

## Does Type of Supervision Impact the Quality of Social Work Field Education?

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### Abstract

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*A Department of Social Work in a Midwest University implemented group supervision as a trial modality in field education due to rapid growth in student enrollment in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Supervision shifted from the previously used individual model to a group model - pairing two to six students with one field instructor (FI). The purpose of this early-stage study is to evaluate impact of this trial on the quality of field education. Specific questions related to type of supervision were added to FI and student evaluation tools. Online qualitative surveys were sent to participants one month prior to practicum completion. Responses were gathered from 52 FIs and 75 students. Results indicated that 63% of the FIs (n=33) and 92% of the students (n=69) had favorable impressions of their supervision type in field education, with no FIs and two students reporting unfavorable impressions.*

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**Key Words:** Social work, Field instruction, Evaluation, Modality, Group

### 1.0 Introduction

For over twenty years, Indiana State University has operated a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program that has historically graduated between 10 and 20 students annually. Over the past five years, however, the BSW program has grown and now surpassed forty graduates; concurrent with this increase in undergraduate enrollment, a Master's in Social Work (MSW) program was added to the Department's programs. The MSW program currently averages around a dozen students per cohort and growth is expected, given that it was recently accredited. A very real concern during periods of significant growth in enrollment is the ability to maintain a consistent quality of education. The focus of this study is on the impact of the rapid growth in a short timeframe on the quality of field education, as the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for social work education, define field education as signature pedagogy in the 2008 Educational Policies and Standards (EPAS; CSWE, 2008).

Faced with these concerns, the Department considered a variety of strategies to accommodate the growing number of students in field education. Although new field placement agencies and field instructors (FIs) were added to the field program, the University's rural location necessarily limits the effectiveness of this strategy due to a concomitant dearth of available social workers and agencies to support field practica.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for the first time, agencies that traditionally hosted one or two students were asked to host multiple students. The demand for social work employees in this community has been consistent for many years and continues to grow.

Although both BSW and MSW students in these programs have typically received individual supervision with a qualified FI, the Department incorporated a second strategy of the use of group supervision with some students in order to place more students in agencies that have few or no social workers.

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<sup>1</sup> The newly accredited MSW program was created from a needs assessment that identified a shortage of MSWs serving this rural area.

Students were placed in one of four supervision types: A) individual supervision with an FI in the agency, B) individual supervision with an FI outside of the agency, C) group supervision with an FI in the agency, or D) group supervision with an FI outside of the agency. Group supervision matched between two and six students with one qualified FI.

This study arose from concern for the potential impact this expansion of modalities in supervision may have on the quality of field education. Thus, the researchers planned to evaluate the practice of multiple modalities after one semester in order to consider whether or not to continue the practice.

Overarching foci were to maintain quality in field education, to maintain student and FI satisfaction, and to also maintaining field agency satisfaction, despite the changing dynamics of the programs. The research design is an exploratory, qualitative study executed through two online surveys utilizing open ended questions addressing the research question, “Does utilizing group supervision have an effect on the quality of social work field education?”

## **2.0 Literature Review**

CSWE defines field education as the signature pedagogy in social work education (CSWE, 2008). Among the requirements, the EPAS require a minimum of 400 hours of field education in BSW programs and 900 hours in MSW programs. EPAS also defines qualifications for FIs as follows, “Field instructors for baccalaureate students hold a baccalaureate or master’s degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited program. Field instructors for master’s students hold a master’s degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited program. For cases in which a field instructor does not hold a CSWE-accredited social work degree, the program assumes the responsibility for reinforcing a social work perspective and describes how this is accomplished” (CSWE, 2008, p.10). The easiest and most obvious way to achieve these standards is to place each student in an agency that employs a qualified FI. In cases where this is not possible, reinforcing the social work perspective is often achieved by pairing each student with a qualified FI that is not employed by the agency for weekly meetings. Traditionally, most social work supervision is provided through a pairing of one student with one FI (Bogo, 2005). While it is assumed that educational institutions aim for highest quality experience for students in field education, Kanno and Koeske (2010, p.23) state, “the quality of social work and of social workers depends in part on the availability and effectiveness of field education opportunities provided.” Changing dynamics in both the educational and industry sectors have driven the need for universities to develop and utilize innovative approaches to manage limited resources and increased demand (Cleak & Smith, 2012).

### **2.1 History of field instruction**

Field instruction has been part of social work education since before social work became an educationally-based curriculum, with field education deriving from the apprenticeship model of teaching in which students learned through practical experiences and the supervisor served as a role model (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Although social work has advanced to an educationally-based curriculum, this historic model is preserved in field education requirements. Now students are required to “connect the theoretical and conceptual contributions of the classroom with the practice setting, fostering the implementation of evidence-informed practice” (CSWE, EPAS 2.1.1, p.9). As such, students develop and refine skills as they synthesize classroom concepts and practice when serving individuals, families, groups, and communities.

Beyond the obvious benefits of practical learning in field placements, the supervisory experience, itself, has been shown to have significant impact on students. Cleak and Smith (2012), for example, have noted that the quality of the supervisory relationship has a strong influence on student outcomes and satisfaction. Further, the quality of supervision in a field setting has been linked to professional longevity and the experience of burnout within the profession (Kanno & Koeske, 2010). As noted above, social work field instruction has traditionally been provided through intensive individual supervision.

### **2.2 Changes in social work education and service delivery**

Rapid and evolving demands are driving the need to shift the structure of field education, including not only supervision, but delivery of service and practica settings. Changes within the settings where human services are provided, as well as the overall environments of these settings, have impacted educational institutions that rely on agencies to provide field practica for students (Cleak & Smith, 2012).

Among the changes that have impacted field education are organizational and budget constraints, which often result in increased production demands with fewer resources, along with decreased time available to work with potential students among agency staff who would traditionally provide field instruction. Many FIs agree to train students as an unpaid volunteer, although some may receive a trade-off of training and/or continuing education units toward social work licensure. As a result of increased demands in the workplace, many individuals who previously served as FIs find that they are no longer able to both accept students and continue to meet the demands of their job; thus, they choose to no longer accept students. Many universities are now searching for new ways to continue to provide quality field instruction. Further, growing student enrollments, increasing numbers of social work educational programs, and growth in other health and human service programs that are competing for field placements, has increased both the complexity and expense of finding and maintaining quality practica (Cleak & Smith, 2012).

Beyond the institutional demands that can lead to a loss of available FIs, student issues can affect the willingness of an agency or potential FI to take on the perceived burden of a practicum student. Students often enter the field education experience with high level, complicated learning needs requiring additional time and attention from both the university and the agency, which can further expand the inherent burden of having students (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Agencies often discontinue participation in field education as a result of a single student whose behavioral, emotional, or professional issues disrupt their workplace. Thus, relationship management is a vital part of field education in these circumstances, and it is not always successful.

The multiple problems that result in loss of practica agencies further enhance the need for quality alternatives to sustain field education. There is unequivocal evidence that these issues are pervasive within the profession.

### **2.3 Modality of supervision**

New and alternative practices in both field practica placement and supervision are being employed by universities to address these dynamics and demands. Students may now engage in internal vs external supervision, individual vs group supervision, and even supervision provided by faculty or contracted FIs. Students may receive supervision from more than one social work supervisor with some supervision provided through group and some through individual modalities. Further, there exists the possibility for split placement supervision, wherein placements are split across two different agencies and include separate FIs in each of the two agencies. With the multitude of options, educational institutions must make tough choices in deciding what options fit with their programs.

### **2.4 Group supervision**

Since the focus of this study revolves around a trial of using group supervision, researchers gave special attention to the type of group supervision in reviewing the literature. The review includes evaluation of group supervision as well as search for methods in successfully using group supervision.

#### **2.4.1 Strengths of group supervision.**

Group supervision promotes a setting of peer learning, an integrated component with supervisory learning (Zeira & Schiff, 2010). Further, group supervision can expose students to a greater number of cases and service arenas than they might be exposed to in individual supervisions as peers share their experiences from other settings. Cleak and Smith (2010) found that students are less satisfied with external supervision, but are rather satisfied with all aspects of supervision where there is a strong onsite social work model. Coulton and Kimmer (2005) indicated that cosupervision is an efficient and beneficial model because it offers greater breadth of knowledge and diverse learning opportunities.

#### **2.4.2 Limitations of group supervision.**

Group supervision challenges the apprenticeship model and may suggest that learning social work is more reliant on tasks and roles, thus allowing students to perform more as employees than learners (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Zeira and Schiff (2010) found that students who received group supervision were less satisfied than those who received individual supervision. They suggested that although individual supervision parallels the dyad that is used in individual work with clients; group supervision loses this benefit. An additional potential limitation of group supervision is that students may find it more difficult to reveal their own limitations, weaknesses, and issues among their peers than they would in a one-on-one setting with an individual supervisor. Group supervision may also be difficult because the individuals may not experience or feel processes in the same way (Zeira & Schiff, 2010).

### 2.4.3 Enhancing the quality of group supervision.

Group supervision should not be random and may not be best suited to beginners. Group size is important, as well, as supervision in small groups has been found to promote understanding and skill development and formation of professional identity (Zeira and Schiff, 2010). FIs providing group supervision should intentionally identify the parallel between supervision and working with clients in order to expedite professional growth. Among the factors that have been found to affect student satisfaction with group supervision are the student's relationship with the supervisor, the agency context, and the available learning opportunities (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Further, group supervisors should work to ensure that students are engaging in effective supervision, which Volk and Thyer (1997) identify as creating positive change in the supervisee's behavior, level of knowledge, and professional values, and improving the supervisee's client functioning. Finally, whether supervision is provided in group or individually, internally or externally, by faculty or otherwise contracted persons, the *Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision* serves as an excellent resource for assuring quality supervision (NASW, 2013).

## 3.0 Methods

The evaluative, qualitative study was conducted via surveys of BSW and MSW Field Program participants. The circumstances related to growth in the numbers of students in each program warrant the need for evaluation of this intervention after one semester in order to determine viability for continuing the use of group supervision.

### 3.1 Research Question

Does utilizing group supervision have an effect on the quality of social work field education?

### 3.2 Participants

Participants included 52 FIs (7 males, 36 females, and 9 anonymous) who provided field instruction (supervision) and 75 social work students (5 males and 70 females) who participated in field education during Spring 2016.

The majority of the FIs (65%) were experienced: 11 participants reported supervising for the first time, 25 participants indicated having five years or less experience, 2 participants had between five and ten years of experience, 7 participants had more than ten years of experience, and 7 participants did not respond to this item.

These FIs reported provided field instruction for 64 students (25 BSW juniors, 29 BSW seniors, and 7 MSW clinical). The majority of the FIs (63%) provided traditional individual supervision: 33 participants supervised one student with the other 19 supervising between two and six students in a group setting. Among the FIs, 27 provided individual supervision within the agency, 6 provided individual supervision outside of the agency, 6 provided group supervision within the agency, and 3 provided group supervision outside of the agency (some FIs did not respond to the question).

Of the 75 student participants (32 BSW juniors, 32 BSW seniors, 11 MSW clinical), the majority (65%) received traditional individual supervision: 42 students received individual supervision with an FI in the agency, 14 received individual supervision with an FI outside of the agency, 10 received group supervision with an FI in the agency, and 20 received group supervision with an FI outside of the agency (some students received multiple modes of supervision and counted it in their responses).

### 3.3 Instruments

Two electronic survey instruments were utilized in this study: (1) the Department's Field Instructor Evaluation of the Field Program, and (2) the Department's Student Evaluation of the Field Practicum. Each of the tools has been used by the Department for a number of years in evaluating field education; however, a few questions were added to specifically address the questions of quality and satisfaction with the different modalities of supervision. The FI survey included an optional field for self-identification; the student survey required self-identification.

Both surveys were set up in Qualtrics, the online survey forum utilized with University support. Demographic information was collected through questions with multiple choice categories while the evaluative questions were open-ended.

### 3.4 Procedures

A field education taskforce evaluated the two survey instruments and created questions regarding the type of supervision utilized, how individual needs were accommodated when group supervision was utilized, if students and FIs were satisfied with the type of supervision received, and suggestions for use of types of supervision for the future.

The modified survey instruments were reviewed by the taskforce and the instruments were uploaded into Qualtrics. Survey links were emailed to respective groups one month prior to the end of the spring 2016 semester. One follow up email was sent to remind students and Fis to complete the surveys.

The field education taskforce reviewed the survey results for consideration of the research question, and to determine whether group supervision should be used as a modality for supervision in future terms. The items relevant to the research question from both surveys were collected and evaluated by the team.

#### 4.0 Results

Most of the FIs (n=33, 63%) reported a positive view of the type of supervision utilized in field education. No participants indicated a negative view of the modality of supervision and 17 field instructors did not respond.

Relevant positive comments regarding the modality of supervision offered by the Fis includes:

- *“I like the dynamics of group supervision, the give and take, and the learning that takes place while sharing with another”.*
- *“I think the group supervision student benefited from the Field Instructor and from one another”.*
- *“I like the group aspect of supervision and felt that it brought more discussion and better questions during the session”.*
- *“Individual is helpful; however, a combination of individual and group might be more helpful in the learning process”.*

Interestingly, no field instructors offered negative comments about their type of supervision in field education.

Fis were also asked to address if the type of supervision met the learning needs of students. While many did not respond, one replied, *“I think it did. My student was super prepared and would write down all of her questions, concerns and observation and then would use her learning plan as a guide. It made my supervision easier because she could remember exactly what she did and said”.*

While this analysis does not provide a comprehensive list of comments acquired in the evaluation processes, the field education taskforce determined them to be an appropriate representation of the comments received. A word analysis of the comments from Fis produced the following top ten words (in rank with most used being first): liked, help, group, time, employed, opportunity, important, learning, understanding, and questions.

Most of the students (n=69, 92%) reported a positive view of the type of supervision that he or she received in field education. Two students reported negative views of the type of supervision received, and four did not respond. One of the two students who had negative views of their type of supervision was in the group classified as ‘individual supervision within the agency’ and commented that supervision was better with an outside the agency supervisor because of a prior experience where they were more productive in accomplishing learning plan goals during the supervision time. The other student who was dissatisfied with their supervision type was in the as ‘group supervision within the agency’ category; this student commented that group supervision was overly focused on the issues of other students and suggested that this distracted from the way in which the student wanted to engage with the FI.

Relevant comments from students with positive views of their type of supervision follow:

- *“I think the group setting was awesome. I had the option to switch but chose not to.”*
- *“I believe the group setting allowed students to hear feedback on not only their agency, but also others”.*
- *“I got feedback from a student who is a senior in the BSW program”.*
- *“I was very impressed and pleased with FN’s ability to meet each student’s individual needs while still generating conversation in a group setting. I never felt as though I was not being listened to or having my needs addressed; however, I did not feel like I was monopolizing all of the session time either. FN was also very patient and understanding with each of us and our needs as students”.*
- *“I liked having supervision outside the agency. I was able to more freely talk about things that concerned me with someone who wasn’t connected to the agency I was interning at”.*
- *“I preferred to have individual supervision with FN because I felt that I was able to have more input and was not talked over by the other student. I liked one on one because I was able to address my specific concerns and needs”.*

Relevant comments from students who disliked their modality of supervision include:

- *“LN is a fantastic supervisor, but I would not recommend group supervision. For several weeks I was alone with my supervisor because my group supervision partner did not attend. I enjoyed individual supervision significantly more”.*
- *“At times I enjoyed hearing their experiences. At other times, I wish it was 1:1 because it was awkward to have other students there”.*
- *“I would’ve preferred one-on-one or a small group (no more than 3)”.*
- *“It was okay but at times it felt like a competition”.*
- *“I disliked that sometimes I did not get to speak much in supervision with then other student had a variety of things to cover on her learning plan. It was fine though because I ended up being ahead on my learning plan and did not need as much time as the other student”.*

While this analysis does not provide a comprehensive list of comments acquired in the evaluation processes, the field education taskforce determined them to be an appropriate representation of the comments received. A word analysis of student comments produced the following top ten words (in rank with most common being first): setting, enjoyed, agency, discussing, feedback, learned, completed, beneficial, favorable, and supervisor.

## 5.0 Discussion

Based on the results of this early-stage evaluation, the field education taskforce decided that the benefits outweigh the risk for continued use of group supervision as a type of field instruction. There were multiple reasons for this decision.

The issues related to growing numbers of students in social work programs are common among social work programs nationally and historically (Cleak & Smith, 2012). The issues related to acquiring and sustaining appropriate field practica sites are also common among social work programs worldwide (Zeira & Schiff, 2010). The CSWE EPAS define no restrictions from using various types of supervision in field education (CSWE, 2008).

While there are controversial findings in the literature on the topic, there remains little empirical evidence in the literature that clearly indicates advantages or disadvantages of group supervision (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Zeira and Schiff (2010) reported that students receiving group supervision were less satisfied than those with individual supervision; however, Cleak and Smith (2012) indicated higher levels of dissatisfaction among students who received external supervision. Although the number of participants in this study was moderately small, both FIs and students were overwhelmingly satisfied with the experience. Of all participants (52 FIs and 75 students), only two students indicated dissatisfaction with their type of supervision: one was in individual supervision within the agency and one was in group supervision within the agency. These results do not align with the literature.

It is necessary to emphasize that the issue of modality of supervision alone does not determine quality of social work field instruction. Review of the study participants reveals that 65% of the FIs had experience in providing supervision with 17% having over five years of experience supervising. Students engaged in group experiences (n=30, 35%) and FIs engaged in group experiences (n=9, 21%) were relatively small. Only one student negatively rated group supervision. The comments of this student did not refer to issues of quality of supervision, but primarily to student preference. Researchers interpret these data to indicate that quality of social work field education was maintained due to the level of experience of the FIs, and that training and experience of these FIs led to inclusion of quality processes and components of field instruction, such as creating positive change in the supervisee’s behavior, level of knowledge, and professional values, and improving the supervisee’s client functioning (Volk & Thyer, 1997).

## 5.1 Limitations of the Study

The study was an early-stage evaluation of one Department’s use of group supervision in field education; thus, the sample size is small. The duration of time involved in collecting participants was short, which further limited sample size. In reviewing the instruments, several participants in both the FI and student evaluations did not answer all of the demographic questions, thus, there is some degree of unknown detail about the research question that affects the results. While the study satisfied the purpose for which it was designed, results must be used with caution. Results of the study are somewhat contradictory to other studies found in the literature. Again, further indication that results must be used with caution. As the study was conducted at only one University, the results may not be generalizable to other institutions or in other settings.

## 5.2 Recommendations for Future Studies

First, this study should be continued to include longer duration of time and to acquire a larger sample size. Instruments should be revised to include more distinct demographics of participants and to assure collection of types of supervision even in anonymous responses. This should enhance the quality of results allowing for better interpretation of findings.

It is recommended that further studies evaluate the quality of field instruction, among many varied and newly trending modalities, including internal vs external supervision, individual vs small group (triadic) vs moderate group, face to face vs online, and the list continues to grow as needs change.

It is also recommended that further studies evaluate the issues mentioned above between graduate and undergraduate social work field education. Lastly, future studies should continue to evaluate the quality and content of the supervision session with respect to outcome goals (Volk & Thyer, 1997). Instruments reviewed in Volk and Thyer's work should be helpful in doing so.

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