives, whether at the stage of moving in, moving through, or moving out of a situation (Schlossberg cited in DeVilbiss, 2014). This is why transition theory is popularly

described as a three-stage process. The significance of an experiential learning theory is that it addresses a central role in the learning process, with experience and its transformation serving as the basic components (Žorga, 1997). An experiential learning theory provides an explanation based on the presumption of the transfer of what is learned from one context to another. Learning is viewed as not taking place in a linear manner, but it is rather based on the interaction among the key role-players. The contextualised learning involves a deep-level processing which goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills to understanding and applying knowledge and skills across various contexts.

### **Conceptualising workplace learning**

The phenomenon of workplace learning was analysed in this study in order to explore its significance in the sustainability of supervision learning and practice. A premise in this article is the blurring of the notions of work and learning within the organisation. There is no single definition of workplace learning as a phenomenon, but rather a broad variety of meanings. Mathews (1999) asserted that workplace learning is linked to several issues such as the learning context, the reason for learning, the learning process, the learning outcomes, and the need for sustained development.

### ***Diverse nature of workplace learning***

There are many ways of describing the workplace learning landscape. Hager (2011) views workplace learning as having evolved dramatically from an initial focus on individual learning to multiple types of learning, such as organisational, group and individual learning. Consequently there are multiple approaches to workplace learning. First is the approach that perceives learning as taking place outside the immediate working environment (off-the-job); second is the approach to learning taking place within the working environment (on-the-job); and the last the approach is one that views learning as a social activity (Stern & Sommerlad, 1999). This study is more aligned with the third approach, and examines the workplace structure in terms of its ability to maximise learning processes continuously. Learning through participating in work depends on the workplace as a supporting or inhibiting context for individuals' engagement in work activities and access to guidance. Workplace learning is regarded as the process of learning towards achieving desirable outcomes for the individual and the organisation, with individuals regarded as engaging in learning through work (Mathews, 1999). The significance of workplace and learning in practice is underlined by the observation that approximately 75% of the skills employees use on the job are reported to have been acquired through processes such as discussions with co-workers, self-study, mentoring by managers and similar methods (Richardson, 2004).

### ***Transitioning to supervision as a social and context-dependent activity***

The notions of social and experiential learning are addressed in the literature, with individuals understood as learning in a social context, with prior learning and accrued knowledge embedded in that context (Berta *et al.*, 2015). Franklin (2011) asserted that role exit and role entry remain fundamental and common experiences for any incumbent transitioning to a new

role. Kauffman and Mann (2014) and O'Donoghue, Yuh Ju and Tsui (2018) described knowledge as a socially constructed and context-bound phenomenon; they accordingly emphasised the parties' interactive roles in the supervision relationship and the influence of the organisational and professional factors in the conception and execution of supervision. The importance of context in knowledge application is highlighted by Kauffman and Mann (2014), where knowledge was described as dependent on context for its meaning, along with understanding and experience, as well as on the way that a range of discipline-relevant contexts encourage self-direction in transferring knowledge to other appropriate contexts.

Adamson (2012) described social work supervision as a non-neutral practice as it is subject to political, professional and organisational influences and he further asserted that these factors underscore the importance of understanding supervision as a contextually informed activity. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) described learning in practice as entailing a social perspective and further explained the dimension of knowing as negotiated and defined within a community of practice. The role of communities of practice are clearly vital in contributing to "continued vitality, application of practice" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015:13).

### ***Formal-informal continuum of learning***

It is evident from workplace learning is that learning is no longer an activity confined to educational institutions, but rather that it is promoted for by a range of opportunities extending from formal to informal learning (Cacciattolo, 2015), which marks a shift from seeing learning in terms of the binary between formal and informal learning. Clearly, "learning is no longer confined to occasional formal activities in classroom environments" (Manuti *et al.*, 2015:2). In contrast to formal classroom-based learning, workplace learning entails learning as integral to an individual's job and occurring within the workplace. Workplace learning, particularly informal learning, includes various forms such as learning from peers and colleagues, learning by trial and error, and individual reading, which are essential aspects of professional development. Manuti *et al.* (2015) also describe learning in the workplace as associated with more informal processes, such as discussing, observing, asking questions and problem-solving.

### **Supervision learning in social service organisations**

The literature describes the historical development of social work supervision as having its roots in the time of charity organisations and having evolved since 1878 (Eible, 2015). It is apparent that the discussion on supervision learning alongside workplace learning is not new. Workplace learning could also be viewed as relevant in addressing the complexity of supervision. It is further reported that the volunteers in the early days had limited knowledge, and as a result they had to learn the supervisory role from practice. Noble and Irwin (2009) give an account of the increasing complexity and associated uncertainty of professional and educational activities of social work in the human services sector.

Most international and local literature tends to share a general view that the transition challenges facing new supervisors in social service organisations result from a lack of

supervision training (O'Donoghue, 2014; Pretorius, 2019). The significant point is that learning is inseparable from the situation in which the knowledge is used (Swanwick, 2014). By their nature, social service organisations are complex systems with unique aspects related to supervision transition. For instance, Patterson and Whincup (2018) assert that as social service supervisors transition into their new roles, they are required to navigate from familiar to unfamiliar settings. Parker (2014:24) asserts that “the supervisor-supervisee relationship can be of a professional or anti-discriminatory nature” and adds that an anti-discriminatory approach is significant in South Africa, “as it is likely that the supervisor and supervisee are from different cultural or religious backgrounds”. Baloyi (2017) found that social work supervisors struggle to submit their work in time, adding that the Department of Social Development was required to workshop time management skills with social work supervisors. Secondly, social service organisations serve as a space for ongoing learning in supervision. This highlights the view that supervision is a continuing process starting during higher education training and extending into practice (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; White, 2015). Thirdly, the supervision transition in social service organisations is underpinned by ethical values, which have a central place in both practice (Valutis, Rubin & Bell, 2012) and supervision (Caras, 2013). Fourthly, supervision is understood as fulfilling both professional and organisational responsibilities within the social service organisation (Rankine, 2017; Valutis *et al.*, 2012). Lastly, the primary goal of social service organisations is to serve the most vulnerable without being driven by profit-making motives, which distinguishes them from the business sector (Lawler, 2015). Hence, the existence of supervision practice in social services in general and social work, in particular, “adapts and responds to contemporary contexts, requiring continual engagement and development of new understandings” (McNabb, 2019:8).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Creswell (2014) describes research methodology as a philosophy underlying the procedures and principles for gathering and analysing data, and adds that the choice of a research method is dependent upon on the needs and purposes of the study. This article was based on the interpretivist paradigm and followed a qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were used as a data-collection method. Ranjit (2019) regards in-depth interviews as enabling a researcher to ask questions without following a strict sequence and also keeping the context in mind. A sample of thirteen participants who participated in-depth interviews were selected until saturation was reached. Morse (2015:587) describes saturation as “the building of rich data within the process of inquiry, by attending to scope and replication, hence, in turn, building the theoretical aspects of inquiry”. On the one hand, the scope is conceived in terms of the comprehensiveness of data, whereas on the other hand, replication refers to data from several participants, which have essential characteristics in common.

The inclusion criteria for participants are summarised as follows:

- To be employed in one of the service offices of the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Social Development;

- To be designated in the capacity of a social work supervisor;
- To have supervision experience of not more than five years;
- To be willing to share their experiences on supervision transition experiences.

Permission was sought from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Social Development as the social service organisation of focus. The University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee granted the ethical clearance number UZREC 171110-030-RA Level 01 PGD 2014/67. The appointments for interviews with the participants were scheduled through phone calls and emails, and the interviews were held at the locations agreed upon with the participants, with mostly preferring the service offices where they were placed.

Clarke and Braun (2013) describe thematic analysis as a six-phase method aimed at identifying, analysing and reporting the thematic patterns that emerge from data. A thematic analysis is essential in organising and describing the data set to elicit the relevant details. It also worth mentioning that this process of thematic analysis, though it is presented in sequential phases, does not in practice follow clear-cut, discreet phases. Presenting them separately in this section is done for the sake of clarity. The choice of thematic analysis was mainly informed by its value in providing flexibility and insight into the detailed descriptions and contexts of supervision transition to answer the research questions. The themes derived from the expressions of the participants were summarised, categorised and grouped in relation to their underlying meanings.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Participant profile**

Table 1 (below) provides a summary of the profile of participants who participated in the qualitative study. Table 1 further indicates the sample of thirteen (n=13) participants, selected according to criterion-based purposive sampling, with a process of sampling up to saturation point being followed. To ensure that the principle of confidentiality was maintained, the participants' personal identities were not revealed, and therefore numbers were used.

**Table 1: Summary of participants' profiles**

| Participant | Gender | Title of position | Post level | Age category | Year of undergraduate completion | Undergraduate programme | Highest Social Work qualification | Social work experience | Supervisory experience | No of training programmes attended before supervising | No of training programmes attended after supervising | Type of training attended |
|-------------|--------|-------------------|------------|--------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---|--|---------------------------|
| 6           | F      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 41 and Above | 2006-2010                        | BA                      | Degree (4 years)                  | 11-15                  | 1 – 5                  | None  | 1 – 2  | W                         |
| 13          | F      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 31-35        | 2006-2010                        | BA                      | Degree (4 years)                  | 11-15                  | 1 – 5                  | 1 – 2   | 3 – 4  | Other                     |
| 25          | F      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 36-40        | 2011-onwards                     | BSW                     | Degree (4 years)                  | 6-10                   | Less than 1            | 1- 2  | 1 – 2  | W                         |
| 26          | F      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 41 and Above | 2006-2010                        | BA                      | Degree (4 years)                  | 11-15                  | 1 – 5                  | None  | 1 – 2  | SP                        |
| 27          | F      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 31-35        | 2006-2010                        | BSW                     | Hons                              | 11-15                  | 1 – 5                  | None  | 3 – 4  | W                         |
| 32          | F      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 41 and above | 1996-2000                        | BA                      | Hons                              | 11-15                  | Less than 1            | None  | None   | W                         |
| 33          | M      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 31-35        | 2011-onwards                     | BSW                     | Degree (4 years)                  | 6-10                   | 1 – 5                  | None  | 3- 4   | W                         |
| 34          | F      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 31-35        | 2006-2010                        | BSW                     | Degree (4 years)                  | 6-10                   | 1 – 5                  | 1 – 2   | 1 – 2  | W                         |
| 35          | F      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 36-40        | 2006-2010                        | BA                      | Degree (4 years)                  | 6-10                   | 1 – 5                  | 3 – 4   | 3 – 4  | W                         |
| 36          | M      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 36-40        | 2001-2005                        | BSW (Hons)              | Hons                              | 11-15                  | 1 – 5                  | 5 – 6   | 3 – 4  | W                         |
| 37          | M      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 31-35        | 2006-2010                        | BSW                     | Degree (4 years)                  | 6-10                   | 1 – 5                  | None  | 1 – 2  | W                         |
| 39          | M      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 31-35        | 2011-onwards                     | BSS (SW)                | Degree (4 years)                  | 6-10                   | 1 – 5                  | None  | 1 – 2  | W                         |
| 40          | F      | SWS Grade 1       | Level 9    | 41 and above | 2006-2010                        | BSW                     | Degree (4 years)                  | 11-15                  | 1 – 5                  | None  | 1 – 2  | W                         |
| <b>n=13</b> |        |                   |            |              |                                  |                         |                                   |                        |                        |   |  |                           |

Keys: SWS=Social Work Supervisor Grade 1; BA=Bachelor of Arts; BSS (SW) =Bachelor of Social Science in Social Work; BSW (Hons)=Bachelor of Social Work (Hons); Hons=Honours; W=Workshop; SP=Skills Programme; M=Male; F=Female

Table 1 represents the participants' details arranged from gender to the type of supervision training programmes attended. Out of thirteen (n=13) participants, nine (n=9) were females.

This came as no surprise as the literature indicates that women outnumber men in traditionally caring professions such as social work, nursing and education (Khunou, Pillay & Nethononda, 2012). Khunou *et al.* (2012:121) further regard gender as continuing to be a “significant factor in students’ decisions to enter and remain in the profession”. Engelbrecht (2019:165) acknowledges women as essential in bringing the feminine qualities “such as relationship building and teamwork that are valued in supervision”.

It was also not surprising to find that none of the participants was below 31 years of age. This shows that social service practitioners are expected to serve at least ten (10) years before being considered for a supervisory role. Consider a scenario of a student who starts a 4-year programme at age 18 years. This student is likely to complete the programme at age 21, and be considered for supervisory role after serving 10 years. This confirms the assertion in Earle’s (2008) study that, in 2005, the majority of social work practitioners across all sectors in South Africa were reported to be between the ages 25 and 34. Urick, Hollensbe, Masterson and Lyons (2017) point out that the workplace is often characterised by different generations interacting with one another.

The majority of participants also indicate that they have not attended any supervision-related training prior to assuming the supervisory role. Of those who reported having received training upon assuming supervisory role, only one participant reported to have attended the skills programme, while the rest reportedly received supervision framework workshops coordinated by their organisation. This aligns with Cacciattolo’s (2015) view that workplace learning is predominantly informal in nature, and often incorporated into workplace social interactions and everyday practices.

## **Themes**

The acquisition and development of knowledge in supervision cannot be divorced from interactive engagements between the key role-players of supervision and the organisational context in which supervision learning occurs. The study found that first-time supervisors experienced supervision learning as a situation-bound process, which enhanced the first-time supervisors’ participation in the organisational context. As a situated kind of learning, workplace learning was found to be characterised by enabling and inhibiting factors. In relation to exploring the supervisors’ transition experiences, it became apparent that the organisation afforded the incumbents the facilitative or inhibitive role in learning. Two themes and related subthemes emerged from this process, namely situational enablers in facilitating supervision learning and situational inhibitors obstructing or inhibiting supervision learning.

### ***Theme 1: Situational enablers in facilitating supervision learning***

This theme focused on the positive organisational factors that served an enabling role, referred to as situational enablers. These factors were viewed as creating enabling environments that promote effective learning.

Participant 13 highlighted the role of the broader society and the economy in influencing the organisation’s activities and identified the organisation’s role in the transition process.

*It is just that there is so much to do, with limited time to reflect on what we learn. However, one still learns in interaction with my supervisees, as work continues. Although we are not a profit-making organisation, our clients' needs require us to hit the ground, with no time to process what we are learning in the process. That is what makes our existence unique. Yes, there may be challenges here and there, but we are still committed to our mandate, and people are still being assisted. We do our best with limited resources. I think training is one area that needs serious attention. (Participant 13)*

*Before I became a supervisor, I viewed supervision as just supervision. I was not bothered about which specific things I needed to learn in the process of becoming a supervisor. I did not know why I had to be concerned with many things, but undertaking quality assurance. In a way, I still share the same view of viewing the ensuring role as essential in what I done. Not to say that I view other things as not important. For instance, providing professional development is as important. It is just that what becomes important is that a social worker exists in order to provide a service and my role is to ensure that this is done. That is the main thing that I find myself concerned about. (Participant 27)*

The statement from Participant 27 reflects that their organisation provided the transitioning supervisors with a context-specific opportunity to develop. It emerged from this finding that learning to supervise does not just occur through the mere acquisition of knowledge, but through active participation and demonstrable experiences of participants in the workplace. Kauffman and Mann (2014) described situated learning as taking place through participation in a particular context, where the incumbent interacts with others members of the community of practice.

#### *Subtheme 1.1: Social development approach in facilitating supervision learning*

The subtheme of the developmental approach in facilitating supervision learning was based on the view that the organisation serves as a medium for knowledge acquisition and development. This understanding was essential in providing a broader picture of the circumstances within which the supervision transition took place. Although different supervisors gave different descriptions of supervision practices, common among their views was the influential role of a social development approach to supervision transition. The participants' comments depicted learning as taking place in practice, with a social development approach contributing to that learning. As Hager (2011) points out, any attempt to understand learning at work has to take into account the wider context in which a particular workplace operates. A social developmental approach is applied by the respective organisation as a policy directive underlying its intervention processes and is therefore critical in establishing the context in which social services, supervision learning and supervision practice occur. In relation to this subtheme, the narratives solicited from two participants revolved around the integration of theory and practice to provide for an effective transition process.

“A manager is placed in a position of authority by the employing organisation” (Reyneke, 2019:45). By understanding the organisation’s endorsement of this authority to supervise, the participant demonstrated an understanding of the domain within which supervisors and supervisees interact.

*Supervision does not exist outside the organisational mandate. It is the organisation that is responsible for appointing staff. It is the responsibility of the Department to appoint supervisors and assign them responsibilities to lead the team. I clearly understand that the supervisory authority that I am entrusted with is an exclusively endorsement by the Department. No one becomes a supervisor without the organisation assigning the responsibility to do so. The provision for enabling supervisors to serve their role becomes a process embedded in the organisation’s mandate. We first become employees before becoming supervisors. We are, therefore, always part of the collective. (Participant 34)*

Participant 34’s assertion reflects the relationship between (social service) organisation and supervision practice. Patel (2019) notes that the linkages between social policy and development outcomes are essential in South Africa. In emphasising the role of the organisational context in supervision, Egan (2012) argued that social work supervision is inextricably linked to the context in which it is practised. This confirms the view that supervision in a social service organisation is a privilege conferred on the role incumbent by the employer (Crevani, 2019).

In contrast to the focus on the influential role of the developmental approach, this section focused on the conceptualisation thereof. The remarks below demonstrate that the participants could provide an operational explanation of the developmental approach.

*For me, a developmental approach is a non-negotiable policy directive that we are expected to abide by. The guiding documents are there. The policy frameworks are there, though, in some areas, policies are still being developed in line with the developmental approach. The question is mainly about how we put things into practice. Asked whether I incorporate the developmental principles in my interventions, I would say to a certain extent, I do. I know others may not see the link between what the policy requires and what they do in practice. Linking the principles is one thing and encountering challenges during practice is another. Even in cases where social workers do not always have sufficient means and resources, they tend to improvise. We hardly receive complaints about people who have not been assisted. I am talking about what is happening in our office in the department. The office is deep in a rural area. Not that what is happening elsewhere is not my issue, but I cannot talk about widespread problems that the country has. At this service office, this is how things are functioning (Participant 6).*

Participant 32 commented:

*We are working within the policies that have been developed. So, the developmental approach is the overarching 'umbrella' that shapes all that we do. At times, I feel that the problems appear to overwhelm us. Practitioners do more with extremely limited resources. At times, you find them using their personal resources to see that the clients receive help. They use their cellular phones, for instance. While we do that much on our side, we expect the clients to do their bit. The gathering of resources to change lives should be everyone's business. Perhaps what we need to do on our side is to prepare our clients and instil in them a sense of ownership of their lives. (Participant 32)*

It became apparent from three participants, Participants 34, 6 and 32, that the incumbents derived their supervision identity from the organisational mandate. It was revealed that a social development approach served as an intervention policy that contributed to the organisational context in which social service practice, supervision learning and supervision practice are taking place. Patel (2019) describes social development programmes as integrative and using various methods of intervention simultaneously. The robust nature of social development approach could be viewed as providing a unique character to social work supervision in South Africa (Patel & Hochfeld, 2012).

#### *Subtheme 1.2: Plurality of supervision in facilitating supervision learning*

This theme indicates that each organisation is characterised by a particular predominant type of supervision or a combination of types. The discourses of professional and managerial supervision are often characterised by divergent views (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). O'Donoghue and Tsui (2011) identified the tendency for social workers to identify with their agencies rather than with their professions as an area of particular concern in social service organisations. A lack of reconciliation of the divergent discourses of professional and managerial supervision was also evident in a recent study, which found the two formations in social service organisations do not always sit "comfortably in relation to each other as the two needs are sometimes contradictory" (Sithole, 2020:68-69).

The below remarks show that the forms of supervision did not take place in a mutually exclusive manner but that the managerial supervision appeared to predominate over professional supervision. To that effect, a participant said:

*We should be worried about the practical part of our performance. We should ensure that the job is done. Not to say that other things are not important, for instance, developing one to be a professional. You are a social worker to provide a service. Upon assuming the role, you learn that even the experienced practitioners, somehow does need a certain kind of supervisory support. (Participant 27)*

Two other participants commented:

*It does not necessarily mean that I came to know about supervising when I occupied the supervisory role. Still, I learned that my main role is to see to it that the roles assigned to supervisees are undertaken as prescribed. For me, this entails that the policies that the organisation comes up with are implemented as expected. Upon receiving the directive, it becomes my responsibility to derive what the tasks and expectations are on our side. The pressure is on the supervisor. I have to be above board in my understanding of the policies so that I will be able to guide others. I have to respond to the aspects that my supervisees do not understand. (Participant 39)*

*Getting promoted and occupying the supervisory position makes the system as if it saying, "You now know it all". Once you are promoted, you are expected to fit in on your own. The difficulties that you experience depend on the service office. I am not saying I have experienced many difficulties. Since I started, I found that there are people I can rely on. The reason is not that we do not face challenges, but one thing is certain, when it comes to doing work, we all do what we are supposed to do. (Participant 34)*

Both comments demonstrated that the pressure experienced by supervisors appears to be more about administrative responsibilities emanating from managerial supervision compared to professional supervision. The two supervision formations were not found to be co-existing smoothly. Jacques (2019) regards the supervisory role in South African social services, and social work in particular, as embedded within both management and professional practice systems. This view is found to be consistent with the one made almost a decade ago by O'Donoghue and Tsui (2011) which suggested that the preoccupation with any one particular function often threatens other functions.

The two participants also raised concerns around managerialism in supervision, which focuses on first-line management activities. As a result, the preference for one form of supervision is likely to be detrimental to another.

Participants 39 emphasised that

*It is difficult to combine different roles; a matter that is not adequately addressed. Nobody tells you what you should do. It becomes a challenge that you face individually. We do provide support only if the social worker comes forward and raises the issue. (Participant 39)*

This comment indicated that the emphasis was on the supervisory role, which is more aligned with administrative functions as opposed to educational and supportive functions. Neither educational nor supportive functions were regarded as being of prime importance compared to the administrative functions. Apparently, the supervisors only assist their supervisees when the latter share their concerns with them.

## ***Theme 2: Situational inhibitors obstructing supervision learning***

This theme focuses on the factors inhibiting supervision learning. Participant 33 went as far as asserting the need to provide incumbents with time to settle into their new role.

*I had been fortunate enough to find a supervisor who had been in the service office for some time. That does not mean that I did not face challenges, but her presence enabled me to know and master the ropes. She would narrate her experiences during her first days in the organisation. She would share stories about how she remained all by herself without any support. At that time, things did not make sense. Apparently, I have learnt about this after some months, and when we discussed our supervision roles. All comes to one issue, that the lack of time to settle on the post posed a challenge. In the first seven months, I found myself juggling different activities without a plan to move from one area to another.*

Sufficient time to adapt was regarded as crucial in enabling the incumbents to explore the best possible ways of learning the supervisory role.

Participant 25 stated:

*We all learn from each other. Supervision is not a new thing. I have learned a lot from my previous supervisor. Even now, we still do relate well. That is why I do not understand when I hear other people talk about sour relations with their ex-supervisors. The service office should be above all of us. If we let our work suffer, it becomes the issue of the organisation as a whole and no longer about the manager, the supervisor, the practitioner or any one individual. (Participant 25)*

Evident from the comments of two of the participants is that developing supervision knowledge and skills is key to learning to supervise, with the organisational context serving as the basis for explaining the experiences and behavioural patterns. The new supervisors made it apparent that there were situational factors that impeded their learning. The study further revealed the negative influences of organisational processes and structures within the organisational context, which threaten the new supervisors' learning process. Watkins and Milne (2014) asserted that learning to supervise is not only about undertaking a specific function, but it involves the ability to deal with complex situations in ways that do not make the supervisee feel disoriented and disempowered.

### *Subtheme 2.1: Professional autonomy and organisational demands in obstructing supervision learning*

From the interviews it became apparent that professional and organisational challenges often confront supervisors. Undertaking diverse roles and functions was not a straightforward process. Practice tended to present supervisors with the opportunity to assist supervisees meet their educational and supportive needs, whereas the organisation expected them to focus on the administrative aspects.

The following insights were shared:

*Even when you sense that resentment and antagonism, you still have to keep to your responsibilities. However, providing support should be an unconditional activity. You cannot say you will not provide support because of specific reasons. You are expected to do that which is correct. In most cases, you realise that the resentments emanate from somewhere. You happen to be treated as an outcast. (Participant 5)*

*The unfortunate part is that while the atmosphere makes it difficult for you to perform specific responsibilities, the expectation to perform becomes unavoidable. The organisation expects you to perform your line management role – to produce the statistical reports, get the work done, and so on. As I said, you try to balance the responsibility to ensure that work is done, and the provision of the support role is about those who lag behind. The pressure exerted by the managerial position impacts negatively on the need to perform other functions such as supervision-related responsibilities. It seems the supportive role is not accommodated in your responsibilities. (Participant 25)*

*At times, you find yourself overwhelmed by the work. Your responsibility becomes that of delivering. It does not matter what the atmosphere looks like. The more you work with them, the more you learn to navigate. (Participant 36)*

The above comment suggests that the participants tended to face challenges in undertaking specific responsibilities. Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield (2011) noted that in the process of performing certain functions, antagonistic relations often arise between managers and those under their supervision.

Participant 34 had this to say:

*When performing my duties, I had to see to it that I chose to pay more attention to what the organisation expects of me or what I see as important in our practice. The dilemma borders on whether to put emphasis on following the requirements of the organisation or pursue the needs of the supervisees. Oftener than not, I resolve to focus on the supervisees' needs at the expense of organisational requirements. (Participant 34)*

It is evident from both comments that new supervisors' challenges could be attributed to the conflicting demands between personal and organisational factors. Goliath (2018) found that transitioning from the level of a social work practitioner to the supervision level raises significant challenges. Patterson and Whincup (2018) also assert that enhancing an understanding of the supervisory task provides the incumbents with the capacity to sustain active and reflective supervision in the face of conflicting demands.

*Subtheme 2.2: Harmful experiences in obstructing supervision learning*

This subtheme focused on the negative experiences that emerged from the organisation's negative influence. Participants' views on the emotions that challenged supervision are cited below:

*On a daily basis, I had to juggle my own development with different other roles involving others. In addition to being preoccupied with my development, I was expected to get work done. I had to see to it that I juggled between the two, my own development and the development of others. Also, when I became frustrated with people pulling in different directions, I had to figure out how I would address that. Often, I availed myself to the supervisees and expressed my willingness to address their issues. In most cases, I would think that we were all on the same wavelength and that they knew what was expected of them. Checking afterwards, I would wonder as to what I should do. Unfortunately, only a few would bother to approach me and seek guidance, which added to my frustration. (Participant 32)*

*In my role as a supervisor, the last thing I expected was to see people getting into trouble for misconduct. For instance, there were a few instances where staff failed to comply with the basic rules. At times, I had to question and doubt my expertise in terms of reaching out to them. I often asked myself whether or not I should watch them closely. I thought perhaps they were people who needed close monitoring. Honestly, I ended up not knowing what to do. (Participants 4)*

*There is no provision to guide us in that area. At times, I feel like being tempted to treat my supervisees as children. It seems it is the culture they are accustomed to. This is how senior managers would come across. When you try to be reasonable, you sometimes realise that it is the culture that is foreign. (Participant 25)*

Workplace circumstances often require individuals to cope with and manage their emotions. These experiences ranged from moderately to extremely harmful ones. Uncertainty and confusion were identified as examples of moderate responses, while harassment and aggression were examples of the extreme responses. Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2012) described this time as a period of emptiness and confusion.

## **DISCUSSION**

The organisation in which the supervision practice is taking place provided the new supervisors with the opportunity to learn to supervise, which may not have been the case outside the organisational context. O'Donoghue, Yuh Ju and Tsui (2018:350) argued that "supervision is a socially and personally constructed phenomenon, based on the context in which it is taking place and the experiences of the parties involved in supervision", a conclusion which supports the findings of this article. The recognition of the facilitatory role played by the organisation further dispels the notion of supervisors as experts. The more one gains confidence and capacity, the more one shifts from the role of "expert" to the role of facilitator. This is in line with experiential learning theory, which emphasises learning from

experience, as well as Schlossberg's transition theory, which focuses on the sense of the self and the situation (DeVilbiss, 2014). DeVilbiss (2014) highlighted the role of the organisational context (situation) in which transition occurs, explaining the shift from one role to another as a three-stage process, namely moving out, moving through, and moving in. The organisational context is viewed as influencing supervision learning, which is evident where the incumbent moves out of the current (practitioner) role, going through a transition and enters a new (supervisor) role through a transition. The conception of supervision learning further emphasises what each supervisor and supervisee brings to the situation and the significance of the informal role. Karvinen-Niinikoski *et al.* (2019) assert that through professional supervision practitioners engage in a relationship with a supervisor. The relationship serves as both a place and space to refine and develop professional identity, knowledge and skills, and for reflectively examining the challenges faced in everyday practice. This is in sharp contrast with formal learning, where most of the workplace learning occurs through self-learning or is organised by the organisation.

It has already been noted that this article posits the view that supervision does not take place in a vacuum but within an organisational context. The focus on the organisation's positive influence explains learning as an asset in new supervisors' transition experiences. Supervision was recognised as an essential aspect of the organisational context in which supervision transition takes place and that experience and learning are mutually interactive (Egan, 2012).

Key to this study was also the notion that supervision transition is a non-static, multi-dimensional phenomenon that is influenced by various factors. It was apparent that not all organisational aspects had a positive influence on learning. The study revealed the negative influence of organisational processes and that structure, in the organisational context, can exert an inhibitory influence on new supervisors' learning process. Some of the organisational factors tended to challenge and even pose a threat to learning. The study found that the organisational culture could and did exert a negative influence on the process of learning to supervise. Chiller and Crisp (2012) identified high caseloads, a lack of resources and guidance, and time-limited interventions as having negative implications for the organisational culture, poor staff morale and stress, among other things.

The controlling of emotions that impact on supervision learning is an endeavour undertaken in relation to supervision transition. Informing this view is the notion that most learning is regarded as occurring through experience, as indicated in experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Socialisation is described as the way that the social structure transmits the skills and attitudes compatible with the specified role to respective individuals. Copeland, Dean and Wladkowski (2011) asserted that supervisors often experience feelings of uneasiness and confusion about when and how to take a stand. From the interviews, it became evident that abusive supervision is predominant in the organisation concerned. Though abusive supervision is often associated with hostile behaviours exhibited by supervisors (Palanski, Avey & Jiraporn, 2014), it is also common to find supervisees displaying hostile behaviours towards supervisors. This challenging situation on the part of supervisors depicts the nature of supervisor-supervisee abuse in the workplace.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The emergence of workplace learning was attributed from the outset to the blurring of boundaries between work and learning. The literature on workplace learning has therefore become critical in highlighting the often overlooked opportunities for organisations to provide for knowledge acquisition and skills enhancement. These opportunities are operationalised through the development of policies, practices, activities and operations, and the advancement of a learning organisation and promotion of interactive role-players (Noble & Irwin, 2009). While traditionally workplaces were viewed as consumers of knowledge, the postmodern era increasingly acknowledged the significance of learning in the workplace. As depicted in the findings of this study and supported by the literature, recognition of the relevance of supervision learning dispels the traditional view that academia is the primary domain for producing knowledge, and that workplaces are solely meant for the consumption of ready-made knowledge. Workplace learning could no longer be perceived as a phenomenon isolated from the organisational context in which supervision learning occurs. Furthermore, workplace learning could no longer be viewed as occurring outside of the interactive processes among the key role-players.

In this study workplace learning was conceived in its broad sense, as a context-specific and interactive process along the formal-informal continuum. The social service organisation, with its unique forms and functions, provides an environment for learning, with first-time supervisors afforded the opportunity to learn within the context and through interaction with other role-players. It is worth noting that a social service organisation has become the domain for socialising practitioners and supervisors. The study found that the transitioning of first-time supervisors into their new role took place mainly through their active participation in an organisational context. In contrast to a merely passive response to environmental influences, practitioners and supervisors become the active central figures in the learning process. The social service organisation, with its potentially facilitative or inhibiting roles, provides broad and flexible opportunities for learning. Hence this study recommends the effective implementation of workplace learning in ways that accommodate formalised time and space for such learning. For workplace learning to be successful, it is important not to rely on coincidental learning or learning through trial-and-error. There is a need for fostering of communities of practice and encouraging an ongoing flow of information, interaction and sharing of knowledge among the role-players. While the social service organisation is a space for learning, there is also a need to provide support and to manage diverse kinds of learning for it to yield positive results. As became evident in the discussion, there is a need for designing and management of workplace learning programmes. Moreover, workplace learning is essential as the basis for the establishment of the learning organisation. Baloyi (2017) found that social work supervisors struggled to submit their work in time, and so recommended that the Department of Social Development be required to provide workshops for social work supervisors that address issues of time management, among other things.

Given that a social service organisation can be a space that can facilitates or hinder learning, there is a need to ensure the creation of sustainable and healthy workplaces. Examples of

sustainable and healthy workplaces conditions necessary for promoting effective learning and countering limitations may involve decisions on the content and nature of the supervisory roles, providing the time and space for supervisory learning as well as opportunities for ongoing feedback on supervisory roles and in this way enhancing the culture of learning.

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