

Raised by the Herd: Insights from African Elephants for the Support and Continuing Professional Development of Newly Qualified Social Workers in South Africa

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Abstract

Newly qualified social workers in South Africa face numerous challenges when transitioning into the workforce, highlighting a gap between their perceived work readiness and the realities of professional practice. Despite completing a four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree with substantial work-integrated learning, many graduates feel inadequately prepared for their roles and experience insufficient support and development upon entering practice. These challenges align with international trends, where newly qualified social workers often lack essential guidance, supervision, and structured professional development. Drawing on lessons from the collaborative care seen in African elephant calves, this study explored the barriers faced by, and the support and development needs of, recent social work graduates in South Africa through a quantitative study operationalised through a cross-sectional survey design. Through non-probability sampling, 39 participants from various social work sectors completed a self-administered, web-based questionnaire tailored to the South African context. Data analysis, using descriptive statistics and content analysis, revealed a pressing need for structured support initiatives, such as mentorship, supervision, and tailored induction programmes. These initiatives are essential to enhance job satisfaction, foster professional and personal growth, and improve retention rates. Insights from elephant calf socialisation, particularly the concept of being “raised by the herd,” emphasise the importance



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of extended nurturing environments and continuous development for young professionals. This emphasises the role of cooperative care and effective communication in supporting newly qualified social workers. Recommendations include a collaborative, accountable approach involving key stakeholders to address existing gaps, enhance access to support initiatives, and provide specialised training.

Keywords: African elephants; continuing professional development; early career social worker; newly qualified social worker; South Africa; support and development initiatives

Introduction

South African social workers are required to complete a four-year professional Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree, which includes work-integrated learning, i.e., practice modules (South African Qualifications Authority 2008). While assuming a certain level of work readiness, newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in South Africa are met with a multitude of challenges when entering the workforce. From his South African study, Alpaslan (2019) highlights a disconnect between theory and practice exacerbated by the limited input from practitioners in shaping curricula. This issue is further compounded in practice, which is often characterised by a general lack of resources, inadequate orientation, limited supervision, high caseloads, work overload, and financial constraints due to low remuneration (Huni and Chikadzi 2014; Mmadi and Sithole 2019). Additionally, the pressure among NQSWs of not being absorbed into the workforce, despite 9 000 unfilled positions with the Department of Social Development (2023), further increases their vulnerability during their transition into the workplace (Nyathi 2022).

Internationally, NQSWs face similar challenges and mirror the lack of (specialist) knowledge and skills, inadequate orientation and supervision, and unprotected caseloads (Hunt et al. 2017; Newman and Littlechild 2022). In addition, literature highlights the internal challenges faced by NQSWs such as emotional exhaustion and accompanying compassion fatigue and burnout (Segev, Hochman, and Shai 2022), and the growing need for professional and professional identity development (Moorhead 2019a). NQSWs face unique challenges and need extra support during their transition into the workplace. Effective initiatives like induction programmes, supervision, professional development, and caseload protection improve job satisfaction and retention (Beddoe et al. 2020; Moorhead 2019b; Tham and Lynch 2019).

Elephants, like humans, are self-domesticated and share a comparable evolutionary path, known for their complex socialisation. Research on elephant calf-care (Garai, Boulton, and Zitzer 2023) mirrors the support and developmental needs required by NQSWs to become independent social work professionals. Therefore, we use elephant calf-rearing as a model for insights into how to support NQSWs better.

This article presents a quantitative study on the barriers faced by, as well as the support and development needs of, NQSWs in South Africa. The study sought to answer the following research question: What are the barriers to, and initiatives for, addressing the support and development needs of NQSWs in South Africa? The article offers a contextualisation and literature review, research methodology, results, discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

Contextualisation and Literature Review

Barriers to, and support initiatives for, NQSWs are examined through the lens of collaborative advantage. The necessity of a developmental process model for NQSWs is highlighted by drawing an analogy to the nurturing of African elephant calves.

NQSWs Entering the Workplace

NQSWs are recent graduates transitioning into the workforce, usually spanning from entry into the workplace until they become engaged practitioners, typically lasting 12 to 18 months after entrance (Tham and Lynch 2014). Questions persist about the preparedness of NQSWs for their professional roles, with ongoing debates questioning sufficient alignment between university curriculum and preparedness for the workplace (Tham and Lynch 2019). Similarly, the situation in South Africa shows that NQSWs feel unprepared when entering the workplace due to inadequate training for diverse work environments and a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills (Alpaslan 2019).

Focusing on the post-graduation period, it is crucial to recognise that while university education marks the beginning of the development of social work professionals, curriculum content alone is not sufficient to prepare graduates for diverse work demands and settings (Battaglia and Flynn 2020; Tham and Lynch 2021). When considering recently graduated social workers as “developing professionals” (Moorhead, Manthorpe, and Baginsky 2020) it is presumed that further readiness occurs within the workplace (Tham and Lynch 2019).

Barriers to Support and Development

NQSWs face multiple barriers that negatively affect their work retention. These include external barriers such as high caseloads and limited resources (Radey and Schelbe 2017) and internal barriers including inadequate support and risk of burnout (Cleveland, Warhurst, and Legood 2019; Glassburn 2018). South African research highlights additional barriers to support and development, namely a theory-practice gap, concerns about unemployment (Huni and Chikadzi 2014), lack of motivation, family commitments, financial constraints due to poor salary, and poor reading habits (Mmadi and Sithole 2019).

Support and Development Initiatives

Recognising NQSWs as beginner practitioners needing extra support is vital for their transition from student to professional practitioner (Moorhead 2019a). This recognition has shifted expectations from being “ready to practice” to adopting a developmental process model that views growth as a continuous process rather than a final product (Carpenter et al. 2015) and acknowledges the continuous process of expertise and skills acquisition (Rousse and Dreyfus 2021). Therefore, continuing professional development (CPD) is essential for preparing NQSWs for the work environment (Stewart and Fielding 2022; Thoburn et al. 2021). The literature identifies two primary areas for supporting and developing NQSWs: implementing relevant initiatives, and addressing essential support elements.

Programmes and Processes as Initiatives for the Support and Development of NQSWs

Initiatives for NQSWs reflect an enhanced response from stakeholders to support and address barriers. Programmes such as the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) in England (Carpenter et al. 2015) and various workforce schemes, like the workforce/employment-based programmes, employer-sponsored organisations, and workforce development organisations, as found in other parts of the United Kingdom (Baginsky and Manthorpe 2015; Cook 2023), are considered to offer robust support. Both international and national studies highlight the importance of quality induction, caseload protection, and effective supervision. Despite the necessity of an induction processes (Tham and Lynch 2019; Yan, Gao, and Lam 2013), such programmes are often ad hoc or organisation-specific in South Africa. Protecting caseloads is essential for managing large, complex cases and improving NQSWs’ retention (Glassburn 2018); however, excessive caseloads remain common (Manthorpe et al. 2014). Effective supervision for NQSWs is also vital for the successful transitioning and retention of NQSWs in the workplace (Engelbrecht 2021).

Initiatives for Addressing Essential Elements During the Process of Support and Development of NQSWs

Four categories of elements are identified as essential for enhancing the support and development of NQSWs:

- Job engagement and professional networking: This entails collaborating with colleagues and engaging in peer support structures (Hunt et al. 2017; Nyathi 2022).
- Professional identity development: This enhances support and development by integrating personal and professional identities during the stressful transition into the workplace (Hochman, Segev, and Shai 2022).
- Knowledge development within specialist fields: Studies reflect the need for extended knowledge in statutory work and enhancement of practice-related skills such as communicating with children and working in the criminal justice system (Alpaslan 2019; Grant 2017; Newman and Littlechild 2022).

- Cultivating NQSWs' flex skills: Flex (or soft) skills such as self-awareness, problem-solving, and teamwork, are crucial for NQSWs (Price and Magy 2021). They also need professional self-care mechanisms (Hochman, Segev, and Shai 2022), resilience and self-efficacy (Cleveland, Warhurst, and Legood 2019), and reflection (Brook and Abbott 2022). However, except context-specific qualitative work by Alpaslan (2019) and Botha and Dykes (2019), these elements have not been explored quantitatively among NQSWs across South Africa.

Insights from Elephants

Insights from raising independent African elephant calves provide key lessons for transitioning NQSWs into the workplace. Extended socialisation and caretaking, lasting up to ten years, foster family stability and reduce physical and emotional stress (Raviv et al. 2023). The lack of social attachment and caregiving impairs the emotional and social development of calves, impacting future generations, while bonds with older elephants enhance access to resources and knowledge, eventually leading these calves to become allomothers (Garai, Boulton, and Zitzer 2023). Allomothering, where females other than the biological mothers provide comfort and protection, is a form of cooperative care (Machado 2018; Poole and Granli 2008). The extended juvenile stage fosters enriched play and promotes social, emotional, and cultural development (Raviv et al. 2023). Sophisticated communication systems underscore the importance of reciprocal vocalisation for teamwork and decision-making (Raviv et al. 2023). Elevated cortisol levels reflect sensitivity to social changes, influencing behaviour, and promoting cooperative care during stressful times (Bradshaw and Schore 2007).

The socialisation process of elephants parallels NQSWs' development by emphasising the benefits of extended support during the development process (Beddoe et al. 2020). It highlights the benefits of peer engagement, supervision, and effective communication for teamwork and decision-making (Moorhead, Manthorpe, and Baginsky 2020). Allomothering and cooperative care during stress are vital for herd sustainability, similar to the need for peer supervision, managerial support, and shared resources in the development of NQSWs (Engelbrecht 2019; Hunt et al. 2017). Elevated cortisol levels in elephants in response to stress underline the importance of additional support and development, particularly in developing self-care mechanisms (Segev 2023), professional identity (Moorhead, Bell, and Bowles 2016), and flex or soft skills (e.g., decision-making skills) such as self-efficacy and resilience in NQSWs (Campbell and Holtzhausen 2020; Segev 2023).

A Multi-Level Approach to the Support and Development of NQSWs: Theory of Collaborative Advantage

The theory of collaborative advantage (TCA) developed by Vangen and Huxham (2010) highlights the importance of organisational collaboration. While collaboration among stakeholders is crucial for the support and development of NQSWs, effective strategies are unclear (Wilson 2014). TCA emphasises the benefits of cooperative efforts,

especially in public administration systems, suggesting that organisations can innovate and achieve common goals through collaboration (Vangen and Huxham 2010; Villagrana 2020). It includes two key principles: balancing collaboration benefits and challenges (Vangen and Huxham 2010), and using a “paradox lens” to navigate collaborations (Vangen 2016). Rooted in the belief that collaboration cultivates creativity and goal achievement, TCA emphasises the benefits of collective efforts, including mutual learning and resource sharing (Vangen and Huxham 2010; Wilson 2014). Stakeholders responsible for the support and development of NQSWs include government entities, higher education institutions (HEIs), non-government organisations (NGOs), employers, employees, professional bodies, councils, students, and service users (Botha and Dykes 2019; Moorhead, Manthorpe, and Baginsky 2020). TCA also asserts the value of stakeholder expertise and collaboration in practical research, validating the inclusion of the views of NQSWs in this study (Adams 2019; Villagrana 2020).

Research Methodology

Approach and Design

A quantitative approach was considered appropriate for exploring the perspectives of NQSWs regarding the barriers and initiatives to address the support and CPD needs in social work across South Africa. A cross-sectional survey design (Babbie 2021) was implemented as the authors were interested to explore the phenomena at one point in time.

Population, Sampling, and Recruitment

The study population included NQSWs working in all sectors of social work services in South Africa, and aimed to recruit participants from all nine provinces in South Africa. Purposive sampling was used, with initial permission obtained to distribute the survey among three Child and Family Welfare organisations and a professional network. The network included secondary settings such as child and youth care centres, schools, hospitals, and treatment centres. However, due to a low response rate, the authors expanded recruitment through social media platforms (LinkedIn and Facebook), ultimately reaching participants from eight provinces (except North West Province).

Participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: obtained a Bachelor of Social Work degree at a South African institution within the past three years; registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions; have been employed for at least six months to three years; and able to complete the questionnaire in English. Ultimately, 39 participants completed the survey, although some questions have not been answered in full by everyone.

Data Collection Tool

A questionnaire, originally developed for use in England, and thereafter adapted for a New Zealand study, provided a contextual foundation for the cross-sectional survey, which is also inexpensive and relatively fast to conduct. The former is available in the public domain and was adapted for the South African context (Ballantyne et al. 2019; DH Research Initiative 2010). In the present study, data were collected through a self-administered web-based questionnaire (Qualtrics^{XM}).

Data Analysis

The raw data were transferred from Qualtrics^{XM} to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics), version 29. Data analysis comprised mainly descriptive statistics, e.g., frequency (*f*) and percentage (%). Where participants responded to open questions, content analysis was implemented to determine the frequency of responses.

Rigour

To ensure content validity (see Babbie 2021), the authors consulted relevant literature and sought expert input to refine the questionnaire. The questionnaire contains no scales; hence, reliability was not calculated. Following its development, the questionnaire was pilot tested with four NQSWs not part of the main data collection. Based on the results of the pilot test, necessary adjustments were made to improve usability and cultural relevance. For example, the questions were made more smartphone-friendly and adjusted to better match South African language use.

Ethical Considerations

Although the study's risk level was considered low, free counselling was available should any participant request the service. Participants were informed of the purpose and related aspects of the study, and consent was provided at the beginning of the survey for voluntary participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and no private information was shared in any public domain (as per Babbie 2021). After securing written permission from the relevant gatekeepers, the study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria (HUM003/0722, dd 5 May 2023).

Results

The results are discussed within three broad categories: the profile of NQSWs, workplace support initiatives, and the learning and development of NQSWs during their transition into the workplace.

Profile of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs)

Table 1 outlines the biographical information of participants. Most participants (*f*=29) were between 23 and 30 years old at the time of data collection. Female social workers

($f=35$) outnumbered males ($f=4$) considerably. Eight of the official South African languages were represented in the survey, with the highest representation being Afrikaans ($f=16$), followed by SeSotho ($f=7$) and English ($f=5$). The majority of NQSWs had an undergraduate degree ($f=36$), with a few having a master's degree in social work ($f=3$). Twenty-six participants stated their work title as social worker, while just over half of the participants worked in a statutory position ($f=22$).

Table 1: Biographical information.

Variable	f	%
Age		
23–30 years	29	74.4
31–47 years	10	25.6
Gender		
Male	4	10.3
Female	35	89.7
Home language		
Afrikaans	16	41.0
English	5	12.8
isiNdebele	1	2.6
isiXhosa	3	7.7
isiZulu	1	2.6
SeSotho	7	17.9
SeSotho sa Leboa (Sepedi)	3	7.7
Setswana	3	7.7
Highest social work qualification		
Bachelor of Social Work	36	92.3
Master of Social Work	3	7.7
Job title		
Social worker	26	66.7
Designated social worker	2	5.1
Social worker: Residential care	1	2.6
Employee assistant practitioner	1	2.6
School social worker	2	5.1
Other	7	17.9
Statutory position		
Yes, a statutory position	22	56.4
No, not a statutory position	17	43.6

Participants' field of service delivery varied, as reflected in Table 2. The results illustrate the primary areas of NQSWs' work, with a strong emphasis on child and family welfare ($f=69$). The representation specifically in youth support ($f=13$), gender-based violence ($f=8$), and mental health ($f=7$) highlights the broad range of social issues addressed by NQSWs. However, certain areas, such as support for refugees and asylum seekers ($f=1$), were significantly underrepresented. This broad scope demonstrates the versatility of NQSWs in addressing social challenges, but also suggests potential gaps in addressing specific needs.

Workplace Support Initiatives

Support initiatives include aspects related to the direct support of NQSWs, including mentorship, induction and orientation, supervision, and caseload management.

Table 2: NQSWs' fields of service delivery.

Fields/services	f	% ^a
Children and families (including child protection)	26	16.0
Children in foster care placements	23	14.1
Family preservation	20	12.3
Community work/development	14	8.6
Young people (adolescents)	13	8.0
People who misuse drugs, alcohol, or other substances	8	4.9
People experiencing forms of gender-based violence	8	4.9
Couples in counselling	8	4.9
Children and families (excluding child protection)	7	4.3
Children in child and youth care centres	7	4.3
People who use mental health services	7	4.3
People with physical disabilities or sensory impairments	5	3.1
Early childhood development centres	4	2.5
Other (not specified)	4	2.5
Older persons	4	2.5
People with learning disabilities	2	1.2
People who have committed offenses	2	1.2
Refugees and/or asylum seekers	1	0.6

^a Percentages do not add up to 100% due to more than one response allowed per question.

Mentorship

The results highlight a clear disparity in mentorship experiences. With all participants providing input, it was found that more than half ($f=22$) did not have any mentorship. A small percentage had mentors only during specific periods, such as induction and probation ($f=3$). In contrast, 13 participants reported having mentors beyond the probation period, suggesting that while some NQSWs receive ongoing support, it is not universally available.

Induction and Orientation into the Organisation

The majority of participants ($n=38$) answered the question about access to induction and/or orientation. Of these, 26 participants had received some form of induction and/or orientation, while 12 participants had not. Those who received induction and/or orientation rated the quality thereof between 6 and 8 on a scale from 1 to 10, suggesting a generally positive perception.

Table 3 offers an overview of the content of induction and/or orientation programmes for NQSWs. The results highlight the emphasis placed on understanding the organisation and functioning thereof. Key areas included: values ($f=22$); policies and

procedures ($f=18$); dealing with confidentiality ($f=21$); and understanding their job description ($f=21$). Regarding professional and personal development, there was a stronger emphasis on providing support and supervision ($f=22$) compared to opportunities for CPD ($f=14$). Notably, topics related to safety did not receive much attention during induction and/or orientation (both occupational health and safety, and personal safety, $f=6$).

Social Work Supervision

Of the 36 participants who answered the questions related to supervision, the majority ($f=21$) received formal supervision only once a month. Ten participants experienced even less supervision. Only five participants indicated that they benefitted from more frequent supervision, occurring weekly or biweekly. The study also explored the contents of supervision sessions (Table 4). Supervision content varied in emphasis. Guidance on challenging cases was considered the most crucial ($f=29$), followed by personal support ($f=21$). Practical elements like case reviews and reflection are prominent ($f=57$), while training, theory, and policies received less attention ($f=31$).

Caseload

Of the 38 participants who answered this question, 22 indicated that their expertise was considered primarily when caseloads were allocated, reflecting recognition of their skills in the assignment process. However, 15 participants reported inconsistent consideration of their expertise, highlighting potential gaps in aligning case assignments with individual strengths. Participants had varied experiences with the handover of cases and files. Nearly half ($f=17$) found the process sufficient, indicating effective transfer of information and responsibility, while others ($f=15$) felt it was inadequate, citing issues such as a lack of proactive communication and clarity.

Learning and Development of NQSWs

The CPD of NQSWs were assessed in terms of available training courses, personal development plans, and support structures offered

Training Courses

Survey results showed diverse responses regarding training beyond induction/orientation. Among the 36 participants who evaluated their training, 15 commented on in-house training. The majority of these participants ($f=11$) rated it positively, while a smaller group of four found it neutral or poor. In contrast, external training received more feedback, with 30 participants providing ratings. The majority ($f=24$) rated external training as good, reflecting a generally positive view, while six participants rated it as neutral. The results suggest that both in-house and external training is valued.

Table 3: Content on induction and/or orientation programmes.

Topics included in induction/orientation programme	<i>f</i>	% ^a
Arrangements for support and supervision	22	10.1
Values of the organisation	22	10.1
Confidentiality	21	9.6
Job description	21	9.6
Relevant policies and procedures of the organisation	18	8.3
Record-keeping	16	7.3
Relationships with other workers	16	7.3
The goals and future plans of the organisation	16	7.3
Arrangements for continuing professional development	14	6.4
Risk assessment procedures/determining the best interest of service users	13	6.0
Communication with service users	10	4.6
Implementing developmental approaches	9	4.1
Identifying abuse and neglect	8	3.7
Occupational health and safety	6	2.8
Personal safety	6	2.8

^a Percentages do not add up to 100% due to more than one response allowed.

Table 4: Content of supervision sessions.

Topics included in supervision sessions	<i>f</i>	% ^a
Advice and guidance on more difficult cases	29	17.3
Personal support, encouragement, and appreciation	21	12.5
Closing files/termination with service users	20	11.9
Review of each case	19	11.3
Reflection on social service delivery	18	10.7
Suggestions for developing reflection and self-awareness	15	8.9
Personal performance against key performance areas	15	8.9
Discussion of training needs	14	8.3
Workplace policies	10	6.0
Help in applying theoretical approaches	7	4.2

^a Percentages do not add up to 100% due to more than one response allowed.

Personal Development Plans

Only 16 of the 39 participants reported having a personal development plan (PDP). Among them, nine participants reported discussing continuing learning support with managers or supervisors, indicating a low utilisation of PDPs for their intended purpose.

Support Structures for Development

The results indicated that support structures for NQSWs predominantly focus on collaborative and interactive methods. The survey explored practices like shadowing, co-working with experienced colleagues, and participating in group sessions such as action learning sets or support groups (participants could select all relevant structures).

Of the three methods reported in the survey, participants reported co-working on a case being the most common form of support ($f=19$), followed by participation in group sessions ($f=18$), with shadowing experienced colleagues being the least utilised method ($f=10$).

Support levels varied between the 31 participants (Table 5), with most reporting to have received substantial help, particularly in practice development ($f=20$). However, 17 participants reported limited or no support in improving case assessment accuracy. These inconsistencies highlight the need for more structured and consistent support.

Professional and Personal Development

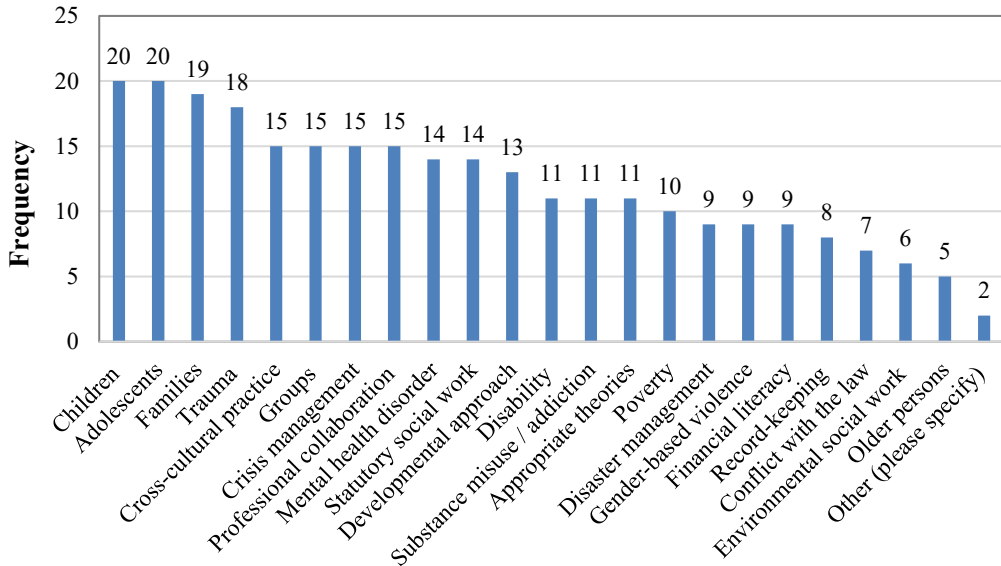
Figure 1 illustrates the professional development needs identified by the participants. Top priorities included working with children and adolescents ($f=20$), followed by working with families ($f=19$), and trauma ($f=18$). Additionally, cross-cultural and inter-professional practice, crisis management, and group facilitation emerged as prominent training needs ($f=15$). Further development areas encompassed implementing the developmental approach ($f=13$), with the developing of specialised skills in working with disabilities, substance misuse, and applying specific theories reflecting as equally important ($f=11$). Overall, Figure 1 underscores the importance of ongoing professional development.

Thirty-one participants ranked the personal skills and characteristics they consider most important in their workplace. Table 6 summarises their perspectives, highlighting the attributes they prioritise in their work environment. The results show that participants prioritised a diverse skill set in the workplace, with a strong emphasis on communication, adaptability, and collaboration, of which being a good listener is considered the most valued skill ($f=11$). Other skills included effective engagement with service users ($f=5$), and adaptability to changing demands ($f=4$). While three participants valued both reflective practice and analytical thinking, skills like empowering service users, professional communication, and cultural responsiveness were seen as less central.

Table 5: Amount of support received for the development and performance of NQSWs.

Variable	Great amount of support		Limited support		No help and support	
	f	% ^a	f	% ^a	f	% ^a
Overall quality of practice (n=31)	20	64.5	9	29.0	2	6.5
Suitable intervention choice (n=32)	16	50	14	43.8	2	6.3
Professional abilities (n=32)	19	59.4	10	31.1	3	9.4
Personal confidence (n=32)	18	56.3	9	28.1	5	15.6
Accuracy and analytical insights of case assessment (n=32)	15	46.9	11	34.4	6	18.8

^a Percentages do not add up to 100% due to more than one response allowed.



Professional development areas

Figure 1: Areas required for professional development.

Table 6: Personal skills or characteristics required in the workplace.

Required skills/characteristics	f	%
Being a good listener	11	35.5
Effective engagement with service users	5	16.1
Adaptability/responsiveness to changing work demands	4	12.9
Being a reflective practitioner	3	9.7
Being analytical in case analysis	3	9.7
Ability to work with various disciplines and organisations	2	6.5
Ability to speak and write professional English	1	3.2
Being culturally responsive	1	3.2
Creating opportunities for service users to be empowered	1	3.2

Discussion

The extended period of professional socialisation for NQSWs is analogous to the socialisation process of elephants, as both are considered to offer significant advantages (Grant, Sheridan, and Webb 2017; Raviv et al. 2023). Despite the varied ages of the NQSWs in the survey, all participants were new to practice and could be considered equally in need of an extended period of targeted professional and personal support. Most social workers were employed in statutory fields, primarily concentrating on child and family welfare. However, research indicates that employers in South Africa do not consider NQSWs adequately prepared for work in these statutory settings (Alpaslan

2019; Degenaar 2023). The present study also signalled the lack of preparedness in the professional development needs for working with children, families, and within a statutory context.

Considerable value is placed on the support and development of elephant calves through allomothering and fostering secure bonds with older elephants, which includes establishing access to resources and providing protection (Garai, Boulton, and Zitzer 2023). Similarly, in social work, various workplace support initiatives emphasise role-modelling and fostering connections with experienced professionals. However, the results indicated that, despite recognising the value of support, there was no cross-articulation between support needs and services provided. Mentorship experiences were limited, not only during, but after completion of the probation period. Other forms of support, including formal supervision and caseload allocation suitable to their expertise, were limited. Noticeably, where participants received support such as supervision and induction or orientation, it was experienced positively, underscoring the value of support services.

Elephants demonstrate that an extended juvenile stage fosters enriched play and promotes social, emotional, and cultural development (Raviv et al. 2023). Aligned to the development process model, the growth of NQSWs should be viewed as a continuous process (Carpenter et al. 2015). While both in-house and external training were somewhat limited, they were, nonetheless, considered valuable and necessary. However, supervision discussions about the training needs of NQSWs occurred relatively infrequently. Nurturing and development are integral to raising elephant calves, as these approaches help reduce stress. As in humans, when elephants experience stress, cortisol levels are raised, which significantly influences their behaviour and cooperative care is subsequently encouraged (Bradshaw and Schore 2007). Despite access to forms of cooperative care within the social work environment, PDPs were found to be poorly utilised. While collaborative and interactive support methods were available, working together on a case remained the most common form of support, though it also occurred at a relatively low frequency.

Research has shown that elephants place importance on learning, and recognise that social interaction, which increases community contact and builds social structures, enhances the development of their young (Raviv et al. 2023). Similarly, key areas of development for NQSWs are significantly influenced by the level of workplace support they receive. Among the needs measured, the highest support was reported in developing skills for improving the quality of practice. However, this is concerning as nearly half of the participants reported receiving limited or no support across the needs measured. The professional development needs of NQSWs highlight employers' concerns in South Africa about readiness related to statutory work and point to a need for specialised training in various fields of social work. Another prominent outcome of self-domestication is the development of complex communication systems. Elephants instinctively understand the importance of communication processes including

reciprocal vocalisation for teamwork and decision-making, which relate closely to the significance of developing the flex skills of NQSWs. Just over a third of the participants identified good listening skills as important in the workplace, followed by effective engagement and adaptability.

Elephants value collaboration in raising their herd (Machado 2018). Similarly, applying principles of cooperative care and allomothering to the TCA underscores the importance of shared responsibility in supporting and developing NQSWs and ensuring the profession's sustainability (Cook 2023; Wilson 2014). The survey results show that, although support and development are highly valued, just over half of the participants received adequate assistance, highlighting the need for greater collaboration during the transitional phase for NQSWs. Raising a herd requires long-term commitment and cooperation from both the herd and the calves, similar to the dynamics in social work.

Limitations of the study include its cross-sectional design and the use of non-probability sampling, which means the results are not generalisable. Additionally, despite multiple recruitment efforts, the survey had a low response rate. It may be that Generation Z, the majority of participants in the sample, may struggle with the concentration required to complete a rather lengthy questionnaire (Salleh, Mahbob, and Baharudin 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The extended period of professional socialisation for NQSWs, similar to the socialisation process observed in elephants, stresses the critical need for ongoing, targeted support and development. The results serve as a reminder that NQSWs are not sufficiently equipped to hit the ground running, and should receive appropriate guidance during their initial working phase. Although mentorship, supervision, and induction are valued, the survey results reveal that many NQSWs receive inadequate support, exposing significant gaps in their preparedness for the work environment. Just as collaborative care promotes the development and stability of young elephants, a robust and supportive environment is crucial for NQSWs to succeed and ensure long-term work retention. Addressing these gaps through enhanced mentorship, specialised training, and collaborative efforts will be essential for improving NQSW readiness and sustaining the social work profession.

Recommendations based on the findings of the study include:

- the development of an accountable, collaborative approach to supporting and developing NQSWs, which can be achieved by creating a forum that comprises representatives from education, practice, relevant government and council sectors, as well as NQSWs themselves;
- acknowledging the specific barriers that NQSWs face during their transitional phase into the workplace and subsequently enhancing access to available support and development initiatives; and

- providing customised levels of training, specifically designed for NQSWs, with a focus on collaborative, practice-based learning.

Recommendations for future research include:

- the development of a CPD framework that specifically identifies the support and development needs of NQSWs within the South African context; and
- the development and evaluation of accessible, relevant, and feasible resources specifically designed for addressing the support and development needs of NQSWs within the South African context.

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