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School social work: A transformative international placement model – Insights from practice

Marelize JOUBERT, Marelize VERGOTTINI, Daleen LABUSCHAGNE, Scott LITTLE and Jane FOGGIN

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development of international social work placements for postgraduate pre-registration students, highlighting a collaborative initiative between Sheffield Hallam University (UK), North-West University (South Africa), and Khula Development Group – a community development organisation based in Paarl, Western Cape, South Africa. The initiative promotes global participation by facilitating the exchange of social work practices, skills, and methodologies in diverse cultural and professional contexts. A key innovation of this collaboration lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates students with occupational therapy, social work, auxiliary social workers, and local primary schools to address critical issues such as school attendance, student well-being, and early identification of learners at risk of disengagement. The 70-day placement offered the students immersive exposure to school-based social work in South Africa, underscoring the importance of multi-agency collaboration, child protection, and the role of non-governmental organisations in community support. Through this experience, the students developed core professional competencies in areas such as power dynamics, social justice, diversity, and organisational leadership, all grounded in community strengths, resilience, and resource assets. The placement also fosters cultural competence and holistic practice, as the students engage with educators, parents, administrators, and community members. The support services provided included counselling, crisis intervention, advocacy, and psychoeducation, which addressed challenges related to adaptation, stress, and identity formation. Ultimately, this international placement model demonstrates both the benefits and the complexities of cross-border social work education. Furthermore, it highlights the value of shared learning, contextual responsiveness, and global partnerships to enrich student development and advance community-based inclusive social work practice.

KEY TERMS: advancing global collaboration, community development, innovative practices in school social work placements, international practice-based education, social work, student well-being

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INTRODUCTION

International placements in social work education offer transformative opportunities for students to engage in diverse cultural, social, and professional contexts. This paper presents a collaborative initiative between Sheffield Hallam University (United Kingdom), North-West University (South Africa), and Khula Development Group, a non-profit organisation, which provides a 70-day immersive school social work placement in South Africa for a postgraduate pre-registration student from England. The initiative aims to promote global citizenship, interdisciplinary learning, and community-based school social work practice. This paper also captures reflections from all stakeholders involved in bringing together the lived experiences of this placement, create opportunities for continued professional development and networking with a focus on strengthening professional development. The international conference on school social work hosted by the Vanderbijlpark campus of North-West University in South Africa, with the theme “Unified for Impact: Global Innovations in School Social Work” provided the perfect opportunity to present and share the lessons learnt from this unique placement experience.

BACKGROUND

The international placement developed between North-West University (NWU) in South Africa and Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in the United Kingdom marks an important step in advancing cross-border social work education. Emerging from an initial agreement between the two universities, the partnership established a structured 70-day placement for a postgraduate pre-registration student within South African community and school settings. Early engagement with the Khula Development Group (KDG), a community development organisation in Paarl, Western Cape, proved pivotal as KDG welcomed the opportunity for reciprocal learning and community benefit.

The initiative unfolded through a phased and carefully coordinated process. Between 2023 and mid-2024, NWU and SHU engaged in collaborative planning, including relationship-building, clarification of expectations, and ethical and logistical preparation. SHU subsequently delivered preparatory sessions to enhance the student’s cultural competence, professional readiness, and reflective capacity. From June to September 2024, NWU, SHU, and KDG worked jointly to finalise placement structures, supervision arrangements, and community engagement plans, underscoring the importance of transparent communication and shared values.

The first placement occurred between September and November 2024 and began with a two-week induction at KDG. This introduction familiarised the student with the organisational ethos, local school environments, and the sociocultural context of the surrounding communities. Collectively, these processes established a robust foundation for a sustainable and ethically grounded international placement model.

Context and rationale

South Africa’s socio-economic landscape presents unique challenges and opportunities for social work practice, particularly in school settings where issues such as poverty and trauma intersect. The placement shed a light on addressing school attendance, student-well-being, and dropout risks. The placement exposed the student to these realities. The inclusion of an occupational therapist, social workers, and social auxiliary workers enriched the interdisciplinary nature of the programme.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES UNDERPINNING THE INTERNATIONAL PLACEMENT

Ubuntu theory and community-centred practice

One of the foundational principles guiding the South African context of this placement is Ubuntu. Ubuntu is an African philosophy that means *I am because we are*. Ubuntu resonates deeply within community-based social work, where relationships and mutual care are central to social work practice (Van Breda, 2019). In the school setting, Ubuntu was reflected in the collaborative ethos between KDG, educators, families, and students. The UK student was encouraged to adopt a relational lens, recognising the value of community strengths, shared narratives, and culturally embedded support systems as outlined by Mabasa (2020) and Mugumbate et al. (2024).

Communication and Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

The importance of communication between social workers and school staff can be framed through systems theory, which views individuals as part of interconnected systems, families, schools, and communities. It emphasises the interaction between microsystems and the role of professionals in bridging these environments. Effective communication is essential to maintain the coherence of the system, enable timely interventions, and foster shared understanding. In this setting, communication served multiple functions: (i) information exchange – teachers and

social workers shared observations to identify learners at risk; (ii) collaborative planning – joint strategies were developed to support attendance, well-being, and participation; and (iii) relational trust-building – open dialogue fostered mutual respect and reduced professional silos.

Theory of change

The student also aligned his interventions with the organisation's theory of change model which is illustrated in Figure 1. The organisation applies the theory of change to map out how their activities lead to short-term results and ultimately long-term goals (KDG, 2025).

Resilience-based practice model

KDG also developed a resilience-based practice model called the STRONG programme (KDG, 2023). The purpose of the programme is to build resilience and positive coping in children. The STRONG programme builds children's resilience by strengthening self-belief (Self), future thinking (Future), emotional regulation (Emotions), empathy and social skills (Respect), and decision-making (Choices). It provides a safe, playful group space where children feel they belong and can connect with supportive adults and peers. During the student's placement, he was introduced to theory building which aligned his group work intervention with this model.

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK: SUPPORT AND INTERVENTIONS – A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

School social work in South Africa currently operates within the Department of Basic Education (DBE), Department of Social Development (DSD), and NGOs such as Child Welfare South Africa, Community Keepers, and KDG. Services include casework, group work programmes, multidisciplinary School-based and District-based Support Teams (SBSTs/DBSTs) for screening, identification, assessment, and support (SIAS), capacity-building of educators, and community liaison to link learners with statutory and non-governmental resources (Pretorius, 2020; Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018; Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). These services are part of national policy expectations, such as the SIAS framework of the DBE and the formal roles of school and district support structures (DBE, 2014; Vergottini & Weyers, 2022).

School social workers (SSWs) address barriers to learning and make referrals where needed. Studies by Boboyi (2024) and Pretorius (2020) indicate that direct counselling, crisis intervention, and referrals are core activities. The authors emphasise that trauma, sexual abuse, and social problems require specialised management (Boboyi, 2024; Pretorius, 2020). In addition, school social workers play an important role in the implementation of inclusive education. According to Van Sittert and Wilson (2018), SSWs work within an ecological, multidisciplinary framework, guiding teachers in SBST processes to identify and plan for learners with barriers to learning (DBE, 2014). Furthermore, Pretorius (2020) and Vergottini and Weyers (2022) emphasise the role of SSWs in capacity-building: training and advising educators on classroom-based interventions, behaviour management, referral procedures, and policy obligations. This role reduces the burden on overworked teachers (Pretorius, 2020; Vergottini & Weyers, 2022).

Further recommendations include formalising school social work as a standardised, funded component of the basic education system; strengthening supervision; establishing social workers in SBST/DBST structures; and formalising partnerships between the DBE and DSD (Boboyi, 2024; DBE, 2014; Pretorius, 2020; Vergottini & Weyers, 2022). In current South African literature (Boboyi, 2024; DBE, 2014; Pretorius 2020; Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018; Vergottini & Weyers, 2020, 2022) school social work is described as a combination of psychosocial casework, inclusive-education-focused educator support, and community linkage, and authors advocate for national standards and stronger intersectoral governance to support learners.

CORE COMPONENTS OF THE PRACTICE EDUCATION FRAMEWORK IN ENGLAND: A SUMMARY FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATORS' STUDENT SUPPORT WHILST ON PLACEMENT

Since the student on placement were from England, it is worth unpacking practice education framework in England. The Practice Education Framework in England offers a structured and theory-informed approach to the supervision and assessment of social work students in practice settings. It is anchored by five interrelated components that collectively support high-quality learning experiences and professional development. The Professional Capabilities Framework (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2018) provides a value-driven model for student development in nine domains, including professionalism, ethics, diversity, and critical reflection. It serves as a reference for learning and assessment throughout practice placements, ensuring alignment with national expectations for social work education. Within England, the Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) (BASW, 2022) articulate the competencies required of practice educators, with a focus on

effective supervision, formative and summative assessment, and the promotion of reflective and anti-oppressive practice. These standards support consistency and accountability in the educator role. Joubert (2020) emphasises the importance of practice educators in fostering readiness through supportive learning environments and calls for curriculum innovation to better bridge academic learning with practice realities.

The Code of Practice developed by the National Organisation for Practice Teaching (NOPT, 2020) promotes equity, quality, and consistency in practice education. One of the main pedagogical principles underpinning social work placement learning is grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb et al., 2000). The framework encourages the integration of academic knowledge with real-world practice. This is facilitated through structured placements, reflective dialogue, and constructive feedback. Joubert's research (2020) contributes to ongoing debates about the effectiveness of social work education in preparing graduates for complex, real-world practice and highlights the value of student voice in shaping pedagogical approaches (Dernova, 2015).

Systemic and contextual influences are part of reflective supervision during placement. It highlights the need for greater recognition of practicing educators and calls for enhanced support mechanisms. These components form a cohesive model that supports the development of competent, reflective, and ethically grounded social workers. The framework also provides a foundation for continuous improvement in practice education through collaboration, professional development, and responsive pedagogy.

Building a partnership between Khula Development Group, North-West University and Sheffield Hallam University – A collaborative approach

Khula Development Group

KDG is a non-profit organisation (NPO) with a mission to prevent school dropout amongst primary school learners from disadvantaged communities. They focus on grades R through 4 where the educational journey begins. In South Africa, the educational challenge is profound. In 2024, the Zero Dropout Campaign conducted research across the country to understand the nuances, perceptions, and dynamics that influence dropout rates. This report (DG Murray Trust, 2024) highlights that around 40% of children who begin school in Grade 1 never complete matric. This staggering dropout rate leaves nearly half of young people trapped in cycles of poverty and unemployment. Many children enter the school system already burdened by significant barriers, ranging from the effects of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, inadequate early childhood stimulation and nutrition to exposure to domestic violence. These personal challenges are often compounded by community issues such as substance abuse, gang activity, and widespread neglect. Unfortunately, the children in KDG's programmes seldom have access to therapeutic or psychosocial support, given an overburdened and under-resourced public sector.

Since its establishment in 2004, KDG has worked to prevent school dropout in Stellenbosch and Paarl communities in South Africa. Initially focused on reintegrating children from the streets back into formal education, KDG employed community facilitators, social workers, and social auxiliary workers to support this restorative process. The organisation also engaged adolescents who had already dropped out of school, many of whom were vulnerable to gang involvement and substance use. Through reflective dialogue with these young people, KDG identified a critical insight: earlier intervention during the primary school years might have altered their life trajectories. In response, KDG strategically shifted its focus toward early intervention, targeting primary school learners and adopting a preventive rather than restorative model. This evolution marked a significant turning point in the organisation's approach to educational support.

In 2018, KDG further strengthened its developmental model by integrating an occupational therapist into its team. This addition improved the organisation's capacity to deliver in-school interventions that addressed both developmental and emotional needs. At the end of 2024, KDG refined its model to ensure equal emphasis on trauma-informed care and developmental support. This was operationalised through the deployment of educational and emotional support facilitators trained, respectively, by occupational therapists and social workers within designated safe-space classrooms in partner schools. These nurturing environments facilitate play-based group and individual sessions tailored to the needs of each child.

Complementing school-based interventions, KDG conducts regular home visits and provides teacher training sessions, strengthening a two-generational holistic approach that engages both children and their caregivers. This integrated strategy reflects a commitment to sustainable community-centred social work practice and highlights the importance of early, relational, and contextually grounded interventions in preventing school disengagement.

KDG recognises the interconnected nature of the lives of children and their caregivers. This approach addresses overlapping educational, developmental, and economic needs, aiming to strengthen family systems holistically. By supporting caregivers alongside their children, the model seeks to disrupt cycles of poverty and promote sustainable development and wellbeing, achieving greater impact than single-generation interventions. The central element of the KDG strategy is the advancement of developmental equity through the decentralisation of therapeutic knowledge as seen in Figure 1 below.

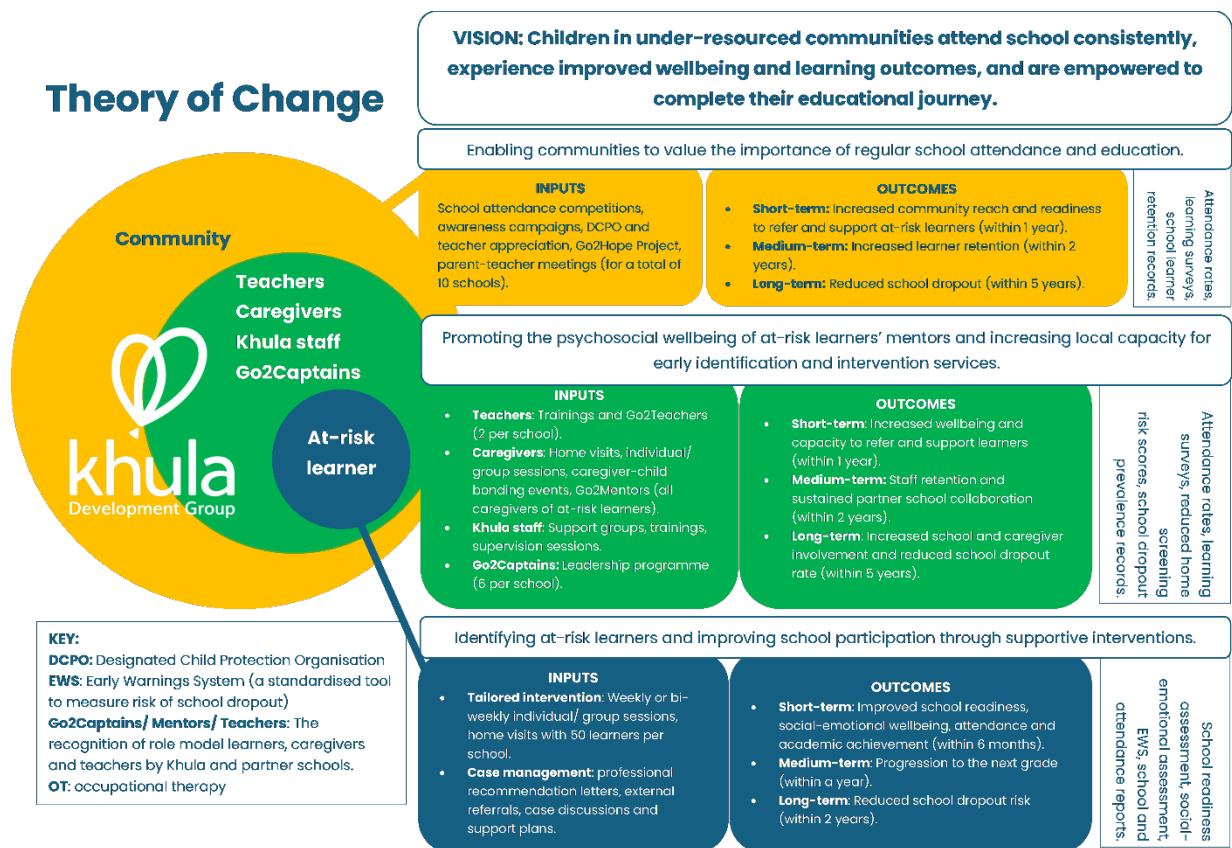


Figure 1: Khula Development Group's decentralised community-based practice – theory of change

KDG further maximises impact by training facilitators of emotional and educational support in core social work and occupational therapy methods. This targeted capacity-building enables social workers and occupational therapists to focus on complex case discussions, individualised support plans, and urgent interventions, thus optimising the use of professional resources and enhancing service delivery. The model as illustrated in Figure 1, known as KDG's decentralised community-based practice, theory of change model focusses on sharing of responsibilities between the organisation, the school and the broader community. By embedding this knowledge within school communities, KDG empowers local role-players to identify and respond to developmental concerns early. This community-based approach improves local capacity and ensures timely intervention while maintaining quality and consistency through supervision by KDG's qualified professionals.

Reflective accounts of learning journey

The following reflective accounts attempt to capture the lived experiences from all stakeholders involved in setting up the international placement partnership.

Student competences and experiences

The placement with KDG in Paarl and Stellenbosch schools highlighted socioeconomic disparities and unresolved government fiscal mismanagement and corruption (Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). This was also evident within classrooms, which were characterised by excessive student-to-teacher ratios: a key factor associated with lower educational attainment (Köhler, 2020).

Structural underfunding of child protection services hindered successful referrals from schools. Although the DSD recommends a caseload of 80 cases per social worker (Masilo, 2024), local social workers explained that their caseloads exceeded this limit. Furthermore, these caseloads were much higher than the reported average of 15.4 cases of child protection social workers based in the UK (Department of Education, 2024). This high caseload meant that local child protection services had a high threshold for intervention, limiting services to the most serious cases. Consequently, teachers, due to spending a lot of time with these vulnerable children, are strategically placed to notice warning signs of neglect and abuse (Sharley, 2022), and often shared their frustration at the perceived lack of action when reporting safeguarding concerns. KDG aims to mitigate this service gap, by working within schools employing a holistic approach with the goal of preventing school dropout and absenteeism (KDG,

2025). The KDG framework, which highlights the importance of interprofessional collaboration, provided opportunities to shadow occupational therapists and community work teams. These experiences increased understanding on how interprofessional collaboration strengthens a holistic, practice-focused intervention in order to promote client well-being (Testa, 2022). The student co-facilitated an eight-week group work intervention for grade 4 students who were identified by teachers as “struggling” and requiring support. From the start of the placement, the student was aware of his position as an “outsider” and as mitigation strategy consciously collaborated with colleagues from the Afrikaans, Coloured, and Xhosa communities to deepen the cultural understanding of the learners’ social and environmental challenges. These collaborations occurred both formally and informally. Local communities had many strengths, for example, the collectivist response to gender-based violence, where members united to create awareness posters and attend a talk from the Paarl Thuthuzela Care Centre. During this event, the student met a woman who was well-known to KDG social workers for opening her home to victims of abuse.

The groupwork progressed through the forming-norming-storming-performing stages (Tuckman, 1965) and covered themes that affected the learners both inside and outside of school. Most of the learners were Afrikaans speaking, which means that the student had to ensure that the sessions were linguistically inclusive. Learners were encouraged to communicate their ideas in their language of choice, whether through speaking, writing, or drawing. Over time, a significant shift was observed in which learners were more willing to communicate in English, signalling that the learners were beginning to view the student less as an outsider and more as a trusted facilitator. During and after sessions, they began sharing deeper concerns and even making disclosures. This was a clear learning point: that children require trusting relationships with competent adults before they feel safe enough to disclose information about abuse (Thulin et al., 2020). The student also provided individual support to a learner who was identified as at risk of dropping out. This short-term intervention involved applying theoretical knowledge, specifically solution-focused practice, and motivational interviewing.

Perspective from the independent practice educator

KDG’s commitment to community practice and school participation provided a rich context for student learning. Early conversations focused on outlining expectations for students, including their roles within school settings, the nature of support services offered, and the values that underlie KDG’s work. As a practice educator, it was important to get to know the student in advance. This informed the setting for supervision and helped establish collaboration with KDG staff, ensuring alignment between academic, practice, and community perspectives.

One of the most enriching aspects of the placement was the exchange of theoretical models and perspectives. The student was partially introduced to Ubuntu. The emphasis on community and shared humanity offered a complementary lens to systems theory. Also, the student brought with him knowledge of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT); a strengths-based approach taught in the UK. The student took the initiative to share this model with KDG colleagues, facilitating informal learning. This reciprocal exchange highlighted the value of learning from models in practice.

The student also recognised shared challenges across contexts, particularly around thresholds for child protection referrals. Tensions between school staff concerned and overstretched statutory services were evident in both countries. The role of NGOs like KDG in filling service gaps became a key learning point, reinforcing the importance of social work presence in schools. Innovative practices such as OT-led approaches and staff support models demonstrated how interdisciplinary teams can foster well-being among educators and learners alike.

This model relied heavily on technology, stable Wi-Fi and consistent power supply, which occasionally posed challenges but also encouraged adaptability. The placement required a shift in traditional supervisory roles to being comfortable with a “long-arm” approach, providing supervision remotely without physical visits or direct observation. Supervision was flexible, responsive, and grounded in reflective dialogue. Navigation of the application of UK professional standards within an international context, while recognising that concepts such as “social work” can be interpreted differently in cultural and institutional settings. An area for future development is the need for stronger collaboration with on-site supervision. Although remote supervision provided continuity, deeper integration with KDG’s supervisory structures would improve student support and contextual responsiveness. The journey was challenging yet rewarding.

Setting up an international placement: Reflections from practice

KDG team reflections

Upon asking the following questions from the KDG staff members, they responded as follows:

1. Could the student manage to move from the position of an outsider to being part of the community?

Yes, he adapted very well and became comfortable with children and parents. He would ask every

time if he found or experienced something more interesting. He also allowed children into his personal (professional) space. He was also open to trying traditional dishes.

2. How did the student handle language and communication challenges?

Some of the children answered in English, where there was a language barrier, we translated.

3. Would you think it is a good idea to do intercultural placements with international students?

Intercultural placements benefit the community, horizons are broadened, and dreams are enriched.

Key themes such as adapted, comfortable, community, open, and traditional dishes reflect the successful integration and cultural engagement of the student during the placement.

North-West University reflections

The collaboration between NWU, SHU, and KDG was a first and, ultimately, a successful international collaboration. The arrangements and continuous communication from all three stakeholders from beginning to end formed the foundation of success. In retrospect, it is important to ensure that NWU, being in South Africa, is more involved with continuous support to the student and KDG – especially because NWU is the local university that oversees KDG collaboration and SHU from UK placement locally. The NWU is the gatekeeper and protector of KDG in South Africa.

Sheffield Hallam University reflections

A postgraduate (pre-registration) Master of Social Work student undertook the 70-day placement in South Africa, as part of his first social work practicum. The preparation included comparative information on school social work, multi-agency collaboration, and child protection systems in both the UK and South Africa. He was supported by a practicing educator who provided structured supervision aligned with the Social Work England (SWE, 2021) professional standards. Supervision was conducted online offering consistent support to the student. KDG played a pivotal role in supporting the student's educational and emotional well-being, offering a rich practice context grounded in community-centred approaches. A comprehensive placement audit and risk assessment were conducted prior to starting, ensuring that ethical and safety standards were met as required.

KEY MESSAGES LEARNT FROM THIS INTERNATIONAL PLACEMENT

The following key learning points were identified and shared during the placement.

- A defining feature of the initiative was its interdisciplinary approach. Social workers and occupational therapists collaborated to address the needs of the learners, recognising the interplay between physical, emotional, and social well-being. This model encouraged: (i) shared assessment and intervention planning; (ii) cross-disciplinary understanding of child development; and (iii) integration of therapeutic and social support strategies.
- The UK student brought training in SFBT, a strengths-based approach. SFBT emphasises building on what is working, setting achievable goals and empowering individuals to envision preferred futures. In practice, the student applied SFBT techniques to support learners experiencing emotional distress and behavioural challenges. The integration of SFBT within a culturally responsive framework allowed the student to adapt his methods, ensuring that he is respectful of local values and communication styles (Zak & Pekala, 2024). It also highlighted the importance of flexibility and humility in cross-cultural practice.
- Effective communication between social workers and school personnel emerged as a critical success factor. It enabled early identification of at-risk learners; coordinated interventions that combined educational and psychosocial support; and trust-building between professionals, students, and families. Case discussions, informal check-ins, and joint planning sessions ensured mutual learning and problem-solving. The student learnt to navigate professional boundaries, cultural nuances, and institutional expectations. In addition, communication was not only functional, but relational, grounded in respect, empathy, and shared commitment to child well-being.
- The international placement facilitated growth in the student's professional competencies. These included understanding of social justice informed by engagement with families and communities; the ability to navigate cultural diversity and uphold ethical practice; strengthened leadership skills and capacity for organisational collaboration; and deepened commitment to community engagement and

resilience-based practice. These were supported by programmes such as The Strong Programme (KDG, 2023), which focusses on building resilience in children facing adversity.

- Living and working in South Africa led to critical reflection on the student's own cultural assumptions and professional identity. The placement challenged normative frameworks and encouraged a more reflexive, globally informed approach to practice. This identity formation process is integral to developing cultural humility and responsiveness in international social work.

Navigating complexity in international social work placements

Although the international placement offered opportunities for learning and professional growth, it also presented complexities. Differences in dialect, terminology, and cultural expressions sometimes hindered clarity and required adaptive communication strategies. Adjusting to cultural norms and developing awareness were essential for ethical engagement and relational practice. Exposure to high levels of community trauma and socio-economic hardship elicited strong emotional reactions, necessitating reflective supervision, and emotional containment discussions. The student had to reconcile academic learning outcomes with the unpredictable and resource-constrained realities of frontline practice. This allowed for rich reflective supervision sessions in which the student balanced academic expectations with reality.

Securing affordable accommodation near KDG's operational areas proved challenging. The limited availability of public transport in South Africa required alternative arrangements to ensure safe and reliable access to placement sites. The student's maturity and gender (male) contributed positively to the resolution of this issue, which is an important consideration for future placements.

These challenges were proactively addressed through structured debriefing sessions, peer support networks, and supervision. The experience highlighted the importance of pre-placement preparation and flexible problem-solving in supporting students through international placements.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

This international placement model offers several important implications for social work education. First, it highlights the value of global and cross-cultural learning in developing students' cultural humility, reflexivity, and capacity to work in diverse and complex environments. The collaboration strengthened students' understanding of community-centred practice, resilience-based approaches, and the influence of socio-economic contexts on child and family well-being. Second, the interdisciplinary nature of the model linking social work, occupational therapy, and school-based support teams demonstrates the importance of interprofessional education in preparing students for holistic, collaborative practice. Third, the use of remote "long-arm" supervision illustrates the need for flexible supervision frameworks that maintain quality, ethical oversight, and reflective learning across geographic boundaries. Finally, the model supports the internationalisation of social work curricula by integrating comparative policy perspectives, global partnerships, and opportunities for virtual or physical mobility.

This model demonstrates the potential of international placements to strengthen global partnerships in social work education; promote inclusive community-based practice; prepare students for complex, multicultural environments and provide opportunities for internationalisation of the social work curriculum. Collectively, these implications reinforce the importance of experiential, contextually responsive, and partnership driven approaches in social work education.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The partnership between SHU, NWU and KDG demonstrates the power of international collaboration to advance the education of social worker students. Embedding students in real-world contexts and fostering interdisciplinary practice, it contributes to the development of culturally competent and socially responsive practitioners equipped to address global challenges in social work. This experience reinforced the importance of effective communication between social workers and school staff. Through regular dialogue, planning, and shared observations, the student learnt how collaborative relationships enhance early intervention, child protection, and learner well-being.

In general, this placement model illustrates the value of intentional partnership, interdisciplinary collaboration, and contextual responsiveness in the education of social workers. It offered a unique opportunity to develop professional competencies in a global setting while contributing meaningfully to community practice in South Africa. Through interdisciplinary collaboration and community-centred practice, the student engaged in critical issues such as school attendance, learning well-being, and early intervention.

The following recommendations are proposed to strengthen future initiatives and enhance the impact of global social work education:

- Development of a sustainable international placement model: This includes clear agreements, ethical guidelines, supervision protocols, and community engagement strategies.
- Planning for future interprofessional collaborations: Building on the success of integrating social work and occupational therapy students, future placements should intentionally design interprofessional learning opportunities.
- Legacy and sustainability planning: Partners should invest in legacy planning, capacity-building for local organisations, and ongoing knowledge exchange.
- Opportunities lie in expanding continuing professional development pathways for social workers: Promote strengthening collaboration between higher education institutions and placement providers.
- Curriculum development and student preparation: Enhancement of preparation for students which include cultural competency training, ethical considerations in international practice, and contextual briefings. Both universities could internationalise their curricula, incorporating global perspectives, and contributing to decolonising social work education.

To widen access and reduce logistical barriers, universities should explore virtual mobility programmes that connect students across borders through online modules and joint seminars. These initiatives can foster interprofessional learning between social workers and occupational therapists in both countries.

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