FIELD EDUCATOR
SIMMONS SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Volume 10.1 | Spring 2020| Practice Digest | © May 2020 | fieldeducator.simmons.edu

Multi-Layered Supervision: The Role of Team-Based Approaches in Field Education

Author(s)

Mary E. Hylton, PhD
Salisbury University

Jill Manit, PhD
Sacred Heart University

Introduction

According to Noble and Irwin (2009), social work supervision balances ethically-informed, competent, and accountable practice with a focus on a learner-centered partnership. As a distinct form of supervision, field instruction focuses on the educational outcomes for students. This focus distinguishes field instruction from staff supervision. While staff supervision focuses heavily on managerial responsibilities such as task coverage, equitable caseloads, and client outcomes, field supervisors are also educators who must balance agency needs with student learning needs. Bogo and McKnight (2006) identify three essential functions of field supervision: 1) the educational function, 2) the supportive function, and 3) the administrative function. The administrative function of field supervision focuses on task assignments and monitoring student performance according to the agency's practices and policies. By contrast, the educational function emphasizes professional growth, including skill development, and awareness. Finally, the supportive function ensures that the supervisor assists the supervisee in handling stress while gaining appropriate autonomy through encouragement and reassurance. Quality field supervision involves the incorporation of all three functions.

Unfortunately, contextual changes within social, health, and community agencies in which students complete field placements threaten the ability of traditional field supervision models to achieve the three functions outlined by Bogo and McKnight (2006). These pressures frequently result in supervision that emphasizes performance over growth (Engelbrecht, 2010; Kadushin, Berger, Gilbert, & de St. Aubin, 2009). Within social service contexts, supervision with educational intent rather than employee accountability may conflict with organizational processes, resource allocation, and organizational culture. As a result of these conflicts, social work supervisors may feel caught in the middle between organizational demands and the needs of their supervisees (Noble & Irwin, 2009). These barriers not only impact student satisfaction with field, they also result in challenges in securing placements. Field educators have declared these challenges a "crisis" and have called for "out of the box" thinking (Ayala et al., 2018, p. 282–283, 290).

Multi-layered supervision is a team-based approach that divides supervision among a team according to unique strengths of team members. The essential elements of multi-layered supervision include: individual supervision, peer support, group supervision, management, and reflection (Richmond, 2009). Multi-layered supervision ameliorates many of the challenges of field supervision in agencies. By dividing the tasks associated with the three functions of supervision, this team-based approach lessens the workload on agency supervisors. This divide addresses the time constraints experienced by many supervisors. It also addresses the lack of available Master of Social Work (MSW) degreed supervisors in some agencies through the use of off-site group supervision. Finally, multi-layered supervision may improve the quality of field instruction by breaking the functions of supervision down to specific roles enacted by supervisors who are competent to perform said roles.

Multi-Layered Supervision Case Study

The multi-layered supervision approach discussed here includes four points of contact in a coordinated supervision model with students in policy and administrative practice field placements. The points of contact included: 1) task supervisors who managed day-to-day duties and ensured accountability to agency tasks; 2) group-based, off-site supervision with a MSW degreed social worker with policy practice expertise; 3) supplemental training on program development and policy implementation processes; and 4) site-based coaching with an agency administrator. The success of the approach required clear understanding of the supervisory functions and tasks associated with each of these roles (see Table 1).

Table 1: Multi-Layered Supervision Roles and Duties

Supervision Role	Supervisory Duties
Off-Site Field Instructor(s) (Educational Function[a])	• Bi-weekly group supervision • Coordinate student paperwork • Monitor learning opportunities and performance • Coordinate final assessment of student performance • Facilitate peer to peer consultation during supervision
Site or Content-Based Coach (Supportive Function[a])	• Liaise with sites, students, & university • Conduct student and Task Supervisor "check-ins" • Support task supervisors • Tutor students on identified areas of concern
On-Site Task Supervisor (Administrative Function[a])	• Identify tasks and supervise students in agency setting • Model appropriate behavior within agency context • Provide input and feedback • Monitor time and general performance
Training (Educational Function[a])	• Coordinated by the faculty experts • Monthly 3-hr training sessions on topics specific to the practice arena (the content extends knowledge and skill building beyond the standard curriculum)

[a]Bogo and McKnight (2006) functions of supervision

Background

A growing shortage of social workers prepared to work in administrative positions led to the development and implementation of the multi-layered approach to field supervision. Administrators within a statewide office overseeing health and human services partnered with the authors to develop a student training program. The administrators reported that direct service social workers employed across the health and human services programs possessed strong clinical skills, but promotion of the social workers proved challenging as they lacked administrative skills and knowledge. Consequently, very few social workers occupied these positions, resulting in the near absence of the profession in service delivery design and decisions. Furthermore, whereas social work students frequently completed field placements within state direct service offices, there had never been any students placed directly at the administrative levels. Providing students opportunities to complete field practicum within state administrative offices would prepare them to assume entry-level program management positions.

A number of potential hurdles to placing students in state administrative offices were identified. First, there were very few employees within these offices who possessed social work degrees. The lack of degreed social work supervisors posed challenges for meeting the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) accreditation standard that states that field instructors should possess a social work degree at the level or higher of those being pursued by the students being supervised (CSWE, 2015). Second, the nature of the work being done differed dramatically from traditional direct service. Translation of how this work connected to the practice competencies as well as helping students articulate what they were doing within their field seminars and methods courses necessitated involvement of experienced social work educators. Finally, many of the agency employees who would be assuming the role of task supervisors were unfamiliar with social work education, including effective field supervisory practices. This lack of familiarity resulted in the need to translate student placement needs into agency normative practices.

Implementation

In the fall of 2017, fourteen BSW and MSW students were placed in various administrative divisions under the auspices of the state department of health and human services. Examples of these divisions included: grants management, aging and disability services, children and family services, and Medicaid. Learning opportunities

included providing assistance in developing regulations and/or implementation of recently passed legislation, research, development of service delivery models, evaluation, and grants management. Through these learning opportunities, students were able to demonstrate rapport building, professional communication (both written and verbal), research, policy analysis, group facilitation, organizational and program assessment, program planning, and evaluation skills.

Three of the four supervision layers were met by inclusion of these field students in an existing policy practice academy. This academy was developed with initial funds from the Council on Social Work Education's *Policy Practice in Field Education Initiative*. Through the academy, students received weekly group supervision with experienced, MSW degreed, policy practice faculty members. Given the lack of agency-based social work supervisors, these off-site field instructors were important in ensuring compliance with CSWE accreditation standards B2.2.9 and M2.2.9 (CSWE, 2015). Through weekly group meetings, the off-site field instructors reinforced the social work perspective and helped students connect professional ethics and values to work being done within the agencies. These supervisors were also skilled in helping students understand the relationship between macro tasks and generalist competencies. In addition, the academy provided monthly training on policy practice issues. The inclusion of the state administrative placement students resulted in additional trainings on policy/program implementation issues.

To address the need to translate field requirements into agency normative practices, an agency-based coach was identified and assigned to provide site-based support for both students and task supervisors. This coach was provided work release to help set up the placements, including identifying task supervisors and assisting in the initial training of said supervisors. The coach also served as a liaison between the agency and the field education program, helping to resolve issues with students as they arose. Finally, agency task supervisors were identified and trained on the social work profession in general and the field education program requirements. They were also provided training on student development and effective supervisory practices.

The multi-layered supervision model allowed typical supervisory responsibilities to be shared. For example, students worked with their task supervisors to identify tasks and projects to include in their learning plans. Students then worked with their field instructors during group supervision to connect identified tasks and projects to the required competencies. Similarly, students sought input from both task supervisors and their field instructor during their evaluations. Students utilized the agency-based coach to gain greater contextual awareness of administrative practice in the

state, historical policy and politics that impact service delivery, and general tips on navigating large systems professionally and effectively.

Successful implementation of this approach to multi-layered supervision required consistent communication as well as training on the approach for both students and task supervisors. Initial training for students oriented them to the purposes of the multi-layered supervision and distinguished the roles of each level of supervision. A similar training for task supervisors ensured that they, too, understood the distinctions among the roles. In addition, regular channels of communication between the task supervisors and the coach, and between the coach and the off-site field instructors, ensured proactive problem-solving.

Lessons Learned

The implementation of this approach revealed a need to enhance student training on how to effectively utilize the strengths of multiple supervisors. While students generally had an idea of the expertise that each supervisor could contribute to their learning, administrative functions such as who should be included in mid-semester site visits or who should be signing learning agreements were challenging for some students. Additional pre-placement guidance on handling these tasks would ease communication challenges and student anxiety.

The organizational culture of the state agency that was the context for this project included constant movement amongst its own personnel. Through internal promotions and subsequent shifting of duties, the students could have been vulnerable to the loss of their placements. Multi-layered supervision provided an element of protection and consistency for the students that supported them as they experienced organizational changes. Task supervisors became so committed to the students that, in the event they changed positions, they frequently took the student with them to their new program assignment. The agency-based coach's oversight cut across placement sites, offering further protection and continuity for the student. During times of transition, the coach provided context for the student in understanding the organizational shifts. Without this context, students would simply observe "turnover" as opposed to strategic organizational transition.

Conclusion

Multi-layered supervision provides one approach for addressing the contextual realities that affect both the availability and quality of social work field supervision. The approach used by the authors consisted of a partnership with a state agency

that served as the context for the field placement sites. Four layers of supervision were coordinated to promote student success and professional development. The implementation of multi-layered supervision expanded the number of field placement sites while also offering high quality supervision and stability in placements. Common barriers found in field education, such as time, resources, and supervisory style were addressed through this shared team-based approach to supervision. The case example illustrates the success of this approach and provides guidance on replication at other sites.

References

Ayala, J., Drolet, J., Fulton, A., Hewson, J., Letkemann, L., Baynton, M., Elliott, G., Judge-Stasiak, A., Blaug, C., Tétreault, A. G., & Schweizer, E. (2018). Field education in crisis: Experiences of field education coordinators in Canada. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 37*(3), 281–293. doi:10.1080/02615479.2017.1397109

Bogo, M., & McKnight, K. (2006). Clinical supervision in social work: A review of the research literature. *The Clinical Supervisor, 24*(1-2), 49–67. doi:10.1300/J001v24n01_04

Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards.* Retrieved from https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Accreditation-Process/2015-EPAS/2015EPAS_Web_FINAL.pdf.aspx

Engelbrecht, L. (2010). A strengths perspective on supervision of social workers: An alternative management paradigm within a social development context. *Social Work & Social Sciences Review, 14*(1), 47–58. doi:10.1921/095352210X505490

Kadushin, G., Berger, C., Gilbert, C., & de St. Aubin, M. (2009). Models and methods in hospital social work supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor, 28*(2), 180–199. doi:10.1080/07325220903324660

Noble, C., & Irwin, J. (2009). Social work supervision: An exploration of the current challenges in a rapidly changing social, economic, and political environment. *Journal of Social Work, 9*(3), 345–358. doi:10.1177/1468017309334848

Richmond, D. (2009). Using multi-layered supervision methods to develop creative practice. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives, 10*(4), 543–557. doi:10.1080/14623940903138431