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Generational Learning in Social Work: Is it Them or Us?

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Abstract

Field education is the signature pedagogy of social work programs, serving to develop the skills and competencies required for this professional designation. This qualitative study explores the experiences of social workers supervising students in the current millennial and Z generations in their social work field placements. Field supervisors indicated challenges particular to the current generation of social work students as coming in the form of a lack of confidence, initiative, and work ethic, and difficulty accepting feedback and engaging in critical self-reflection. The findings highlight the need for social work educators to revisit traditional approaches to teaching and evaluation.

Keywords: social work; field education; generation; qualitative

Introduction

It has been proposed that field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education programs in developing the unique skills and competencies required for professional designation (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). While the academic setting is

one forum for the integration of theory and practice, the opportunity to demonstrate acquisition and application of this knowledge in a realistic context falls largely to the supervised student field placement. It is within the structured field placement that the means and process knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Miller, 2010). Many of the competencies associated with professional social work practice are difficult to discern and evaluate solely within the classroom setting. The benefits of field education have been well documented, where in addition to the overarching goal of integrating theory and practice, students learn to develop direct practice skills, to evaluate their interventions, and to engage in a process of learning how to emotionally manage the challenges embedded in the clinical realm (Bogo, 2015). Field education is an integral component of any social work curriculum particularly in helping students develop essential professional competencies around the demonstration of empathy, maturity, and overall emotional intelligence needed for professional practice. The field placement serves as an evaluative mechanism for determining competency and subsequent student readiness for professional practice.

The ability of schools of social work to procure suitable field education opportunities for students has been met with several challenges over the last decade. These challenges include: scarce resources, increasing caseloads, and greater time demands on front line staff, who historically enacted the role of field supervisors, but now find themselves too busy given the demands of their job (Tam, Brown, Paz, Birnbaum, & Kwok, 2018). All of this has occurred against a backdrop of an increasingly limited number of field agencies equipped to take social work students in this climate of ever-shrinking resources. All of these factors highlight the ever-growing importance of ensuring that the students who are sent into field placements by schools of social work are prepared for the rigors and challenges of this type of learning. If not, schools of social work risk having partner organizations in their communities withdraw agency resources from student education programs (Ayala et al., 2018).

There is increasing anecdotal evidence to suggest that among the challenges for field placement agencies and organizations is the increasing diversity of students and their needs entering the placement experience. This diversity is present on a number of fronts, including: cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious. Diversity among the student demographic related to different learning styles, the need for academic accommodation due to physical and/or emotional disabilities, and the diversity in age of the modern student have increased. The focus of this study is on the impact of generational differences between student and field instructor, another form of diversity, and its potential impact on the learning process in social work field education. There is limited research on the implications of generational differences between students and

instructors in the field of social work education (Baird, 2016) and even less published inquiry on its impact on field education (Moore, 2012).

The current student body in higher education is primarily comprised of the so-called Gen Y (or Millennials), those born between 1981 and 1994, and Gen Z, those born between 1995 and 2010. There has been a proliferation of research and study into the current generation of students, both Gen Y & Z, and how their unique orientation has implications for higher education (DiLullo, McGee, & Kriebel, 2011; Twenge, 2013), the business world (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010), and their relationships, both with each other and to technology (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Seemiller and Grace, 2016; Turkle, 2011).

Generation Y, also known as Millennials, have been characterized as “Generation Whine” or the “trophy kids,” children raised by Baby Boomer parents in environments of structure and overprotectiveness, where their physical and emotional “safety” was of paramount importance during their formative years (Moore, 2012; Twenge, 2014). Not only has this generation been overly organized and structured by parents and school systems alike, they were also raised during the “self-esteem movement,” and as such were raised by parents who told them they were special and winners for no other reason than “they are who they are” (Eckleberry-Hunt & Turccarone, 2011). It should be noted that early indications suggest that Gen Z students differ slightly, having been raised to honor achievement that is best obtained through hard work, and where recognition for this achievement is highly sought after and the opinions of others is a motivating factor for much of what drives them (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Concerns then arise regarding the perils of gaining one’s sense of intrinsic worth largely through the means of external validation.

Dubbed “digital natives” (Prensky, 2005), the current students in higher education are the first generations of students to have grown up with technology, and for many Gen Z’s, the first generation not able to recall a time without digital connection (Frاند, 2000). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram have shaped how students of this generation interact with each other and the world around them. Constant digital connection with family and friends is not only sought after but deemed essential to everyday living (Turkle, 2011). The result however is that technology has served in many ways to redefine relationships and the concept of friendships, where connections to “others” tend to lack commitment, be artificial in nature, and lack intimacy and depth in most cases. As Turkle (2011) in her research noted, Millennials tend to shy away from face-to-face human interaction and prefer digital connection with the “disembodied other,” preferring texting to even phone

connection. Early research of Gen Z notes that the synchronous relationship they have with technology has resulted in achieving greater comfort communicating online and, in exchange, not having learned or been exposed to the skills to manage complex interactions or associated emotions that accompany these interactions (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Although young people from Y and Z generations have been found to be more effective in some areas of functioning such as multitasking, responding to visual stimulation, and filtering information, they are less adept at face-to-face interactions and deciphering nonverbal cues in conversation (Smith, 2008). The result of this reliance on technology has contributed in some ways to a generation that is plagued by a deep sense of loneliness and isolation – confident intellectually, but less so socially. The concomitant impact of this are high rates of anxiety and depression not experienced by students from previous generations (Baird, 2016; Turkle, 2011).

That said, there are indications that students representing Gen Z may be shifting this perception, as research by Seemiller and Grace (2019) notes, this most recent generation can be characterized as “open minded, caring, diverse, and grounded in a sense of integrity and tenacity. They value financial security, family, relationships, meaningful work and happiness” (p. 33). Despite the fact that each generation presents with perfectionist tendencies, they are motivated by relationships and a desire for achievement. The high expectations they have of themselves span to high expectations they hold of others.

Parental rearing practices and the proliferation of technology are not solely to blame for the behaviors and attitudes exhibited by this generational cohort. Their transition to adulthood has been complicated by high levels of student debt, high rates of unemployment, and an increasingly unsteady economic and social world (Moore, 2012). They have grown up amid an economic recession, wars, and violence locally as well as internationally. For today’s students, education is a necessary and expensive means to an end, that some will unfortunately have to forgo due to high costs, but for most remains the bridge to future prosperity (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

Anecdotal evidence provided to this group of researchers suggests that there is an increasing reluctance by social workers in the field to take on the responsibility for supervising students in field placement, directly fueled by the negative discourse of this generation of students as “entitled” and “needy.” If the reluctance by the field to take students for field education becomes a trend, this could be detrimental to schools of social work in providing quality social work education. As a result, this study was initiated to explore the nature of the unique challenges this generation of students presents in social work field education from the perspective of social work field

supervisors. This research aims to provide field educators and schools of social work with generationally-informed recommendations that will serve to enhance current approaches to professional social work education.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative exploratory descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2000). The chosen design is useful in summarizing discussions with key informants toward a greater understanding of an area of interest. The study, with the use of semi-structured interviews, engaged in a retrospective exploration of the experience of social work field supervisors as to the challenges and opportunities presented by the current generational cohort of social work students.

The study sample was comprised of key informants representing social work field supervisors with a minimum of fifteen (15) years of student supervision experience purposely selected from a roster of field supervisors used by the School of Social Work at King's University College in London, Ontario, Canada. The intentional use of key informants was "to obtain expert opinion from individuals who are presumed to have special knowledge about the target population" (Rubin & Babbie, 2014, p. 366). The sample consisted of two key informants from each of the social work practice fields of child welfare, mental health, medical, justice, school, and individual/family counseling. A letter was sent to each individual with information about the study and indicated their selection as potential participants due to their knowledge and experience as social work student supervisors in field education. The individuals were instructed to contact the Principal Investigator if they were interested in participating in the study and/or if they required further information.

The nine (9) individuals who agreed to participate were emailed an informed consent that outlined the responsibilities of participating as well as risks, benefits, and procedures. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of King's University College. Participants were individually compensated for their time and involvement in the study with a twenty-dollar (\$20) gift card.

The key informants were interviewed in relation to their experiences supervising social work students. Interviews were 60–90 minutes in duration. All participants were female, with experience in social work ranging from fifteen (15) to thirty-three (33) years. The average number of students supervised during the course of their work was fourteen (14) students.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to examine the participants' interview responses to identify common themes based on the questions asked by the interviewer. Data analysis consisted of a three stage coding process undertaken by three researchers with experience in qualitative data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Each researcher independently engaged in a line by line coding of each transcript in order to generate emergent categories of key concepts and ideas shared by the research participants. The second stage of the analysis was identification of the most significant and frequent codes within a process of constant comparative approach (Charmaz, 2014). The data revealed itself through multiple iterations of sifting, sorting, modifying, and comparing codes independently. The draft codes were discussed collaboratively between the three researchers to ensure consistency and to refine the codes. The researchers came together after thorough coding and subsequent identification of common themes had been established to compare and discuss prevalent themes to ensure consistency and understanding. In the case of discrepancies, at both the coding level and during theme development, the researchers came together to discuss until consensus was reached in order to move forward in the analysis process.

The information presented in this paper represents the common themes established through analysis of the nine interviews. The quotes provided are exemplars taken from the interview transcripts. The findings that resulted from this research process represent a consensus of issues raised by multiple supervisors. The common elements of supervisors' experiences are enriched with direct quotes from participants (with names removed to protect anonymity), which are intended to provide additional context and first-hand examples of the issues in practice.

Findings

The qualitative data gathered for this study reflect that social workers in the field experience both positive and negative aspects of supervising students within their places of employment. In addition to the perceived benefits embedded in assuming the role of field supervisor, the interviewees identified areas of challenge in providing field supervision to social work students. These challenges were perceived by the supervisors as unique to the current generation of students, namely, a demonstrated lack of confidence in the clinical setting, a perceived lack of initiative and work ethic, and an inability to accept and meaningfully incorporate feedback given during the course of supervision.

Positives of Supervising Social Work Students

On the positive front, current social work students were perceived by field instructors as bringing “freshness” and a “different perspective” to placement. One respondent noted, “Students always keep you fresh in the field, it’s like they keep your eyes open to new things” (R1). By virtue of also being engaged in classroom instruction, students provide the field with a working knowledge of the newest approaches to practice and theory, “Having students pushes me to stay connected to theory and practice [...] staying current in new research, what’s happening in research in social work [...] keeps me fresh, helps to keep me informed” (R2).

Current generation students were also valued for their orientation and recognition of diversity, “[...] students have been helpful for me [...] wrapping my head around being more aware of issues of cultural diversity and how do I engage from a cultural awareness perspective” (R6); “Students today come with a broader awareness of issues of diversity and they bring that to placement where all of us at the agency can learn from them” (R2). In some instances, students are acknowledged for leading agencies and organizations to revisit their policies and procedures that consider issues of diversity, “We think about it more when the students raise issues of diversity and difference that sometimes get lost in the day to day work of providing service to clients” (R6).

In addition, students’ use and knowledge of technology was well noted, “Today’s students have a good concept of technology, right, loved it. They caught onto it, they taught me things about how to use it, so that was really great. Their capacity to connect using technology was great. For someone say in my age group or the next couple of generations before the Millennials there was a little more hesitancy around that part, hesitation of using technology. So in that way the students taught us a lot about how we could use it in our work which was great” (R4).

In fact, one respondent commented that because of the level of comfort and ease by which current students adapt to the use of technology, students coming into human service organizations express at times frustration at the seeming lag in technology at placement, “I mean they’re a generation born with technology in their hands so I don’t think they have problems with that, I think what happens more is that they get frustrated with the low level of technology that’s available to them here which is probably much different than what they have at home or at the school” (R4).

Lack of Confidence

Field supervisors identified that more recent students under their direction were perceived to be lacking the necessary confidence that would enable them to actively engage both clients and colleagues in the placement setting, “A real lack of confidence generally in one-to-one situations – more so than what I have experienced with students in previous years – not sure what that is about” (R7). Or as (R4) noted, “There is an eagerness to learn but really passive when it comes to interacting with clients and colleagues alike” as well as the following from (R6), “I see time and again from students that have recently come to our agency a real lack of confidence in being able to negotiate relationships with clients and other professionals.”

There was a recognition by practicum supervisors that passivity demonstrated by the students in client interaction is in fact a part of the learning process at the onset of many placements and in many ways to be expected, “[...] some lack of confidence can be expected from students just starting out but more recently students have expressed more anxiety in doing this than students I have had in the past – the idea of sitting with clients really seems to scare them” (R6). Most importantly, a perceived reluctance to engage on an interpersonal level with clients was a noticeable gap in skill. Students presented as “[...] very nervous and hesitant, what seemed to be an uncomfortableness in interacting with clients, and it shows and clients notice it, a bit timid and it took very long for her to become less anxious and willing to see clients than I have seen with past students I have had for sure” (R4). The lack of confidence in the process of direct practice exhibited by the students was reported as seemingly a unique challenge that had not presented itself previously in their experience of supervising students of earlier generations.

Lack of Initiative and Work Ethic

A subsequent theme that emerged was a general lack of initiative on the part of the students, coupled with a seemingly eroding work ethic. The perceived lack of initiative originated from the students’ increasing desire for more structure and direction within the day to day experience of placement, “I’ve had students recently where every step you need to tell them what to do, constantly. It’s just this – even from whether it be day one in placement or the very last day of placement, you’re still telling them what they need to do, how they need to do it, and what is expected at every turn” (R2). (R6) further articulated, “I find they overall work at a slower pace – I find I’m constantly saying have you got this done? Have you got that done? I feel like I have to give a lot

of prompting and reminders, and I find that a bit frustrating, and I do it see it more with this generation of student for sure.”

(R5) expressed frustration at the level of ongoing direction required from students, “It’s more like they have to be spoon fed, you know, rather than coming from within and then being able to look at a situation and kind of go, ‘okay while I’m here I can do A, B, C, and D [...] they have to be told what to do.” The field supervisors noted that the initiative that was once second nature in students appeared to no longer be present in some students, “I’ve been here so long, but I think there’s something to be said for great initiative, I haven’t had a lot of that lately with students, some of that is self-learning that I feel like isn’t necessarily second nature for students any longer compared with my past students” (R6). The respondents clearly perceive that today’s social work students require more direction and prompting than students were perceived to have needed in the past.

Field supervisors also reported that in comparison to students in past years, they experienced a shift in students’ approach to workplace expectations, for example, arriving to work on time, taking timely lunch breaks, and working necessary overtime to accommodate the needs of clients. As respondents note, “There’s a laissez faire attitude [...] I can come in when I want to come in, I can dress how I want to dress, it’s like they don’t feel bound [...] in my era it was very much be on time, be punctual, that was a sign of respect and there was more rigidity around that and I do find that is perhaps a challenge for sure with the more recent students I have had” (R1) and “[...] I would say their attitude is when it’s time to go it’s time to go and they’d come in in the morning and be like yeah I get here when I get here” (R5). (R1) attributes this attitude to good boundaries, “I guess you could also look at their reluctance to work past the time they should be there as good boundaries, I just find that with the newer students that like 4:30 comes and it’s time to go.”

Difficulties in Receiving and Reflecting on Feedback

A noted challenge for these field supervisors centered on the process of providing “constructive” feedback to students through the course of supervision, namely, through the process of providing feedback on performance, engaging in a dialogue with students regarding the feedback, and having them then reflect on the feedback for incorporation into their practice. This process of engaging students in the feedback loop, according to participants, has become more difficult on a number of levels. Field supervisors found that at times students are not open to feedback that contradicts how they perceive they are doing in placement or is interpreted by the student as being

critical in nature. As (R4) notes, “When I say to a student I noticed you did this, why did you do that? And trying to have that conversation is a little tougher with students nowadays to get through and it took a little more time and required a lot more sensitivity on my part of not making them feel bad as it was obvious most students today are not comfortable in that space.” (R3) further elaborates, “when I think back to some of my earlier students they really embraced that feedback and took it to heart in terms of how they kind of experience some of that growth but I find now more recent students have been more sensitive to that kind of feedback and see it more as criticism and just don’t take it quite so positively [...] they really struggle with any kind of constructive feedback.”

The inability to accept feedback as a learning process is perceived as a challenge, yet it is only one half of the feedback loop. Social work students are expected to then integrate the feedback as a mechanism for continued development of skills and abilities. The field supervisors noted students to really struggle to integrate the feedback within any process of personal reflection. “Students seem less reflective than I have had in the past, definitely more a stretch for them to engage in any self-reflection [...] almost to the point where I wonder if they don’t know how?” (R3); “Students today are almost nervous to self-reflect, very guarded when asked to think about feedback and how they can use it towards their practice” (R5).

For some supervisors, they questioned whether the students’ perceived inability or hesitancy to engage in self-reflection had to do with a reluctance to enter a space of emotional vulnerability, “I think the feedback makes them feel vulnerable which in turn makes them feel uncomfortable” (R7). Field supervisors saw this issue of vulnerability as important to practice, as (R9) notes, “more recent students I find are afraid to be vulnerable but I always tell them it is important in social work to be vulnerable because our clients are all vulnerable.”

Students’ hesitancy in occupying this space was interpreted by supervisors as a troubling trait of the current cohort, “I’m not as sure if they’re as comfortable being vulnerable for the self-reflection that you have to do in practice [...] I find recent students I have to be very guarded emotionally, afraid to risk and be seen as vulnerable” (R3). The findings from this study would suggest that students from generations Y and Z demonstrate a reluctance to accept feedback without the tendency to personalize the comments as negative, and a difficulty being able to demonstrate the skill of engaging in a process of reflection toward the goal of personal and professional growth.

Generational Framework

The theoretical lens used in the course of this research project was the intention to explore the issues in a way that does not contribute to the ongoing negative discourse of generations Y and Z, which problematizes many of their perceived behaviors, attitudes, and values (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Twenge, 2014; Twenge & Campbell 2009), but rather, offers an alternative perspective that views students' experiences within the broader social, economic, and cultural context (Cairns, 2017). Rather than understanding students' experiences through a lens of entitlement, or what cultural critic Dombek (2016) identified as an unprecedented "epidemic of narcissism," the authors elected to adopt what Cairns (2017) views in his book, *The Myth of the Age of Entitlement: Millennials, Austerity, and Hope*, as a generation responding to a world that is filled with uncertainty for themselves and their future. This is a theoretical position that requires a broader level of understanding and empathy for the world in which Millennials find themselves. In this way and consistent with a social work perspective, the authors intentionally adopted a lens of understanding human experience that maintains a person within the context of their environment.

Discussion

The findings from this study reflect that the experience of supervising social work students in a field agency offers benefits and challenges concurrently. Through the process of engaging with this research, most notably during the analysis phase, it became apparent to the authors that a generational lens is essential for understanding the perceived challenges this cohort of students present for field practice supervisors. This lens allows appreciation for, and understanding of, students' attitudes and behaviors as being grounded in the manner in which they have been raised and shaped by the world in which they have developed socially, economically, politically, and environmentally (Twenge, 2014).

Cairns (2017) offers a compelling argument, that the current generation of students faces unprecedented stresses and pressures from multiple fronts, that is not only helpful in understanding students' orientation to education and learning but also their behaviors as their attempt to navigate the complex world in which they are growing up. Cairns (2017) argues that a generational lens is essential in any study of the current cohort of students, and that the negative discourse surrounding young people today should be viewed as a product of their culture (Twenge, 2014). As Twenge (2009) reminds us, "generational difference reflects changes in culture as a whole. Generation

is a useful proxy for the socio-cultural environment of different time periods” (p. 399). In this way, readers should resist the urge to understand the reflections presented by participants in this study as abject truth, but rather originating from one side of the generational lens. By operationalizing a generational framework, the authors are able to take the stance that many of the participants’ experiences in supervising current social work students are not surprising when students’ cultural milieu is considered, including the role of technology in students’ lives, the way they were reared as children, and the impact of social, political, and economic forces on their overall social and emotional development. Exploring the findings from this study with this lens provides insight into students’ social-emotional functioning and a more in-depth understanding of their needs within the social work field placement setting.

Lack of Confidence

At the onset, a primary challenge expressed by the interviewees was the perception that today’s social work students lack “confidence in managing the interpersonal relationships” associated with the placement experience, most particularly, confidence in face-to-face, real time interactions with both clients and colleagues alike. This finding in many ways runs contrary to existing literature on Millennials that suggests this generation of students is more confident than previous generations in addition to being more comfortable in team environments (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). There may be a number of ways to understand this discrepancy between what is reflected in the literature but not observed by field placement supervisors. The perceived lack of confidence may reflect the unique nature of direct social work practice for which students enter placement ill equipped to manage socially or emotionally.

The social work profession at its core is embedded with uncertainty and ambiguity. The literature suggests that the current cohort of students, many of whom have grown up in environments characterized as overscheduled, organized, and structured for most of their lives by well-intentioned parents, have as a result grown up uncomfortable in situations that reflect uncertainty and a lack of structure (Twenge, 2009). Because social work involves working with people who are diverse in all ways possible, there tends not to be structure or order to the work. In any given day, social workers are expected to juggle multiple roles and tasks simultaneously, and to be an effective worker requires thinking on one’s feet and responding to circumstances and crises as they arise. What social worker has not had their neatly planned day experience significant fracture by needing to respond to a client in crisis? Social workers must be flexible in their approaches given the ambiguity embedded in the helping process. These skills take time to develop and master, and require

independence and problem solving ability. Students' need for structure and order runs contrary to social work practice, leaving many with the need to develop these skills for the first time in the context of a fast paced and at times chaotic field placement environment.

Students' lack of confidence in the field is perhaps related to a hesitancy in knowing how to engage in unpredictable social interactions. For a cohort of students that have developed their interpersonal skills and ways of interacting with the world around them in a technologically mediated manner (DiLullo et al., 2011), conceivably they lack the essential skills to manage face-to-face, real time interactions. Face-to-face interactions require social workers to emotionally and practically manage their clients' complex emotions and behaviors be it anger, frustration, confusion, sadness, or potentially all of the above. These encounters can be uncomfortable spaces to occupy in direct practice even for the most seasoned worker, let alone a student. Studies have shown that this generation of young people has markedly lower levels of empathy toward others in favor of more narcissistic pursuits (Twenge, 2012). In the workforce, empathy is necessary to effect teamwork, collaboration, and negotiation with others. Developing the skills to manage the intricacies of human interaction, be it individual, family, or group, is the cornerstone of the social work profession. The lack in the ability to relate on this level by students entering the profession is notable for agencies and schools of social work alike.

Engaging with clients in an authentic and genuine manner requires a certain level of emotional risk and willingness to be vulnerable on the part of the social worker. As previously noted, this generation's use of digital connection gives license for individuals to present a less than authentic self and with it the safety to manage from a distance what transpires in the one-on-one encounter. In addition, responding to individuals through the medium of technology affords one the time to craft responses in a desirable way. However face-to-face interaction requires spontaneous "on the spot" responses which take greater skill and "thinking on one's feet" to negotiate. Technology has normalized an informal technology-based sense of "connectedness," which may result in millennial students lacking the interpersonal skills as they relate one-on-one interfacing with clients and colleagues (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). Relatedly, the current generation of students enrolled in higher education has been documented as being one of the most anxious and depressed generations in recent history (Baird, 2016). Their anxieties are "not just of physical dangers but of the emotional dangers of adult social interactions. Their caution helps keep them safe, but it also makes them vulnerable, because everyone gets hurt eventually" (Twenge, 2017, p. 167). This focus on safety may inhibit students from truly engaging with clients or

wading into the “uncomfortableness” synonymous with direct social work practice. The desire for emotional safety will have implications for social work education, as Twenge (2017) notes, “it is important to be safe, but [...] if you don’t take chances, how can you invent yourself? If you aren’t comfortable with instability, how can you create change?” (p. 153). In essence, perhaps it is not a lack of confidence witnessed by supervisors of their students, but rather the result of a generation of students apprehensive of wading into the complexities of complex human interaction and the associated discomfort it entails.

For current social work students, the ambiguity of placement coupled with the complexity of human interactions may create an uneasy experience. From navigating a changing landscape of challenges and priorities to listening to the “messiness” that at times can make up the lives of clients, the uncertainty of this profession may at first seem a daunting and overwhelming task. Their concern with ensuring safety and structure may make it difficult to manage the overall complexity of a social work field placement (Moore, 2012). So perhaps the demonstrated lack of confidence is more hesitancy and a genuine uncertainty on the student’s part of how to proceed. In response, students require more guidance and direction from their supervisors, which is later couched in discourse reflecting a “lack of initiative.”

Lack of Initiative and Work Ethic

The interviewed group of field supervisors noted a marked lack of demonstrated initiative in their students’ approach to the roles and responsibilities associated with the field placement. To provide context, as noted earlier, the literature highlights that today’s university students represent the most structured and organized generation in recent history. They have grown to be adults that thrive in environments where expectations, rules, and procedures are explicit and where ambiguity is limited (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 44). For students who grew up in households where parents have guided and planned for their children’s every day, entering the professional world where autonomy and initiative are valued attributes can seem overwhelming.

In modern day work environments, there is an overriding perception that today’s developing professionals are not being equipped with the skills or confidence to handle the most mundane tasks without guidance or “hand holding” (Hershetter & Epstein, 2010). This leads to understanding what field supervisors labeled a “lack of initiative” as students’ response to an ambiguous process for learning how to engage in a setting with foreign formal and informal rules and regulations.

Simply stated, where supervisors are expecting demonstrated professional autonomy, students are awaiting clearer direction and guidance. Students may desire to engage, but knowing how to go about this “engagement” has not yet been taught. This dynamic in placement becomes increasingly complex if one considers that the hallmark of social work practice is ambiguity. Having the skills to problem solve and navigate complex human service organizations involves the confidence (as noted earlier that is lacking) and the initiative to wade into some level of uncertainty. Developing these skills on the part of the students may pose a significant learning curve in the absence of adults to motivate and guide them every step of the way (Nargundkar & Shrikhande, 2012). For students who grew up in overly structured environments where they were rarely required to forge their own path, the autonomy and initiative needed for professional practice are new territory to negotiate and subsequently must be embedded in the curriculum for incoming social work students.

Difficulties in Receiving and Reflecting on Feedback

The opportunity for students to be provided with feedback on their performance is a core educational process in social work education (Barretti, 2009; Bogo et al., 2017). Feedback provides several important pedagogical functions for developing social workers with respect to facilitating the link between theory and practice. In addition, feedback from supervisors lends itself to encourage self-reflection (Bogo, 2015) and self-critique toward improved professional practice and competence (Abbott & Lyter, 1999).

Existing literature in social work education has traditionally identified that the provision of feedback to students is a multifaceted process and has the potential to be fraught with challenges for both students and field supervisors alike (Bogo et al., 2017), most notably when students do not accept the feedback and it rather serves as the basis for confrontation (Borders et al., 2017). The field supervisors interviewed for this study highlighted their own challenges in providing feedback to students, specifically a perception that students were reluctant to receive feedback that on some level was perceived by students as “corrective” or “negative.” Relative to their experience of students in the past, conversations embedded in this process now require more sensitivity regarding how the feedback would be perceived and internalized by the students. This reality is problematic for social work education as it speaks to a reluctance to freely exercise a key element of the student-supervisor relationship and thus field education.

The current perception that students struggle to accept or engage in the feedback process is not surprising if one adopts a generational lens. Generation Y, coined the “Me Generation,” grew up the recipients of praise for no other reason than for being themselves, as “parental and social upbringing [...] tended to emphasize building self-esteem through positive feedback, praise and recognition” (Zaslow, 2007). The field is encountering a cohort of students unable, unsure, or immediately threatened by feedback.

This perception of this cohort of students is consistent with Twenge’s (2017) research reporting that today’s twenty-somethings who were overpraised as children are more self-centered than previous generations and thus also feel insecure if they are not regularly complimented. They strive to receive positive feedback on their performance yet fear negative feedback because they often demonstrate a tendency to negatively internalize this type of feedback as a challenge to their self-worth (Alsop, 2008). There may be hope however, as Meister & Willyerd (2010) found that individuals born later in this generation respond more favorably to constructive feedback if they perceive it will enhance their individual development, and function as part of their internal process of self-validation.

The second element of the feedback loop important for social work education is students’ ability to utilize feedback in a process of self-reflection and at times critique. This process involves reflecting on the feedback in an intentional way as a means to reshape thinking, attitudes, or behavior. This practice enables students to incorporate feedback as an impetus for change and a driver toward developing competence. Field supervisors reported in this study that students demonstrate a reluctance or inability to engage in necessary self-reflection. In addition, the perception of field supervisors is that students struggle with knowing exactly how to engage with feedback in an in-depth manner. This could be the result of students having been reared in a digital age where they have been accustomed to engaging with information on a surface level. Research does suggest that current students demonstrate an inability for “deeper engagement” with content, with social media being implicated as allowing students to merely scan rather than examine materials from various perspectives in a meaningful way (Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone, 2011). This creates a challenge for social work education, “If they are to be useful and knowledgeable workers they must learn skills outside of just locating information and scanning it - [they] need the skills to analyze [and] synthesize information on a more in depth level” (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Schools of social work will need to facilitate students’ development of competencies for in-depth engagement with feedback and other content to prepare them for field education and practice.

Summary and Recommendations

The findings from this study highlight the important contribution of a generational lens for understanding the perceived challenges posed by incoming social work students in the realm of field education. A generational lens provides a more holistic understanding of our students by placing their attitudes, values, and behaviors in the context of their generation with all of its economic, political, social, and environmental influences. In addition, the use of a generational framework in the context of social work student competencies provides a roadmap for what skills and abilities need to be taught to tailor education processes in the classroom and in the field to this generation's unique needs. To that end, there are a number of recommendations that would serve in this pursuit.

Schools of social work are encouraged to:

- Review current practices associated with field education to ensure they reflect pedagogical approaches that are consistent with the types of learning amenable to the current generations of social work students
- Ensure that field supervisors and accompanying agencies provide students with a clear and concise orientation of agency policies, procedures, and expectations for conduct and behavior related to agency/organizational culture
- Have a conversation with students regarding their learning styles prior to beginning their placements; Particular attention should be paid to preferences regarding client interactions, i.e., initial independent contact with clients versus prolonged periods of shadowing before independent practice
- Provide guidance and education to field supervisors regarding the process of providing feedback in placement, stressing the importance of regular, clear, specific, and constructive feedback grounded in competencies for students (Kourgiantakis, Sewell, & Bogo, 2019)
- Provide structured supervision that incorporates opportunities for guided and meaningful self-reflection
- Apply a generational lens to the challenges that arise during supervision to better understand students' behaviors, attitudes, and values, and to motivate co-creation of generational differences in expectations

Limitations

There are a number of limitations associated with the present study. First, the generalizability of the findings is limited by the sample size. Findings reflect the attitudes and experiences of a small subset of field supervisors involved in field education associated with one school of social work in southwestern Ontario. Second, a generational lens existed on the part of the field supervisors interviewed, which bias their perception of the issues explored as part of this study. Future research should include the voices of students to provide further insight and a more balanced approach to the topic. Additionally, selection bias is inherent in the recruitment strategy used in this study, given the use of a purposively rather than randomly selected sample of field supervisors.

Conclusion

The findings from this study highlight several challenges of supervising the current generation of social work students. These challenges are perceived to be found in students' lack of confidence, lack of initiative, and difficulty receiving and reflecting on feedback. These themes highlight the need for schools of social work and field supervisors to consider how generational issues can be incorporated in field education. Moving forward, it will be important to characterize the current discourse of students in a light that does not problematize their attitudes, values, and behaviors, and rather develop field policies and practices that assist students in developing confidence and skills to manage ambiguous and uncertain settings, in addition to encouraging processes that emphasize openness and vulnerability. This research highlights opportunities for schools of social work to develop targeted strategies for capacity building that will benefit students' overall confidence and growth during field education.

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