Supervisory Experiences of Social Workers in Child Protection Services

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Abstract

Social work in the child protection field presents an opportunity to positively transform the lives and future of vulnerable children, but frequently at a cost to the mental health and well-being of the social workers concerned. Social workers must constantly manage children's trauma, resource challenges and parents' emotions. Providing supervision to social workers is mandatory in the social work profession. Although there are three functions of supervision, it is argued that the support function is neglected in favour of the administrative and educational functions of supervision. The support function of supervision aims to equip social workers to manage their work-related stress especially in the field of child protection. In light of the literature reviewed on the benefits of the support function of supervision juxtaposed with contrasting anecdotal evidence that suggests a neglect of the support function of supervision in practice, a qualitative study was undertaken in South Africa with the aim of enhancing the understanding of the experiences of social workers in child protection services in respect of the support function of supervision. The study's major finding pointed to an absence of the support function in supervision. Child protection social workers experienced a need for continuing professional development to increase their competence and reduce burnout. The findings also highlighted the value of peer support as a significant experience in child protection work. It was concluded that organisational compliance with the minimum standards set out in the Supervision Framework of the Department of Social Development, in partnership with the South African Council for Social Service Professions, and

the inclusion of peer mentoring could contribute significantly in enhancing the mental health and well-being of child protection social workers.

Background and Introduction

Social work is a caring profession aimed at dealing with a wide variety of human challenges to improve the social functioning of vulnerable populations. According to the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IFSW 2014, 1), "social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing".

Child protection social workers (CPSWs) advocate for the rights and enhanced well-being of children and families, including to a large extent, but not limited to statutory interventions. Social workers execute their duties in different contexts with diverse client groups. For the purpose of the present article, child protection is the context in which social workers carry out their designated duties. CPSWs primarily work with vulnerable children and their families and are often engaged in sensitive cases involving statutory work. Owing to the inherent vulnerabilities of children, such as their age and position in society, CPSWs are entrusted to protect children in need of care and to render services to families who are unable to provide safety and security to their children (RSA 2006). Immediate and urgent intervention often characterises child protection services, which requires the CPSW to think fast and to act quickly.

Families that are unable to ensure the safety and protection of their children generally resort to hostility and resistance towards social workers, viewing the CPSWs as a threat to their families (Forrester, Westlake, and Glynn 2012). This may be due to a combination of factors such as the family not wanting to be exposed for their "wrongdoings" to not wanting to relinquish the care of their children because they do not see their actions as being "wrong". Turney (2012, 154) concurs that child protection work involves working with involuntary clients who may demonstrate negative reactions towards the social workers, for fear of being blamed for the abuse of their children. Hence, the CPSWs must navigate this resistance and hostility while balancing the best interests of the child and their own professional dignity and emotional "trauma". Furthermore, CPSWs in South Africa must comply with the regulations of the Children's Act (RSA 2006) and are obliged to complete investigations regarding child abuse and child abandonment within 90 days of a removal. They must also provide a report to the Children's Court (RSA 2006). This points to the complexity of child

protection work and the need for the support function of supervision for the CPSWs (Bradbury-Jones 2013; Ferguson 2005; Goddard and Hunt 2011; Truter and Fouche 2015).

The primary focus of the support function of supervision is to equip supervisees with the capacity to deal with "job-related stress" and thus ensure psychological wellness (Kadushin 1976, 190) and mental resilience (Jacques 2019; Kadushin 1976; Kadushin 1985; Kadushin and Harkness 2014). Kadushin (1985, 225) further explains that the support function of supervision ensures that supervisees "are comfortable, satisfied, and happy in their work". Since child protection social work is complex, emotionally charged and requires prompt and critical decisions on the part of CPSWs, the need for the support function of supervision to promote psychological resilience of social workers is recognised globally.

Pettes (1979) states that the support function of supervision can take the form of facilitating decision-making, providing practical assistance, and lending a sensitive ear to workers in distress. Collins (2008) echoes that the benefits of the support function of supervision ignite flexibility in thinking about and generating practical solutions to work challenges. This in turn allows the clients to be serviced by a confident social worker who instils in them a sense of hope (Kadushin 1976). The strategies used for the support function of supervision involves providing affirmations, and allowing space for emotional expression and genuineness when engaging with the supervisee (Kadushin and Harkness 2014; Parker 2017). These strategies may allow for reflective practice in the implementation of the support function of supervision.

The existing literature on social work supervision shows that the lack of the support function of supervision is not limited to South Africa. However, its absence in child protection in African communities has been highlighted in contemporary literature (Chibaya 2018; Jacques 2019). Truter and Fouche (2015, 223) assert that the support function of supervision "which is concerned with emotionally supporting social workers, is the function in which resilience of South Africa DSWs could be promoted", since the ultimate aim of this function is "to enable supervisees to mobilise their emotional energy required for effective work performance" (Engelbrecht 2019, 11).

The Department of Social Development (DSD), in partnership with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), developed a Supervision Framework for the social work profession in South Africa, noting the need for a policy to regulate supervision in the country (DSD and SACSSP 2012). This Supervision Framework defines social work supervision as an interactive and dynamic process that occurs in a collaborative relationship, based on scholarly knowledge, through which a social work supervisor oversees a social work practitioner by executing educational, supportive and administrative functions to promote sound practice (DSD and SACSSP 2012). Within the Supervision Framework, the support function of supervision plays a critical role in supporting CPSWs when carrying out their designated duties.

Weinbach (1994, 122) states that the type of job stressors and tensions inherent in child protection, as an example, often dictate that much of the supervisor's time is spent on providing psychological support to a supervisee. In the absence of the support function of supervision, the consequences of professional burnout in social workers can be serious including long-term absenteeism as well as ill health.

However, Engelbrecht (2013, 463–464) interrogates the framework and concludes that despite its good intentions, "the educational and support functions of supervision are inevitably not regarded as a priority of supervision" and that these functions have become "compliance checking" and "auditing of adherence" to organisational mandates. Therefore, several issues remain that have an impact on the quality of supervision provided to CPSWs, such as administrative supervision being prioritised which compromises supportive, reflective and integrated approaches to supervision (Engelbrecht 2013, 456). Globally, the available literature underscores the importance of reflective practice to meet the multifaceted support needs of practitioners (Turner-Daly and Jack 2017).

In light of the literature reviewed on the benefits of the support function of supervision juxtaposed with contrasting anecdotal evidence suggesting a neglect of the support function of supervision in practice, a qualitative study was undertaken with the aim of enhancing the understanding of the experiences of social workers in child protection services in respect of the support function of supervision. The objectives of the study were as follows:

- to explore and describe the experiences of CPSWs in respect of supervision;

- to explore and describe the supervision needs of CPSWs specifically in terms of the support function of supervision;

- to explore and describe how these needs are being dealt with at present; and

- to explore and describe how CPSWs' needs in respect of the support function of supervision may be dealt with in future.

Theoretical Framework

A strengths perspective was deemed the most appropriate conceptual framework for the study. The basic assumption of the strengths perspective is the focus on how people have used their own resources to survive challenging life experiences (Saleebey 1992). The rationale for using a strengths perspective for the study is the recognition that CPSWs have inner strengths as well as internal and external resources that help them to continue working under challenging circumstances.

Saleebey (2009, 36) explains that the strengths perspective recognises the independence of each person and their potential to grow and change. Furthermore, it emphasises a

paradigm shift from a problem focus in that it focuses on strengths rather than on pathology (Grant and Cadel 2009). Healy (2005,152) maintains that the strengths perspective focuses on what works well and assumes that individuals have inner strengths to overcome life's challenges. The strengths perspective is directly linked to the primary purpose of the support function of supervision where the supervisor assists supervisees to deal with work-related stress and to be emotionally and mentally well. The outcomes associated with the support function of supervision point to enhanced mental wellness and resilience, an increased confidence and instilling a sense of hope in supervisees. This is in accordance with the strengths perspective which highlights people's abilities to draw on their inner strengths, and to mobilise internal and external resources under challenging conditions.

Within a strengths-based supervision framework, the support function of supervision could thus play a significant role in enhancing the psychological resilience of CPSWs. According to Engelbrecht (2014, 132), strengths-based principles require the supervisor to adopt "a facilitation and partnership role in supervision". This partnership, in turn, enables supervisees to "accept co-responsibility for their development and supervision" and may allow the supervisees to be more active and solution driven. The key principles in the strengths perspective and strengths-based supervision are the fundamental focus on strengths, competencies and scholarly knowledge in regard to supervision practices.

From a strengths perspective, the support function of supervision offers validation to social workers who deal with sensitive child protection cases. Goddard and Hunt (2011, 424) suggest that CPSWs need to be "nurtured after critical incidents and that supervisors should provide such debriefing services." This nurturance will ensure that CPSWs receive emotional support to remain responsive to the needs of vulnerable children and their families. However, strengths-based supervision "requires a mind shift from conventional supervision to one that focuses on the strengths and resiliency of social workers and the recognition that supervisees are experts in their own right" (Engelbrecht 2012b, 40). Engelbrecht (2012b) regards the supervisor and supervisee as both involved in critical, reflective and creative thinking, making strengths-based supervision a learning space for both the supervisor and supervisee.

Lietz (2013) suggests that supervision in child protection settings ought to incorporate discharging of the administrative, educational and support functions of supervision, linking the principles of family-centred practice (FCP) in supervision sessions, and employing tasks, reflective supervisory processes and facilitation supervision using individual and group methods.

FCP implies a focus on the child and family as a unit with an interdependence on the environment. Scerra (2012, 4) affirms that "the best approach to child protection is a collaborative one with fully engaged stakeholders to effectively protect children from abuse." In this regard, the supervisor's role is vital in assisting the supervisee to work from an integrated and strengths-based approach. From an administrative perspective,

Lietz (2013, 2) proposes that "assessing performance also entails recognising strengths and offering appreciation when the worker's practice is of high quality." Rene (2013, 2) argues that "strengths-based supervision is a collaborative relationship that starts with the notion that the supervisee is authentically enthused to assist others and has the capacity to achieve client outcomes." Lietz (2013) purports that "strengths-based practice is optimistic, strengthening, interactive, receptive, and responsive to each supervisee's unique needs." Thus strengths-based supervision affirms both the supervisor and supervisee's expert knowledge and skills for quality service delivery.

Weinbach and Taylor (2015, 221) assert that "supervision which promotes growth should create a climate for problem solving wherein mistakes are openly discussed in a nonthreatening environment." This is in accordance with the principles of the strengths-based theory, which regards mistakes as opportunities for growth creating a safe climate for supervisees to discuss client situations as well as interventions which they may have reflected on as being counterproductive, harmful or incorrect as an opportunity for growth and development. Strengths-based practice is further seen to build and enhance a trusting relationship between the supervisor and supervisee.

Research Approach and Methodology

A qualitative research approach with an exploratory, descriptive and contextual design was selected for the study. This design allowed the researchers to explore an under-researched area and to describe the participants' experiences and perceptions of the support function of supervision in the context of child protection social work. According to Blaikie and Priest (2019, 81), "exploratory research is implemented when limited knowledge exists on the matter under investigation." The researchers utilised an exploratory design as little was known about the support function of supervision in the child protection field.

The population from which the sample for the study was selected consisted of 64 social workers working in child protection services in a specific public sector organisation in the Nelson Mandela Bay region of the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. The researchers employed non-probability purposive sampling as an appropriate sampling method for the study. In using purposive sampling, the researchers requested the gatekeepers to extend an invitation to all social workers who met the sampling criteria. Those who showed an interest then contacted the researchers to schedule an appointment. The final sample size consisted of 10 social workers based on the principle of data saturation. The participants were all female social workers aged between 25–34 years with 3–10 years of experience in child protection. This profile implies that the research participants were largely in the early years of their social work career where professional supervision is essential to their development (DSD and SACSSP 2012).

The participants were engaged in semi-structured individual interviews to obtain the necessary depth of information (Greeff 2011). The following broad-based questions were explored in the interview with suitable probes based on the participants' answers:

- Tell me about your experience as a social worker in the field of child protection?

- What do you know about the support function of supervision?

- Tell me about your experience of supervision in the field of child protection?

- What are your support needs in relation to supervision?

- What kind of support is available to you?

- How have you supported or been supported in order to cope better with your work?

- What type of support could have assisted you to cope better with the demands of child protection services?

- How can your supportive needs of supervision be met?

Thematic content analysis was employed. The researchers utilised the eight steps of Tesch's model to analyse qualitative data, as indicated in Creswell (2014, 198). The data were independently coded to enhance trustworthiness.

The researcher obtained permission from the Department of Social Development of the Eastern Cape to conduct the research in the Nelson Mandela District, in two services offices. The university's research protocols were followed and ethical clearance granted by the postgraduate research studies committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences (H15-HEA-SDP-001). The ethical principle of informed consent (Ruane 2016, 50) was upheld as potential research participants initiated voluntary personal contact with the researcher (Neuman 2011, 149) after the research proposal was presented at a CPSWs' meeting. The ethical considerations of ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality (Wiles et al. 2008, 418) were upheld as the participants contacted the researcher directly instead of via a gatekeeper, and participant numbers instead of names were assigned for the research interviews and transcripts. The research interviews were furthermore conducted in the participants' private time, and researcher integrity was upheld by excluding the service office in which the researcher was employed. Lastly, in keeping with the principle of researcher accountability, the researcher submitted a report of the findings to the district and provincial offices of the Department of Social Development.

Findings and Discussion

Three themes with various sub-themes and categories emerged from the data analysis process. These themes are:

- social workers' experiences of working in child protection services;
- social workers' perceptions and experiences of social work supervision in general and the support function of supervision in particular; and
- social workers' recommendations on how their need for the support function of supervision can be met.

All three themes will be discussed below with a specific focus on the support function of supervision in respect of CPSWs and the role of professional peer support.

Theme 1: Social Workers' Experiences of Working in Child Protection Services

Although this theme is not directly linked to the research objectives, it provided the context within which the participants narrated their specific experience of, and needs for, the support function of supervision. The findings revealed that CPSWs experience their work as emotionally demanding, mainly because it involves working with sensitive and urgent client issues. This finding is confirmed by the existing literature, for example studies by Gibbs (2001), Truter (2014), and Truter and Fouche (2015).

In addition, high caseloads are an ongoing challenge for CPSWs and contribute to their physical and mental exhaustion, often resulting in burnout. Two participants expressed their sentiments about the high caseloads, and the impact this had on them and their clients, as follows:

> I am burnt out with doing casework. It's been five years casework, casework, casework. Nothing else and there is also work overload … In terms of my work I think now I am burnt out you see because now I have been doing the same thing for five years … I feel that it's time that I change and move from child protection to something else because it can be also emotionally draining because there is also no debriefing. (P6)

> Right now what we are doing is really not a justice to any child because we are just taking the child, the child has just been molested. We just taking the child, [and] place [the child] to [Child and Youth Care Centre], that's it … but emotionally what we are supposed to be doing, we are not touching on that because number one resources they are lacking. (P2)

The participants' narratives imply that the high caseloads compromise the quality of service rendering. It was also apparent that the high caseloads were viewed as a contributing factor to the CPSWs' inability to engage with and deal with their clients' emotionally charged issues.

In addition, the findings revealed that the statutory nature of child protection work and the lack of structured, consistent professional supervision contributed to CPSWs' feelings of stress and burnout.

For instance, participant 5 stated:

I don't take it so personally any more even though it's a very emotionally laden type of work that we do … you become desensitised to the plight of the clients.

Globally, social work is characterised by high workloads, high staff turnover and inadequate support which are considered the main sources of stress for CPSWs as evidenced in literature by Bradbury-Jones (2013, 254), and the findings of this study appear to be consistent with global trends. Furthermore, the findings of this study revealed a link between the repetitive routines of CPSWs' work, low morale and burnout with the absence of regular supportive supervision. Calitz, Roux, and Strydom (2014, 163) highlight that South African social workers are faced with similar challenges of heavy workloads and complex cases, few resources, long working hours and inadequate support in the form of supervision which lead to work-related stress, professional burnout and impaired performance.

One participant expressed this sentiment as follows:

Supportive supervision, we need it as social workers from the supervisors. We are being loaded with lots of work and we don't get support where you are being called by the supervisor trying to find out how are you coping with the cases? (P8)

Both globally and in South Africa, the available literature on social work supervision reveals that there is a non-prioritisation of support function in practice. A study conducted in the United Kingdom by Wilkins, Forrester, and Grant (2016) revealed that administrative supervision superseded the support function of supervision, and that supervision sessions offered limited opportunity for reflection and emotional support. Jacques (2014) echoes such similarities in South Africa and warns that this void in the support function of supervision compromises the quality of services provided to service users.

Theme 2: Social Workers' Perceptions and Experiences of the Social Work Support Function of Supervision

Under this theme, the lack of the support function of supervision again emerged as one of the reasons that participants experienced their work in child protection services as emotionally demanding. The findings revealed that the support function of supervision is lacking in the practice environment despite the demanding nature of child protection work. As indicated above, the participants are obliged to rely on their colleagues for support. The findings demonstrated that CPSWs were able to discuss their cases and frustrations with their peers; this proved to be useful as they were able to secure support and practical advice on dealing with their frustrations. CPSWs were able to draw on the experiences of their senior colleagues who provided valuable input on challenging cases. They used their peers to debrief in the absence of the support function of supervision.

One participant described the value of the collegial support as follows:

> You sometimes end up sitting with your colleagues and telling them about your client … and this is the way you sort of debrief. Maybe the case is too stressful, and we end up making fun of it so that you do not go home with that burden of that case otherwise there is no formal place to pour your heart out on a case. (P6)

This collegial support enabled them to reflect on the dynamics of their cases and to endure the pressures inherent in the field of child protection work. Such support was one way in which CPSWs responded to the lack of the support function of supervision. However, the findings showed that this kind of support does not adequately fulfil their supervision needs. With the support of their professional peers and senior colleagues, CPSWs continue to meet organisational goals despite the absence of the formal support function of supervision. This finding may be understood from a strengths perspective, where peers pool their strengths in the area of child protection social work to assist each other to achieve positive client outcomes, in the absence of the support function emanating from the supervisor. This finding further points to social workers' abilities to self-manage and the power of agency that lies in their sphere. In essence, the concept of self-management implies that people are able to manage and control their behaviours to meet organisational goals and for the benefit of their clients (Smit, Botha, and Vrba 2016).

Furthermore, a specific need for the support function of supervision was emphasised, as illustrated by the following two participant quotes:

> So I think that a supervisor should be like a cushion for you. (P2)

> So supportive supervision is [when] a supervisor must give support to supervisees, to the social workers or the supervisees, or whatever, yes, in terms of making sure of arranging the transport or try to go with the social worker if it's a big issue or it's a serious thing. (P7)

These findings are consistent with the existing literature on the importance of social work supervision (Bradbury-Jones 2013; Goddard and Hunt 2011). Also, some CPSWs stated that they only receive supervision during the quarterly performance review of the organisation. One participant relayed this as follows:

> After three months, that is when the supervisor needs to know did you do your work, did you manage to meet the return dates, did you manage to finish all the work that you were given … that is all they want. (P8)

It can thus be argued that, again this kind of supervision is only focused on administrative requirements and that CPSWs often find themselves isolated and left alone to navigate and secure their own support systems and resources. The difficulties they encounter are further exacerbated by the fact that they have to work with resistant parents and limited alternative care placements for vulnerable children. From a strengths perspective, the CPSWs in this study were able to work with what they had, relying on

their professional peers for support and reflective supervision and, in this way, managed to proceed with the work, which demonstrates their resilience and self-leadership. As peers they were able to relate to the struggles of their colleagues and could thus provide useful guidance from their own practical experience.

Theme 3: Social Workers' Recommendations on how the Need for the Support Function of Supervision can be met

In exploring the main research question, the researchers sought the participants' recommendations on how their need for a support function of supervision could be met. The participants provided varied suggestions, which are discussed in the form of three sub-themes regarding the support function of supervision.

Sub-theme 3.1: Continuing Professional Development

Although continuing professional development (CPD) is more accurately linked to the educational function of supervision (Jacques 2019), social workers who lack the knowledge and competencies to deal with specific cases, are more inclined to succumb to work-related stress and present with poor mental health. This points to an interrelatedness between the educational and support function of supervision. To ensure that ethically sound social work services are provided to clients, practitioners have to continually develop their knowledge and skills. CPSWs highlighted the need for ongoing training and development so that they can be better prepared to deal with new issues and trends that emerge in social work practice, as one participant stated below:

> And also my experience is that with the ever-changing types of abuse and everything we are dealing with, [we] as professionals need to constantly go through trainings because things change. (P2)

Practitioners work under immense pressure in dealing with the ever-present crises in child protection and with tight deadlines to finish investigations and submit reports. They often have to make critical and high-impact decisions when dealing with child protection work. This work requires highly skilled practitioners who are able to make rational decisions about complex child protection issues. Although the primary benefit of CPD training is to upskill CPSWs, CPD training provides a secondary benefit by reducing anxiety and stress associated with not knowing how to respond in certain cases as anxiety and stress have a direct link to the support function of supervision.

Sub-theme 3.2: Structured, Formal, Regular and Consistent Supervision

Although this sub-theme relates to the participants' need for supervision in general, rather than for the support function of supervision specifically, the literature is clear that the three functions of supervision can be effected in a supportive and integrated manner. Owing to the fact that social work supervisors have responsibilities other than supervision, there is limited time for structured supervision, which has an impact on the quality of supervision and presents serious challenges for CPSWs. Some of the

participants expressed their need for structured and consistent supervision, especially the opportunity to discuss practice issues and concerns and how this kind of supervision is frequently lacking or conducted haphazardly. One participant expressed this lack as follows:

> I would like to see consistency … consistency in the times in the scheduled times of meeting with a particular supervisor. I would desire that the supervisor take initiative also in addressing in creating a platform that will be very helpful to all officials. (P3)

The researchers are of the view that the prioritisation of supervision would require structural changes, since there is a need to pay close attention to the way supervision is conducted. Firstly, the supervisor-supervisee ratio needs to be revisited in accordance with the Supervision Framework (DSD and SACSSP 2012) to allow enough time for all the functions of supervision to be considered equally with each supervisee. This would enable the support function of supervision to be practiced more consciously by the supervisor to enhance the well-being of CPSWs and to be able to assess the personal development needs of CPSWs. In addition, this finding points to an expressed need for structure and contracting in respect of supervision sessions to enable consistency.

Sub-theme 3.3: Ways of Overcoming Inconsistent Supervision

The findings of this study indicate that mentoring was envisaged as one of the creative ways of dealing with the lack of supervision. Engelbrecht (2012a, 361) highlights the complexity of the concepts of mentoring, coaching and consultation that are often erroneously used interchangeably. The author elucidates mentoring as a supervision activity where the mentor (the more experienced supervisor and adviser) can model specific skills and transfer knowledge to the novice supervisee. The ensuing section will present the participants' suggestions regarding how peer mentoring can be developed when attending to their child protection duties. The participants' description concurs with Engelbrecht's (2012a) conceptualisation of mentoring, with the exception that the participants referred to their senior colleagues as their mentors rather than their appointed supervisors. The participants suggested allocating more challenging cases to more experienced CPSWs or to form teams on a case according to the level of experience. For example, participant 2 indicated:

> In reality there are cases that maybe would require one or two social workers to tackle.

In considering the nature and complexity of child protection work, practitioners need to work collaboratively in critical cases and sometimes work in pairs on a single complex case in order to create learning opportunities through peer mentoring and collegial support. In the words of one participant:

> I feel if there is a social worker who has got 10 years [experience] then why not when there are difficult cases that those senior social workers attend [to] those cases so as to use their experience not to deprive even those who have been less on the job. (P2)

Thus, it can be argued that there is also a need to consider the CPSWs' levels of experience in allocating work. The more challenging cases may need to be given to more experienced CPSWs. However, this is a challenging task as it requires a supervisor to know the supervisee's strengths and weaknesses to appropriately allocate such cases. Moreover, careful consideration is needed on the part of the supervisor so as not to overwhelm the more senior practitioners and to enable the less experienced practitioners to develop the relevant skills to do the work. Cloete (2012, 150) proposes that mentoring newly qualified social workers may lead to their improved self-efficacy, increased knowledge and work performance. However, this does not replace the value of competent supervision and consultation required for every professional social worker. Concurring with Cloete (2012, 150) and Engelbrecht (2012a, 361), the DSD (2013, 105) purport that mentoring is directly linked to a developmental approach whereby a senior professional imparts knowledge, insight and expertise, and provides practical support to a less experienced professional. This approach is in accordance with the principles of strengths perspective in working with the available resources.

Conclusion

CPSWs' experiences of working in the field of child protection were explored. The findings of this study revealed the experiences and views of social workers regarding the support function of supervision, showing that current supervision practice does not adequately fulfil the social workers' need for the support function of supervision, and that this function of supervision should be prioritised. Furthermore, the literature findings both in South Africa and globally point to a significant gap in the area of the support function of supervision and that more studies focusing on this function are needed.

The findings also indicate that the participants require opportunities for CPD so that they are equipped to deal with their child protection work effectively. CPD training will increase the competence levels of CPSWs and thus reduce work-related stressors and tensions, which have implications for the support function of supervision.

An increased number of qualified supervisors with recognisable experience would deal with the issue of supervisor-supervisee ratios in accordance with the Supervision Framework (DSD and SACSSP 2012). This increase could ensure that supervisors acquire proper and relevant knowledge and skills to conduct professional supervision, which prioritises all three functions, including the support function of supervision. The workloads of supervisors should be revisited and reduced to allow them time to provide structured, consistent and regular supervision. In addition, the findings of the study reveal that supervision could take the form of peer mentoring through collaborative work between novice CPSWs and their senior colleagues to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills.

Of utmost importance, the findings indicate that in the absence of the support function of supervision, CPSWs can discuss their challenges and frustration with their peers who provide useful guidance from their own practical experience. These informal sessions are more reflective and thus beneficial as social workers can discuss their child protection concerns more openly in a non-threating environment.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

In considering the findings of the present article, the following recommendations are made with regard to practice:

- Supervisors should structure supervision sessions to ensure that the support function of supervision is honoured as much as administrative and educational supervision.

- The employer should recruit more qualified supervisors with recognisable experience to deal with the issue of supervisor-supervisee ratios in social work in general and in child protection in particular.

- The employer should develop a mentoring programme for novice social workers by allocating each social worker to a senior colleague who facilitates the transfer of knowledge and skills and provides practical assistance. Allowing two practitioners to work on one single case or programme will not only benefit the less experienced practitioner, but it may also improve the quality of services provided to clients. This practice is consistent with the principles of a strengths perspective.

- The workload of supervisors should be revisited and reduced to allow them time to provide supervision in accordance with the Supervision Framework.

- Supervisors should adopt strengths-based supervision which appreciates collaborative work as an integral part of child protection work. Furthermore, strengths-based supervision could provide a safe and comfortable space where CPSWs are able to openly reflect on their uncertainties and concerns.

- More opportunities for informal professional peer support sessions need to be provided wherein social workers are able to discuss their complex child protection cases with their fellow colleagues in a safe and non-threating environment. From a strengths-based supervision perspective, such opportunities will foster creativity and reflective practice which can contribute to positive client outcomes.

Based on the major findings in respect of the literature review in this study, the following recommendations are made for future research:

- More research focusing on the support function of supervision in social work practice in general, and more specifically in the area of child protection should be conducted.

- A large scale, qualitative study with a more diversified sample drawn from a wider public sector as well as non-profit organisations in the Nelson Mandela Bay region of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, should be conducted.

- Research into the experiences and perceptions of supervisors in relation to their supervisory roles and functions in general, and factors influencing the support function of supervision in particular, should be conducted.

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