

INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORK FIELD PRACTICE EDUCATION: AN ECOSYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper an attempt will be made to provide a framework for thinking about indigenous social work field practice education in South Africa by means of an ecosystems perspective. This will be done by sketching the rationale and necessity for indigenous social work field practice education by clarifying the term "indigenous" and by proposing an ecological configuration of systems. South Africa currently finds itself in a period where the importance of indigenous theory and practice is greatly valued. The ecosystems perspective that this paper proposes ought therefore to make a contribution towards the establishment of indigenous social work field practice education.

1. RATIONALE FOR THE NECESSITY OF INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORK FIELD PRACTICE EDUCATION

Right from the beginning of social work education at South African training institutions, field practice education for students in some or other form was part of their training. Since 1938 social work has been recognised as a separate major subject and field practice education formed part of both the degree and diploma courses. This took place in co-operation with welfare agencies. As far back as 1965, however, it was reported that field practice education for social work students was problematic, as there were large gaps and differences in the quality of the education (Muller, 1965:55, 64, 73). Once again in 1976 it was reported that there was a considerable lack of clarity and differences of opinion in South Africa about the actual meaning and nature of field practice education (Botha, 1976:9). The research done by various authors over the past few decades proves that there was disparity between the outcomes that were achieved through education at South African universities and the expectations of practice (Collins, 1985; O'Brien, 1990; Ramphal & Moonilal, 1993; McKendrick, 1994; Rankin, 1997).

The reasons for the discomfort about field practice education in South Africa over the course of time can mainly be ascribed to the fact that social work education in the past focused mainly on the needs of the dominant white population group in South Africa and on corresponding international trends (McKendrick, 1998:99). The education of social workers was also to a large extent cast in the American mould, due to its being dependent on American literature (Muller, 1965). After South Africa's first democratic election, the transformation of welfare by means of the White Paper for Welfare (Department of Welfare, 1997) and the general acceptance of the philosophy of the African Renaissance (Department of Welfare, 1999), it is inconceivable that social work education should not strongly focus on that which is characteristic of South Africa and Africa. It is therefore inevitable that any discussion about social work field practice education in South Africa must include the term "indigenous".

2. CLARIFYING THE TERM "INDIGENOUS"

For the purposes of this paper, "indigenous" is interpreted as "appropriate" and "relevant". Indigenisation can also refer to the presentation of theory and practice in a specific socio-cultural

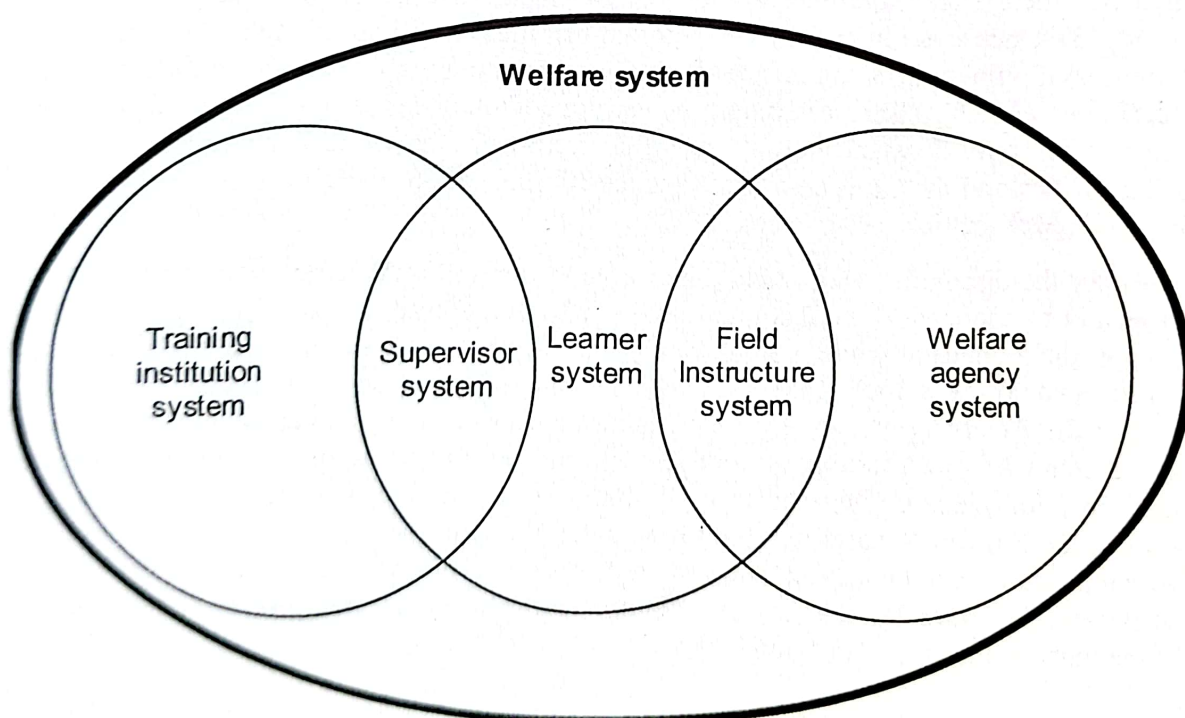
and historical context as a means to find new ways, or revise old ways and to solve local problems. Indigenous social work field practice education therefore refers to tailor-made education for the South African context.

In the broader societal context the White Paper for Welfare (1997) can be regarded as a noticeable step towards the conceptualisation of indigenous working methods in South Africa. The White Paper for Welfare (1997) can also be interpreted from an ecological perspective in that it emphasises the transactions between people and their environment. It is therefore quite clear that any discussion regarding indigenous practice must also take into account ecological perspectives.

3. CONFIGURATION FROM AN ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE OF THE SYSTEMS THAT ARE INVOLVED IN FIELD PRACTICE EDUCATION OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

It is significant that those authors who write about the field practice education of social work students do attempt to explain field practice education ecologically, but not in terms of the broader societal context; for example, they do not take into account the specific welfare model involved (Bogo & Vayda, 1987; Doel & Shardlow, 1998; Hoffmann, 1990; Kadushin, 1992). Currently in South Africa a social development welfare model is being followed, which on the macro level has a great impact on the welfare system. This impact also affects the field practice education of social work students. Indigenous social work field practice education therefore implies an ecosystems perspective that results in a configuration of systems involved in field practice education.

FIGURE 1
CONFIGURATION OF SYSTEMS THAT ARE INVOLVED IN THE FIELD PRACTICE EDUCATION OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS



In the literature on field practice education (Gray, Alperin & Wik, 1989:90; Hoffmann, 1990:118-119; Simpson, 1995:359) it seems that it is common practice to define field practice education to social work students systemically in terms of a tripartite relationship, namely the field instructor at the welfare agency, the supervisor at the training institution and the student who must be trained. A summary of systemic analyses (Bogo & Vayda, 1987:12; Grossman, 1991:39-41; Kadushin, 1992:26-28), however, reveals that there are more than just three systems from an ecological systems perspective that have an impact on the field practice education of social work students.

The following systems can be identified and can be interpreted as the student, the supervisor at the training institution, the field instructor at the welfare agency, the welfare agency and the training institution. This is presented graphically in Figure 1.

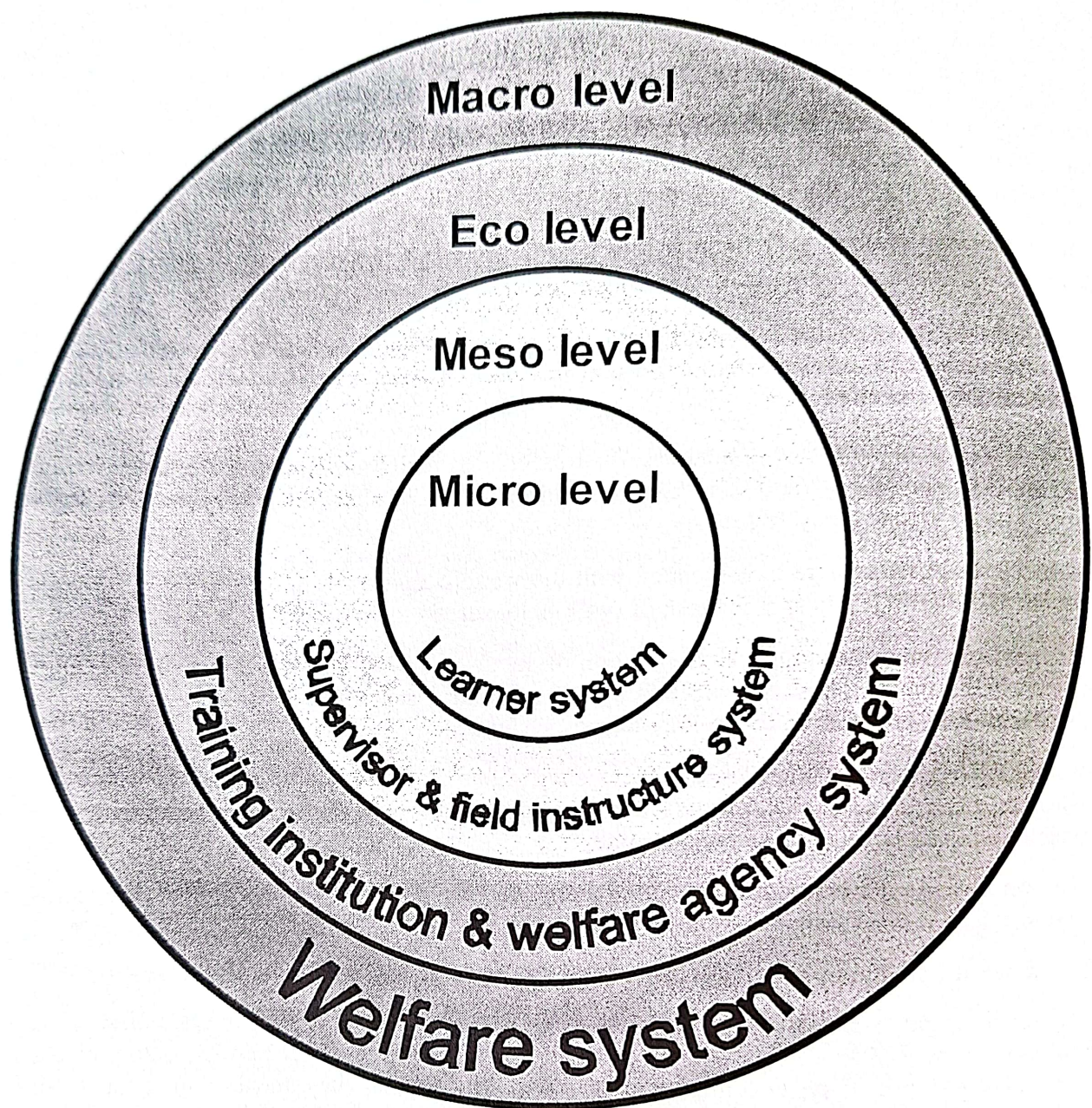
The configuration of systems that are involved in field practice education of social work students can be presented from an ecological systems perspective in Figure 1 as follows:

- the learner system consists of the social work students who receive field practice education; it can be regarded as a micro-system because it is the smallest, but most central system in terms of education in social work;
- the supervisor system refers to the supervisor associated with the training institution and who accepts responsibility for the field practice education of the student and can work together with the field instructor system;
- the field instructor system is associated with the welfare agency; it is regarded as the meso-system, because it points to a network of systems that are in interaction with one another;
- the training institution system is that section of an accredited training institution that accepts responsibility for social work education by means of an education programme in social work and can work together with the welfare agency system;
- the welfare agency system, which is the agency where students are placed for field practice education, is regarded as the eco-system because it involves the larger institutions within which the micro- and meso-systems operate;
- the welfare system determines the welfare policy and can therefore be regarded as the macro-system, because it influences and regulates the eco-system, meso-system and micro-system.

Figure 2 shows the configuration of field practice education systems from an ecological perspective.

An ecological perspective refers to components such as adaptation, transaction and goodness of fit with the environment (The Terminology Committee for Social Work, 1995:20). The nature of the identified configuration of systems that are involved in the field practice education of social work students will be discussed in the following section with reference to the aforementioned components.

FIGURE 2
THE CONFIGURATION OF FIELD PRACTICE EDUCATION SYSTEMS FROM AN
ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



4. THE MACRO SYSTEM

The White Paper for Welfare (Department of Welfare, 1997) has led the welfare system in South Africa into a new era. The influence of this specific policy on the configurations of other systems that are involved in the field practice education of social work students is confirmed by the fact that social work as a whole is determined by social agendas, because welfare policy directs the welfare system, which is the outcome of a political process and which reacts to indigenous environmental demands. The welfare policy is therefore a conceptualisation of indigenous working methods in South Africa. This conceptualisation must, however, be regarded from the context of the historical evolution of the formal welfare system, due to the fact that in the past no

provision was made for the needs of the majority of people. It gave rise to strategies such as the RDP and GEAR, which were the basis for the White Paper for Welfare. This White Paper proposes a system that facilitates human capacity within a caring and enabling socio-economic environment. It resulted in a radical regrouping of the welfare system, considering that it focused on the link between social and economic development. It requires a transition from traditional clinical micro-practice to a social development perspective. In the following section the welfare agency system and the training system will be discussed on the eco-level in this regard.

5. THE ECOSYSTEM

Welfare agencies, where students are placed for field practice education, are in many instances dependent on financial subsidies from the state. With regard to financial subsidy, the welfare agencies must meet certain requirements of the financial policy of the Department of Welfare (Department of Welfare, 1999), which in most cases requires radical paradigm shifts away from the thought patterns of the previous political dispensation. Therefore welfare agencies may not disregard indigenous cultural practice and rights and must reflect cultural diversity. Welfare agencies must support and reflect the strategic philosophy of the African Renaissance in order to receive financial support from the state (Department of Welfare, 1999). The impact of this on the configuration of systems that are involved in the field practice education of social work students will be discussed in terms of the training institution system.

The training institution is the place that the student supervisor is associated with and where the students receive their education as social workers. It is inevitable that drastic changes in the welfare policy also have implications for social work education (Rankin, 1997:189). Before 1994 the South African education system was to a large extent organised along racially based guidelines. The former education system also focused on passive learners and equality, accessibility and quality assurance were not part of the agenda. It was therefore not only the racially based education system that had to change, but also how people think about education (Van Wyk & Mothata, 1998). This was addressed through the Government's Third White Paper for education (RSA, 1997a) and the Higher Education Act (RSA, 1997b) with the aim of transforming the higher education system to serve a new social order to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities. Its foundation is outcomes-based education that focuses on equipping learners for practice outside the training institution (Pretorius, 1998). By means of outcomes-based education the training institutions should be preparing social work students for a social development perspective on the welfare system. It implies that social work field practice education programmes must contain relevant content in the theory and practice, so that in some way the needs of the interaction between people and their environments can be addressed that keep up with the socio-political, economic and social changes that the country is undergoing.

In the context of social work supervision Kadushin (1992:142) points out that there are certain general educational contents with regard to supervision. He refers to people, place, process, personnel and problem. Hoffmann (1990:65) had already a decade ago identified the content for field practice education in South Africa in terms of learning areas from an ecological systems perspective. They are highlighted as follows: "Within ecological and systems perspectives, the five learning areas pertaining to course objectives would be identified as the person-in-environment; the needs of people; social work intervention; and the student as a developing social worker." These learning areas always feature in terms of a knowledge dimension, value dimension and a skill dimension.

It ought to be clear from the above discussion that the supervisor at the training institution that provides field practice education to the social work student must be up to date with the principles of outcomes-based education. The supervisor must also understand the nature and content of appropriate learning areas of field practice education. On the meso-level this has various implications, which will be discussed below.

6. THE MESO SYSTEM

The supervisor associated with the training institution has a central position and responsibility in the field practice education programme. The particular model of field practice education that is followed will, however, determine the tasks and roles that are expected of the supervisor (Rodway & Rogers, 1993:43-52). Tasks such as the supervisor's responsibility as the representative of the training institution to maintain regular contact with the welfare agency and the responsibility to teach the students to integrate the theory with the practice are emphasised throughout the literature on field practice education. However, very little information is found in the literature about the roles of the supervisor, as there is a dangerous assumption that all supervisors know how to coordinate classroom and field experiences, offer support to students, assist in conflict resolution and serve as consultants to the field instructors (McInnis-Dittrich & Coe, 1997:101).

A wealth of literature on models for supervision for social workers and students is available. For the purposes of this paper a distinction is made between supervision models for qualified social workers and those for field practice education to students.

The following models are identified as the most suitable supervision models for field practice education to social work students:

- *the* growth-orientated model that has personal growth as its objective (Shardlow & Doel, 1996; Tebb, Manning & Klaumann, 1996);
- the role systems model that is comprised of interaction and communication, role expectations, role fulfilment and mechanisms for control (Shardlow & Doel, 1996; Tebb *et al.*, 1996);
- the development model that focuses on the student's developmental stage of learning (Feltham & Dryden, 1994; Kadushin, 1991; Taibbi, 1995; Van Kessel & Haan, 1993);
- the structural learning model that provides a systematic guideline for education during supervision (Shardlow & Doel, 1996);
- the integrated theory and practice model ("loop model"), which is a four-phase model and process to facilitate learning amongst students (Bogo & Vayda, 1987; Bogo & Vayda, 1991; Shardlow & Doel, 1996);
- the competence model that is the outcome of all the above-mentioned supervision models, because the growth orientated, the role systems, the structural learning and the integrated theory and practice models are all competency orientated (Guttman, Eisikovits & Maluccio, 1988; Shardlow & Doel, 1996).

It seems that the competence supervision model is eminently suited to the present-day indigenous situation in South Africa, because both the White Paper for Welfare (Department of Welfare, 1997) and the White Paper for Higher Education (RSA, 1997a) have competency as their core component. The characteristics of the competency supervision model relate directly to the outcomes-based model of education, considering that both models focus on outcomes, the demonstration of such outcomes, specific assessment criteria, reverse planning and facilitation. In

field practice education competency refers to the student's knowledge, values and skills to influence the environment, people in the environment and people's needs by means of intervention to bring about change or development (Guttman *et al.*, 1988). It therefore corresponds to the already identified learning areas of field practice education.

The content of the competence supervision model can only be carried out by a competence-orientated supervisor. Such a supervisor is also a person who maintains an ecological attitude towards supervision and who is familiar with the broader community (Guttman *et al.*, 1988). These qualities can also be expected of the field instructor at the welfare agency. There is a lot of overlap between the educational function of the field instructor and the supervisor, particularly with regard to the integration of the theory and the practice. In this regard, however, the supervisor ought to maintain a broader perspective, because the student receives a general education and is not being trained for a specific welfare agency. Field instructors do, however, have a big responsibility to act as positive role models in the field, as they are observed by students in field practice.

The previous discussion ought to clearly reveal that the meso level, which is comprised of the supervisor system and field instructor system, determines the field practice education that the social work student will receive. Particularly the closeness and openness of the boundaries between the systems, mutual relationships, interaction between the systems and inputs and outputs are of considerable importance. In this regard the impact of the macro-system and the ecosystem, in terms of the current welfare and education policies, must be taken into account. What the real impact of the macro- and eco-systems are on the nature of the meso-system at present is unknown and will in future have to be determined by means of empirical research so as to suggest indigenous field practice education models. It seems, however, that field practice education models must be applied in combination with and as supplementary to one another so as to adapt to the unique circumstances and expectations of the meso-system.

7. THE MICRO SYSTEM

If the field practice education for the social work student is regarded from a systemic perspective, then the eco- or learner system is very important because field practice education takes place for the sake of the student. The ultimate goal of field practice education is for students to develop into competent social workers (Botha, 1976:51).

The distinctive character of the training institution, on the eco level, means that the student, on the micro level, is also brought face to face with certain developmental tasks. The four years of undergraduate study as is currently applicable to social work education can be regarded as separate systems or units with permeable boundaries in the second and third year of study (Lotz, 1995:139-143). Progression through the separate units of study years implies the successful accomplishment of developmental tasks by the student.

Certain qualities that students possess will determine the successful accomplishment of developmental tasks. So, for example, the qualities of a student who comes from a previously disadvantaged community are characteristic of a large part of the South African student body. These students come from communities that are educationally, economically or socially disadvantaged as a result of inferior education, inadequate infrastructure and lack of opportunities for growth and development. Many young people in South Africa therefore grew up with political, criminal and family violence (Gray, 1998:187). Students from these communities can therefore be both the victims and the perpetrators of violence and have possibly been exposed to its consequences. The impact of this ongoing exposure to violence has a negative effect on such a

students' self-concept and their perception of others. It can have a significant impact on the field practice education of the social work student.

The qualities that learners possess are not only distinguished in terms of personality traits and cognitive development, but also with regard to learning style, which is of particular importance for field practice education (Memmott & Brennan, 1998:82). If indeed the qualities of social work students are taken into account, then it is clear that the unique qualities of the students involved cannot simply fall into the category of andragogy or pedagogy. Various research findings (Davenport & Davenport, 1988:83-920; Kramer & Wern, 1994:43-63) support this statement. Integrating the pedagogic and andragogic educational principles is therefore necessary to train diverse social work students. It will not be to the advantage of the field practice education of students to rigidly categorise the qualities of students in the South African learning environment and to make inferences from these that cannot be changed.

It is also a myth that people only have one learning style (Thomlison, Rogers, Collins & Grinnell, 1996:40-42). Learning styles vary from task to task while the context within which the learning takes place has a further impact on it. Students, however, tend to go into learning environments that suit their learning style preference. Discussions about learning styles, particularly when seen against South Africa's political background, ought to focus on the appreciation of differences and not on typifying them. For this reason supervisors and field instructors must guard against rewarding students whose learning styles correspond to their own or to penalise those whose learning styles differ considerably from the average and "traditional" student. The fit of the supervisors' and field instructors' educational strategies to the learning styles of students is therefore necessary in order to make provision for the diversity of students in South Africa. This fitting of educational strategies must, however, also include attempts to adjust students' learning styles to the requirements of the environment. The requirements of the environment, on the macro level, can be interpreted in terms of the current welfare policy. The impact of the identified configuration of systems on others is once again illustrated through this.

8. CONCLUSION

In this paper an ecological framework of thoughts for indigenous social work field practice education serves to describe the theory and practice in a graphic way. It helps to describe and understand the complexity of field practice education to social work students in that it provides a clear framework and can be used as an aid to research. It can therefore lead to the educators of social work students designing appropriate and relevant field practice education programmes, which can contribute to an improved standard of education and to the development of the social work profession in South Africa.

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