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Social workers' perspectives and recommendations with regard to the training needs of social work supervisors

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ABSTRACT

Social work supervision is vital for the success of social work practice. A shift towards a developmental paradigm to address community needs and reduce inequality has increased the demand for social work services and put a stronger focus on supervision to support social workers. However, current supervision practices are not aligned with this developmental paradigm, and supervisors often lack the necessary training to provide adequate support. The literature confirms the scarcity of training, leaving supervisors unprepared for their roles. To address this gap, a qualitative study guided by four of the six phases of the Design and Development (D&D) model was conducted to develop a training programme for supervisors in a development context. This article presents the findings of one phase in which individual semi-structured interviews with social workers were conducted to explore their experiences and perceptions of supervisors' training needs. Participants were selected using non-probability purposive sampling. The findings of this study confirm the lack of training for social work supervisors. The themes and subthemes that emerged through thematic analysis highlighted the training needs of supervisors and also recommended training in, amongst other aspects, supervisory roles and responsibilities, contextual and practical supervision, functions of supervision, systemic challenges and leadership.

Keywords: developmental social work; social workers; supervision; supervisors; supervision training

INTRODUCTION

The growing need for social work services in South Africa, coupled with the high levels of social inequality in the country, puts social workers under increasing pressure (Badisa, 2025; Patel et al., 2023). For social workers to perform effectively, they require robust support and supervision, as it is widely acknowledged in research that social workers frequently encounter challenging situations, leading to trauma and emotional exhaustion (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015; Mashego et al., 2023; Ratcliff, 2024). Regular social work supervision of a good quality is essential and is seen as an integral element of social work practices (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Ncube, 2019b; Nickson et al., 2020). Consequently, regular and high-quality supervision is mandatory within the South African developmental context, as outlined in the Social Service Professions Act as amended (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1978) and the Children's Act, No. 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2006). In addition to the mandatory nature of supervision, social workers expect to receive the necessary guidance and support through supervision. However, as reported by researchers such as Parker (2017), insufficient training, lack of structural support and overwhelming workloads undermine the ability of social work supervisors to provide effective supervision.

As supervision is considered a key component of support to social workers, the importance of supervision and the need for the training of supervisors are evident. Supervision is regarded as a professional practice that requires specific training, and the literature underscores the critical need for specialised supervision training (Baloyi, 2017; Maluleke & Bhuda, 2024; Manthosi & Makhubele, 2016). The absence of supervision training contributes to poor and potentially harmful supervision practices (Wynne, 2020). Furthermore, supervision training should preferably be tailored to suit the country's specific welfare policies and developmental context (Engelbrecht, 2013; Khosa, 2022).

SOCIAL WORK WITHIN THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT

The White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) provided the foundational policy framework for the transformation and restructuring of welfare services in post-apartheid South Africa, marking the formal adoption of a developmental social welfare approach (Department of Social Development [DSD], 2005; Ncube, 2019c; Patel & Hochfeld, 2013). This shift represented a decisive move away from residual, remedial welfare models toward a more inclusive, proactive strategy focused on social and economic development. In line with this vision, a review process of the 1997 White Paper culminated in the release of the final draft of the new White Paper for Social Development in May 2019 (DSD, 2019). While updating and expanding the framework to address contemporary socio-economic challenges, the 2019 draft reaffirms and strengthens the commitment to the social development paradigm introduced in 1997. Central to this paradigm are the goals of social justice, economic development, the inclusion and integration of disadvantaged and previously excluded populations, improved quality of life, capacity building, and the promotion of human rights (Midgley, 2016; Patel, 2014; Patel & Hochfeld, 2013).

The implementation of the developmental approach to social work puts further pressure on the already overburdened South African welfare sector, as this paradigm shift brings about a

change in organisational culture and management practices through the expansion of services to reach underdeveloped and marginalised communities (DSD, 2019; Patel, 2009; Shokane et al., 2017). Social workers often find the transition to the developmental approach challenging (Van Breda, 2018). Yet, these social workers are increasingly regarded a strategic human resource to help deal with societal needs and problems, and turn the developmental approach to social work into a reality (DSD, 2005; Patel, 2009; Shokane et al., 2017).

SUPERVISION WITHIN THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT

To optimise supervision in a specific country it is necessary to consider the welfare paradigm, institutional context and social work research of that country to determine how supervision should be applied in the workplace (Engelbrecht, 2013). Shokane et al. (2017) support this view, highlighting the challenges that are experienced in terms of supervision in the South African social development context. These challenges include the diverse contexts in which the country's social workers operate, the lack of resources and the morale of the social workers (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015; Mashego et al., 2023; Ratcliff, 2024). Supervision that is appropriate for the South African context is therefore imperative and expected by social workers. The Supervision Framework (Department of Social Development & South African Council for Social Service Professions [DSD & SACSSP], 2012) for the social work profession was developed by the Department of Social Development (DSD) and the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) with the aim to improve supervision practices in the country. Engelbrecht (2013) raised the concern that the Supervision Framework (DSD & SACSSP, 2012) risks being used as a management tool rather than a mechanism for staff and skills development. This approach positions the framework as a primary criterion for evaluating and measuring the service delivery of organisations and the performance of supervisors and social workers. This use prioritises the administrative function of supervision, which is centred on performance evaluation (Engelbrecht 2019a; Nickson et al., 2020; Tsui et al., 2017) at the risk of neglecting the developmental function of supervision. Consequently, supervision is used to monitor and control rather than to develop and support, thereby failing to provide the support necessary for social workers to deliver effective social services.

LACK OF TRAINING FOR SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISORS

In line with numerous international authors, a South African study by Engelbrecht (2013) identified the lack of training of supervisors as a concern. Recent South African studies that highlighted the lack of training and emphasised the need for supervision training include those of Chibaya (2018), Khosa (2022), Manthosi and Makhubele (2016), Mokoele and Weyers (2021), Mokoka (2016), Ncube (2019c), Parker (2017), Ramabulana-Ndzuta (2022), Shokane et al. (2017) and Wynne (2020). These authors confirmed the need for supervision training within the South African context.

In May 2020 the Minister of the Department of Social Development at the time, Lindiwe Zulu, declared supervision an area of speciality in social work in the Government Gazette of 22 May 2020 (RSA, 2020), in terms of Section 28 (1) (gA)(i) and (ii) of the Social Service Professions Act (RSA, 1978) and on the recommendation of the SACSSP and the Professional Board for Social Work. In the future specialised training for supervisors will become compulsory and the

title "specialist in supervision" may be used only by those registered for a speciality in supervision. The training of supervisors as "specialists" is therefore imperative.

Engelbrecht (2013) emphasised that the body of knowledge on supervision in other countries, especially Western countries, should not be adopted randomly. The content of supervision training must be adapted to suit the country's welfare context. In South Africa the Supervision Framework (DSD & SACSSP, 2012) requires that supervisors attend supervision training presented by an accredited service provider recognised by the SACSSP. Engelbrecht (2019b) found it problematic that this requirement is not enforced, that the focus of supervision training is not specified, and that the mentioned service providers are not regulated. Specialised supervision training is required to produce well-rounded, professional supervisors, not just managerial supervisors.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted as part of a broader research project titled "A training programme to enhance the knowledge and skills of supervisors for a social development context". The research followed the Design and Development (D&D) model of intervention research developed by Rothman and Thomas (1994) and implemented four of the six phases of this model. This article focuses on Phase 2, which emphasises information gathering and synthesis (Roestenburg & Strydom, 2021). To gather relevant information individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with social workers and supervisors. The experiences of social workers and supervisors were explored to gain a better understanding of the training needs of supervisors within the South African social development context.

This article focuses on the experiences of social workers as the recipients of supervision. It is underpinned by a study that adopted a qualitative research approach and is grounded in the strengths perspective, which aligns with developmental social work and emphasises social justice, equality, *ubuntu*, democracy and social change (Saleebey, 1996). The strengths perspective, as explained by Engelbrecht (2010b), is integral to the developmental approach to social welfare in South Africa, particularly in the context of the country's Integrated Service Delivery Model (DSD, 2005). For this study, the participants were selected from social workers employed by the DSD and a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Table 1 provides a summary of the organisations (and the provinces they represent) that participated in the study.

Table 1: ***Organisations and provinces represented in the study***

Organisation	**Province**
DSD	Western Cape
NGO 1	Western Cape
NGO 2	Northern Cape
NGO 3	Eastern Cape
NGO 4	Free State

Non-probability purposive sampling, based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, as frequently employed in social research, was used (Babbie, 2021; Strydom, 2021). To be eligible for inclusion in this study, participants were required to be employed social workers registered with the SACSSP.

Online semi-structured interviews were conducted with the sampled social workers. Interviews were chosen as the primary data-collection method for this qualitative study because of their effectiveness in capturing deep insights and understanding, and in "seeing the world through the eyes of the participant" (Babbie, 2021; Gentles et al., 2015; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a). Online platforms, such as Zoom and MS Teams, were used for the interviews. Thirteen of the 22 social workers interviewed were from the DSD, while nine were from NGOs. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved. For data analysis, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were used for thematic data analysis using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework (2013) for thematic analysis, as thematic analysis is widely applied in qualitative studies. The rigorous thematic analysis ensured trustworthy and insightful data (Nowell et al., 2017) from which themes and subthemes could emerge.

As this study involved social workers as professionals and not individuals from vulnerable populations, there was minimal risk. The author was aware of and sensitive to any potential harm, as unintentional harm may occur (Babbie, 2021; Roestenburg & Strydom, 2021). The participants were able to make an informed decision about their participation in this study. Ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and protection from harm were taken into account. Ethical permission to conduct this study was obtained from the ethical committee of North-West University with ethics number, NWU-00949-19-A1. Legal authorisation was also obtained from the provincial office of the DSD in the Western Cape, as well as the head offices of the NGOs. So-called "goodwill permission" was obtained from the managers of specific offices prior to the start of the interviews.

The author adhered to Lincoln and Guba's model (1985) to ensure the study's trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was established by collecting rich, high-quality data and achieving data saturation, and enhanced by using a co-coder (Lincoln et al., 2018). Transferability was supported by providing a detailed description of the data, including direct quotes from the participants and substantiation from the literature. An audit trail of all raw data, including voice recordings and field notes, will be available for five years. The study's data management and analysis procedures were thoroughly documented to ensure dependability and replicability (Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). Confirmability was achieved by documenting the research process and all supporting verifications (Schurink et al., 2021), complying with the ethical clearance process of the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at North-West University (NWU), and adhering to the approved research protocol and ethical principles throughout the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Six themes, with subthemes, emerged from the data gathered during the semi-structured interviews. Table 2 provides a summary of the six themes.

Table 2: ***The six themes that emerged from the data***

Theme 1	The roles and responsibilities of supervisors
Theme 2	Contextual and practical dimensions of supervision
Theme 3	The functions of supervision
Theme 4	Supervisors in context: Navigating complex roles and systemic challenges
Theme 5	Leadership and leadership styles in supervision
Theme 6	Training of supervisors: Gaps, needs and priorities

Theme 1: The roles and responsibilities of supervisors

The roles and responsibilities of supervisors emerged as the first theme. Guidance, support, availability and co-responsibility for the social workers' work and their growth and development were mentioned as expected roles and responsibilities of supervisors. Furthermore, the participants asserted that supervisors are responsible for ensuring the delivery of quality social work services. The participants identified these roles and responsibilities as important for supervisors and therefore concluded that training in this regard is important. Engelbrecht (2021a) underscored the importance of role differentiation, noting that supervisors often lack clarity about their responsibilities. Integrating this clarity into training programmes is vital to ensure supervisors understand their roles within specific contexts.

Most of the participants considered guidance and support equally necessary for effective supervision. Verbatim responses highlighted the importance of guidance and support: *"Supervision is a platform where the supervisor can give me guidance"* (SW8), and *"My expectation is basically that the supervisor should be there for me for support"* (SW4). In this context, Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield (2011), Silence (2017) and Ncube (2019a) also emphasised the value of guidance and the importance of guiding supervisees to deliver quality social welfare services. This guidance fosters independent thinking and empowerment, aligning with the strengths perspective (Engelbrecht, 2021b; Saleebey, 1996, 2002). The role of supervisors in providing support is well documented (Manthosi & Makhubele, 2016; Silence, 2017; Wynne, 2020).

All the participants agreed that the availability of supervisors was important. SW19 confirmed this: *"The supervisor must be available … 24 hours a day if there is a crisis"* (SW19). Similarly, Maluleke and Bhuda (2024) stated that availability is one of the aspects of supervision valued most by supervisees.

The participants perceived supervision as an investment in their growth and development as professionals. According to them, supervisors are co-responsible for their growth and development: *"… to guide me to be the best at what I do … Help me to develop within the profession"* (SW16). Likewise, Silence (2017) and Tsui et al. (2017) stated that supervision is

seen as the cornerstone of professional development, ensuring that social workers have the necessary skills, knowledge and attributes for optimal service delivery. This view aligns with the strengths perspective, emphasising empowerment and capacity building (Baloyi, 2017; DSD & SACSSP, 2012; Kadushin, 1992; Saleebey, 1996, 2002).

The participants were furthermore of the opinion that supervisors are co-responsible for their work and conduct: "*Also, a supervisor who is very responsible ... taking responsibility ... because it is not only the social worker who has to take responsibility, but also the supervisor"* (SW2).

Various researchers as well as the participants agreed that the main purpose of supervision is to ensure the quality of services provided to service users (Engelbrecht, 2019a; Kadushin, 1992; Tsima & Ncube, 2023; Unguru & Sandu, 2017; Wynne, 2020). The participants expressed this as follows: "*There must be quality assurance of my work*" (SW4), and *"... to ensure I'm on the right track ... to see if you follow the right processes ... Is it the correct process for that specific situation and in the best interests of the client or the child?*" (SW3).

The Social Service Professions Act (RSA, 1978) and the Supervision Framework (DSD & SACSSP, 2012) clearly state that supervisors are co-responsible for the actions and professional conduct of their supervisees. Supervisors therefore play a pivotal role in quality assurance, supporting social workers in providing excellent services to service users (Bourn & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; DSD & SACSSP, 2012; Parker, 2017).

Theme 2: **Contextual and practical dimensions of supervision**

In South Africa, the Social Service Professions Act (RSA, 1978) mandates supervision, a requirement echoed by the participants and supported by various frameworks and models (DSD, 2005; DSD & SACSSP, 2012). These regulations underscore the need for supervisors to possess the competencies required for effective supervision practices and support. Based on the experiences of the participants, there is a need for training on supervision practices for supervisors, especially within the South African developmental context.

Subtheme 2.1: The supervisory relationship as foundation for effective practice

The participants emphasised that the supervision process happens in the context of the supervisory relationship. A participant stated: "*Building such a relationship is also important to me. If we have a good relationship, the supervision sessions will be more comfortable. Then we can talk openly with each other"* (SW8). According to the participants and as alluded to by various authors (Botha, 2002; Kadushin, 1992; Unguru & Sandu, 2017), the supervisory relationship is critical and forms the basis of effective supervision.

Subtheme 2.2: Ethical practice through supervision

The participants referred to the importance of ethical behaviour by social workers and supervisors to ensure ethical practice. One participant said: *"Just practising those social work principles, those ethics, those values ... We have set values, set standards, set norms. Also, a supervisor who is very ethical ... ensur[es] ethical practice"* (SW2). Caras (2013) agreed that supervision can be used as a platform to improve performance with high professional standards

and ethical interventions, while the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2012) stated that high-quality supervision is essential for accountable and ethical practice.

Subtheme 2.3: Challenges of inconsistent and unstructured supervision

The participants clearly preferred planned and structured supervision to ad hoc supervision. The Supervision Framework (DSD & SACSSP, 2012) mandates structured sessions, while Beddoe and Wilkins (2019) emphasised that frequent, well-structured supervision provides essential education, as well as administrative, social and emotional support. Here, a participant mentioned:

> *If you have the structured, planned supervision then you know – these are the cases I would like to discuss with my supervisor. You have that agenda and it makes it formal. He* [supervisor] *signs – this is what we did – and I sign, and then it is filed.* (SW4)

The lack of supervision reported by the participants is therefore concerning: "*I also think the fact that no formal supervision sessions take place at this stage is a challenge ... I expect formal supervision sessions, and that is not what really happens*" (SW4).

The participants expanded on the negative effect that the lack of supervision has on clients:

> *Not having guidance, not having support, just doing things on your own … and it gets very difficult because with social work you have to own up to every decision you make regarding clients. So, now, if you don't have anyone to back you up or to guide you, it gets really frustrating and it makes your work really difficult.* (SW2)

Like the participants, Ncube (2019c) and Tsima and Ncube (2023) also highlighted that the lack of structured supervision could hinder the delivery of professional services and supervision in South Africa. Concerns about the lack of supervision were also mentioned in other South African studies – in particular those of Chibaya (2018), Mokoka (2016), Ramabulana-Ndzuta (2022), Silence (2017) and Wynne (2020). The lack of supervision, as reported by the participants, is therefore cause for concern and should be noted by supervisors.

Subtheme 2.4: Open-door policy and ad hoc supervision

Most of the participants reported that some form of informal, open-door policy or ad hoc supervision was mostly utilised. One participant mentioned, *"In general, I think the supervision happens more on an ad hoc basis … that the supervisee approaches the supervisor because he or she knows something or does not know, or seeks guidance"* (SW10). Concerns about the quality of supervision were also reported. According to the participants, supervision is sometimes only done in a rush and "on the run": *"Everything feels so rushed and I feel we just don't give the proper quality to each case … It's more you doing quantity than quality and I don't feel that is fair because we are dealing with lives"* (SW22).

While Skidmore (1995, in Baloyi, 2017) commends the open-door policy for its accessibility, other scholars caution that it cannot be used as a substitute for regular and scheduled supervision (Chibaya, 2018; Wynne, 2020). Chibaya (2018) and Engelbrecht (2013) also agreed that "on-the-run" supervision has unfortunately become a reality and sometimes the norm in the South African context.

Subtheme 2.5: Supervision methods – preferences and application

Referring to supervision methods, the participants stated that individual, group and peer supervision are used. Supervisors have the privilege of choosing any of these methods, provided it takes into account the needs of the organisation and the supervisees, as well as the time available for supervision (Silence, 2017). Knowledge about the different methods of supervision is therefore essential and should be included in a training programme.

It was evident that individual supervision remains the preferred method of supervision in South Africa: *"Most of the time we have individual supervision. You are able to share your views, weaknesses and everything with your supervisor … So, one comes up with ways on how to deal with certain situations. I prefer individual"* (SW2). Similarly, Engelbrecht (2010a; 2019b) remarked that individual supervision is regarded as the preferred – and often default – method of supervision in South Africa.

Individual supervision is preferred for its supportive nature, while group supervision is valued for peer learning and problem-solving (Botha, 2002; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). In line with the literature, the participants believed that group supervision lends itself to learning from each other: *"… and with group supervision, that is where everyone is involved in, everyone comes up with solutions to a certain problem. It really helps to have everyone involved on how to do things"* (SW2). In addition to learning from each other in group supervision, some participants reported that they value the peer support, because it is non-threatening and facilitates camaraderie among peers. The following comment confirms this: *"We are a good team working together. During peer supervision, they will give solutions and possible ideas on how we can handle a situation. So, that peer support is very important"* (SW8).

Subtheme 2.6: The integration of technology in supervision

The participants reported on the successful use of technology and social media platforms (such as WhatsApp) for supervision and communication. Participants mentioned that technology enables them to contact their supervisors more easily, without necessarily waiting for a formal supervision session. This flexibility facilitates timely support and guidance, contributing to more responsive supervision practices, while still aligning with professional and ethical standards. One of the participants commented, *"The fact that you can call the supervisor at any time … I do not struggle to get hold of her. I can send a WhatsApp, I can send an e-mail, I can call …"* (SW18). Similarly, Engelbrecht (2019a, 2019b) and Mo et al. (2020) encouraged the use of technology in supervision. In this regard, the SACSSP published the Interim Ethical Guidelines for Social Workers in South Africa with respect to technology, which is also applicable to online/virtual supervision (SACSSP, 2020). As technology will increasingly be used for supervision in the future, training in this regard is important.

Subtheme 2.7: Supervision activities

The Supervision Framework (DSD & SACSSP, 2012) and Engelbrecht (2019a; 2019b) allow for various types of supervision activities. The participants referred to consultation and mentoring as supervision activities. The participants who referred to consultation stated that they perceived social workers who make use of consultation as experienced and independent:

"Supervision is more intense in terms of what she [the supervisor] *needs to feed you. In supervision she will guide, lead, assist … Consultation is often not that. On consultation she knows you already have the experience and how can we build on that expertise"* (SW16). The participants' views echoed those of Engelbrecht (2012; 2019a), who claimed that consultation works after an initial period of intense supervision and that experienced social workers require consultation only on specific issues as they, in general, need less structure, support and supervision. Referring to mentoring, one participant stated: *"I must be mentored. They should share their experience with me as well – and perhaps with practical examples of what they might have gone through"* (SW17). This response is in line with how the DSD and SACSSP (2012) view supervision, emphasising the transfer of knowledge and skills and the professional development of supervisees.

Subtheme 2.8: Specialised supervision needs of newly qualified social workers

The participants deemed regular supervision, support and guidance as essential for newly qualified social workers, as explained in the following comment:

> *They must guide me as a newly qualified social worker. They need to encourage me because what we deal with – it's very stressful at times, even very traumatic … I need to be guided. I need to be supported. I must be encouraged. I must be mentored.* (SW17)

The participants reflected on the significant lack of supervision, support and guidance for newly qualified and appointed social workers: *"Those young workers – I do not think they get that guidance they should get. And then all the crises – it's not small crises. A young worker stumbles and falls when they don't get the support"* (SW19). Authors such as Beddoe et al. (2021), Pretorius (2020) and Wolfaardt (2022) also highlighted that newly qualified social workers need additional support and guidance. Engelbrecht and Ncube (2021) specifically mentioned that newly qualified social workers are highly dependent on supervision. Therefore, supervisors must be aware of these additional needs.

Theme 3: The functions of supervision

In line with the literature, the majority of the participants identified the three functions of supervision as the administrative, educational and support functions (Chibaya, 2018; DSD & SACSSP, 2012; Ncube, 2019c; Tsima & Ncube, 2023; Unguru & Sandu, 2017). According to the participants, these functions are interlinked: *"For me, the three functions actually go hand in hand"* (SW11). Supervisors must be trained in the effective execution of all the functions of supervision.

Subtheme 3.1: The administrative function

The administrative function is regarded as normative as it helps to ensure the delivery of professional services by the supervisee, in accordance with organisational policies and statutory norms (DSD & SACSSP, 2012; Engelbrecht, 2019a). In this regard, the participants agreed that compliance, accountability and monitoring form an integral part of the administrative function. One participant expressed this as follows:

> *With the administrative function, our supervisor must pay attention to compliance – compliance in terms of your Batho Pele principles, compliance in terms of legislation. The supervisor must see that there is an all-paper trail – all administrative functions for which he or she is responsible must be managed and monitored and evaluated to ensure that everything is done within the legislation.* (SW11)

As confirmed by the statements and experiences of the participants, supervisors strongly focus on the administrative function of supervision, sometimes to the detriment of the educational and supportive functions: *"For most supervisors, it* [administrative function] *is very important – more than the support. I would say for most of them it is more important than anything, because it is now about proof, about accountability"* (SW3). In this context, Engelbrecht (2010a) specifically warned that supervisors are focusing on the administrative function to the detriment of the other functions. Authors such as Wilkins et al. (2017) and Nickson et al. (2020) also argued that, unfortunately, the educational and supportive functions are neglected in favour of the administrative function. Studies by Chibaya (2018), Parker (2017), Silence (2017) and Tsima and Ncube (2023) further confirmed that supervision in South Africa is still primarily focused on the administrative function, often at the expense of the educational and supportive functions. Engelbrecht (2019a) and Tsui et al. (2017) pointed out that supervisors' practice of focusing on the administrative function is directly in contrast with the developmental and strengths-based paradigm of social work.

Subtheme 3.2: The educational function

Referring to the educational function, the participants' statements correspond with those of authors who believe that the main goal of the educational function of supervision is to equip and empower supervisees with the knowledge and skills required for effective delivery of social work services (Botha, 2002; DSD & SACSSP, 2012; Engelbrecht, 2019b; Kadushin, 1992). A participant stated: *"I think it remains an important function of the supervisor to also improve the social worker's knowledge and skills"* (SW4).

The participants realised the neglect of the educational function of supervision. One participant stated: *"It's also a zero – a zero at the moment. Education does not at all happen in supervision"* (SW19). Botha (2002) argued that the educational function of supervision has always been neglected in the past and in some cases not even applied. The participants' narratives confirmed Botha's findings.

Subtheme 3.3: The supportive function

The importance of support and the supportive function of supervision was emphasised by the participants.

> *Support is very important because I have been in situations where I feel I am shaking and want to cry. And then it feels like I have to talk to her and then she assures me I am following the right steps … Then you feel at ease because you know your supervisor has your back.* (SW12)

The participants' statements correspond with those of various authors who indicated that the supportive function is considered restorative as it enables the supervisee to mobilise the

emotional energy needed for effective job performance (DSD & SACSSP, 2012; Engelbrecht, 2019a).

As with the educational function of supervision, some participants commented that the supportive function was lacking and that they did not feel supported. The support function of supervision requires that the supervisor provides support to the supervisee, even in instances where the supervisee does not explicitly request it:

> *... but sometimes you just feel you need that support and then it's not there for you. You have to go and ask for support. You have to say, 'I'm struggling. I need advice.' It cannot only come from the worker's side.* (SW19)

Similarly, Chibaya's study (2018), conducted in the South African context, concluded that there is a lack of support for supervisees. Vetfuti et al. (2019) also highlighted the non-prioritisation of the support function of supervision, both globally and in South Africa.

Theme 4: Supervisors in context: Navigating complex roles and systemic challenges

Supervisors who work in the complex South African socio-political context face demands that require sensitivity and specialised knowledge. The participants emphasised that supervisors need training for their roles as managers to navigate the diverse South African context, acquire specific knowledge and skills, and maintain their mental health.

Subtheme 4.1: The dual role of the supervisor

The participants recognised that, in the South African context, supervisors need to fulfil a dual role as they are both managers and supervisors. This dual role often undermines the quality of supervision, as noted by the participants and confirmed by various authors (Engelbrecht, 2010a; Parker, 2017).

The participants believed that this dual role was a challenge and that it had a negative impact on supervision. They felt that their supervision was neglected as a result of this dual role:

> *I do not think there is any supervision at the moment ... but it is not humanly possible for my supervisor to reach out to me because she has all these operational issues. They have management and office roles that are overwhelming. They do not have time for supervision. Is it necessary that she still has the role of an office manager too?* (SW19)

In this context, Chibaya (2018) and Ncube (2019c) specifically stated that this dual role represents a significant threat to effective supervision in South Africa.

Subtheme 4.2: Diversity and culturally competent supervision

South Africa is a multicultural country with a diversity of languages, religious beliefs and customs. According to the participants, supervisors are in general sensitive to the significance of diversity. As indicated by one participant:

> *I think most of the supervisors I have encountered try to be culturally sensitive. I have had black supervisors and I have had white supervisors – all the colours of the rainbow and I*

really cannot say that one of the supervisors that I had was deliberately insensitive … People try to accept and to understand. (SW10)

The participants were aware that multiculturalism and diversity implied an understanding of a range of identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, language, religion and spirituality, immigration status, age, and generational experiences. The participants, like Ncube (2019c), agreed that supervisors must demonstrate cultural competence and respect for diverse identities. They cited examples of sensitivity to diversity:

LGBTQI – it is important that one has a non-judgemental attitude and also not say derogatory things towards your supervisee. The supervisor must have gender sensitivity" (SWS10); "*Something we do as colleagues – to include everyone, to speak a language that everyone understands …* (SW8)

I get along well with people of all races. So, I have no problem. (SWS19)

Although the majority of the participants reported that their supervisors were sensitive to diversity, it remains essential to include diversity in supervisor training as South Africa continues to be a highly plural society.

Subtheme 4.3: The acquired knowledge and skills of the supervisor within the South African context

It was evident from the voices of the participants that supervisors, practising in South Africa, require certain knowledge and skills. Most of the participants strongly agreed that supervisors need to have adequate knowledge of supervision practice, social work and social work practice. The participants regarded knowledgeability as an essential characteristic of a competent supervisor. The following comment reflects this assertion:

I think, number one, is good knowledge of his or her field. So, they need to know actually what is practical social work. They need to know what the expectations of the Department, of our NGO or whatever are … and also what the legislation is to be able to back me up if you do not know or if you are stuck with a problem. (SW20)

Research by Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield (2011) and Rothwell et al. (2019) confirmed that effective professional supervision requires a complex mix of knowledge, values and skills.

The participants highlighted that South African supervisors do not only need knowledge and theoretical skills but also interpersonal skills. In this regard, a participant mentioned: *"You can be a good social worker, a very good social worker, but maybe you're going to be a very poor supervisor because of the absence of interpersonal skills"* (SW17). Perumal and Tanga (2020) also highlighted the importance of interpersonal skills for supervisors, while Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield (2011) emphasised the value of communication skills for supervisors.

Subtheme 4.4: The emotional wellbeing and mental health of supervisors

The participants were aware of the demanding working conditions of supervisors in South Africa and concerned about their supervisors' emotional wellbeing and mental health. They regarded the emotional wellbeing and mental health of supervisors as crucial for the effective supervision, assistance and guidance of supervisees:

> *I worry more about her mental health than my own because the managerial role is such a weight of responsibility. We are working in this environment where we are depending on her a lot for emotional support, but we forget she also needs it because of this managerial role. Just to understand that this manager is also human ...* (SW16)

Similarly, Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield (2011 and Hafford-Letchfield (2021) also found that supervisors are poorly supported and do not receive adequate supervision themselves. Rankine and Thompson (2022) confirmed that supervisors feel overlooked in their own supervision, leading to feelings of isolation.

Subtheme 4.5: Challenges in supervision within the developmental context

Challenges in supervision within the South African context were highlighted. These challenges may not necessarily be resolved or addressed through training. However, the difficulties should be noted, as supervision training takes place within this demanding context. The challenges mentioned by the participants were the lack of time for supervision, the workload and demanding work of supervisors, the supervisor-supervisee ratio, distance and workspace.

The lack of time for supervision was singled out as the main challenge of supervision. A participant responded: *"Challenges I would say is the time constraint"* (SW22). The participants believed that supervision is often the last priority, usually because of a lack of time and the workloads of both the supervisor and the supervisee: *"The time for supervision is a challenge. It's* [supervision] *supposed to happen today, but a crisis might come in"* (SW6). Similarly, the social workers in Chibaya's study (2018) also mentioned time constraints as a major obstacle. In their studies, Silence (2017) and Wynne (2020) also found that social workers struggle to find time for supervision.

The workload, demanding nature of the work and working conditions of supervisors were considered challenges in ensuring quality supervision (Tsima & Ncube, 2023). In this regard, a participant reported:

> *You find that they have so much on their plate. For example, my supervisor – he is dealing with probation, substance, GBV – there's so many things. Our supervision maybe is second or third priority. It seems as though maybe my session is not that important.* (SW14)

Likewise, Ncube (2019c) pointed out that the supervisors themselves cited their heavy workloads as a constraint to effective supervision.

Referring to workload, the participants also mentioned the ratio of supervisors to supervisees. According to them, this ratio is skewed with too many supervisees per supervisor. The Supervision Framework (DSD & SACSSP, 2012) recommends ratios of 1:10 or 1:6 for structured supervision. However, the participants reported higher ratios, consistent with

Mokoka's findings (2016), which advocate for reducing the number of supervisees per supervisor. Here, one participant commented:

> *They also have to look at the amount of workers who report to a supervisor because you cannot give him 10 or 15 or 20* [supervisees] *and he cannot even cope with it … And how many cases does each worker have – and the supervisor is co-responsible for all those cases, even if they have to appoint more supervisors and say we have one supervisor for every five workers.* (SW19)

As a final challenge, the participants mentioned the perceived unavailability of the supervisor because they are not in the same office or because of distance. Hence, the participants did not feel supported:

> *Our supervisor has different offices. She is not there every day, and we only have supervision once a month and then we can also contact her by telephone. It's a challenge that she is not there with us. Sometimes, there are documents that need to be signed and things that need to be read on children immediately.* (SW12)

In this context, Ramabulana-Ndzuta (2022) also identified travelling and distance as challenges hampering effective supervision.

Theme 5: Leadership and leadership styles in supervision

Leadership and leadership styles in supervision emerged as the fifth theme. It is believed that supervisors need to possess leadership abilities and skills to set an example. The statements of the participants demonstrate the need for supervisors with strong leadership skills: "*Sometimes we don't need managers, we need leaders. They must be able to influence us in a positive way"* (SW17), and *"I also believe that leaders should lead from the front. You pick up that shovel first and then everyone else will follow"* (SW16). The participants emphasised the important role of the supervisor as leader who is able to make the final decision, especially in difficult cases or crisis situations: *"But I think sometimes it is necessary the supervisor must take the lead and take the initiative himself and say, 'We are going to handle the situation this way. I think at the moment this is the best'"* (SW11). Likewise, Haworth et al. (2018) found that strong leadership is essential to successfully embed strengths-based approaches in practice, enable well-functioning organisations and help ensure effective supervision in social work.

Most of the participants reported that they prefer a democratic leadership style:

> *Democratic for me, it's democratic because you also get a say. You're not just told do this, do that. You also like part of the decision. It makes employees or social workers under you feel very comfortable, giving your employees a voice …* (SW2)

They agreed that they do not prefer an autocratic leadership style:

> *An autocratic leader … is not going to help much because you are just going to be the puppet and you're just going to just say, yes, yes, yes to everything. And yet again, we still feel as though we haven't grown. We're still stuck in one position.* (SW14)

The participants' observations correspond with the findings of researchers such as Ding et al. (2020), who state that democratic leadership, rooted in strengths-based and developmental approaches, aims to enhance supervisees' performance by providing growth opportunities. In contrast, autocratic leadership negatively affects workplace outcomes, including team interaction, organisational commitment and employee performance, by centralising decision-making and enforcing strict control, stifling learning and initiative-taking attitudes among supervisees. Statements made by the participants are consistent with these findings.

Haworth et al. (2018) stated that there is a lack of literature and research on leadership in the field of social work. Vito and Schmidt Hanbidge (2021) also emphasise the critical need for leadership and supervision, noting that many social workers are promoted to management positions without adequate preparation and training. They argue that integrating leadership training into supervision programmes is essential for developing effective leaders in human service organisations. The need for leadership and the development of an effective leadership approach are critical to ensure effective social services (Haworth et al., 2018; Vito & Schmidt Hanbidge, 2021). A supervision training programme should therefore also explore leadership and leadership styles.

Theme 6: Training of supervisors: Gaps, needs and priorities

The participants agreed that supervisor training is important, that there is a need for training, but that there is a lack of training opportunities. The need for training of supervisors therefore emerged as the sixth and final theme. Expectations indicated that supervisors must be well trained. One participant observed: "*They have to have the proper training – the necessary training, the academic training*" (SW5). However, the participants believed there is a lack of training and training opportunities for supervisors: *"If you are appointed as a new supervisor then you go for supervisor training. But afterwards, then there is no further training for the supervisor. No opportunities are created to broaden their knowledge"* (SW21).

The participants specifically emphasised training on the various aspects of management. They confirmed the need for training on the following aspects:

Time management: Supervisors are expected to balance competing priorities, including administrative responsibilities, crisis intervention and the supervision of multiple staff members. Participants noted that poor time management often leads to reduced availability for meaningful supervision and undermining the developmental function of supervision. For instance, one participant commented, *"Time management – the work demands are hectic on the one hand. On the other hand, as a supervisor, he could have spent his time a little better"* (SW4), pointing to perceived inefficiencies that hinder effective support. This aligns with Parker (2017), who argues that time management is essential in ensuring supervision is consistent and productive. Supervisor training should therefore include practical tools and techniques for managing workloads, prioritising tasks and protecting time for structured supervision.

Crisis management: Participants emphasised that supervisors must be equipped to respond decisively and appropriately to emergencies. This includes knowing when and how to escalate matters, mobilise resources and provide emotional containment to social workers

in high-pressure situations. One participant stated, *"Crisis management – a supervisor must know what is an emergency"* (SW19). According to Dughi, (2025), effective crisis management by supervisors is foundational for ensuring quality service delivery. Training in this area should incorporate scenario-based learning to build confidence and competence in real-time decision-making.

Conflict management: Supervisors need the skills to manage conflict, mediate disputes, set professional boundaries and foster a culture of open communication. A participant asserted, *"Conflict management is also important for training – how do you deal with conflict*" (SW9). Sele and Mukundi (2022) argue that conflict management is a key leadership competency in social services settings.

Debriefing: Debriefing was described as a restorative process that helps mitigate emotional burnout, process traumatic experiences and foster resilience. "*Training on debriefing – for themselves* [supervisors] *and for us as social workers …*" (SW8) reflects the dual need for emotional containment and peer support. Chibaya (2018) supports the idea that reflective practice is integral to supervision. Supervisors should thus be trained in structured debriefing techniques and understand the psychological principles underlying emotional regulation and trauma-informed supervision.

Stress management: Participants recognised that supervisors operate under significant pressure, making stress management an essential training area. Participants noted that stressed supervisors may become unavailable or emotionally withdrawn, impairing their capacity to provide effective supervision. *"They need to also learn to manage their stress*" (SW14) illustrates this concern. Freund and Guez (2018) similarly note the importance of the adoption of strategies to cope with work-related stress by supervisors. Supervisor training must address self-care practices, stress reduction strategies and organisational wellness frameworks to promote sustainability in supervisory roles.

Management of administration: Managing administrative responsibilities emerged as a training need. Participants expressed frustration with supervisors overwhelmed by paperwork, sometimes at the expense of supervision. "*How to manage all the admin …"* (SW19) reflects this burden. Chibaya (2018) and Tsima and Ncube (2023) both caution that administrative overload reduces supervision to a compliance exercise rather than a developmental one. Training should offer supervisors practical strategies for balancing administrative tasks with supervisory duties.

Planning: Planning was described as a foundational yet underdeveloped skill among supervisors. *"They need to be able to plan – planning skills …"* (SW7), indicates that current supervisory practices often lack foresight. Rothwell et al. (2019) affirm that planning enhances effectiveness and accountability. Training should therefore include modules on goal-setting, scheduling and outcome-based supervision planning.

Legislation: Participants expected supervisors to be well-versed in legislation relevant to the South African context. One participant noted: *"Training on the different laws – whether it is the Children's Act or any other …"* (SW8). Supervisors must not only understand the relevant laws, but also be able to translate them into practice (Khosa, 2022). Training

programmes should therefore integrate applied legislative knowledge and policy interpretation.

In line with Perumal and Tanga (2020), the participants acknowledged the multitude of skills that supervisors need, as well as the challenges they face, especially within the South African context – hence the supervisors' need for training. Recent research clearly indicates that supervisors are not properly trained, both internationally and within South Africa. Recent South African studies by Ramabulana-Ndzuta (2022) and Wolfaardt (2022) reinforce the critical need for training programmes to equip supervisors with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively support and guide their supervisees. Wong et al. (2023) found that internationally supervisors frequently take on supervisory roles without sufficient training, while Saitadze and Dvalishvili (2023) reported that newly appointed supervisors feel unprepared for supervisory responsibilities because of a lack of training. These findings underscore the need training programmes to equip supervisors with the necessary skills and knowledge.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The narratives of social workers, as the participants in this study, highlight the crucial role of supervisors in South Africa. The Social Service Professions Act (RSA, 1978) mandates supervision by another registered social worker, a requirement echoed by the participants and supported by various frameworks and models (DSD, 2005; DSD & SACSSP, 2012). These regulations underscore the need for supervisors to possess the competencies required for effective supervision and support. The insights gained from the research reveal the essential components of effective supervision and the need for a well-structured training programme for supervisors from the perspective of social workers, as the recipients of supervision.

This article focused on Phase 2 of the Design and Development (D&D) model, exploring social workers' perceptions of supervisors' training needs. The six themes that emerged from this phase point to an urgent need for targeted training for supervisors, as well as a significant gap in available training opportunities and programmes. The findings clearly articulate the participant's perspectives and recommendations with regards to the training needs of supervisors, focusing on the knowledge and skills required by supervisors in the South African context. Important aspects that have been identified as the training needs of supervisors include their roles and responsibilities, contextual and practical dimensions of supervision, supervision functions, leadership and leadership styles, and the specific challenges faced by supervisors in South Africa.

Given the evident need for a structured supervision training programme, it is recommended that supervisors receive formal training before assuming their roles and that ongoing specialised training be made compulsory. This training should ideally be offered as a formal qualification, such as a postgraduate diploma, honours or master's degree, endorsed by a higher education institution. Continuing professional development training opportunities can be utilised by supervisors in their pursuit of continuous professional development as supervisors. Furthermore, authorities and welfare organisations must recognise the critical importance of addressing this training gap to improve supervision quality, ultimately benefitting both social workers and the communities they serve.

If this critical need for the training of supervisors is not adequately addressed, the consequences may be detrimental. Inadequate supervision can lead to professional burnout, ethical lapses, poor service delivery and reduced job satisfaction among social workers. Ultimately, this compromises the quality of care provided to vulnerable populations, undermining the goals of the social development agenda. It is therefore imperative that stakeholders act decisively to prioritise and institutionalise supervisor training.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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