Contrasts and reflections: Social work fieldwork supervision in Brazil and England

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Abstract
This article compares field supervision in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to practices in a major city in England in order to contextualize the academic training of students. It considers practical dimensions and incorporates a qualitative study carried out in England exploring how the process of supervision in social work affects student learning and development from the supervisor's perspective. In the study, particular attention is paid to field support provided to students and to practice educator qualifications. The results support the importance of placement supervision and the role of practice educators and supervisors in the overall social work education process.

Keywords
Education, learning process, social work academic training, social work supervision, supervisor role

Introduction

Professional practice and supervision are essential elements of social work in a global context. This article considers professional practice and supervision specifically in relation to Brazil/Rio de Janeiro and England/a major city. The impetus for this article derives from ongoing professional experience in social work field supervision in Rio de Janeiro combined with the doctoral research in the United Kingdom. The article intends to show the social work context related to academic training in the two cities considering the field supervisor assistance in this formative process.

For this purpose, this article stems from the understanding of the importance of supervision as part of the formative as well as the ongoing process of social work, considering supervision as a

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pedagogical instrument responsible for guiding the student, monitoring progress in practice and developing the skills and abilities required while simultaneously taking a critical stance on social reality (Assis and Rosado, 2012).

Literature review

Social work and supervised practice in England and Brazil

English background. Social work in Britain has a long history. Clearly, there have been many changes and this overview will concentrate on the most recent. In the late 1980s, there was a government review of social work education based on the need to establish the standards required for a competent workforce (Davis, 2008). A new qualification in social work – the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) – was introduced in 1989 by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) (McNay et al., 2009).

In 2003, partly influenced by the Bologna agreement, the 3-year undergraduate degree in social work was introduced with a 2-year Master's qualifying degree for students with a relevant first degree (Anghel and Ramon, 2009). In 2001, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) for social work and social care replaced the CCETSW to oversee education and registration. In 2003, it created the first professional register for qualified social workers. In the same year, experienced service users were involved in the 'design, delivery, assessment and management of social work education' (Davis, 2008: 22). This became one of the major requirements of social work education in England.

In 2008, the government established the Social Work Task Force (SWTF) and recommended a single national programme for social work. In 2010, the new coalition government made radical changes, relating to both structure and process. The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and The College of Social Work (TCSW) were the key players taking these changes forward (Taylor and Bogo, 2014).

In 2011, TCSW (2012a) introduced a suite of reforms from the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) in order to further improve the quality of the social work degree. As part of these reforms, a new assessed and supported year in practice was introduced (the ASYP) and the HCPC was tasked with developing standards of proficiency for social workers in England. These standards, called the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), represent what a social worker must know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completing their social work degree. The PCF was designed to differentiate between capabilities and competence and to move away from the previous national occupational standards for social work, which had come to be regarded as a mechanical tick-box approach (Taylor and Bogo, 2014).

In August of 2015, the first review of PCF was completed and concentrated on three key themes. These three themes are as follows: the importance of the PCF as a progressive professional framework for social work; how the PCF works in conjunction with other standards, statements, curriculum guidance and expectations – both now and in the future; and the identification of any modifications needed to the PCF so that it continues to be valued as a framework for developing best practices (TCSW, 2015). More recently, the Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS) has been introduced as a means of complementing the PCF. It is also important to note that at all stages, service users and carers need to be involved in admissions processes and course delivery.

In England, social work courses are heavily regulated in terms of meeting the PCF and KSS standards and both undergraduate and Master's courses comprise two placements of 70 and 100 days respectively, with at least one of these placements having to take place in a statutory agency.

Supervised practice in England

Practice, teaching and learning on qualifying social work degree programmes helps to turn social work students into qualified practitioners. It is important to consider that 'the learning provided through the placement experiences also allows students to extend their knowledge, skill and value base through the realities of practice, inviting them to improve their performance and be assessed on the job' (Plenty and Gower, 2013: 49).

In addition to the implementation of the PCF, the Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) for social work have also been established. These are based on two stages related to 'different levels of complexity and responsibility in teaching, assessing and supervising social work degree students' (Plenty and Gower, 2013: 51). For Stages 1 and 2, the practice educator plays an important role in enabling students to obtain many specified learning outcomes.

The England 2010 Social Work Reform Board developed a framework for supervision that contains four key elements. These are as follows:

1) Improve the quality of decision making and interventions. 2) Enable effective line management and organizational accountability. 3) Identify and address issues related to caseloads and workload management. 4) Help to identify and achieve personal learning career and development opportunities. (Wonnacott, 2012: 23)

Willians and Rutter (2010) emphasize the important role played by the practice educator in supporting work-based learning, and draw attention to a variety of requirements at several levels. These include managing, enabling and assessing social work students in their practice placements, supporting newly qualified social workers, supervising unqualified staff undertaking work-based learning, mentoring or coaching colleagues and providing support in continuing professional development.

The practice educator in England can also take on a practice supervisor role if they work on site and are a qualified social worker. He or she works together with the university tutor during three key meetings to talk about the student's development. As part of the supervision process, the student must receive weekly formal supervision of 1.5 hours and on the final placement a minimum of 2 hours per fortnight.

Students are responsible for identifying, discussing and presenting evidence of their achievements linked to the PCF to their practice educators who then evaluate it. On their first placement, students must be able to show evidence of a minimum of at least two direct observations, obtain feedback from at least two service users and carers and undertake three critical reflections of practice. For the final placement, the requirements are at least three direct observations, two feedback reports from service users and carers and three critical reflections of practice. In both placement stages, students need to provide evidence from supervision records and from work they have undertaken for the agency. During this process, the practice educators must give feedback on whether or not the students' evidence is sufficient and suggest when it might be necessary to employ other means of demonstrating the acquisition of abilities (TCSW, 2012a). Students are awarded three marks, the first one from the practice educator for their practice, the second from the practice tutor for a written portfolio of practice experience and evidence and the third relating to an academic mark for an associated case analysis.

Brazilian background

The social work profession emerged in Brazil in the 1930s. The academic degree in social work was established as a result of legislation (Law Number 1.889/1953 of 13 June 1953, Civil House, 1953) in 1953. In 1957, further legislation (Law Number 3.252/1957 of 27 August 1957, Civil House, 1957) regulated the profession.

The first school of social work, the Centre of Studies and Social Action (São Paulo), was established in 1936 and was subsequently incorporated into the Pontifical University Catholic of São Paulo (PUC-SP). The first social work school in Rio de Janeiro was established at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in 1937. In the following decades, many more Brazilian universities developed social work courses.

In the 1960s, under the Brazilian military dictatorship, the social work profession underwent a form of reconceptualization. Netto (2002) presented three different strands of the reconceptualization movement, which are the modernizing perspective, the perspective of refresher conservatism and the perspective of a rupturing intention from traditional social work. The first strand expressed the interest of the profession in the pursuit of efficiency and scientific modernization, with functionalism as the basis of social analysis. The second had phenomenology as a theoretical approach and intersubjectivity as fundamental to the knowledge of the subjects involved and for professional practice. The third one was based on a marxist conception of social reality and national macro analyses and became hegemonic in social work. This happened not only in Brazil, but was also extended throughout Latin America. This movement contributed to the debate on vocational training during the 1970s and led to the development of a mandatory new curriculum for all social work courses in Brazil. The Federal Council of Education approved these in 1982 (Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro [UNIRIO], 2009).

In 1996 new legislation was brought in, which led to the subsequent reform of teaching, with new curriculum guidelines for social work courses being established by the Brazilian Association of Teaching and Research in Social Work (ABEPSS). From 1997, departments, schools and faculties of social work across the country had to review their curriculum. Between 1998 and 1999, several of these began to implement new courses based on the parameters of the curriculum guidelines (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro [UFRJ], 2008).

According to the 1996 curriculum guidelines, the profile of the Bachelor of Social Work student is a

[…] professional who engages with social issues, formulating and implementing proposals to address these, by means of public social policies, business, civil society organisations and social movements. A professional with generalist critical intellectual and cultural training, competent in its performance, with creative and purposeful intervention capability, in the set of social relations and the labour market. A professional committed to the values and guiding principles of the code of ethics of the social worker. (ABEPSS, 1996: 27)

In order to think about the process of academic training in Brazil, it is useful to review the current curriculum of one of the schools in Rio de Janeiro. The admission process requires students to undertake a national test (ENEM) and achieve a specified grade. If the student achieves the required grade, the university course will be free. This process applies to both federal and state universities. The social work course operates by means of a half yearly system and day and evening courses, catering for different groups of students, run simultaneously. The course taught during the day has a minimum of 8 school periods (semesters) and the evening course 10 school periods (semesters).

The course comprises a total of 3150hours, distributed between 1680hours of theoretical disciplines, 480hours of practice disciplines (Supervised Practice modules I–IV), 780hours of theoretical-practical work, 60 hours of guidance and support and 150 hours of extra-curricular activities (scientific initiation, mentoring, monitoring and participation in seminars).

Some disciplines or modules have prerequisites. As an example, each social work module operates as a prerequisite for the following social work module, as well as for each module of Supervised Practice (IIV). To progress in each of the four levels of supervised practice, the student must achieve a pass grade in modules such as Social Work II, Professional Ethics and Professional Practice. From the beginning of the process of guidance until the final academic report, the student must complete three modules of supervised practice.

Supervised practice in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

In 1993, supervised practice in Brazil saw a legal landmark with the passing of the Professional Regulation Law (Law Number 8.662/1993 of 7 June 1993, Civil House, 1993). This makes the supervision of a social work student an important part of a practising social worker's role. The ABEPSS[1] curriculum guidelines for 1996 also present supervised practice as a mandatory curriculum activity, requiring systematic supervision. Finally, Practice Law No. 11.788/2008 codifies the practice process and the Federal Council of Social Work (CFESS),[2] resolution number 533/2008, regulates the direct supervision of training in social work.

The general principles of the last 1993 Code of Professional Ethics guide all activities and professional assignments. This includes direct supervision, which is performed by a field supervisor and an academic supervisor. Supervision practice is informed by the principles of liberty, equality, social justice, pluralism and citizenship with the clear purpose being to overcome oppression, hunger, poverty, unemployment, social discrimination and inequalities. Supervised practice[3] consists of the following:

> A mandatory curricular activity that configures the student's insertion into the socio-institutional space in order to enable him to exercise his professional work, which assumes systematic supervision. This supervision will be carried out by a supervising teacher and by a professional in the field, through reflection, monitoring and a system based on training plans prepared in conjunction with the academic unit and field placement institution. (ABEPSS, 1996: 18)

It is important to highlight some aspects of the relationship between the supervising teacher and the field supervisor in Brazil. The supervising teacher is the associated professor from the university where the academic course is taught. The field supervisor[4] is a social worker who belongs exclusively to the organization's permanent staff. Both have responsibility for opening and closing the field of training, jointly planning activities inherent to the placement to ensure a timeline of systematic supervision, planning training courses, holding meetings, discussing and formulating strategies, and addressing issues related to the placement practice.

Guerra and Braga (2009) consider supervision as a socio-professional role and as an essential mediation for vocational training and the achievement of the professional qualification. They propose several assumptions and premises: (1) supervision as an expression of the insolubility between work and vocational training; (2) supervision as an expression of the unity between theory and practice; (3) supervision linked to its theoretical–methodological, ethical–political and technical– operative components; (4) supervision developed from the character and model of social policies (whether public or private), and ways of dealing with the 'social issue' and its relation with the work dynamic; and (5) supervision as a space for attaining a unified teaching and learning process. To this end, the authors conceive supervision not only as an essential activity for academic development but also for ongoing professional training and for the formulation and implementation of social policies and services.

The theoretical–methodological, ethical–political and technical–operative principles of supervision are related to training and professional activities. The professional exercise requires social workers to fully understand the relevant theories and methodologies and to have technical and operational skills. Ethical aspects are also fully included (CFESS, 2013).

In Brazil, supervised practice is performed at different levels of knowledge corresponding to the level of the academic course being undertaken. The student starts the placement in the second academic year and in each placement term the student has to deliver a paper on the knowledge expected for that specific level. This article is then evaluated by the supervisor/teacher. The field supervisor evaluates the level of development during the placement term and decides whether the student has reached the required standard to pass this element of the course.

Major differences: Brazil and England

In this section, key differences between social work practice in Brazil and England will be highlighted. The major areas of difference to be focused on include the centrality of practice, academic and field support for the student, the qualifications of practice educators and service user engagement in the learning process.

The first key aspect is the centrality of practice in professional training. In England, previous care work experience is an important factor in the admissions process. In Brazil, this is not a prerequisite as students are seen as growing and developing as they work their way through the stages of the course. It is the course, including placement experience, that is regarded as providing students with access to all the tools necessary for the practical and theoretical understanding of the profession.

The second key aspect is about the student's academic and field support. In England, social work students are supported in their academic learning by their academic tutor and they also usually have access to a welfare tutor. The practice tutor, the practice supervisor and the practice educator are fundamental to the student's process of learning on placement. The practice tutor is the academic tutor and the practice educator must be a qualified social worker who meets specified criteria and who usually has undertaken an accredited two-stage practice educator course. If a practice educator is not available on site, a practice supervisor can provide day-to-day onsite supervision. They do not have to be a qualified social worker but must work closely with an offsite practice educator.

In Brazil, there is also a professor (academic tutor) and a professor from the academy (academic supervisor) who work together with the practice educator (field supervisor) in monitoring students during their process of learning. The difference in Brazil is that the roles of practice supervisor and educator are developed by the same person. The supervisor must be a qualified social worker who monitors the students and offers day-to-day supervision. This means that the field supervisor must be in the workplace with the student during the placement term.

In both locations, many people are involved in the learning process. These include the student, the academic supervisor, the social worker/field educator/supervisor, as well as other professionals from involved organizations. All of these develop a collaborative teaching–learning relationship.

In terms of differences between the two countries, one major disparity relates to the length of the placements. This is 170 days in total in England with each day comprising approximately 7hours. In Brazil, there is a minimum of 120hours (maximum of 30hours a week by law) in each one of the four terms.

The activities undertaken by the students in both countries relate to working with service users to meet agreed needs. All of this requires systematic supervision. This is fundamental to developing a student's skills, knowledge base and experience as a future practitioner, enabling them to practice the main elements such as observation, communication, intervention skills and critical analysis. The practice educator/supervisor role has fundamental importance in this process.

The third key aspect is related to the practice educator qualifications. In both countries, a practice educator must be a qualified social worker. However, in England, an additional requirement relating to the completion of a specific training course for practice educators is gaining ground. Here, professionals need to attend five teaching days to obtain a stage 1 qualification. For the second stage, social workers need to complete Practice Education Stage 2 and evidence extensive experience of practice education as well as undertake supervision of their practice supervision skills in the workplace. In Brazil, any qualified social worker can operate as a supervisor. However, free courses for supervisors are offered, which can include three units with each one comprising 60hours.

The last key aspect is about service user engagement in the learning process. In the last 20 to 30years in health and social care services in England, the role of service user and carers in policy development and service provision has been emphasized. This represents a sea change from previous practice and takes account of the importance of empowerment, consumer rights and improved outcomes for service users (Matka et al., 2010). In many universities in England, service users and carers are involved in the process of admissions, direct teaching, assessment and the development of teaching material.

In addition, service user and carer feedback is integrated into the assessment process and the student's PCF portfolio must contain at least two pieces of evidence relating to this from each placement (TCSW, 2012b). In contrast in Brazil, although Brazilian social work also works towards the involvement of service users in policy and practice, this has not yet been incorporated into universities' social work courses.

The study

A small scale qualitative study was conducted in a major city in England related to the practice supervision of social work students. The researcher drew from her own experience of social work field supervision in Brazil to explore the contribution of the supervisor in the student's process of learning. The main research question focused on exploring how the process of supervision in social work affects student learning and development from the supervisor's perspective.

Within this, there were also some secondary questions that were explored. These included the following questions: (1) How can the field supervisor's profile (in terms of professional experience and qualifications) influence the student's learning and development process? (2) How do supervisors think about and exercise their roles to help the students' process of learning and development?
(3) How can the supervisor's critical analysis of the development of the supervision and social work profession contribute to the supervisory process?

The study consisted of carrying out semi-structured interviews with 17 social work practice supervisors from a range of settings. The participants were recruited by means of placement contacts from a participating university. All participants volunteered to be interviewed and the criteria for inclusion was the undertaking of social work supervision either on-site or off-site. It was made clear that the participants could withdraw from the research project at any time and that their contribution would be fully anonymized.

During the research process, it became apparent that the type of work setting was not a relevant aspect. However, the experience of the social work supervisors and their critical reflections on the process featured significantly. In terms of process, the interviews generally lasted from 40minutes to 1hour and focused on the profile of the social worker, their supervision plans, the assignments set for the student and the limits as well as the opportunities created by student supervision.

The interviews were transcribed and the data content was analysed, drawing from a thematic analytical method developed by Attride-Stirling (2001). According to the author, this form of analysis is increasingly being seen as a positive step towards a deeper understanding of social phenomena and their dynamics.

Findings

First of all, throughout the interviews it became apparent that even those social workers/professionals who did not have a very extensive professional background felt able to operate effectively as supervisors based on the skills and values obtained during their qualifying university courses. The practice educator (PE) and practice supervisor (PS) roles described by the interviewees clearly matched the standards, guidance statements and values laid down in the guidance documents (TCSW, 2012b). This can be seen to demonstrate an adherence to what are regarded as professional standards. However, the interviews also highlighted that those supervisors with extensive professional backgrounds brought more critical analysis to the supervision process. This indicates that experience can have a bearing on students' learning and development process.

With regard to how the supervisors viewed their roles, most of those interviewed emphasized how their student's ability to grow during the placement enhanced their own motivation as a supervisor. Many of the discussions about supervision were associated with the ways in which the supervisor could contribute to the student's development and that this was a two-way process, taking account of all the experience and knowledge brought by students to the placement. The interviewees also drew attention to the leaderships skills, networking, supervision and research knowledge, and career development opportunities which they could develop further as a result of taking on the role of student supervisor. Overall, in relation to the supervisory role, it appeared that this not only supports the students' process of learning and development, but that there are also strong reciprocal elements.

In terms of supervision issues, there were procedural factors that were raised. These largely related to the demands made by universities in terms of their requirements. An example given was associated with the different paperwork required by different universities. This can be a challenge for the practice educator, who should work with different systems to show evidence of learning.

Another area raised was associated with the length of the first placement – just 70 days, with 30days for the development of practice and professional skills. Some of the participants highlighted that the placement appeared too short to fully maximize all the learning opportunities available.

One of the themes that appeared in the interviews was associated with the debate about whether qualifying social work courses should remain generic or become more specialized. The profession of social work globally has a generalist formation that enables the professional to work in a variety of different areas and develop a range of skills. However, in England there is pressure for qualifying social work degrees to encourage a greater degree of specialization.

Croisdale-Appleby (2014), in his report on the future of social work with adults and communities, discusses the opportunities and constraints posed by genericism and specialization. He comments that although there are always drivers towards prequalification specialism, attention should be paid to 'education for a career in social work' not 'for some arguable short term gain in practice readiness' (p. 68). Overall, he recommends that the qualification of social work remains a genericist qualification, enabling newly qualified workers to work with individuals, groups and communities in different settings and situations.

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was associated with the perceived movement in social work away from social work learning based on the social sciences and critical analysis towards more individually- and clinically-oriented assessment models with these including an increased technical focus. Noble and Irwin (2009) highlight in their research findings that 'supervision becomes more focused on efficacy, accountability and worker performance often at the expense of professional and practice development' (p. 345). They consider that aspects of the new economic landscape negatively affect social work and have implications for supervision. They argue that the conception of neo-liberalism has brought a universal adoption of economic rationalism and managerialism into the design and operation of social welfare services and that this creates challenges in professional practice. They claim that a drive to manage social risk has resulted in the emergence of more therapeutic type interventions focused on individuals rather than on 'community development, social policy and social change work' (p. 349). They also argue that supervision needs to be revisited in order to open up creative spaces, and that critical analysis has to remain an essential component of social work supervision.

Wonnacott (2012) similarly argues that within adult services the introduction of care management has influenced the process of supervision. As a result, the focus has become less concerned with the relationship between social workers and service users and more concerned with 'practical matters of assessment, completion and the management of resources' (p. 16).

With regard to further themes emerging from the interviews, issues associated with critical thinking, the availability of resources and the importance of punctuality and regular attendance featured significantly. All the interviewees recognized the value of critical reflection and analysis of professional issues and associated limits and possibilities, both in relation to the supervision process and with regard to social work generally. Those interviewed felt that social work should be engaging and constructive, and that by means of supervision, student social workers could be supported to think differently, operate creatively and work collaboratively with service users.

With regard to resources, the majority of those interviewed believed that the importance of the supervisors' role could be assessed by means of the resources invested in it. It is notable that in relation to the study, half of the interviewees operated as full-time supervisors (PE and PS or both roles). Operating as a full-time PE or PS makes a considerable difference to the support that students can be offered. It was found that the job descriptions, training and support provided by the agencies to supervisors for supervision activity and development served as an important way of assessing agency investment in the role and the importance afforded to it.

On the subject of student attendance, all interviewees agreed that punctuality and regular attendance was important and needed to be monitored. Those interviewed believed that this is important to ensure that students take responsibility as future practitioners in a demanding learning and development process.

These findings provide further insight into the role of practice supervisors and highlight the importance of these roles in understanding the relationship between theory, policy and practice and the process of learning. Although the study was conducted in a major city in England and, as discussed earlier, there are major differences between social work supervision in major English cities and in Rio de Janeiro, there are clear synergies. These relate to the importance ascribed to the role, the significance of the practice learning process, the commitment to a continued emphasis on critical thinking and reflection and a dedication to the maintenance of professional values and standards.

Conclusion

This article has focused on supervision in social work and has compared both the differences and the similarities in social work practice in England and Brazil. In order to complement this discussion, the details and findings from a small-scale qualitative study carried out during a research exchange from Brazil to England have been included. Both have highlighted the important contribution of professional experience and qualifications to social work qualifying training and have emphasized the importance attached by practice supervisors to their very significant roles and responsibilities.

What comes to the fore in both countries is the importance of placement supervision and the role of practice educators and supervisors in the overall social work education process. There are many current challenges relating to macro and micro societal, economic and political issues. However, the contribution of the field supervisor cannot be underestimated in terms of maximizing professional capability and maintaining a high level of qualification and experience in the social work profession.

Funding

Notes

1　　This association, which has both an academic and scientific nature, has the task of establishing and coordinating the political direction of the intrinsic training relationship between the professional practice and the political organization of social workers (CFESS, 2013).

2　　The Federal Council and the Regional Council of Social Work includes the professional practice primary supervisory functions that guarantee the political and ethical principles as well as professional work ethical and technical conditions (CFESS, 2013).

3　　According to Article 2 of Law number 11.788 (Law Number 11.788/2008 of 25 September 2008, Civil House, 2008), which rules on student practice, this stage may be mandatory, in which the workload is a requirement for approval and obtaining a diploma, or non-mandatory, in which it is developed as an optional activity in addition to the mandatory and regular workload.

4　　For a social worker field supervisor, according to resolution no. 533 (CFESS, 2008), and considering the other assignments and complexity of professional activities required for social workers, it has been established that the ceiling should not exceed one trainee for every 10 working hours per week. In most of the cases, supervision is not the social worker's unique role.

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