Challenges Faced by Social Work Students during Field Placements in Malawi

Tapiwa Singini

School of Social Development-Anthropology Department, East China Normal University

ABSTRACT

Field placements are an integral component of social work education, offering students critical opportunities for experiential learning and professional development. Field placement provides an opportunity for students to use knowledge gained in the classroom to test and improve their skills through experience. In the process, they gain more knowledge, gain confidence by working with clients and confirm their skills. However social work students in Malawi face numerous challenges during field placement. This paper explores the experiences of social work students during their field placements in Malawi. Based on the interviews of twenty-two social work students from The Catholic University of Malawi who completed field placements in 2024 in different institutions such as non-governmental institutions, government agencies, not for profit organization and charity agencies, this research revealed that students encountered many ethical difficulties in field placements. Findings reveal that while field placements provide invaluable hands-on experience, challenges such as limited resources, cultural barriers, emotional burden, poor orientation and readiness, a disconnect between theory and practice, and inadequate supervision frequently hinder the learning process. These challenges significantly hinder students' ability to develop practical skills, professional identity and confidence in applying classroom knowledge to real life situations. The study highlights the critical role of effective field education in bridging academic learning with professional practice. It underscores the need for improved collaboration between academic institutions and field agencies, better supervision structures, and preparatory training to support students' readiness for placement. The findings have important implications for curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and the overall quality of social work education and practice.

Keywords: ethical dilemmas, field placement, Malawi, social work practice

INTRODUCTION

Social work education blends classroom theory with hands-on, experience learning via fieldwork. Field placements in social work education help students build and solidify their professional identities, connect social work theories and knowledge with practice, and equip them to work with people and settings while adhering to social work ethics and principles. Field placement (FP), also known as practicum, internship, field work, industrial attachment can be defined as a way where a social work student displays knowledge learnt in class into practice. Students get the chance to encounter ethical dilemmas and learn how to handle them professionally through field placement. Field placements provide a crucial link between classroom instruction and practical experience in Malawi, allowing students to apply abstract ideas to intricate societal problems. However, most schools or departments of social work in Malawi lack professional field staff and coordinated curriculum to guide social work profession, in contrast to social work education in developed nations. These may produce ethical challenges and make it difficult for students to seek professional assistance for the difficulties during field placements. Research on this topic is significant to provide empirical evidence upon which support may be developed and delivered to help students cope with or learn to solve ethical difficulties in field placements in Malawi.

The role of field placements in social work education

Field placements are an essential component of social work education, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom and the practical skills required in the field (Sunirose, 2013)& Uche et al,

2014). These placements offer students the opportunity to apply academic learning in real-world settings, where they encounter the complexities and challenges inherent in social work practice (Sunirose, 2013). This experiential learning process is crucial for developing professional competence, ethical decision-making, and the personal qualities required for effective social work practice.

Field placements are selected based on convenience, availability and accessibility, providing an opportunity for social work students to exercise their roles as social workers (Lombard, 2015). Moreover, FP provides an opportunity for students to use knowledge gained in the classroom to test and improve their skills through experience. In the process, they gain more knowledge, gain confidence by working with clients and confirm their skills (Mugumbate, 2020). Field placements provide a unique environment for students to gain firsthand experience in diverse social service settings (Hemy et al., 2016; Maidment, 2003; Smith et al., 2015), such as community organizations, hospitals, schools, and governmental agencies. By working directly with clients and engaging with social work professionals, students learn to navigate the various systems they encounter in their careers, from social service policies to organizational structures and community resources. These experiences help students understand the broader socio-economic and cultural contexts in which social work interventions occur, ensuring that their practice is relevant, sensitive, and culturally appropriate.

Furthermore, field placements allow students to engage in real ethical dilemmas, offering a crucial space for developing ethical reasoning skills. In the classroom, students may learn about ethical principles and codes of conduct, but it is only in the field where they can test these theories against the reality of human suffering, systemic injustice, and resource limitations (Baird & Mollen, 2023; Eriksen & Gradovski, 2020). Students often face complex ethical situations, such as balancing client autonomy with their duty to protect vulnerable individuals or navigating organizational constraints that may impede the delivery of optimal services. These experiences provide invaluable opportunities for reflection, as students must grapple with their emotions, values, and professional responsibilities while finding ways to resolve ethical conflicts.

Another significant aspect of field placements is the mentorship and supervision that students receive during their time in the field. Field supervisors play a critical role in shaping the student's development by providing guidance, support, and constructive feedback (Islam, 2024; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). Through regular supervision sessions, students are encouraged to reflect on their practice, explore their emotional responses to challenging situations, and consider alternative approaches to addressing complex issues. This supervisory relationship is key to helping students integrate theoretical knowledge with practical skills while fostering their professional identity and self-awareness. Field placements for social work practice training should have an onsite supervisor to supervise the daily practice of social work students; office space and/or infrastructure, and the minimum administrative support (Lombard, 2015). However, most practicum institutions lack supervisors who can guide social work students as they are either not trained in the field or do not have experience in supervising social work students (Solomon, 2020). This gap creates a challenge for the students when they face ethical dilemmas.

In addition to professional development, field placements also contribute to personal growth. Social work students often encounter challenging and emotionally taxing situations that can lead to stress, burnout, or ethical dilemmas. These experiences require students to develop emotional resilience and coping mechanisms, ensuring they are better equipped to handle the demands of social work practice (Eriksen & Gradovski, 2020; Mthimkhulu; Rehn & Kalman, 2018). The emotional challenges faced in the field also provide opportunities for students to build empathy, develop emotional intelligence, and learn how to manage the emotional toll of working with vulnerable populations (Wu et al., 2021).

Overall, field placements are indispensable in the formation of competent and ethical social workers. They not only provide students with the practical skills needed to succeed in the profession but also nurture the personal and emotional growth required to meet the challenges of social work practice. By offering a platform for hands-on learning, critical reflection, and ethical practice, field placements prepare students to navigate the complexities of real-world social work, ultimately equipping them with the tools needed to make meaningful contributions to the well-being of individuals and communities.

Social work education in Malawi

In 1964, Magomero College, a training center under the then-Ministry of Local Government, launched a diploma program in community development with the primary goal of preparing Malawi Young Pioneers to carry out community development projects successfully. This marked the beginning of social work education in Malawi (Kakowa, 2016). The Young Pioneers were an elite wing of the League of Malawi Youth, a nationalist organization affiliated with the then-dominant Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (Phiri, 2000 as cited in (Kakowa, 2016)). In 1966 the government established the Ministry of Community and Social Development that inherited Magomero College and the certificate course. More social work modules were added to the curriculum in 1978 as a result of the communities' increasing need for social welfare services, the College introduced a fully-fledged certificate programme in social welfare that produced Social Welfare Assistants (SWAs). During this period, the professional cadre of social welfare officers were drawn from sociology and other social sciences and sent for professional training at Swansea University in Wales. In 2006, the Catholic University of Malawi introduced a four-year bachelor's degree programme in social work (Kakowa, 2016; Kakowa & Nkhata, 2023; Walker et al., 2024; Wizi-Kambala, 2024). This was followed by DMI-Saint-John of God the Baptist University's (DMI-SJGBU) opening of a school of social work with three bachelors' degree programmes, namely Community Development, Human Resource Management and Social Work, in 2010. However, the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) had limited influence over the curriculum, these being private universities. The Ministry, therefore collaborated with the University of Malawi, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to introduce a social work degree programme at Chancellor College, the first intake of which was in 2013. Apart from these programs, there are also universities that provide courses in community and rural development that are evaluated by United Kingdom (UK)-based organizations. Four-year bachelor's degree programs in rural and community development have also been added by a few private universities, such as Exploits University, Shareworld Open University, and Blantyre International University. The Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) in collaboration with the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) introduced a certificate programme, Community Based Work with Children and Youth (CBWCY), which targets volunteers and frontline staff in social welfare agencies, working with children and youth (Kakowa, 2016). The degree programmes introduced by the three universities are still established, separate from each other and hope for regulation and standardization rests in by then yet to be formed National Association of Social Workers. Now called The Association of Social Workers in Malawi (ASWiM) founded in 2017 has no established curriculum to guide social work program in the universities. But according to (Gray & Fook, 2004), social work education must be up to date and address contemporary issues. Therefore, it is necessary to make sure that the curriculum is contextualized to represent Malawians' requirements. This entails going beyond activities that are traditionally conceptualized as part of the social work domain (Mupedziswa & Sinkamba, 2014). The curriculum should prepare the professionals to be Conventional and flexible to address the nation's complex socioeconomic issues. If social work education is to be relevant, it must be acknowledged that the theoretical foundation of the curriculum must address the needs of the local population that is intended to be serviced. Universities that offer social work program focus on general social science modules, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, and economics. Common modules in the Chancellor College, Catholic University and DMI-SJGBU curriculum are: entrepreneurship and micro-financing, counselling and guidance, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) management, organizational behaviour and conflict management, hospital social work, rural and urban development planning, social work administration, social work with disabilities and special populations, family and child welfare, life course and ageing, social protection, youth and development, environment and disaster risk management, community health and nutrition, and community development. All colleges also send their students once or twice for field placement during the third and fourth years of their studies. The placements are either in charities/nongovernmental organizations or with the district councils and can be classified into two categories. In the first category, students are expected to work at the allocated agency, shadowing social workers who are currently employed there and produce a report at the end. In the other category, the students are expected to design a project and implement within the placement agency under the guidance of a licensed social worker and produce a report at the end. Typically, the placements last for four months long. Although there are different approaches, all colleges train generalists or generic social workers. The programmes, however, are not very contextualized (Kakowa, 2016). Moreover, according to Kakowa and Kambala, although social work profession

is becoming more and more recognized, students often face obstacles because of limited resources, different levels of field supervision, and sociocultural complexities in service delivery (Kakowa, 2016; Wizi-Kambala, 2024). These obstacles call for specialized support mechanisms to ensure effective learning and professional growth.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study involved students in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSc) programme at The Catholic University of Malawi, who completed placements in 2024, were purposely selected, considering the appropriateness of sample, availability of research participants and limited financial support for this research. The programme was launched in 2006 and was amongst one of the first Social Work programmes in Malawi. Students are required to complete a 480-hour field placement within four months during the second semester of their final study. Also known as block practicum where students conduct fieldwork for a semester without other subjects. There are several social work agencies in Malawi but do to unclear description of roles for social workers, many social work students end up in institutions that do not clearly empower social work students, and not all students were able to do placements in social work agencies. Amongst ninety-two BSc students who completed placements in 2024, only 54 did placements in social work agencies. Considering that this research intended to explore students' ethical difficulties in professional social work settings, only thirty-five students were selected and approached. Following the principle of data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), after interviewing twenty students, the ability to obtain new information was attained and further coding was no longer feasible. Two additional interviews were conducted and confirmed data saturation. Therefore, a total of twenty-two students were included in this research. These twenty-two students were placed in five social work agencies, nine non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that engage social work professionals in providing services for vulnerable people, and eight governmental departments in charge of social work services (district councils). Of the twenty-two students, five were weekend students who work in other professions other than social work but want to upgrade themselves, but none had experience as social workers before the placements. The participants aged between twenty-three and twenty-eight years with a median age of twenty-four years. Eighteen were female.

In-depth individual and semi-structured interviews were adopted to collect data. The development of the interview guide was based on the literature review on ethical difficulties amongst social work students and practitioners in field placements and in consultation with social work teachers who taught and provided field placement supervision for social work students in this research. Examples of the interview questions included 'What were ethical difficulties in your field placement?', 'How did you respond to them?' and 'Was there support available for you to handle them?'. Fifteen participants were interviewed face-to-face in places convenient for participants and seven were interviewed through WhatsApp phone call due to their unavailability of an onsite interview. The data were collected from March 2025 to April 2025 when the participants just completed fieldwork. Each interview took an average of forty-five minutes. The study was approved by the social work department and conducted under the ethical guidelines. Because all participants were familiar with language used been, written consent was adopted.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and double checked. The transcripts were coded and analysed thematically to identify themes and categories within the qualitative data. The codes were developed using artificial intelligence from WordCloud.com (Fig 1). The step-by-step qualitative data analysis approach (Alston and Bowles, 2019) and constant comparison were employed. To avoid losing any meaning of the dialogue, the transcripts of interviews were read and analysed in English. Quotes representing the major themes were selected from the transcripts and then translated from Chichewa to English. Personal identifying information was erased from the records and transcripts and pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality of the participants.

To ensure confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms, and identifying data were excluded from the transcripts and all data were stored securely. Participants were also assured of their right to withdraw from study at any stage, without needing to provide a reason or face any consequences. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Social Work at The Catholic University of Malawi before data collection.

RESULTS

This section presents findings from qualitative thematic analysis of transcribed interviews with 22 Bachelor of Social Work students from The Catholic University of Malawi. The data was manually coded and arranged into six major themes. The results are conveyed through structured thematic descriptions, direct quotations, a summary table, and accompanying visualizations, including a word cloud.

Data organization and thematic summary

Interview responses were systematically coded and grouped into the following six categories (see tables 1 &2 below)

Table 1: Summary of key themes and frequency of reported challenges during field placement

Theme No.	Theme Title	Sub-Themes	Frequency
1	Inadequate Supervision	Supervisor absence, lack of academic follow-up	High
2	Financial Hardship	Lack of transport/meal support, economic distress	Moderate
3	Marginalization	Assigned non-social work tasks, professional neglect	Moderate
4	Theory-Practice Disconnect	Ethical contradictions, disillusionment	High
5	Poor Orientation and Readiness	Unclear goals, lack of preparatory training	High
6	Emotional and Psychological Burden	Trauma exposure, absence of support systems	Moderate

Table 2: demographic data of the participants

Participant name	age	gender	Reported challenges	Quotes		Agency
Vunda	21	M	emotional and psychological burden, financial hardship	Sometimes it was hard to hold it together when clients are expressing their concerns, you feel like crying but you are expected to be professional. It was very hard, I had to figure out for transport, two way and lunch was on my own. Sometimes I had to skip lunch just to save up for transport.	Community placement	Youth centre
Chifuniro	22	F	inadequate supervision, poor orientation and readiness, financial hardship, emotional and psychological burden	During my fieldwork, I only met my supervisor once. I felt neglected and unsure of what I was supposed to do most of the time. I feel like I was not well prepared. Of course, before the practicum we were oriented but only on what we should do, for example how to handle file work which we present it to the university supervisor during supervising, but they never taught us	Conventional placement	Social welfare department

				on how to present ourselves professionally and all the work ethics		
Sithembile	22	F	inadequate supervision, poor orientation and readiness, marginalization	We were just sent to the field without proper orientation. I didn't know what to expect or how to behave professionally My supervisor would show up once a week. I had to make tough calls on my own and I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing	Community placement	Health centre
Salaniponi	22	M	emotional and psychological burden, financial hardship, poor orientation and readiness	Listening to client's traumatic experiences every day was draining. I didn't know how to deal with it emotionally	Conventional placement	Refuge centre
Dzeko	22	F	emotional and psychological burden, financial hardship	The place was convenient for me but local transport and lunch are way too much for me…	Community placement	Youth centre-NGO
Titi	22	F	inadequate supervision, theory and practice disconnect, marginalization	What we learnt in class is different from what happens in the field. I was confused because I couldn't apply most of the theories	Community placement	Child protection centre
Nana	22	F	emotional and psychological burden, financial hardship	Every time I went to work, I felt anxious, not because of the work itself, but because I didn't feel emotionally equipped to handle the clients' trauma.	Conventional placement	HIV/AIDS centre
Sibo	22	F	theory and practice disconnect, marginalization	In school, we were taught about empowerment and ethics, but in the field, I saw clients being treated without respect and dignity	Community placement	Women's program
Maya	22	F	inadequate supervision, theory and practice disconnect	The office was too open. Sometimes clients would walk in while I am in session with another client, or my co workers could walk in during the session, so we had to stop and wait until we have no one around. I think sometimes confidentially is bleached	Conventional placement	NGO
Xhosi	23	M	inadequate supervision, theory and practice disconnect, marginalization	We were not given any financial support for transport or meals. I had to borrow money just to report for fieldwork I was mostly doing clerical work-writing reports and filing	Community placement	Local CBO

Bangula	23	M	emotional and psychological burden, theory and practice disconnect	I had to report a case of child abuse, but the family and the village elders wanted it to be handled 'traditionally'. I felt stuck between ethics and culture	Conventional placement	Government hospital
Muzikola	23	M	emotional and psychological burden, poor orientation and readiness	After seeing a child in a terrible condition, I couldn't sleep well for days.	Conventional placement	Hospital
Gogo	23	F	emotional and psychological burden, financial burden, poor orientation and readiness	It was hard to concentrate at the placement because I was constantly worried about how I would afford transport the next day	Conventional placement	Elder care centre
Mphax	23	F	theory and practice disconnect, poor orientation and readiness	Sometimes I felt like the theories were just for passing exams, not for real practice. I find it very difficult to apply the theories….	Community placement	Youth centre
Tutu	24	M	poor orientation and readiness, marginalization	There was no clear outline of the objectives we were supposed to achieve. I ended up doing general work without any learning outcomes	Community placement	NGO-youth centre
Nyasa	24	F	inadequate supervision, theory and practice disconnect	We were many of us from different universities… It felt like we were expected to know what to do from day one, but we didn't, and our supervisor expected a lot from us… but was barely available	Community placement	Social welfare
Mthetho	24	M	emotional and psychological burden, financial hardship, marginalization	My supervisor would assign me tasks unrelated to social work just to keep me busy, like making photocopies	Community placement	Community outreach
Mzati	24	M	inadequate supervision, poor orientation and readiness	Sometimes when I ask my supervisor he wouldn't respond, he would just tell me to figure out myself, but when my female colleagues ask he would respond in no time….	Conventional placement	NGO
Kwangu	25	F	emotional and psychological burden, financial burden, marginalization	During orientation, they never told us how emotionally exhausting it is….	Community placement	Clinic
Mwapatsa	26	F	inadequate supervision, theory and practice disconnect	I never had the chance to interact with my internship supervisor. There was no guidance or follow-up throughout the placement	Community placement	Social welfare department

| Nsipe | 28 | F | inadequate supervision, theory and practice disconnection, poor orientation and readiness | The supervisor is there but too busy with other things, we rarely met…. | Conventional placement | NGO |
| Themba | 31 | M | inadequate supervision, poor orientation and readiness | He is either in the field or had travelled for other tasks, we were only sending reports to him through WhatsApp… | Conventional placement | NGO-Partner |

Theme 1: Inadequate supervision

One major problem for participants was that there was no regular supervision in place at either the agency or institutional level. There were complaints from students that assigned supervisors did not guide them well, leaving them without advice in tough ethical situations. According to one student:

My field supervisor and I only had one meeting during my field placement. I often felt that nobody cared and I wasn't sure what to do most of the time.

This indicates that there is a deeper problem in using field education guidelines, as supervision is frequently focused on procedures rather than the learning experience. Not properly supervising students makes it hard for them to learn through reflection, form a professional identity and make good ethical judgments in real settings.

Theme 2: Financial hardship during placement

Many participants reported that not having financial resources creates major obstacles when taking part in field activities. Students said that they stressed more and missed school sessions because the institution did not help cover their basic costs such as transportation or meals. As one of the participants explained,

We had to pay for the transport and food ourselves. All my money went towards fieldwork, so I had to borrow it just to begin.

Through this theme, we see how unfairness in the economy can combine with unequal education, leading to extra difficulties for students to learn from their surroundings. A lack of financial costs prevents teachers from getting to placement sites and this leads to repetitive stress that takes attention away from teaching and improving.

Theme 3: Marginalization by supervisors and staff

Many students said they felt excluded and treated as less important by their host institutions. Quite a lot were required to do basic office duties and paperwork, far from important tasks they were qualified for. One stated that,

I was once told by one participant that occasionally, their supervisor gave them photocopying as a duty instead of meaningful work in social work.

Being excluded from work hours signals that these students are neglected as competent in both learning and career skills. They make learning difficult, suggest to students that they get in the way and contradict the idea of equality central to social work education.

Theme 4: Theory-practice disconnect

Disparity between classroom learning and field realities was a major concern. Many students found that things taught in class did not always match what was seen in the field. Students were disappointed that the things they

learned at university were very different from what was happening in the care settings they worked in. According to Student 8, students are shown the principles of empowerment and ethics in school, but in real life, they noticed clients weren't treated with respect.

'In school, we are taught about empowerment and ethics, but in the field, I saw clients being treated without respect.'

Such contradictions point to a need for curriculum localization and integrative pedagogy. As a result, the underlying knowledge structure in social work teaching centers needs to be updated by making academic content fit the context of social work in Malawi. Without this guidance, students encounter conflict between how they imagine things and how things actually work without much help or guidance.

Theme 5: Poor orientation and readiness

Many students entered fieldwork without full understanding of the ethical, procedural and interpersonal obstacles that might occur. Several participants mentioned they were given insufficient notice about what they would have to do, or how to behave. One student complained that:

We were dropped into the field and left to learn it by ourselves. I wasn't sure what to anticipate and how I should carry myself in a job situation.

The absence of support needed makes it difficult for students to work as professionals, as they have not learned the basic things needed to do so. These readiness deficiencies prevent people from adapting quickly, reduce their ability to keep learning and cause more questions about doing the right thing.

Theme 6: Emotional and psychological burden

Students participated in practice places that prepared them for dealing with trauma, systemic shortcomings and individuals who were most at risk. With no formal psychosocial care, students stored these difficulties inside them which often resulted in stress and, at times, secondary trauma. One student had this to say:

After seeing a child in a terrible condition, I couldn't sleep well for days.

The analysis shows that emotional labour plays an important, yet often understated role in field education. Evidence clearly supports the view that learning about emotional resilience, using counselling and engaging in debriefings should be fundamental to social work education. Figure 1 is a recap of the findings.

Visual representation of findings

Figure 1 Word Cloud visualizes the most frequently used words in student narratives.

Thematic co-occurrence

The thematic analysis found that challenges experienced by social work students during field placements were not discrete, but rather part of an interdependent system of structural, pedagogical, and emotional difficulties. The heatmap reveals that Inadequate Supervision and Poor Orientation and Field Readiness co-occurred most frequently (value = 9), suggesting that students who were inadequately prepared at the outset of their placements were also more likely to lack meaningful supervisory guidance. This is illustrated in the thematic co-occurrence heatmap in figure 2.
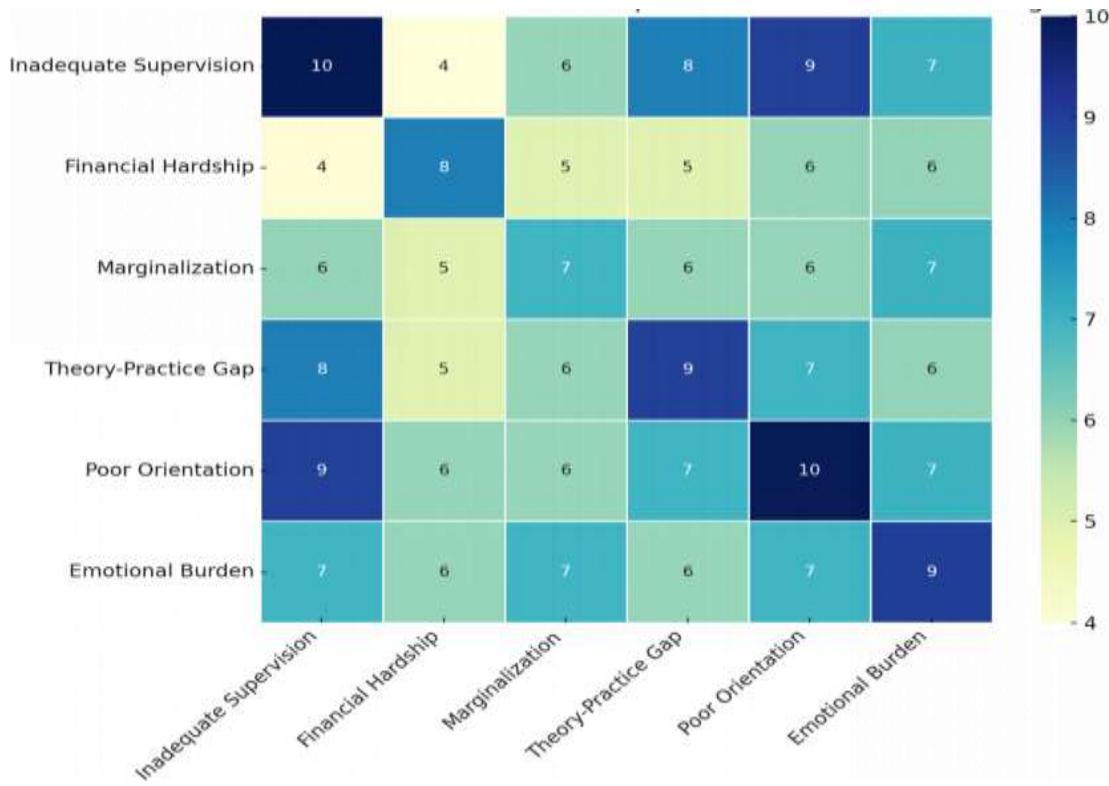

Figure 2 Thematic Co-occurrence Heatmap illustrates the frequency of joint mentions of key challenges experienced by social work students during field placements. Strong co-occurrence between "Poor Orientation" and "Inadequate Supervision" (9), and "Theory-Practice Gap" and "Emotional Burden" (6) highlights overlapping structural and affective dimensions of student experience.

This pairing underscore a systemic gap in the continuity of support from pre-placement to active engagement in the field.

The Theory-Practice Gap also displayed strong co-occurrences with both Inadequate Supervision (8) and Emotional Burden (6), reflecting how the inability to apply classroom learning was exacerbated by weak institutional scaffolding and the psychological toll of ethically complex environments. Emotional and psychological strain was found to be strongly tied to Marginalization by Supervisors and Staff and Poor Orientation (each with a value of 7), indicating that emotional distress is not merely a personal reaction, but a product of persistent exclusion, ambiguity, and unstructured learning environments.

In contrast, Financial Hardship, though widely cited, demonstrated lower co-occurrence values, suggesting that while it imposed a constant burden, it was less directly entangled with other thematic domains. Its impact appears more backgrounded, amplifying rather than initiating other placement-related challenges.

Overall, the heatmap emphasizes that these themes are mutually reinforcing. Ethical dilemmas, professional confusion, and emotional strain arise not from isolated incidents but from the cumulative effect of intersecting deficiencies. This points to the need for integrated reform strategies that address the placement experience holistically prioritizing coordinated orientation, consistent supervision, and structural support systems.

DISCUSSION

The study looked at the ethical challenges that social work students encounter when on placement in Malawi. The study found that field placements are meant to help students apply what they learn in class, but the research showed that this does not always happen. Ethical issues, influenced by the client's nature, the institution's structure and the relationship with supervisors, were a central part of what students faced. They caused emotional problems for the concerned and helped them grow and become more ethical.

Discussion on the findings is based on community social work placement model (CSWPM) proposed by Mugumbate. The model views field placements as more than just individual learning opportunities, it integrates students into real community contexts where they can engage in empowerment, participation, and collaboration.

Problems related to ethics when working with clients

Many of the authors highlighted the ethical issues found in working with clients. Although students have learned about client-centred practice and professional boundaries, they often find themselves dealing with strict rules and the community's customs. Malawi's culture, which gives family and community greater power over personal choices, goes against the social work ethics that stress self-determination. This aligns with (Sichone, 2019) who found that culture hinders social workers to effectively play their role. Students' experiences supported this idea by showing that isolated training in ethics does not work well. Moreover, students reporting facing challenges to integrate theories into practice confirms with Shokane who underscores that most students in DSD had challenges integrating theory into practice as the placement does not provide a suitable opportunity to integrate the two.

In many African societies, including Malawi, gift-giving is a deeply embedded cultural norm used to express gratitude, maintain relationships, and show respect (Mbiti, 1991, Chirwa 2001). Gifts are not merely material items but are social acts that bind people in mutual recognition and obligation. However, this cultural norm can come into conflict with social work ethics which emphasize boundaries, impartiality, and avoidance of dual relations. For social work students, the tension arises when the clients offer tokens out of genuine appreciation, yet students, bound to codes of ethics, which are taught to decline such offers. This dilemma reflects cultural-ethical paradox in African professional contexts. The meaning of gift-giving in many Malawian societies created problems with professional ethics. Students find it difficult handling situations where clients offered small tokens of appreciation which, while culturally acceptable, posed ethical concerns about professional boundaries. The results suggest that teaching ethics should involve local stories and indigenous knowledge to help students make decisions relevant to their communities (Nsamenang, 2001).

Not meeting supervisory standards and ethical exposure

The second central theme examined how supervision can help or worsen ethical problems. Students were often supervised by people lacking proper social work training or moral skills. Because of this, people rarely find opportunities to think about ethics in these environments. Students could not solve ethical issues without proper guidance, and their view of professional practice became unclear. These results align with Dhemba and Tanga who found that students were supervised by agency supervisors who had not received any training prior to the commencement of the field placement and were supervised by non-social workers (Dhemba, 2012; Tanga, 2013).

Supervision using reflective and dialogical approaches can improve a person's ethical understanding (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). Nevertheless, where supervisors were present, students reported not to receive adequate supervision because supervisors were either busy with meetings or field work leaving them on their own to manage cases unsupervised. This put students in ethical dilemma wondering whether what they are doing was right or not. This is inconsistence with Shokane (2016), Ncube and Ross (2018) who reported that social work students reported not being adequately supervised during field practice. This points to a systemic issue in Malawi because students in unregulated fieldwork are more likely to lose their moral direction. According to Poggenpoel (2018), ethical learning in the field cannot be achieved if supervisors are not qualified and involved. Therefore, improving supervision through national laws and financial support should be the primary focus of

educational reform. Moreover, according to the Community Social Work Placement Model, supervision should be reflective, participatory, and rooted in real community engagement. However, students in this study reported inconsistent or absent supervision, which undermines their ability to reflect on practice and develop confidence.

Problems caused by rules and sacrifices of ethics

Another area was formed where organizational limitations and ethical concerns were met. The agencies where students were placed were marked by inadequate funding, little or no basic infrastructure and strict rules. Because of these limits, students attached to health care sometimes had to trade ethical values for results such as revealing private information or providing only basic care. Focusing on donor goals rather than clients' needs reduces the chances for ethical thinking. These findings concur with Shokane, social work students experienced problems of limited resources such as of office space, stationery, and transport for home visits, conducting group work and community work. Furthermore, Maidment's insight on lack of funding by university institutions on work-based learning concurs with the findings of the study where students reported to source out money for meal and transport. This is the case because the University does not provide financial support to students, students are expected to use their own money for transport, accommodation, and meals resulting to financial constraints. These findings are not exceptional, despite social work students at UNIVEN being provided a once off stipend, students reported fieldwork results in financial constraints (Shokane, 2016, Dhemba 2012).

Such a gap between theory and practice points to system problems and policies. Wizi-Kambala (2024) has already pointed out that ethical standards vary from one institution to another due to the lack of contextual standardization in Malawi's social work field. The findings of this study agree with the claim, showing why it is important to align policies and update curricula to deal with the realities of practice. The findings also suggest a bigger problem: students are likely to fail if ethics are taught without considering resources.

The CSWPM emphasizes applying academic knowledge in real-world settings through active participation in community processes. The disconnection students experienced between classroom theory and field realities suggests a need for more integrated and intentional placement structures aligned with the model.

Feelings and growth trajectory

Facing ethical dilemmas made students feel sad, powerless, confused and resentful. Such reactions are examples of "ethical stress," as Eriksen and Gradovski (2020) call it, meaning the pressure experienced by professionals when they cannot act ethically because of the system. Even though stress like this can lead to emotional exhaustion, it can encourage personal growth if the situation is managed correctly. These feelings arose as the students had no support systems to help them handle distress. Students reporting series of emotions that reflect the internal moral conflict between what they have been taught as professional "right" and what they culturally perceive as morally acceptable or humane. This dilemma could arise due to inadequate supervision. If students do not receive adequate support and guidance from the practitioners, they may feel anxious. This clash can lead to emotional fatigue especially when students feel unsupported or unable to resolve the dilemma. Field work education in social work emerged out of apprenticeship model, where students learn by doing. The CSWPM model advocates for community-based support systems and Uncollaborative learning. Yet students reported significant emotional stress, isolation, and limited resources, indicating that their placements lacked the supportive, community-centered orientation the model recommends (Mugumbate, 2020). The CSWPM advocates for a community-based approach that emphasizes collaborative learning, peer support, and mentorship. However, the experiences of students in this study indicate a gap between the model's ideal and its current implementation within Malawi's fieldwork education. It is important to integrate students into community settings, where learning is not only theoretical but also rooted in real-world community issues. However, many placements lack strong connections with local community organizations or grassroots initiatives, leading to a sense of isolation among students.

Furthermore, several students described positive changes in their thinking after dealing with ethical challenges. Participants mentioned that they felt more confident ethically, paid closer attention to ethics and felt stronger about their role in the profession. The results are consistent with what experiential learning theory, particularly

Kolb's model, suggests: that learning is at its best when we reflect on our experiences. This study proves that field placements help students practice ethics despite not offering a perfect setting.

However, whether students could transform by having access to caring support and areas for reflection. Without their teachers and institutions, their efforts would be minimal. Hence, institutions must help students by providing psychosocial support, regular debriefings, and ethical supervision.

Implications for social work education and practice

To address the challenges identified, the Community Social Work Placement Model offers valuable guidance. Strengthening partnerships between universities and host organizations can ensure that placements are structured around community engagement rather than administrative convenience. Training supervisors in reflective and participatory methods, as proposed in the model, could improve student support. Moreover, this approach will empower students to become more engaged in their communities, fostering a deeper sense of purpose and commitment to the social work profession. Finally, embedding community needs and voices into placement planning can enhance both learning outcomes and community impact.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study reveals that while ethical challenges encountered by social work students during field placements in Malawi evoke a range of emotional responses, they also present valuable opportunities for growth and development. The emotional distress caused by these challenges highlights the need for stronger institutional support, including more effective supervision, clearer ethical guidance, and enhanced mentorship. Despite the difficulties, many students demonstrated resilience and ethical courage, ultimately gaining deeper insights into ethical practice and enhancing their professional identity. The study emphasizes the importance of experiential learning, where real-world challenges contribute significantly to the development of ethical competence. Moving forward, it is crucial that social work institutions provide more comprehensive support systems to foster the emotional well-being and professional growth of students, ensuring they are better equipped to navigate the complexities of social work practice in Malawi.

Disclosure statement

The author report there are no competing interests to declare.

REFERENCES

1. Baird, B. N., & Mollen, D. (2023). The internship, practicum, and field placement handbook: A guide for the helping professions. Routledge.
2. Dhemba, J. (2012). Fieldwork in social work education and training: Issues and challenges in the case of Eastern and Southern Africa. Social Work & Society, 10(1).
3. Eriksen, H. L., & Gradovski, M. (2020). Ethical dilemmas in field placements: The experiences of social work students in Norway and possible implications for social work education. Dialogic Pedagogy: A Journal for Studies of Dialogic Education, 8, SA85-SA111.
4. Gray, M., & Fook, J. (2004). The quest for a universal social work: Some issues and implications. Social Work Education, 23(5), 625-644.
5. Hemy, M., Boddy, J., Chee, P., & Sauvage, D. (2016). Social work students 'juggling' field placement. Social Work Education, 35(2), 215-228.
6. Islam, M. R. (2024). Supervision of Fieldwork Students. In Fieldwork in Social Work: A Practical Guide (pp. 185-203). Springer.
7. Kakowa, F. (2016). Nurturing professional social work in Malawi. African Journal of Social Work, 6(2), 1-6.
8. Kakowa, F., & Nkhata, D. K. (2023). Exploring a Decoloniality Perspective of Social Work Education in Malawi. In Indigenization Discourse in Social Work: International Perspectives (pp. 219-234). Springer.
9. Kourgiantakis, T., Sewell, K. M., & Bogo, M. (2019). The importance of feedback in preparing social work students for field education. Clinical Social Work Journal, 47, 124-133.

10. Maidment, J. (2003). Problems experienced by students on field placement: Using research findings to inform curriculum design and content. Australian social work, 56(1), 50-60.

11. Mthimkhulu, M. Coping strategies employed by third year social work studies to manage emotionally challeges

12. Mupedziswa, R., & Sinkamba, R. P. (2014). Social work education and training in Southern and East Africa: Yesterday, today and tomorrow. In.

13. Rehn, M., & Kalman, H. (2018). Social work students' reflections on challenges during field education. Journal of Social Work, 18(4), 451-467.

14. Sichone, T. (2019). Social Workers on Child Protection, in Conflict with Community Norms and Values: A Case Study of a Community Based-Organisation in Malawi. In.

15. Smith, D., Cleak, H., & Vreugdenhil, A. (2015). "What are they really doing?" An exploration of student learning activities in field placement. Australian social work, 68(4), 515-531.

16. Sunirose, I. (2013). Fieldwork in social work education: Challenges, issues and best practices. Rajagiri Journal of Social Development, 5(1), 48-56.

17. Tanga, P. T. (2013). The challenges of social work field training in Lesotho. Social Work Education, 32(2), 157-178.

18. Walker, J., Cauvain, S., Kakowa, F., & Fometu, A. (2024). Social Work and Practice Education, Decolonisation and Ubuntu: Making Connections in Malawi. In Routledge Handbook of African Social Work Education (pp. 370-381). Routledge.

19. Wizi-Kambala, A. G. (2024). Social Work Field Practicum: Experiences, Challenges, and Perspectives from Malawi. Routledge Handbook of African Social Work Education, 231-241.

20. Wu, L., Huang, Y., Chen, Q., & Shi, Y. (2021). Social work students' experiences of ethical difficulties in field placements: A qualitative study in China. The British Journal of Social Work, 51(2), 505-523.