

# Challenges of Social Work Students from Historically Disadvantaged Universities during Placements in Semi-Rural Areas in South Africa

**Varoshini Nadesan**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5786-529X>

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

[vnadesan@uj.ac.za](mailto:vnadesan@uj.ac.za)

## Abstract

This study highlights the challenges faced by social work students during their fourth-year field placements. The research was conducted among social work students at two historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa. The aim of the study was to understand the field experiences of final-year Bachelor of Social Work students from historically disadvantaged universities. It was anticipated that these students were placed at rural or semi-rural communities that were close to the university. Students in the fourth and final year of their undergraduate study are expected to receive training that would generate advanced field practice experience in specialised settings to prepare them for the reality of social work practice in the workplace. A qualitative study was undertaken among current and past social work students. The findings highlighted issues pertaining to limited placements, poorly managed student placements, access to communities, and supervision challenges. However, the key findings indicate that once placed, the students felt abandoned by their training institutions and left to rely solely on their field supervisors for academic, administrative and developmental guidance. The study recommends that universities be more adept at fulfilling the needs of students and providing comprehensive support. The study also recommends that a suitably administered system of communication between the university, student and placement agency be implemented as part of the comprehensive support to students.

**Keywords:** historically disadvantaged, field instruction, field placements, social work students

## Introduction

South Africa is recognised as part of the Global South, and is a developing country recovering from the strains of an apartheid system of life and education. The apartheid era system of education compromised some higher education institutions (HEIs), with some benefitting from available resources, whereas others were poorly resourced (StatsSA 2003). Historically disadvantaged refers to institutions and persons that were subject to the negative effects of the apartheid rule. Historically disadvantaged HEIs in this instance include those institutions which were geographically isolated in the so-called homelands and deprived of resources and funding during the South African era of apartheid (Atkinson 2014). This study examines the field instruction experiences of current and past students from two historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa.

Social work students studying in South Africa register for a four-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree and complete a structured curriculum that consists of set modules for theory and field instruction (SAQA 2009). Accordingly, a typical BSW curriculum comprises academic teaching and a structured field practice component across the four years of study.

During field practice, students are placed at university-approved human service or similar organisations to gain practical experience (Petersen and Osman 2013). Practice placements include child and family welfare organisations, primary health clinics, hospitals, correctional services, substance dependency treatment centres and geriatric care facilities. These placements enable students to gain hands-on experience by drawing upon their university-acquired knowledge, skills and values for implementation with service users (Royse, Dhooper, and Rompf 2012). Ideally, field practice provides students with first-hand training, experience and real-life situations with individuals, families, groups and communities that strengthen and enhance their practical skills (Trevithick 2008).

However, research shows that not all practice settings provide adequate training and preparation for students. Some placements fail to provide students with sufficient practice opportunities in interviewing, conducting needs assessments, and implementing planned professional services with individuals, families, groups and communities (Jones 2015). Baum (2012) argues that the practice settings neglect to provide students with opportunities to use their skills in negotiation and mediation in situations of conflict. The shortcomings of placement agencies could be overcome by proper screening of agencies prior to students arriving for the placement. This screening would include verifying the existence and registration of the agency, whether the agency could meet the academic requirements of the university, the physical and human resources of the agency, and challenges experienced during previous student placements. Nevertheless, despite verification, placement agencies could fail to provide opportunities for students to effectively implement and reflect on their interventions (Raniga and Seepamore 2017).

Given the need to provide students with a high calibre of field experience and training, this study aimed to explore the experiences of students from historically disadvantaged universities during placements. In particular, this study sought to explore the placement experiences of students in semi-rural areas in South Africa. To meet this aim, the study objectives were to describe student experiences of placement selection, to describe the placement challenges experienced by students, and to establish from students the way in which these challenges were dealt with.

## Contextualising Field Placements in Social Work Education

The BSW degree consists of fundamental, core and elective components, with the core components based solely on social work modules, and the electives on recognised humanities or related fields (CHE 2015). The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) recognises the four-year BSW degree at level eight on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), a level reserved for a professional bachelor's degree or an honours degree with a research focus (SAQA 2012). The levels are described in the Level Descriptors of the NQF (SAQA 2012, 10–11), which include, inter alia, that (social work) graduates demonstrate the application of knowledge, theories, research methodologies, methods and techniques relevant to the field, discipline or practise, and also problem-solving, ethics, professional practice, and accountability.

The structure of the curriculum in the BSW degree makes provision for a theoretical learning component and a structured practice component known as field instruction. These two components may run either concurrently or in a block segment across the latter three years of the BSW degree (CHE 2018), therefore field instruction is integral to the BSW degree. Field instruction occurs in the form of field placements across a designated period during the academic calendar. During field placements, the student acquires first-hand practical skills and knowledge while working in real-life situations. The qualifications standards for the BSW degree (CHE 2015) state that field placement experience is fundamental to the qualification and also the achievement of attributes required by the student. More especially, the professional skills and knowledge utilised by the student during field placement practice should contribute significantly to uplifting the lives of individuals and communities with whom they engage (CHE 2015).

### **Social Work Students**

Academic literature on the roles and responsibilities of students is limited (Carillo, Manoleas, and Carillo 1991; Royle, Dhooper, and Rompf 2012; Wilson 1981), whereas information on student requirements during their training is contained in the programme's learning guides and field instruction policies. Central to the field instruction process is the social work student, who is required to participate fully in learning. Students in any social work academic programme are required to have practical training in professional development and growth, transitioning across the years of study (Hoffman 1990; McSweeney and Williams 2018). During this transformation,

students progressively take on more professional responsibilities, gather evidence in assessment and intervention, and understand the way in which to integrate theory into practice in order to make professionally informed decisions (Mathews, Simpson, and Crawford 2014).

### **Practice Placements**

Practice placements lie at the heart of social work education and training. Placements are an opportunity for students to put into practice their academic learning, to garner additional knowledge, skills and values, and to work safely and effectively with different service users. Social work students are placed mostly at human service agencies to maximise the benefits from implementing the theoretical knowledge, skills and values that were taught at university. These agencies provide a vast and complex array of social work and programmes that provide welfare and other benefits. Their services occur at a governmental and non-governmental level. The South African National Department of Social Development (DSD) is the overarching provider of social welfare services in the country (DSD 1997). Non-governmental organisations are independently managed, but with oversight from the state department (DSD 2017). More recently, in the field of social services, the state department focused its attention on statutory services with a specific focus on foster care and statutory interventions (DSD 2017). This implies that student placements in this agency are limited across the micro, meso and macro levels of social work interventions, thus providing limited opportunities for professional training.

Lomax et al. (2010) argue that social work students should gain experience in at least two practice settings and provide services to at least two types of service-user groups across the training period. The reality in rural and semi-rural areas of South Africa is that having experience in more than one practice setting depends on the availability of resources and placement opportunities. One of the noticeable challenges in this developing country is the blunt realities and differences in placements in urban areas compared to those in semi-urban, rural and semi-rural communities. This demarcation of the urban-rural divide is enmeshed with the mushrooming of informal housing communities on the periphery of or in available spaces in the urban areas (Du Toit 2017). Urban areas are known to provide more and accessible resources that cater to their ever-growing populations that flock to the cities for work and better living conditions (Atkinson 2014). Rural communities in South Africa are historically mostly geographically removed from urban environments, have limited access to resources, and are ruled mostly by traditional authority structures (StatsSA 2003). Practice placements in rural areas are thus limited and offer a narrower range of learning opportunities for social work students. The lack of available and accessible placement settings in rural and semi-rural areas results in students sharing placements, or students having to travel long distances to their placements. Placements in semi-rural and rural areas are unique: they are in the heart of villages in which protocols of entry must be observed, knowledge of Western social work is not readily welcomed, and preference is given to indigenous healing practices (Nadesan 2019).

## **Field–Practice Relationships**

The successful outcome of any field instruction programme is dependent on the relationship between key entities in the programme. These key entities include the practice educator and the university that are responsible for student placements, the students, who are the learners in the process, the student supervisors, under whose expert guidance the students develop, and the placement agency that is responsible for the location where the student is based during the field placement. Students work only under the direct supervision of a supervisor who is a registered social worker (SACSSP 2006, section 5.4.1.f), and must consult and attend supervisory sessions with the supervisor. Therefore, during the training period, students are guided on the way in which they utilise the skills, knowledge and values acquired at university in the field.

During the field placement period, it is imperative to have clearly identified roles and responsibilities. More importantly, it is argued that these key entities must execute their roles effectively, interrelate regularly on placement matters, and communicate with one another in the best interest of student placement and field practice (Nadesan 2019, Schmidt and Rautenbach 2016). These entities form a field instruction system that functions as an interrelated set of cogs that support student field education.

## **Methodology**

This study followed a qualitative approach (Merriam 1988; 2009), using a case study design (Stake 2006) to explore students' experiences on placements during their field instruction training. A paradigmatic case sampling method (Flyvbjerg 2011) was used to highlight more general characteristics derived from the population of 16 universities that offer social work in South Africa. A total of 14 university sites volunteered to participate in the study, from which two university sites were purposively sampled (Strydom 2015) for the study. These sites were university campuses which provided the basis for student training. The inclusion criteria were that the universities had to be considered historically disadvantaged, the student placements had to be in a semi-rural or rural community, the researcher had to have access to the participants, and the universities' BSW degree had to be accredited with the Council on Higher Education in South Africa (CHE 2004; 2018). Both sites used the block model of placement, in which students were at placements full-time during part of an academic semester. In site one, all the students were on placement at the same time, whereas in site two, the students were divided into two groups with a rotational system, where one group was on block placement and the other group was in class. This rotational system was the universities' solution to the shortage of placements in the geographical setting.

Two populations of participants were sampled at each site, and consisted of current social work students and social work graduates and alumni. The inclusion of persons who had graduated from the same programme in the list of participants provided in-depth post facto reflections of their field placements.

Following from the two populations, consideration was given to the distribution of participants from each of the two universities that would form the respective samples. There were two sets of samples of the population, namely 13 BSW students and 12 BSW graduates and alumni, totalling 25 participants. There were seven BSW students and six BSW graduates from site one, and six BSW students and six BSW graduates from site two. Recognising that students acquired professional knowledge and training progressively across the four years of study, the sample of student participants consisted of only final-year social work students registered for field instruction.

Using a purposive sampling technique, the sampling criteria were that students had to be in their fourth and final year of the BSW field instruction programme, had to be placed at a semi-rural or rural environment for their field placement, and had to be willing to participate in the study. Sampling criteria for the graduates and alumni population were that the graduates had to have completed their final-year field placement within the previous two years as this would provide recent understanding and knowledge of their field instruction programme, had to have been placed in semi-rural or rural placements, and had to be available to participate in the study. These criteria provided a homogenous and yet diverse set of participants, using a non-probability sampling technique. Access to all participants was obtained through the practice educators at each university campus, who served as the gatekeepers in the research. The gatekeepers identified and recruited participants from the two samples based on the sampling criteria provided, thus a purposive sample was obtained.

Interviews with the BSW students were held at their respective placements, thus all interviews with the BSW students were single-person interviews. All interviews with graduates were held at the respective universities, and all opted to be part of a group-interview process. There were thus 13 single-person interviews, with seven students from site one and six students from site two. There were four group interviews of three to four members each, with two group interviews held per university site. A similar semi-structured interview schedule was developed for both the single-person interviews and group interviews. This was developed using an iterative process in which the schedule was piloted and amended for relevance with students and alumni not forming part of the study. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. As is suggested with case study research, the researcher reached beyond the interviews and also studied accessible and related documentation. These included field instruction policies and learning guides, which in turn helped with triangulation of data, a factor necessary in case study research (Rule and John 2011; Stake 2006).

A systematic process of coding ensued. Open codes and *in vivo* codes were used to label segments of text to identify an idea, theory, argument, statement or similar content and actual wording related to field instruction (Saldaña 2009). The coding generated 85 open and *in vivo* codes. The next step was to create a reduced code list of 16 axial codes and then group the axial codes into four broad themes or selective codes (Saldaña 2009).

Trustworthiness in this study was ensured using the four main dimensions of rigour by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through the process of triangulation using two sets of participant in the unit of analysis, and from documentation of each university site. The detailed and thick descriptions of the study sites and research methodology supported the transferability of the findings. Dependability was achieved using research tools that went through a pilot process and iterative review to ensure relevance. Finally, confirmability was monitored with the use of an audit trail in which all documents and communications were meticulously labelled and filed for easy retrieval, and line-by-line referencing facilitated tracing back to the transcriptions of the audio recordings.

A detailed research proposal and an application for ethics approval were submitted to and approval obtained from the Faculty of Humanities Higher Degrees and Research Ethics Committees of the University of Johannesburg (REC-01-059-2017). In addition, detailed submissions were made to the participating universities for their approval and consent to approach gatekeepers. In addition to obtaining institutional permissions, it was necessary to obtain individual consent from each participant. All the participants were over the age of 18, thus parental consent was not required. Each participant was provided with a detailed letter explaining the aim, objectives and procedures of the study. This letter also explained possible risk factors, such as the disclosure of sensitive information, the unintended identification of the study site or placement agency, or inadvertent disclosure of confidential participant information. Voluntary participation was essential, and participants could withdraw from the study without penalty. All the participants completed a letter of informed consent before participating in the study.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented under the four key themes that emerged from the data analysis. Theme one focuses on access to placement agencies in semi-rural areas, theme two relates to challenges experienced by students at their agencies during their field placements, theme three highlights practical challenges unique to many rural and semi-rural placements, and theme four describes the students' challenges with the process of supervision. The central argument underlining all four themes was that the challenges experienced by students during their field training could be overcome with proper monitoring and communication.

### **Theme 1: Access to Placement Agencies in Semi-Rural Areas**

This theme highlighted issues concerning the students' experiences of and challenges with the sourcing of agencies and placement opportunities, and the verification of agencies as authentic and aligned to meet the objectives of the field instruction programme. Wilson (1981) argues that universities, through persons such as practice educators, are tasked with sourcing properly constituted agencies and providing

authentic learning opportunities for students. This process was listed in the policy documentation obtained from both sites.

However, in reality, the universities' practice procedures were not implemented. The general response from the participants was that they had to seek their own placement agencies. Challenges were encountered as some agencies were not aligned with the university requirements. "We had to look for placements ourselves. I go to an NGO that is not even registered [as a non-governmental organisation]," implying the lack of suitability to the university programme. Another participant reflected: "I was just called [by the university] and asked 'where are you doing your placement?' That was it. The university did not ask for the telephone number or if [the placement organisation] was really there," implying that the placement was not verified as suitable in accordance with university requirements. "When I went there [to the placement agency] it turned out that they didn't know I was coming." One participant expressed feelings of embarrassment at being at an agency that was unaware of her pending arrival and narrated the following discussion about her placement agency to the university: "The student is here. You sent her here [to the placement agency] but we didn't know she was coming."

The common viewpoint in this theme was that both universities failed to facilitate student entry at placement agencies. All but one participant expressed frustration at having to seek their own placements. The participants recommended that universities extend themselves to make the effort to obtain placements closer to the university, to confirm placements, and to fulfil their mandate by conducting a process of verification before the placement of the student at the agency. The participants felt that stronger communication between the university and placement agency was essential before the placement: "even if it is a phone call [to the placement agency] . . . just to say 'this is what we are expecting for the student from your side'." Similarly, stronger communication is essential between the university and the student. Statements from participants such as, "I just knew I had to be at some organisation. I didn't know which one," indicate the confusion experienced by students before the placement.

The limited resources in rural and semi-rural areas where the students were placed have an impact on the student numbers at the agency:

At times you find that students would want to go to a certain organisation. But because of the number of students who are allowed there, the institution does not cater for all of them. You find they may request only three but yet the university wants to place six there . . . So as a student you are compromised.

As an alternative, students reflected that placements could be sought in areas other than rural or semi-rural areas; this could be in urban areas in which wider placement opportunities may be prevalent:

For me, it was an advantage to have to look for my own because it was closer to home and it has less expenditures. If the university maybe places me in a faraway town, then I will have to rent out a flat, pay for transport.

This distant placement from the university, however, would have an impact on the university's efforts to verify and monitor such placements. Nonetheless, the challenge of accessing placements in rural areas was dependent on prior communication by the university regarding the student's placement. Once placements are sourced and verified, the path becomes paved for students' entries to these placement organisations.

## **Theme 2: Challenges Experienced by Students at their Agencies during Field Placements**

Further challenges experienced by the participants while at their placement agencies related to contact between the university and the agency during their placement. A key factor supporting a successful placement for students during field instruction appears to be that of monitoring. Monitoring is noticeable in the frequency of contact between the university and the student during placement, the contractual obligations and promises proffered, and the way in which challenges related to supervision and placements are resolved. The relationship between the university and student while on placement is noticeable in the frequency of contact. Students rely on their university to provide authentic learning opportunities. "[The agency] has no idea of what you want or what you want them to do."

The absence of such an agreement, setting out mutual expectations during the placement, has a negative impact on a common understanding of role expectations and on students' experience of their placement:

I think there was a sort of misunderstanding between the university and those agencies on what is expected from the students.

We were told 'this is the person who is going to come to you, whether you are in Zimbabwe, Cape Town, Joburg'. We were so happy knowing that finally, someone is going to come because the previous students they already told us that the [university] does not come [to the agency] at all; however, we know that they [the university] will never come [to the agency].

No one [from the university] came. Even though it was written in the [contract] that the university will come on a certain date, we would wait. My [agency] supervisor was always asking 'where is your university supervisor?' and then I gave her the contact to call her and then she told me 'she said she is coming next week'. Come next week, no one is coming [to the agency].

The failure to maintain contact with the students during placements constitutes a failure on the part of the university to uphold its placement obligations. Students should feel a sense of fulfilment instead of neglect and abandonment during their placements.

However, the participants regarded the distance to visit students in rural placements as not a valid excuse, for example, one participant said: “I was at a placement with a student from another rural university and that university used to visit the organisation.” Students’ feelings of abandonment were thus exacerbated when agency supervisors appear to favour universities who were in contact with their students: “The [agency] supervisor gives more attention to students whose universities visit than those students from universities that don’t visit the agency.”

Despite the students experiencing these perceived shortcomings from their universities, they were hopeful that support would be forthcoming:

Maybe my lecturer or the university should come [to the agency], like at least twice a month or once in a month so that she can see and evaluate my progress and if I have questions [at the agency].

### **Theme 3: Overcoming Protocols in Semi-Rural and Rural Communities**

This theme focused on the challenges experienced by students that affected their access to service users and the community. One of the realities of working in semi-rural and rural areas is that of access to the community. Villages are generally governed by a respected elder, a chief tribal officer, or a group of leaders seen to be the gatekeepers to the community. This would mean that all entry to the community as a whole must obtain the permission of the gatekeepers:

It’s very rural [at the agency]. Before you go to the community, you have to ask permission from the local authorities or the tribal authorities. You write a letter first. They give you a date that you come in. So, it takes time.

Once a student begins placement at an organisation and requires access to the community, the onus is on the student to request such permission of entry via the gatekeepers to that community. Noting that students have a short academic time frame, delays in gaining permissions would cause a delay in accessing service users and rendering effective social work services. Facilitating entry into the communities could be facilitated by the universities that have an involved role with their students during field placements (Boitel and Fromm 2014; Perlman 2018).

The lack of resources, including public transport, in rural areas was experienced by the participants:

Working in rural areas was a struggle. We faced a lack of resources, lack of empowerment; and you cannot walk from village to village, it’s too far, and you walk on gravel roads.

A further factor complicating access to communities was the patriarchal views of the villagers:

In the rural areas people would see you as this woman that is a social worker and look at your age and be like ‘you are never going to help us. You can’t come here and think that you will change how we live’.

In the rural areas it is believed that if you are not married then who are you to talk with us. We are the men in this village so how can you come here and stand here and tell me what to do and when to do it.

Implementing the principle of respect for cultural practices in the villages, the students soon learnt that they needed to adapt to the culture of the village in which they worked:

[As a] a woman, I can’t go there wearing trousers; I have to wear a dress and have a doek [scarf] on my head. That is very important. We learn [about] cultures and we adapt.

These sentiments reflect insight into working in rural communities and call for a deep understanding of cultures and ethnicity before entering such communities. Similar arguments have been put forth by researchers working in rural communities (Kreitzer 2012; Thabede 2008) and strengthens recent arguments in humanities and the social work profession on decoloniality and understanding indigenous practices of communities (Le Grange 2014; Tamburro 2013).

#### **Theme 4: Students’ Challenges with the Process of Supervision**

Students are supervised on all aspects of their field practice as this forms part of their professional development. Field supervisors are mostly based at placement agencies, have direct contact with the students, provide guidance on the way in which to enter and work in a social worker–client relationship, and explain the way in which to overcome workplace challenges. In this context, it is incumbent on the field supervisor to provide guidance that is developmental, and mentoring that is supportive and an example of professional behaviour that students can emulate. The administrative functions of supervisors in the checking of reports were highlighted.

In this theme, the challenges experienced by students reflect the lack of supervision and the less-than-exemplary behaviour of supervisors. Students reported having to write professional reports for the supervisor despite not having the professional mandate to do so: “I did reports for my supervisor, but I had to put her name on the report.” One student reported that the supervisor conducted personal activities such as selling linen to the villagers during working hours, thus delegating unsupervised professional tasks to the student.

The process of receiving professional guidance and direction was hampered by the lack of supervision:

The only time that I had supervision was in the first week whereby I was introduced to how to write process notes and everything – and the rest I had to try myself.

No one is supervising you. Sometimes we would encounter difficult cases and you struggle to attend to this. You don't know what to do.

I am just doing everything on my own currently . . . They don't even check my reports.

To cope with challenges in the supervision process, the students developed their own coping strategies: "Sometimes I would escape and hide in the boardroom in order to write my reports." Another student said, "Until I spoke up. I said to my supervisor, 'I am here to learn. Give me something to do,' and that is when she went to the office supervisor and asked for files for me."

Supervisors and students should be active partners in the supervision process. The monitoring of students during their placement facilitates student access to communities, and is particularly relevant to the placement of students in rural communities in which protocols of entry with tribal chiefs and villagers are followed. However, the lack of monitoring of students during their field placements is exacerbated by factors such as the lack of effort from the university, absence of formal agreements and infrequency of contact between the agency and the university. The lack of monitoring of students is expressed by the students in feelings of abandonment and distrust. Ultimately, a well-constructed, trusting relationship between the university, the student, the supervisor and the placement agency is required (Jones 2015; Parker 2006; 2010).

## Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the inclusion of the perspectives of only students and alumni of their experiences during the placements, and not the views of practice educators, supervisors and agency personnel. These added voices might have contributed to a broader range of responses with reasons and explanations for the views of the student participants. A second limitation was that this study was situated at two university sites only. Perhaps a wider range of sites that met the sampling criteria would have provided a richer range of results. A third limitation was that access to the participants was only through the practice educators who selected the participants for the study, leading to possible selection bias. The researcher could have used snowball sampling to overcome this limitation and to obtain a wider range of views.

## Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

This study focused on the experiences of final-year social work students and recent alumni from historically disadvantaged universities of their placements in semi-rural areas in South Africa. These views were analysed against literature on field instruction and concepts from the systems theory. Four key themes emerged from the data describing the challenges that students experienced when placed in semi-rural areas and agencies. Access to placement agencies dominated the discussion of the first theme. The

reality is first that most students are not necessarily able to seek out placements that would ensure that university requirements are met, and second that students needed support from the university to pave the way for their entry into the agencies. The data suggest that the students could be at risk of an incomplete training experience if the agencies did not provide proper training opportunities to meet university requirements.

In analysing this feedback, it is important that the field instruction programme be viewed as a system. One of the characteristics of field instruction systems is arguably the communication among the role players. Ignoring the significance of having well-informed and verified placement agencies implies that communication strategies in the systems were weak. It is important that universities communicate their requirements or placements to the agencies, and pre-approve agencies before students begin their practical training. The universities' placement of students in unverified agencies suggests a lack of quality and rigour in the identification and selection of placement agencies. Rather, universities should demonstrate to students that placements meet the approval of the department and are compliant with a well-structured programme of field instruction. Ideally, this would be supported by an assessment of the students' attributes in relation to the placement agencies. After all, universities are the training ground of knowledge and skills, and failure to demonstrate that students construct their knowledge in proper field placements results in universities failing to support student learning.

Other challenges highlighted the need to exercise regular monitoring of students, supervisors and the organisational placements during the placement. This challenge highlights the need for feedback loops in the field instruction system. Feedback loops are based on regular input from students of their experiences, understanding and acting upon the implications of the students' experience (throughput) and implementing systems of control (output) in the field practice process. The conclusion drawn from the data is that most students felt abandoned by their universities while on field placements.

The key argument from students and alumni alike was that the role of the university was to manage the placement by monitoring the student, the agency and the supervisor during the placement. With contemporary advancements in technology such as Zoom and Skype, this process of monitoring is made easier. It is incumbent on universities to make concerted means of maintaining contact with placements agencies. Telephonic contact, chat groups and other communication mechanisms remain a means to be taken advantage of by universities to enhance and strengthen contact with students during their field placements, and with placement agencies.

Another conclusion drawn from the study is that given the limited placement opportunities in semi-rural areas in South Africa, universities experience difficulties in placing the ever-increasing numbers of students at agencies in rural areas. Placements are contained in welfare resources. The availability of suitable resources is integral to the proper functioning of the field instruction system as these provide placement opportunities for students to implement praxis. The situation of limited resources and

agencies in semi-rural areas is clearly not easily overcome. The implementation of a rotational model of field placements was evident in a university's effort to overcome a potentially threatening situation. Universities are encouraged to seek alternative solutions, such as rotating students in placements, seeking shorter-term placements so that more students could benefit from such placement opportunities in rural areas, having more simulated sessions at university, and exploring the development of university resources that will expand the current resources available in resource-deprived communities.

Students are learners, taught at universities by experienced, qualified and knowledgeable academics. Field instruction systems have hierarchical levels of control, ranging from the university which yields positional power over the student's field practice experience, the agency which holds placement control over the university and student, and the student as the active recipient of learning in the system. Support from the universities to students and placement agencies should be mandatory and form part of the teaching, learning and support component of any field instruction programme.

Finally, given the continuous debates in higher education about the need for implementation of indigenous knowledge in semi-rural and rural communities, it is surprising that the data in this study did not yield this focus. Perhaps it could be argued that such knowledge in practice was not focused on these debates, or that the students were unaware of these debates. This aspect of knowledge was only realised in relation to access protocols in rural and semi-rural areas.

This study emphasised the triadic relationship between the different components of the field instruction systems in placements in rural and semi-rural placements in South Africa. From the data it may be concluded that the challenges listed may be considered unique to rural and semi-rural placements given the issues of access to placements, the lack of placement resources and the lack of monitoring of placements. However, a further conclusion derived is that deconstructing the placement process from a systems perspective will provide a concerted appreciation of the challenges experienced by students in placements. This will pave the way for greater effort in administering field instruction programmes that are relevant and transformative, and that ultimately contribute to effective student teaching.

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