Social Work Field Instruction Supervision and Resilience during COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

In Social Work education, field instruction is a component where students learn the practice of social work through delivering social work services to clients in non-profit organizations, government departments and community settings. Through the field instruction placements, students learn how to integrate theory into practice, to critically examine the knowledge, values, and principles of what they have theoretically learned in a lecture room. Therefore, proper preparation of social work students to enter practice is critical. It requires supervision by an experienced field instruction social worker of all processes and interventions undertaken by students during their field instruction practice. The role of field instruction in Social Work education is recognized as an integral part of students' learning and development. This chapter seeks to explore and describe how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected student social workers' training and what could be considered for the future of social-work field instruction training. As the researcher's endeavour to respond to these questions, she will base her discussions on her capacity as a former field instruction coordinator, observations, and experiences in engaging with students and their supervisors.

Subsequently, the researcher will highlight some of the strategies that emerged during the lockdown period to enhance the supervisory interaction, whilst ensuring quality field instruction supervision standards. Furthermore, this chapter envisages to unravel some strategies from which the institution of higher education offering the BSW degree can take lessons and strengthen and refine what works in different contexts, as well as share best practices.

Keywords: Resilience, coping strategies, field instruction coordinator, COVID-19

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Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how resilience in social-work field instruction training has come into play among all the parties involved during this COVID-19 lockdown. As a social worker, I will not be able to follow the format typical of this volume. I have no experiments or studies to report and no clinical recommendations. My interest is based on my experience and reflection as a former social-work field instruction coordinator at a South African university. Therefore, I respond to questions as stipulated in the journal of Alteration call, as my discipline is both empirical, conceptual, and normative – seeking to clarify the concepts that we use in our field to suggest ways how the program can be modified and how it can be taken forward in a structured way.

According to the Conversation, March 2020, scientists have known of the human coronavirus since the 1960s. However, only rarely has it garnered wider recognition over the past half century. One example was in 2003 when the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) caused an outbreak of the disease, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in mainland China and Hong Kong. Another was in 2012, when the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) led to an outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the Republic of Korea, among other countries.

In both cases, the coronaviruses were new to science. Happily, both outbreaks were contained thanks to a combination of human intervention and still unknown natural circumstances. In 2020, coronaviruses became a household name all over the world. Most people by now have heard of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), or COVID-19, but some may not be aware that SARS-CoV-2 belongs to a family of viruses.

Field instruction in social training is a critical element from which students receive experiential learning and learn how to integrate theory into practice. Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the regulations by the government, some students may be deprived of this opportunity. The deprivation could be due to anxiety, lack of resources and access to agencies where the experiential learning could or should take place. Even though the institutions may come up with alternative methods to salvage the academic year, not every student will fully benefit, due to the previous inequalities.

In the previous decades, the world experienced various or outbreaks similar to COVID 19 in different continents and contexts. History tells us that,

even though there were fatalities, vaccines were developed to overcome or control the outbreaks. For the purpose of this chapter, the author will focus on the COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa.

Coronavirus in South Africa

On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, China. 'Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2' (SARS-CoV-2) was confirmed as the causative agent of what we now know as 'Coronavirus Disease 2019' (COVID-19). Since then, the virus has spread to more than 100 countries, including South Africa. In the two diagrams, A depicts where the highest risk of community transmission is in South Africa, while diagram B depicts the trends in new cases. The author is aware that the statistics keep changing; however, the current and tables below reflect where SA was during the write-up of this chapter.

Southern African Higher Education Institutions and COVID-19

In African countries, approximately 9.8 million students at institutions of higher learning are experiencing a disruption to their studies due to COVID-19. In South Africa, students at public and private institutions were evacuated from campuses during the earlier phase of the virus. This was followed by the unintended closure of the institutions when the virus started to spread more rapidly.

South African Higher Education Institutions and COVID-19's Response

Noting the public health challenges posed by COVID-19 worldwide and the increasing positive cases locally, the South African government introduced measures to curb the spread of the virus in communities. On 15 March 2020, the President of South Africa declared a state of emergency. This included the temporary closure of schools, workplace, and travel restrictions. Individuals were also cautioned to adhere to strict public health measures such as regularly washing hands, and social isolating and distancing.

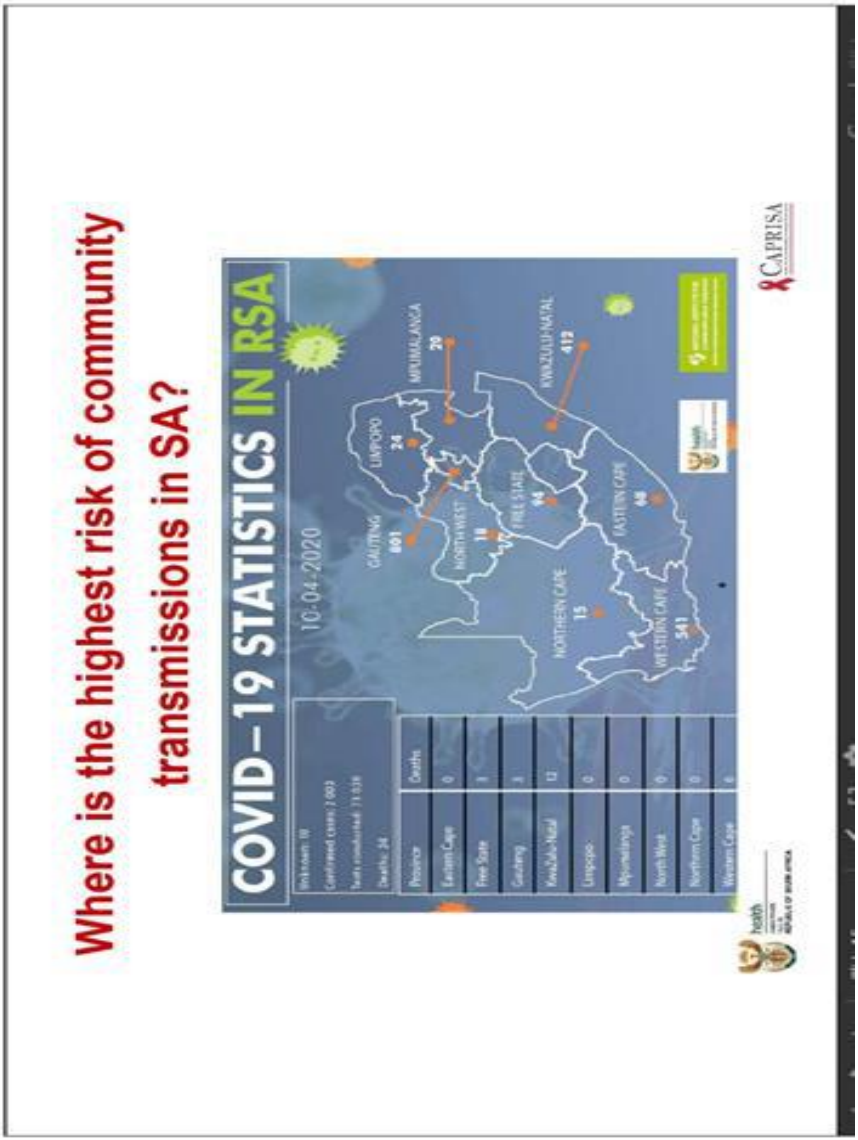

Diagram: A
Reference: SAcoronavirus.co.za

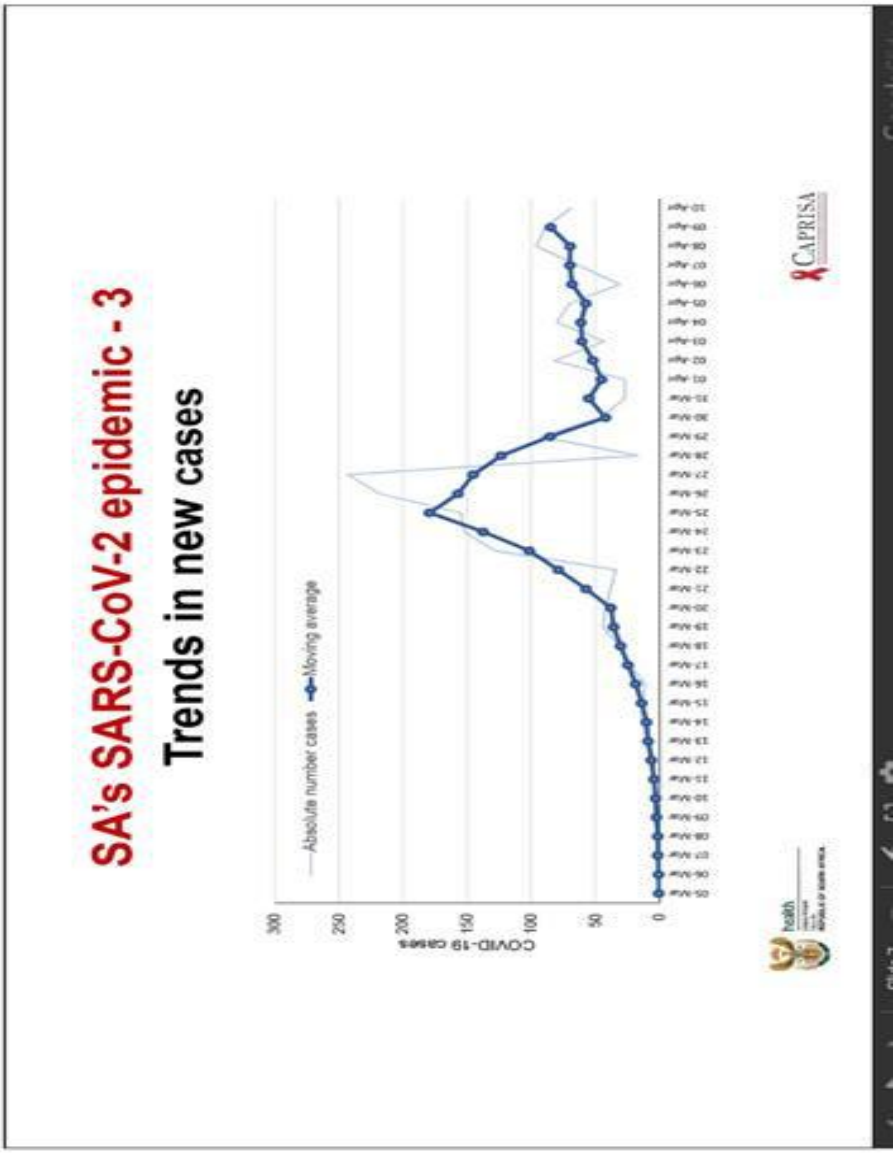

Diagram: B
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Due to the increasing spread of COVID-19, on 28 March 2020, a 21-day lockdown was introduced by the President of South Africa, which was extended by a further two weeks, ending on 30 April 2020. The introduction of the lockdown abruptly limited the operation of many sectors of the country. For example, institutions of higher learning had to close campuses to allow students to travel home. As the institutions had to close, scheduled laboratory work and field practice for students had to be suspended and, in some cases, certain field practice settings possibly becoming unavailable to our students post the lockdown. Since vice-chancellors had received a joint briefing on the COVID-19 virus from the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) on 19 February, they sprang into action, gearing up their institutions for a concerted response when the epidemic arrived on their campuses. With the number of confirmed cases tallying at 1,460 in South Africa (as of 2 April 2020) and with the presence of COVID-19 now confirmed in all provinces of the Republic, the arrival of this pandemic at all university campuses proved more imminent than ever (https://www.usaf.ac.za/universities-coronavirus-covid-19-updates/). Now that we are in a national lockdown, our member institutions are rigorously preparing and psyching their communities up for virtual teaching and learning in the quest to salvage the 2020 academic year.
In March 2020, a new pronouncement was made by the Minister of Higher Education … the re-opening of universities also had to be included.

To that end, some shared available resources, while others offered online skills training in this regard (https://www.usaf.ac.za/universities-coronavirus-covid-19-updates/).

Conceptual Framework

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines and reports the Coronavirus as a cluster of pneumonia cases, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2, now known as Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Definition of Key Concepts

Field Instruction Definition

In social work, field instruction, which is sometimes referred to as practicum, is an experience that requires the practical application of a theory or conceptual knowledge in context (Garthwait 2011:2) For this chapter, ‘practicum’ and ‘field instruction’ are used interchangeably.

Resilience

This refers to an individual's ability to overcome, learn from, and adapt positively to adverse events (Riley & Masten 2005). Essentially, to study resilience is to identify ways in which individuals and communities withstand adversity through individual and collective strengths, resources, and capabilities (Panter-Brick *et al.* 2018). Community resilience refers to the ability of groups of people to respond to and recover from adverse situations, such as natural disasters, acts of violence, economic hardship, and other challenges to their community. In the context of this chapter, the focus is on resilience and COVID19, social work field instruction and institutions of higher learning.

An Overview of Social Work Field Instruction in South Africa

Social work education in South Africa is regulated by the South African Council for Social Services Professions (SACSSP) and the Council of Higher Education (CHE). Since 2007, all providers of social work education had to offer a four-year undergraduate BSW, which consisted of 27 exit-level outcomes up until the recent move to social work standards with consolidated the Field instruction exit learning outcomes approved by the National Standards Bodies (NSBs) and the South African Qualifications Authority. . Field instruction sites are considered critical, as they need to demonstrate their competency as an enabling environment for the student learning environment. According to Simpson and Raninga (2014), student supervision brings together two main areas, namely the educational component that influences the experiences of the students at the university and their academic requirements, and the welfare context that impacts the type of placements available for students and their experiences in the field. Raniga (2012) postulates that a major concern of social work academics is the need to balance students' learning opportunities for the completion of the academic requirements, while at the same time students need adequate supervisory support amid strained budgets and human resources. Furthermore, the massification of social work training in South Africa due to the provision of bursaries and scholarships, and the migration of social workers from the NGO sector to the government sector are also noted as affecting students' field instruction placement. Lombard (2008, in Engelbrecht 2014:176) points out that both NGOs and the government experience human resource capacity challenges, with subsidy cuts. It is the same NGOs that has borne the brunt of the crisis on social service

delivery, as most of social work students are placed within these agencies. The subsidy cuts and COVID-19 posed a double challenge, as the NGOs had to provide services under stringent conditions.

South African Council for Social Services Professions

The South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP/Council) is a statutory body established in terms of section 2 of the Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978 (the Act). Based on the Act's provisions, the Council's comprehensive role is to be the determining, guiding and directing authority body within the structure of social service professions in South Africa. The Council fulfils this role by setting the standards for education and training of practitioners and by taking policy resolutions as guidelines for the practising of the social service professions under its auspices. The Council has two Professional Boards under its auspices, namely the Professional Board for Social Work and the Professional Board for Child and Youth Care Work.

The Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978 require of institutions of higher learning to register students studying towards social work qualifications with the Council. This is done to regulate students' training and performance, and the quality of training offered by the institutions. However, in the light of the pandemic this process could be compromised, where students might somehow be ill-prepared due to inadequate experiential learning. Thus, new terms or standard agreements would need to be considered in order to maintain quality training and completion of the degree.

Resilience, Teaching and Learning, Field Instruction Supervision during COVID-19

The pandemic has become a threat to the health and wellbeing of the world population. Its global pandemic nature has the potential to destabilise systems and processes that have defined human existence, epistemology, and knowledge. New ways of thinking, new responses to systems and processes, new boundaries and new teaching modalities are being formed as a result of this rapidly spreading disease. In response to the disruption to higher education, more specifically in South Africa, one needs to, or has tapped into alternative modes of coping. Previous studies on resilience mostly focused on the psychosocial traits of individuals (Brodsky *et al.* 2011). However, varying determinants of resiliency exist across individuals, cultures and social

environments (Ungar 2008). Traditional psychological research on resilience does not investigate the role of socio-political contexts, history and culture sufficiently in its analyses (Eggerman & Panter-Brick 2010), which is crucial in academia. Resilience has historically been viewed as a collective cluster of protective factors that arise from an individual's genetic makeup (Henderson 1998). Research evolved our understanding of the phenomenon, and it is now recognized that some protective factors can be learned by individuals in the face of adversity (Edward & Warelow 2005). Resilience may manifest through various protective factors that are both inherent and learned. Socioecological processes of resilience acknowledge the interaction of an individual's ability with the social, physical, and political environments that can promote or hinder the use of those abilities (Ungar 2012). The converging interaction of individuals with their social and physical ecologies can shape an individual's resilience in the face of extreme stressors (Harvey *et al.* 2003).

Studies on social work field instruction have generally considered resilience as one of the protective factors that test the balance on students ability to integrate theory into practice with little research focused on understanding how resilience comes into play for all stakeholders involved in training the students, namely field instruction coordinators (FI), institutions agencies and supervisors. Moreover, FI coordinators have a complex set of experiences, which gives meaning to the process rather than the traits of resilience (Lenette, Brough & Cox 2013). Therefore, we need to avoid associating resilience as a present or absent dichotomy (Ungar 2008) when studying field instruction and supervision in social work. Instead, studies should explore the process of resilience as it unfolds within field instruction course. Students, FI coordinators and agencies experience and consider the heterogeneous process of resilience (Ungar 2012), including interactions between the individual and the environment. Thus, it is critical to understand how they display and utilize resilience across different social and physical ecologies. The playing field is indeed uneven and whilst many in society and our community enjoy greater levels of privilege, the consequences of the pandemic have illuminated and amplified the existing inequalities in our society – with the poor, marginal, precarious, and under-resourced disproportionately experiencing its fallout. The emergency remote teaching and learning plan must take into consideration the different learning environments of our students and their access to learning resources, appropriate devices, and data.

Resilience in Relation to Communities and Students

COVID 19 and the regulations that were implemented impacted several entities, communities, families and individuals. Norris *et al.* (2008:131) define community resilience as 'a process linking a set of networked adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation in constituent populations after a disturbance'. Furthermore, in a recent literature review on resilience, Castleden *et al.* (2011:370) define community resilience as 'a capability (or process) of a community adapting and functioning in the face of disturbance'.

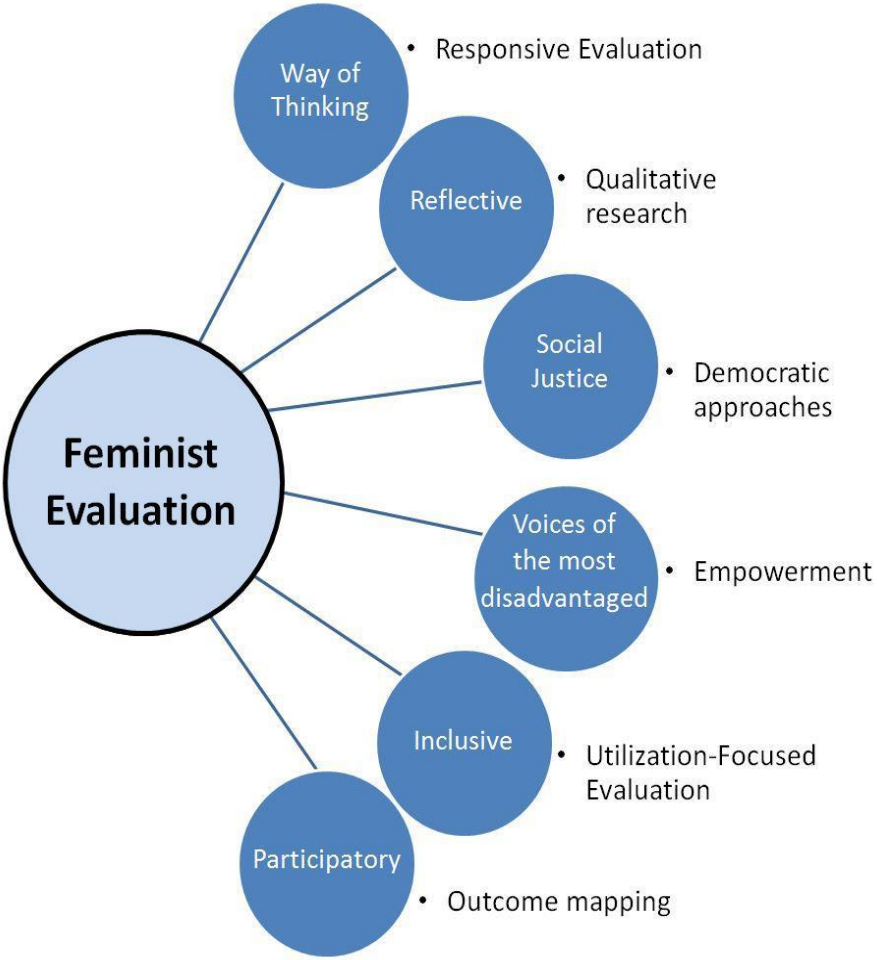
The concept of 'community resilience' is almost invariably viewed as positive, being associated with increasing local capacity, social support and resources, and decreasing risks of miscommunication and trauma. Yet consensus as to what community resilience is, how it should be defined and what its core characteristics are does not appear to have been reached, with mixed definitions appearing in the scientific literature, policies and practice. For the purpose of this chapter the definition by Norris *et al*. is considered more appropriate within the context of the COVID 19 pandemic. Communities had to adapt to a new normal, namely social distancing, in order to enable normal functioning. They had to devise new methods of connecting with their loved ones, friends and extended families.

To ensure that no-one is left behind or discriminated against, students, student organisations, academics and institutions of higher learning had to engage in developing new strategies to enhance teaching and learning, salvage the year and achieve the annual goals. Resources and logistics were put in place, and sustainability in terms of institutional responses is one of the matters to be looked at going forward.

A Shift from a Traditional Field Instruction to a more Context and Developmental Approach

Theoretical Framework

Feminist evaluation is based on feminist research, which in turn is based on feminist theory.



Feminist Partnership Model and the Interactional Process Model, adapted from Podems and Negroustoueva (2016).

Discussion

The chapter sought to examine and critique literature on the role of resilience in social-work field instruction supervision during the COVID-19 lockdown. The reflection allows a glimpse of how adversity can become a way of life for students and teachers. Stressors during the COVID-19 lockdown covered

multiple areas and varied in depth and impact. Academic concerns served as stressors and were exacerbated by stress. However, COVID-19 demonstrates the mitigating effects of resilience. Teachers and students' ability to cope with multiple stressors, their efforts to turn the experiences into lessons and opportunities to remain focused, and the ability to achieve a degree of normalcy in one's life (through educational pursuits), regardless of the situation in which COVID-19 places one, serves as an example of the role resilience can play in teachers and students' lives.

This chapter is underpinned by (i) the higher education context in South Africa during the COVID 19 pandemic; and (ii) the SW as a professional degree and what needed to be modified or transformed within Social Work field instruction is described. I will approach this by answering the much-needed 'Wh' questions; why, who, what, when and how.

Question One

How have institutions responded to the institutional closures and the protection of the integrity of what is being taught, learned and assessed across programmes in the Humanities?

In the quest to preserve their academic integrity and save students' lives, the institutions had to implement strategies to protect their integrity. For example, there was an early recess strategy, introducing synchronous or online teaching, rethinking and refining student assessment methods. Other University Centers for Teaching and Learning had to assist academics with different online learning and teaching tools to ensure that learning continues remotely. However, aspects of what the cost implication was going to be for students were not adequately addressed. Cost needed to consider both local and international students. As a result, those who could not afford to immediately vacate the residences had to negotiate, while at the same being at risk of staying with their basic needs not adequately met. Therefore, being away from families or support systems could led to continual anxiety and panic.

Question Two

What might the curriculum within the Humanities programmes look like in the immediate and longer term, post this pandemic disease period?

The pandemic necessitated a collective effort by different stakeholders, namely NGOs, CBOs, Faith Organisations and Government Departments. For instance, the institutions of higher learning and the Department of Higher

Education in this instance will have to collaborate with the Council in Higher Education (CHE), governing bodies, student bodies and communities to craft the re-designed curriculum and make it suitable for the current situation, without jeopardising the students and the quality of training. In doing so, the parties need to acknowledge the demographics and socio-economic disparities of the students and teachers. In my discipline, which is social work, all the strategies are to be implemented aiming at ensuring that BSW students meet the basic criteria and competencies for field practice, as stipulated in the CHE BSW Standards, (2004) as well as the SACSSP BSW Norms and Standards, (2016) documents. In limiting direct human contact and maintaining social distance, some consultations have been moved to online spaces. For example, students receive mentorship and supervision online.

Also, to keep up with social work education standards, students had to continue working with clients remotely (sessions are recorded for supervision purposes). I argue that this will vary across the levels of study and the students/s context and have cost implications.

Problematisation

To date, empirical research has not examined the alternative modalities in teaching field instruction, especially in African countries or previously disadvantaged countries, which include South Africa. However, several promising context-relevant alternatives had to be thought to ensure a triparty benefit, namely students, teachers, and governing bodies. First, there was a compelling need to face the socio-economic disparities of our students and teachers; the notion of the haves and have not became visible. The diagram on page 212 depicts the demographics where the highest risk-transmission community is. The diagram further reflects the socio-economic disparities, where most community members struggle to access healthcare services. Students from these communities would often be the first ones to have gone to university, and their home conditions may not have access to any internet. They might even experience a struggle to pay the varsity fees. Therefore, the discussions and the deliberations had to ensure that the training standard in the Humanities is not or will not be compromised as stipulated by different governing bodies per discipline. What this means is that collaborations and networking, skills sharing, distribution of resources and some degree of flexibility were to be utilized. Evidence for such activities called for resilience of each party involved.

The period of the pandemic has been an opportunity to reflect on our losses, which include the value of face-to-face engagements, freedom of movement, security, and comfort. However, there were some gains, for instance, the need to strengthen collaborative relations, facing the realities of life and strengthening interdependence.

Opportunities for New Insights and Responses to Infectious Diseases, especially COVID-19, that Confront the Humanities Curriculum within Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programs

New Directions are Needed in Teaching and the 4IR

Optimal progress in introducing the 4IR in developing countries is scanty, as was proven by the COVID-19 pandemic. The relationship between online teaching and learning in various contexts will require multimethod, interdisciplinary approaches to research. In recommending multiple methods, q ualitative research strategies could start with ethnographic fieldwork studies with various groups, using interviews and observational methods to gain thick descriptions of online teaching, resources, and access for both students and lecturers. These research strategies could employ the paradigms of cultural teaching and indigenous teaching that value local knowledge and bottom-up model building (Kim, Park & Park 2000). Quantitative studies could investigate indigenous definitions of online teaching and the specific tools used to generate teaching and learning. Collaborative, action-research approaches should be utilized, particularly with underserved populations.

Sustainability on New Insights and Responses to Infectious Diseases, especially COVID-19

Most institutions of higher learning have introduced several interventions or measures in the quest to continue with the academic programme. However, one wonders about the sustainability of the measures in view of the inherited inequalities. These measures include, (i) Zero-rating webpages; (ii) Providing data and airtime; and (iii) The provision of laptops on a loan basis. Should the infections by the virus continue at this scale, the question is whether the universities will be able to sustain interventions related to these measures.

Some reflections on the need for universities to move most of their

postgraduate courses to online platforms can also be interesting. Most postgraduate courses at some universities still require direct contact and it is assumed that they are badly affected by the pandemic. I mention postgraduate courses because students at this level of study do not require nurturing like undergraduate students.

Study Implications

Considering that not all resiliencies are inherent and some protective factors can be learned, supporting vulnerable groups can constructively affect their mental health. Support can take several forms. While providing mental health support services to cope with pre- and post-FI stressors and trauma is of paramount importance, another application to social work practice can be to create opportunities for FI coordinators to become more IT savvy and engaged. This may help reduce the incidence of a panic mode and feeling ill-equipped in relation to mental health issues. The author's involvement in the field instruction module challenges was a significant mood enhancer and focused at finding possible solutions while she was seeking help for her overwhelming environment as the Head of Department in Social Work. In doing so, she was not only able to find help, but also identified the needs of others in the same space.

Limitation

Due to the perceived subjective nature of reflective methods, I acknowledge my own potential biases in the construction of this chapter. It is also important to note that my reflection was constructed retrospectively and represents a combination of how I remember past events, as well as my interpretations of these events. However, the goal of reflective research is not to control subjectivity (Greenhalgh *et al.* 2005), but to interpret the story appropriately, which can be achieved by restoring and co-constructing stories with the participants.

Conclusion

My reflection provides a rich illustration of several challenges that multiple parties may face through the COVID-19 period and the academic year. This chapter highlights how students and teachers are subjected to varying intersecting challenges and the need to support them by humanizing their experiences and providing them with culturally relevant resources.

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