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Innovative fieldwork education in Africa

Professor Rodreck MUPEDZISWA

ABSTRACT

My remarks focus essentially on the theme of social work education in Africa. I observe that social work education per se has two prongs – classroom instruction and field practicum. I then indicate that the paper is interested in the practicum component of social work education. It notes that in the context of Africa, there has been a clarion call for relevance in social work on the continent. To this end, terms like Ubuntu and indigenisation, have emerged in the context of the discourse on the quest for relevance of social work on the continent - concepts which are consistent with a developmental social work model. My argument is in order to successfully promote the development approach in social work, change has to begin in the education component. The challenge though is that some institutions of education and training in social work, have purported to be promoting the developmental social work education approach, when in fact, the practicum component of their education and training programmes is not consistent with the developmental approach. Apparently, some social work educators are not very clear in terms of what the developmental approach entails, while others are curtailed by institution culture and policies. I then argue that in order to produce a cadre who is well versed in the developmental social work approach, the fieldwork practicum component has to be consistent with the key tenets of the developmental approach. Six models of the developmental social work approach to fieldwork placements are presented as examples of the kind of field placements that would go with the developmental approach. Advantages of the developmental type of placements are briefly explored.

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HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this as one of the keynote speakers. I should however begin by congratulating my colleague from Mauritius for scooping the social worker of the year prize. That is something really to cherish for life. Incidentally, for four years, I was external examiner for the social work programme at the University of Mauritius. The first three years, I would fly to the beautiful country of Mauritius to do the moderation, but when the COVID-19 pandemic visited, we ended up doing the work by remote. Papers would be sent to me and I would moderate and send them back. Anyway, and to Professor Rasool, I wish to say I really want to thank you for your thought-provoking presentation, particularly because you and I have something in common, issues around gender-based violence. But that is a conversation for another day.

Allow me to go to the introduction now of my presentation. The paper that I am presenting is titled *The Quest for Relevance, Rethinking Strategies for the Practical Fieldwork Component of Social Work Education*. That is the focus. And I should mention that I chose to talk about social work education because the reasoning is that if the education in social work is done well, then it ought to follow that practice (upon graduation) will also be okay; the graduate will perform well in the field of work. Hence, that's my major reason for choosing to speak on the theme of social work education, with particular focus on the African continent.

Now, let me begin by stating the obvious, which is that social work education itself has two prongs, namely classroom instruction and, of course, the practical field work component. I am aware that with many institutions in Africa and beyond, there is greater emphasis on classroom instruction (theory) than on the practical component, unfortunately. And in that respect, I argue that it's unfortunate that the training part, the practical component, is often treated as a poor cousin in many social work education institutions. I have been privileged to serve as external examiner for thirteen tertiary education institutions in Africa. And, in each instance, I have taken particular interest in how they run their programmes. And in a couple of instances, I actually came across institutions that were offering a social work education programme without the practical component. Hence the question of whether or not practical field work or practicum is crucial, has been a major issue.

FINDINGS FROM EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The observations I make above are predicated on the results of some research work that we did with some colleagues in 2008, with funding from the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Three institutions participated in that study, namely the University of Johannesburg, University of Botswana, and the National University of Lesotho. I should quickly mention that at the University of Johannesburg, we worked with the late Prof Tessa Hochfeld. Hence, it was really the Centre for Social Development in Africa at UJ then led by a Professor Leila Patel), that we worked with, at that institution and we came up with a report which was published in 2009. It's titled, *Developmental Social Work Education in Southern and East Africa*, and so my comments are really based on the experience from that study, although I did further work later on, which kind of confirmed what we had found out. We were interested in establishing the extent to which institutions in this region (Southern and East Africa) had embraced their developmental social work approach.

One of the troubling findings that came out of that study was that while many institutions said they were promoting or moving in the direction of developmental social work, what we found out on the ground was that there was an apparent mismatch between theory, you know, what happens in the classroom (on the one hand) and the practical component (on the other). One of the challenges was you would find, yes, the institution is trying its best to go developmental, as it were, but when it came to practice, when students are meant to go on practical field attachment, there was no opportunity to really sit down and to think whether the practicums students selected, would be consistent with expectations of a developmental social work approach. The definition by James Midgley and Amy Conley, of developmental social work, - some refer to it as the social development approach - emphasises the importance of social investment in professional social work practice. The investments are meant to meet the material needs of social work clients and facilitate their full integration into the social and economic life of the community.

We found it rather interesting that some institutions actually said they didn't know what developmental social work is all about, noting that, that was the reason why they were not offering it or that was why they were not moving in that direction. Others said, yeah, we may have interest, but the institution itself is fixated on the remedial approach, so

there is no way we can move in the direction of developmental social work. Clearly, there was limited appreciation of the concept (of developmental social work). Others would say, well, when it came to field work, there was the problem that there was shortage of qualified field supervisors, or supervisors who had a clear picture of what the developmental approach was all about. In other words, they were content with the conventional approaches, if you like. The previous speaker correctly alluded to the fact that, the emphasis today should be on focusing on structural changes. And of course, the fact is, structural changes tend to go hand in hand with the developmental approach. All said, and with due respect, it does not seem to make very good sense for any institution to say they are promoting developmental social work while at the same time they are sending their students to traditional placements the normal, placements - counselling, case work, that kind of thing. If going developmental, there is need to go beyond clinical work. In saying this, we are not suggesting it is wrong to engage in case work and counselling, etc; we are simply saying the definition of a developmental approach to social work goes way beyond that, to even look at economic issues, and more.

I make a clarion call here for social work social education and training institutions in Africa to begin to think outside the box, and go beyond conventional social work. In other words, let us be innovative, be creative in an effort to offer more meaningful field placement, especially if the institution is promoting a developmental social work approach. My humble view is that there is need for social work in Africa to more in the direction of the developmental approach. Work. In the remainder of the presentation, my paper is really trying to introduce or to give a few examples of innovations that people at various institutions can begin to think about if they are going to come up with field placements that are relevant to the developmental social work approach. In all, I have six examples that I want to share with you (See diagram 1 below), and I must be quick to mention that some of these examples were thought of many years ago, it's just that institutions have not emphasised them. I should also mention that it is possible that some institutions may be doing some versions of what I'm going to share here. I am sharing this information because I've put together all the six examples of innovative placements that are ordinarily outside the box, if you like.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL FIELDWORK MODELS

The first one, the first example that I have is what has been termed the *Workshop placement*. This is one strategy for coming up with a practical fieldwork placement that is developmental in nature. And Kendall talked about this model of field placement way back in 1974. And this was in the context of the US, very interesting, and I am saying it's an idea well worth revisiting - the workshop type of field placement- and I understand it was tried out in Latin America and the strategy involved groups of students with one or two staff members being assigned to non-structured open field placements. Remember, the title of my presentation is Rethinking Fieldwork in the context of the search for relevance. We are trying to find the kind of field placement that can be relevant to our African context, especially since Africa is talking of such terms as Ubuntu and indigenisation. and strategies like that.

Mupedziswa's Model of Developmental Fieldwork



I am saying this time, the workshop type, might be one good example of a placement which we may want to consider. According to Kendall, the locale for such a placement might be a squatter, slum, a centre for agrarian reform, a cooperative, a particular neighbourhood. Thus, you're taking your students to such destinations, and they are involved in what you might call workshops as the main thrust of their field placement. The argument is such strategies help unravel some problems that may be hidden in the community. These may include gender-based violence, a theme that I am very passionate about.

Another example of a placement, the second, is what Kendall again called the *Floating placement*, which, I understand, was tried out in the Philippines. This is another innovative type of field placement which an institution can think about. Some of these strategies that I'm talking about here may come in very handy because some organisations today are reluctant to accept students for placement, because of the COVID - 19 situation. They will say, you know, our office is small, so we cannot take students on board at this time. But, if you are going out there into the community, the floating placement will move from place to place, rather than being concentrated in one confined place. The Floating placement is also non-structured, indicating that students will not be stationed in one place. They will move from one area to another for the duration of the placement.

The third type is the *Village camping* approach, and it is another innovative type of placement which is consistent with the developmental social work approach. The two authors, Bogo and Herington (1986) described what this is all about. They indicated that the strategy involves selecting a placement, on the basis of some kind of criteria, maybe poverty state or whatever it might be. You target one or more villages and your students, your group, you might have 20, 30 students, they take residence in that village, and they actually begin to engage in a variety of activities. Some may focus on education (e.g. literacy), others on health issues, others still on welfare issues (maybe income generating projects), and so forth. Activities may also include family therapy, or group or community research, action research, activities like that. The students will be camped in one village. Students on such a placement could also get involved in community improvement activities, including adult education. They might even start an evening class for those

that are not literate and that will welcome such.

The fourth example is involves doing things with communities. For lack of a better term, I shall call it the *Working with communities* approach. I understand from Maxine Ankrah that this approach was tried out at Makerere University in Uganda. I don't know whether it is still happening or whether it has taken a new form. If we have anybody from Makerere in the audience, it would be appreciated to hear how it is being they are doing it, if they are still doing it. I have it on good authority that the University of Zambia used to have something which was more-or-less along the same lines, if my memory serves me right, where they would take a group of students into some rural community out there for field work. Ankrah states that whether in the traditional agency or in more 'progressive' ones, the clear formulation of expectations and objectives was paramount. Clarity of intentions thus, seemed to pave the way for familiarity or participating in more development-aimed programmes than had been experienced hitherto. In other words, when using the community approach, there was more focus on developmental kind of programmes, as long as the objectives of the placement were clear. She reports that this innovative idea was tried, as I said, at Makerere, and it had considerable success.

Example five relates to what Jennings has referred to as the *Group block*. With many of the approaches I have reviewed above, one might be forgiven for thinking perhaps the difference is only in name, but when you do a serious and close analysis, you may find there are some differences here and there. According to Jennings the field instruction involves an eight-week group block field placement in a community where students live, eat, and work together. They work together with community members and with some training teams that might be in the community already. The difference is, whereas with the other approaches mentioned earlier, the students are having their own meals out there, but with the *Group block* approach, the focus is on living with community members, eating with community members, and working with them. It is akin to participatory research. Students are required to undertake a range of different activities, and they work and learn as members of smaller teams comprising fellow students, community members, and professionals who are already working in the community. With this approach, the model of success, according to commentators, depends on carefully designed field experiences being grounded in community practices, coordinated by well-established community curricula for the classroom experience, and includes greater balance between prevention, development, and remediation.

Model number six relates to an approach that some of the audience here may be familiar with, and this has been tried out in the Western world. The approach is referred to as the *Long-arm practice supervision* model. And looking at the current situation across the region, especially with the threat of COVID-19, this approach may also be well worth considering. This strategy for practical fieldwork training, has apparently been tried out at a number of institutions, including Christchurch University in the UK. It refers to an arrangement in which a supervisor is located at a distance, and supervises a student on placement far away. That's where the long-arm issue is; the supervisor is at a distance to the practice site. As supervisor, you might not even have an opportunity to visit the actual placement because of the distance involved; but you can, perhaps, do the supervising by 'remote control', if you like, maybe using your cell phone, online (e.g. via Zoom), or whatever other means.

Even so, the supervisor takes full responsibility of supervision and supporting the students. And it may be one student, it may be many students who may be doing their placements for away. But there is emphasis there on the need for clear objectives agreed with the supervisor. Commentators are agreed that with such a model, choice of placement is important of course, especially if the intention of the student is to pursue developmental social work. The supervise is expected to use their own judgment when endorsing appropriate learning opportunities for the student. The student may choose an area that you have to sit down with the students to determine what is possible in terms of learning. What are the advantages of these approaches in the context of innovative developmental approaches? For theory and practical experiences to be properly aligned, there would be need for proper planning; it is not a question of simply sending students out there, just abandoning them in the field. You, as supervisor, you need to sit and talk to the student and come up with a clear strategy; determine whether there is a learning experience that can come out of the suggested placement.

Advantages of the developmental model

Let's look at a few more advantages of the developmental approach. I must emphasise here that innovative field placements must be very carefully thought through, especially in terms of objectives and also the outcomes. That will

be helpful because if you don't do that, the students may go out and sit under trees without achieving much. One of the renowned social work pioneers, Katherine Kendall, in a 1974 publication stressed that site placements are rooted in life as it exists in the community and are mainly aimed to address macro issues. And when we talk of macro issues, we are talking of the developmental approach, given that it is in this approach that macro practice is really considered key. In the various models reviewed above, emphasis is on self-directed learning, a key ingredient for promoting maturity among your students. Because self-directed learning is not for the faint-hearted that are used to being spoon fed, field supervisors can afford to visit the student only occasionally, maybe once or twice per placement, depending on the length of the placement, and the complexity of the issues the student is dealing with. Keeping the number of supervision visits to a bare minimum might actually be for the benefit of the student – it might help by leaving room for creativity, originality, and innovativeness on the part of the student.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The developmental approach to fieldwork education requires careful planning, for it to be of benefit to students. This means the supervisor has an important role to play both at the level of choice of placement, and when crafting the objectives of the placement. Jennings (2001) has argued that, unless tension between focusing on the individual change and working as an advocate for development and social change is acknowledged and addressed, the complexity required by a community orientation will ensure it remains secondary to a remedial approach. In other words, if you don't do things the right way, there will be insurmountable challenges; you may find both the supervisor and the student will continue to wallow in the quagmire of the residual, or remedial approach, when the intention by both was to go developmental. These are some of the critical ideas that I thought I would share with the delegates in regard to thinking outside the box. I said at the beginning that the topic is rethinking our fieldwork experiences. And what I have shared here are six examples of innovative models which can be considered in search for a developmental approach to social work. Thank you very much. I rest my case.

About the Guest Speaker

Professor Rodreck Mupedziswa is a Professor of Social Work. In 2001, he accepted a post as Inaugural Coordinator of the Centre for Gender-Based Violence, Prevention and Empowerment at the BA ISAGO University in Gaborone, Botswana. The Centre offers education and training programmes in gender-based violence, Community outreach and advocacy, and Research with a bias towards gender-based violence and empowerment of vulnerable groups. Prior to this appointment, he was based at the University of Botswana, for a period spanning 15 years, March 2007 to May 2021. At the University of Botswana, he served as the Head of the Department of Social Work for six years, and as Professor of social work for the remainder of his stay. Previous positions held by Professor Mupedziswa include Director of the Forced Migration Studies Programme in the Graduate School for the Humanities at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (2002 – 2004), and Deputy Director at the School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe- (1983 to 2001; 2004- Feb 2007). Professor Mupedziswa's research interests focus essentially on issues pertaining to the empowerment of vulnerable groups in society, including women and children. He has published widely and has made academic paper presentations at over 120 conferences, workshops, symposia, etc. in 44 countries around the world. Of late, he has researched and published on the themes of social impacts of climate change, especially on vulnerable groups with particular focus on the situation in Southern African region. He has an unbridled passion for empowerment of vulnerable groups in society.

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