

A Collaborative Response to the Support and Development of Newly Qualified Social Workers: Insights From Graduates and Supervisors

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Abstract: *Newly qualified social workers face numerous challenges as they transition from university into practice. This qualitative study, underpinned by the Theory of Collaborative Advantage and framed within an instrumental case study design, explores the support and continuing professional development needs of newly qualified social workers in South Africa. Data was collected through online World Café sessions with 23 participants recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, including newly qualified social workers and social work supervisors. Through a process of reflexive thematic analysis, four themes were generated: (1) Preparing for practice, identifying gaps between education and the realities of practice; (2) Organizational factors, including mismatched work expectations and under-resourced settings; (3) Development of newly qualified social workers, highlighting the need for professional and personal development; and (4) Solution-based strategies, including induction processes, accessible continuing professional development opportunities, internship models, and enhanced collaboration between educators and employers. Trustworthiness was ensured through enhancing credibility, transferability, dependability, and auditability. The study recommends a collaborative approach to supporting the continuing professional development of newly qualified social workers, involving employer-funded training and active stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, it proposes developing a contextually relevant professional development framework that bridges education, practice, and research, with potential applicability across resource-constrained countries.*

Keywords: *Theory of Collaborative Advantage, continuing professional development, newly qualified social workers, support initiatives, workplace transition, South Africa*

Newly Qualified Social Workers Transition Into the Workplace

The social work profession faces challenges such as decreased resilience and increased burnout among practitioners, driven by prolonged exposure to high stress and various organizational factors, including extensive caseloads, role ambiguity, and limited resources (Newell, 2019; Pulman & Fenge, 2024). Graduated social workers, who are already navigating a tumultuous transition into the workforce, face compounded difficulties. The entrance phase into social work has been described as being ‘lost in transition’ (Tham & Lynch, 2019), reflecting the importance of addressing their needs.

A key challenge for newly qualified social workers (NQSWs), also referred to as recent graduates or early career social workers, is the perceived gap between their generic undergraduate training (often a four-year Bachelor of Social Work program) and the specialized demands of the roles they enter (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2015; Tham & Lynch, 2021). While the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) established global standards emphasizing core competencies and ethical principles, the growth of

specialized fields reflects social work's evolving demands (IASSW & IFSW, 2020; IFSW, 2022). Furthermore, despite the value of practice education, many feel inadequately prepared for the specific requirements of their work, including high-pressure environments for frontline child welfare workers and specialist areas, such as child-focused work with children in families (Ferguson, 2017; Radey & Schelbe, 2017).

In South Africa, the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) is the four-year qualifying degree for entry into the profession, combining theoretical and practical components. The program, guided by the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (IASSW, 2020), is registered with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and is offered at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 8, requiring a minimum of 480 credits (4,800 notional hours). The Council on Higher Education (CHE) regulates the curriculum and audits Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to ensure accreditation, while SAQA sets the standards (CHE, 2015; SAQA, 2021). Upon entering the workplace, graduates must register as social workers and annually renew their license with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP). The Professional Board of Social Work (PBSW), operating under the SACSSP, oversees a continuing professional development (CPD) system to maintain service quality. Registered social workers must obtain a minimum of 20 CPD points annually (or 40 points over a two-year cycle) and keep a Portfolio of Evidence. CPD activities include group activities, such as conferences, seminars, and information sessions, as well as individual activities, including self-study, formal learning programs, paper presentations, and peer reviews (SACSSP, 2021).

Although undergraduate programs provide a strong academic foundation, certain aspects of readiness only develop as NQSWs transition into the workplace (Battaglia et al., 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2019). By implication, NQSWs require additional support and development opportunities when entering the field (Stewart & Fielding, 2022). Notably, even when recent graduates felt prepared for their roles, many report that their expectations for employer-led support and training were unmet (Grant, 2017). The support and CPD of NQSWs ensure work productivity and retention and include professional and personal development (Beddoe et al., 2020; Grant, 2017; Segev, 2023).

NQSWs face multiple barriers during the transition into the workplace, including the strain caused by variations in managerial and leadership expectations (Thoburn et al., 2021). Despite the expectation that employer organizations provide orientation, supervision, and caseload protection, this is often not possible because they face limited resources, heavy workloads, and high staff turnover (Beddoe et al., 2020; Manthorpe et al., 2014; Thoburn et al., 2021). Unregulated registration systems (Kwan & Cui, 2022; Yan et al., 2013) and insecure employment (Harrison & Healy, 2015; Stewart & Fielding, 2022), together with excessive hours and complex caseloads (Cleveland et al., 2019; Radey & Schelbe, 2017; Segev et al., 2022), create unstable work environments. Insufficient preparation places NQSWs at risk of emotional exhaustion, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Cleveland et al., 2019; Kinman & Grant, 2017; McCusker, 2022; Segev et al., 2022), leading to reduced self-efficacy (Wu et al., 2022).

Although South Africa is classified as an upper-middle-income country (World Bank, 2025), it exhibits characteristics of lower-middle-income economies, including limited access to quality basic services (Ledger, 2021). Efforts to promote social equity

and reduce poverty place financial strain on the Department of Social Development (the national department responsible for social welfare services and social security), which faces underfunding and subsidy withdrawals for non-profit organizations (NGOs), while private-sector social workers often contend with low salaries as a result of, amongst other, insufficient subsidy from the Department of Social Development to implement welfare programs (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2025). Apart from these practical realities, NQSWs remain committed to addressing social inequalities but frequently lack confidence and adequate support, compounded by concerns about low remuneration, limited employment opportunities, as NGOs often close down due to insufficient subsidies, and inadequate preparation for statutory work during their BSW education. The Department of Social Development also has numerous vacant posts due to budget cuts by the treasury (Alpaslan, 2019; Erasmus & Bloem, 2023; Gray & Lombard, 2023; Mmadi & Sithole, 2019; Nyathi, 2022). The role of employer organizations in supporting NQSWs' transition into practice is vital, providing the guidance and resources needed for effective adaptation (Tham & Lynch, 2021). Grounded in the Theory of Collaborative Advantage, this study adopted a multi-level approach to explore practice-based solutions. The Theory of Collaborative Advantage emphasizes the value of organizational collaboration, mutual learning, and stakeholder engagement to achieve shared goals (Vangen & Huxham, 2010; Villagrana, 2020).

As a social worker with experience in social work practice and practice education, the researcher aimed to consider the balance required in addressing the support and development of recent graduates entering the field. The study underscores the importance of shared understanding in collaborative practice by incorporating the perspectives of NQSWs and social work supervisors.

This article examines the support and CPD needs of NQSWs in South Africa and their readiness for practice as they transition from university education. While South Africa faces challenges common in lower-middle-income contexts, these difficulties reflect universal trends, highlighting a broader global concern in social work. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider the distinct contextual and structural factors that shape NQSW experiences in such settings. Given limited research on the perspectives of NQSWs and their supervisors during this transition, the article aims to deepen understanding of these collaborative viewpoints and inform strategies to support NQSW development in South Africa and other resource-constrained contexts. The research question for the study is: *“What are the support and continuing professional development needs of newly qualified social workers, as identified by recent social work graduates and social work supervisors, respectively?”*

Method

Research Approach and Design

This qualitative study explored the support and development needs of recent graduates from the dual perspectives of NQSWs and their supervisors, highlighting convergent and divergent findings through data source triangulation. The study aimed to understand how both groups interpret their experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Tisdell et al., 2025). An instrumental case study design was employed to gain insight into the broader issue of NQSWs' support and development needs rather than on the case itself. The case was thus treated as a means to an end, rather than the

ultimate goal (Padgett, 2016). The study consolidated data to explore the topic (i.e., NQSWs' support and development needs), rather than to contrast different research sites or data types (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1. *Online World Café Profile of Research Participants: By Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW, n=12) and Supervisors (SWS, n=11)*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range (Years)	Race*	Sector
NQSW				
Anneri	Female	22-26	White	Private
Clare	Female	22-26	White	NGO
Sarah	Female	22-26	White	Public**
Zinhle	Female	22-26	Black	NGO
Melissa	Female	22-26	White	Private
Andrea	Female	22-26	White	NGO
Avasha	Female	22-26	Indian	NGO
Thabo	Male	22-26	Black	NGO
Wandile	Male	22-26	Black	NGO
Palesa	Female	22-26	Black	Private
Carol	Female	22-26	White	NGO
Bongi	Female	22-26	Black	NGO
SWS				
Lindiwe	Female	36-45	Black	NGO
Wilma	Female	46-55	Coloured	NGO
Adele	Female	56+	White	NGO
Ayanda	Female	36-45	Black	Public**
Tracy	Female	25-35	Black	Public**
Annelie	Female	46-55	White	NGO
Priscilla	Female	46-55	White	NGO
Jacky	Female	36-45	Indian	NGO
Susan	Female	46-55	White	Public**
Elize	Female	36-45	White	NGO
Anka	Female	46-55	White	NGO

Notes: * Official population group categories as defined by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2023).

** Government department or public healthcare facility.

Population, Sampling, and Recruitment

The researcher contacted the management of three non-governmental welfare organizations to discuss the goal of the study and to seek permission to conduct the study. Once permission was granted, the researcher applied purposive sampling, based on the notion that participants need to be typical of the population and have knowledge of the scope of the study, to recruit potential participants (Sarfo et al., 2022). Eligible individuals received an invitation, prepared by the researcher, via email to participate in the study from the organization management, and subsequently contacted the researcher directly to express interest in the study. Due to a low response rate, the researcher approached a private social work practice and obtained permission to recruit participants among the employees. Snowball sampling was used to identify and invite potential participants through referrals from participants who had already indicated

their interest (Sarfo et al., 2022). The inclusion criteria for NQSWs were as follows: (1) registration with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) as a social worker, (2) access to the internet and a suitable device for online data collection, (3) ability to communicate in English, (4) possession of a Bachelor of Social Work degree from a South African institution obtained within the past three years, and (5) currently employed as a social worker, and have between six months and three years of work experience. The inclusion criteria for supervisors stipulated: (1) registration with the SACSSP as a social worker, (2) access to the internet and a suitable device for virtual data collection, (3) ability to communicate in English, and (4) currently employed as a social work supervisor and have experience supervising at least two NQSWs within the past three years.

To capture the diverse perspectives, the study included 23 participants: 12 NQSWs and 11 supervisors, from six of South Africa's nine provinces. Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics, organized by group: NQSWs and supervisors. Participants were predominantly female, reflecting the global trend of social work as a female-dominated profession (World Health Organization, 2023). Age and race show a mix of demographics, with NGOs being the most prominent work sector. All participants met the study's inclusion criteria, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives across different service delivery fields.

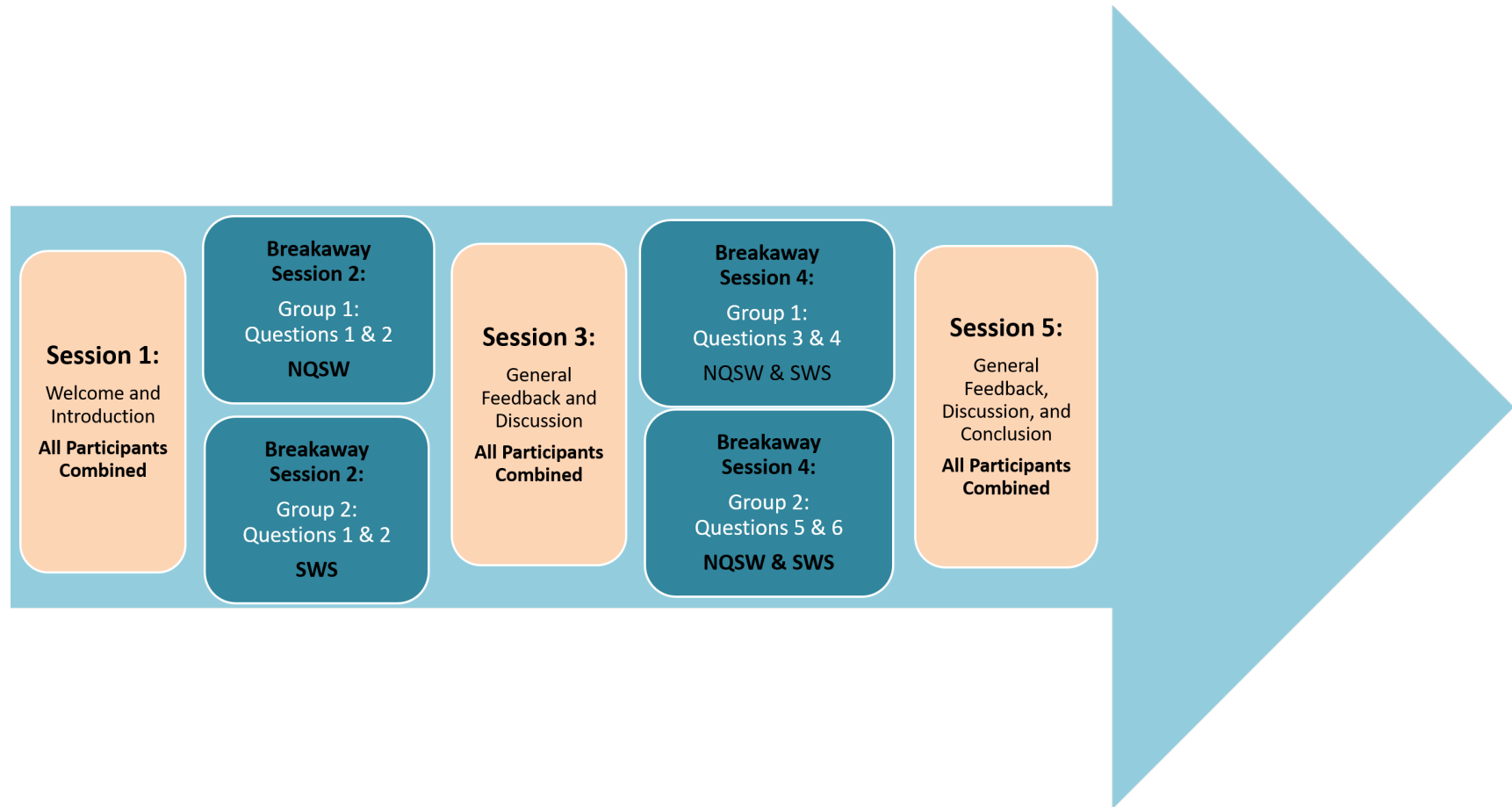
Data Collection

The author conducted two online World Café sessions in May 2024 to minimize costs and travel time, using this method to enhance stakeholder engagement and information-sharing (Fouché & Light, 2011; Löhr et al., 2020).

Figure 1 illustrates the data analysis process. Data were collected through two separate World Café sessions, each lasting two and a half hours, with participant composition and data collection instruments kept consistent across sessions. Each session followed the same structured process, divided into five parts with predetermined open questions and group formations, including an orientation, two group discussions, joint discussions, and a concluding session. The preparatory phase included research assistants who facilitated the small group discussions, alongside a technical assistant, while the author acted as host and facilitator (Albrecht et al., 2022). Assistants received detailed guidelines on the process, including visuals, session links, key questions, and prompting questions (McKimm et al., 2020). The assistants co-facilitated the World Café based on the interview guide prepared by the author, as the researcher. The agreement signed by the research assistants emphasized confidentiality and that their involvement would not be beyond the data collection phase.

Sessions were hosted on the Blackboard Collaborate platform (a Learning Management System), with participants' written consent for recordings.

Figure 1. *A Visual Representation of the World Café Data Analysis Process*



Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data, offering a flexible and theoretically compatible approach for identifying patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Muzari et al., 2022). *Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data* included transcribing the recordings from the Blackboard Collaborate platform using Turboscribe, with the author cross-verifying accuracy, anonymizing participants' names for confidentiality, and immersing herself into the data to gain a comprehensive understanding. *Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes* followed a semantic, multi-coding process by the author, using Atlas.ti (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) to generate initial codes and meaning from the data, facilitating an inductive approach to theme development (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). *Phase 3: Constructing Initial themes* involved an in-depth process of analyzing and interpreting codes, while arranging and rearranging themes and subthemes using a thematic map to review and test generated themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In *Phase 4: Reviewing Themes*, the author, in consultation with a peer, interpreted relationships among themes and their relevance to the research question through consistent refinement. *Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes* allowed the researcher to name the refined themes, synthesizing themes into a coherent narrative for the final phase. *Phase 6: Producing the Report* directly addresses the research question through the use of direct quotes for illustrative purposes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Data from NQSWs and supervisors, collected using the same method, were organized into themes and subthemes and analyzed separately to preserve each group's distinct voice. Triangulation of these data sources enabled the identification of both convergent and divergent perspectives, enhancing the richness and credibility of the findings (Carter et al., 2014).

Trustworthiness

Strategies to ensure trustworthiness included credibility, transferability, dependability, and auditability. Credibility was ensured through peer debriefing, and triangulation of data from NQSWs and supervisors, capturing both distinct and integrated perspectives (Anney, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). Transferability was supported through, amongst others, purposive sampling, to recruit 'typical' participants in the social work fraternity, as reflected in the discussion on participant demographics (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). Dependability was ensured by maintaining a well-documented, logical, and transparent research process, which also enhanced auditability (Anney, 2014). Nowell et al. (2017) emphasise that reflexivity is essential in creating an audit trail, which the researcher achieved through a reflexive thematic analysis process and by maintaining a self-critical account of the research journey. Auditability was enhanced by keeping an audit trail, which reflects the changes in the study as required, e.g., refinement of the interview guide reflective of the iterative process of the study, and through peer debriefing, which involved consultation with the study supervisor (Lietz & Zayas, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

The study was considered low-risk, with free counselling available upon participant request (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021). Participants completed an e-mailed written informed consent form before participating in the World Café (Babbie, 2021) and were informed of all aspects related to the project (Neuman, 2014). Technical and research assistants signed confidentiality agreements to uphold ethical standards. After securing written permission from public, private, and welfare (non-governmental) organizations, the study received ethical clearance from the university's Research Ethics Committee (HUM003/0722) on August 23, 2022. To protect participant confidentiality, assigned pseudonyms are used alongside role identifiers throughout the findings section (e.g., Anneri-N; Lindiwe-S), where 'N' denotes newly qualified social workers (n=12) and 'S' denotes social work supervisors (n=11).

Findings

Themes and subthemes (Table 2) were generated through reflexive data analysis. The table below presents an overview of the key themes and subthemes identified across the two participant groups. The final component of this section often a brief overview of the data source triangulation.

Table 2. *Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme
Theme 1: Preparing for Practice: Social Work Education and the Initial Transition Into the Workplace	1.1: The BSW Degree: A Foundation for Newly Qualified Social Workers' Work Readiness 1.2: Newly Qualified Social Workers' Work Readiness in the Transitional Phase of Entering the Workplace
Theme 2: Organizational Factors Related to Newly Qualified Social Workers Entering the Workplace	2.1: Newly Qualified Social Workers' Position within the Organization 2.2: Orientation and Induction Strategies 2.3: Supervision as a Key Support Mechanism 2.4: Caseload Management
Theme 3: Development of Newly Qualified Social Workers	3.1: Professional Development through Training and Skills Acquisition 3.2: Personal Development through Building Self-care and Emotional Resilience Strategies
Theme 4: Solution-based Strategies for Newly Qualified Social Workers	4.1: Retention Strategies 4.2: Risk Management in the South African Context

A discussion of the themes and subthemes, highlighting the perspectives of NQSWs and supervisors, is presented below.

Theme 1: Preparing for Practice: Social Work Education and the Initial Transition into the Workplace

Theme 1 discusses the pathway to career readiness as provided during the undergraduate BSW degree studies and upon entering the field of social work.

Subtheme 1.1: The BSW Degree: A Foundation for Newly Qualified Social Workers' Work Readiness

Despite both NQSWs and supervisors recognizing the value of the BSW degree, a gap was evident between theoretical knowledge and the ability to apply this knowledge in practice. NQSWs described how the realities of frontline work differed markedly from their university experiences: '...what we learned in varsity [sic], I'm not saying it wasn't helpful, it was, but it's very different in school than when you actually start working' (Palesa-NQSW [henceforth N]). They emphasized the importance of greater practical exposure and opportunities to work across diverse fields prior to qualification: '...the practical component of attaining a social work degree, that's good' (Zinhle-N); '...I think I would have liked to have had more experience within another organization or practice...' (Andrea-N).

Supervisors agreed that the BSW provides a sound theoretical foundation but highlighted that NQSWs often require structured guidance and support to translate knowledge into competent practice: '...there were certain things that she knew in theory, but she was unable to apply in practice' (Lindiwe-Supervisor [henceforth S]); '...the newly qualified social worker already has their degree, they just need a bit of guidance here and there' (Tracy-S). They reaffirmed that undergraduate training should be viewed as the starting point of a lifelong learning process rather than the final stage of preparation: '...university is the foundation of your learning. It's just the start—it never really stops' (Adele-S).

These insights underscore the importance of structured induction and workplace learning opportunities that bridge the transition from university to practice, laying the foundation for enhancing work readiness, as discussed in the next subtheme.

Subtheme 1.2: Newly Qualified Social Workers' Work Readiness in the Transitional Phase of Entering the Workplace

Supervisors noted that while NQSWs generally possess sufficient theoretical grounding, they often lack the applied skills required in specialized organizations, which can hinder adjustment to the workplace. As one supervisor explained, '...most organizations these days are a bit specialized, either on gender-based violence or on different topics' (Wilma-S). Supervisors also reflected on the developmental aspects influencing NQSWs' readiness, suggesting that professional growth and maturity continue well beyond graduation. One supervisor illustrated this point by noting, '...to do the self-reflection at university, you know, to understand or to start understanding your strengths and weaknesses, but we also know that as we get older, we mature a bit as well' (Jacky-S).

Variation in the quality of university training was identified as another factor influencing work readiness. Supervisors acknowledged that NQSWs enter the field with differing levels of preparedness, depending on the higher education institution and the quality of field placements they experienced: '...some universities do give us a better end product than others do' (Annelie-S); '...people come in with different levels of knowledge... to find out what do they actually know about the post they have applied for' (Annelie-S).

Supervisors emphasized the need for patience, mentoring, and gradual development as NQSWs adjust to practice realities: ‘...but then with time I realized that they need a little bit of patience...she needed a little bit of fine-tuning...’ (Lindiwe-S).

These insights highlight that while NQSWs enter practice with a solid academic foundation, their transition is shaped by factors such as the specialization field of the organization, individual maturity, and the quality of their training. Structured support and adaptive supervision are therefore essential to help them translate theoretical understanding into professional competence.

Theme 2: Organizational Factors Related to Newly Qualified Social Workers Entering the Workplace

Participants emphasized various elements within employing organizations that affect the support and development needs of NQSWs. Organizational factors shape the structural environment into which new practitioners’ transition and dictate the availability of professional resources. Institutional positioning, structured induction, supervisory support, and workload management emerged as key subthemes that influence early career retention and integration.

Subtheme 2.1: Newly Qualified Social Workers’ Position Within the Organization

How NQSWs are positioned within organizations influences the level of support and development they receive. NQSWs emphasized the importance of understanding their roles and workplace expectations to integrate effectively into practice.

Supervisors highlighted that organizational management with a social work background is better equipped to recognize the developmental needs of NQSWs. One supervisor explained, ‘...it’s really a struggle to try and explain to them (management) why this person needs extra training or extra supervision or guidance’ (Wilma-S). They also stressed the need to raise awareness of professional roles across organizational levels, noting, ‘...we have an obligation just to reorientate our organizations about the roles of social workers, supervisors and NQSWs’ (Lindiwe-S).

Both groups therefore recognized the importance of clarifying professional roles, with supervisors particularly emphasizing the role of organizational structures and management understanding in supporting NQSWs’ transition into practice.

Subtheme 2.2: Orientation and Induction Strategies

NQSWs emphasized the value of induction in helping them understand organizational goals and expectations. One participant explained, ‘...it (induction) gave me the foundation to understand where the organization is coming from and what their vision is’ (Bongi-N). In contrast, those who did not receive structured induction reported uncertainty about their roles and responsibilities.

Supervisors acknowledged the importance of providing orientation, even amid limited resources. One stated, ‘...we should just invest a little in the newbies that are coming in ... so you won’t have your staff turnover’ (Jacky-S), and added, ‘...(I) can

guide you a bit better because I know how it feels to be thrown in the deep end...' (Jacky-S).

Both groups viewed induction as a practical necessity for easing the transition into professional practice and reducing staff turnover.

Subtheme 2.3: Supervision as a Key Support Mechanism

Both groups' view supervision as a key protective factor against burnout. NQSWs emphasized the need for accessible and supportive supervision: '...I feel like I'm just swimming and I'm sometimes drowning, but I'll get there' (Bongi-N), and '...she's not only focused on the work, but also focusing on how we can take care of ourselves...' (Wandile-N).

Supervisors highlighted the importance of a safe and open environment: '...an open-door policy, is that let's not make them feel unsafe. Let's be there for them to check...' (Annelie-S).

Subtheme 2.4: Caseload Management

Supervisors acknowledged that protective caseloads for NQSWs are ideal but often not feasible. Caseloads are tied to available posts, and when a newly qualified social worker is recruited, they are expected to take on the workload assigned to that position. A supervisor explained as follows: '...I think protective caseload is nice in theory, ...we cannot implement that way specifically as a way forward to let them take their time in adjusting to the organization' (Ayanda-S).

Theme 3: Development of Newly Qualified Social Workers

Professional development is a shared responsibility, with NQSWs being expected to take ownership of their training needs, while organizations provide support. A reality, however, is the lack of funds for training, and while organizations and supervisors can offer training, external courses are expensive and mostly inaccessible.

Resource challenges are highlighted by supervisors noting, '...I think in general social workers are not paid well. So, it's a struggle. It's an unfair struggle to keep up to date if there are no reasonable resources available' (Annelie-S). Further emphasizing the financial burden of accessing training a newly qualified social worker added, '...so there are a few courses we have to fund ourselves, unfortunately' (Melissa-N).

Supervisors stress the impact of limited organizational resources on supporting skill development and NQSWs emphasize the financial burden of accessing training.

Subtheme 3.1: Professional Development through Training and Skills Acquisition

Both participant groups emphasized the importance of ongoing professional development and CPD to remain informed and competent in the field.

NQSWs stressed the need for support and development in specialist areas, including grief counselling, statutory work, caseload management, working with children, and mental health. Additional areas included basic office management, report writing, and understanding relevant policies and procedures. Flex-skills, such as

conflict management, communication, teamwork, and time management, were also considered essential for professional readiness. A participant suggested early exposure to soft skills during undergraduate training to ease the transition into practice: ‘...I really like the idea of helping students developing soft skills... (this would) make me feel more comfortable stepping into practice right away’ (Carol-N).

Supervisors emphasized CPD as essential to adapt to changes across international, national, and regional contexts: ‘...continuous training (is important) because there are so many changes that are happening all around us internationally, nationally, and regionally’ (Lindiwe-S), and further: ‘We learn throughout our whole lives. Life is about learning things at different times’ (Ayanda-S).

While both groups value CPD, NQSWs focused on practical and specialist skills to support immediate workplace performance, whereas supervisors emphasized ongoing learning to adapt to evolving professional demands.

Subtheme 3.2: Personal Development through Building Self-care and Emotional Resilience Strategies

NQSWs emphasized the need to develop self-care strategies and build resilience in response to the increasing complexity of their work. One participant explained, ‘...I had to learn from my supervisors, how do I deal with this (difficult case)’ (Thabo-N). Self-confidence was a contentious issue, with experiences ranging from experiencing self-doubt to feeling competent but undervalued: ‘...a little bit of impostor syndrome. So, like, just not thinking you have the answers when actually you do’ (Andrea-N), and ‘I think it can be either end of the spectrum, either an organization feels do what you are taught and leaves you to your own devices, or you are questioned’ (Avasha-N).

Supervisors highlighted the importance of self-care, emotional awareness, and recognizing personal limitations as essential for sustaining effective practice. One noted, ‘...If we are unhinged, it’s very hard to be a balanced social worker’ (Annelie-S), further explaining that ‘...(it) starts with you confronting your own traumas. Self-care includes normalizing the realities of dealing with complicated emotional cases...but it must be okay to not be okay’ (Annelie-S). Another supervisor added that while NQSWs have many competencies, they often do not ask for sufficient support, which can affect service quality: ‘...the motivation or willingness to want to further develop themselves is a little bit, you know, a concern’ (Adele-S).

While NQSWs focused on developing practical self-care strategies and managing emotional challenges, supervisors emphasized self-awareness, resilience, and proactive development to ensure the delivery of quality social work services.

Theme 4: Solution-Based Strategies for Newly Qualified Social Workers

Both groups of participants agreed on the importance of collaboration among various role players to ensure a smooth transition for NQSWs into the workplace and to strengthen the longevity of the profession. Training institutions play a key role in these collaborative efforts by preparing NQSWs for practice.

Subtheme 4.1: Retention Strategies

NQSWs emphasized that supportive supervision and structured development are critical to remaining in the profession. One participant noted, ‘...I think I’m just grateful that I find myself in that position or that organization whereby almost everyone is actually supportive’ (Wandile-N), while another added, ‘If you don’t have a supervisor who is patient with you, who is willing to teach you, then it becomes a negative working experience...’ (Zinhle-N). NQSWs also highlighted the value of practical training opportunities, such as internships: ‘...a year program that involved a lot of training and then you work in practice and you get a lot of supervision...’ (Anneri-N). Financial support, creativity and flexibility for ongoing development were also raised, with one participant suggesting, ‘...or maybe if it’s an online thing, online training and development, so they also provide that space, like giving that space to attend that world seminar online’ (Thabo-N).

Supervisors emphasized that supporting NQSWs’ self-care and preventing burnout is central to retention: ‘...you won’t have, you know, your social workers leaving because they are exhausted’ (Jacky-S). They also stressed the importance of organizational commitment to structured support and development opportunities to sustain workforce stability.

With both NQSWs and supervisors agreeing that mentorship, structured training, and practical experience are essential for retention, NQSWs focused on practical exposure and financial feasibility, while supervisors highlighted self-care, burnout prevention, and organizational responsibility.

Subtheme 4.2: Risk Management in the South African Context

NQSWs and supervisors expressed the need for improved risk management, including dealing with litigation and competence regarding legal boundaries in practice.

Supervisors generally suggested that risk management is seen to be overlooked in the field of social work, with a supervisor stating, ‘... risk (management) is something that’s not really taught to you young social workers and I think it really needs to be looked at because we are always taking risks...’ (Susan-S). Further elaborations expressed that an important part of risk management is the ability to create professional boundaries and also be able to ask for help, with a supervisor adding, ‘... as the individual social worker and supervisee, you also have to learn to ask for help. As human beings, we really resist that’ (Adele-S).

Data Source Triangulation

Various convergent and divergent themes are generated through the triangulation of the data. *Convergent themes* included agreement on the importance of theoretical preparation, organizational support, supervision, manageable caseloads, ongoing professional and personal development, collaborative strategies, and risk management, all recognized as critical to supporting NQSWs during their transition into professional practice.

Divergent themes reflected differing priorities within these shared areas: NQSWs emphasized practical exposure, role clarity, personal and emotional support, specialist training, and financial support for development, while supervisors focused on bridging theory and practice, the provision of management support, workload feasibility, proactive self-care, burnout prevention, and facilitation of professional risk management. These convergent and divergent perspectives underscore both shared priorities and the unique challenges each group faces, providing a nuanced understanding of the support and development needs of NQSWs during the transitional phase.

Discussion

This section presents an integrated discussion of the findings from both NQSWs and social work supervisors. Using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis on the combined data, themes and subthemes were generated and integrated throughout this discussion, with data triangulation (Carter et al., 2014) employed to identify convergent and divergent themes.

The discussion begins by exploring the role of the undergraduate social work degree in shaping NQSWs' readiness for practice. The BSW degree is generic in most countries, including South Africa (SAQA, 2021), and provides a foundational knowledge and skill set. This generic foundation allows for the assumption that NQSWs possess a certain baseline of social work knowledge and skills upon entering the field. Consequently, the undergraduate degree is considered the start, not the end, of the learning process, forming the basis for lifelong skills and knowledge development (Carpenter et al., 2015).

The practice education component in the undergraduate degree is valuable. Participants supported the practice component, advocating for exposure in various fields of social work. Consistently, there remains a call for further practice exposure (Tham & Lynch, 2021).

The generic nature of the degree does not fully prepare NQSWs for work in specialist fields. It is reasonable to state that various specialist skills are therefore only learnt once the social worker has entered the field (Cane & Tendam, 2022). Of concern is the expectation identified in the study that NQSWs should be prepared for specialist fieldwork. This expectation was noticed in both participant groups, reflecting an unrealistic view of the outcomes of a generic degree. Despite a general discrepancy between NQSWs and supervisors' expectations regarding the abilities of NQSWs to enter work and manage complex cases (Carpenter et al., 2015; Huni & Chikadzi, 2014), a realistic understanding of what they 'should be able to do' in terms of specialist practice is required. To manage this expectation, supervisors have suggested that NQSWs, on entering the workplace, are assessed, with consideration of prior learning, and that relevant support and development opportunities are provided.

A collaborative approach is essential for supporting NQSWs' transition into practice, highlighting shared responsibility among stakeholders. Employers and social work education institutions must ensure adequate preparation and support (Segev et al., 2022), with improvements needed in academic and employment systems (Rentea et al., 2025). As educators are encouraged to strengthen and maintain standards in practice education, employers are encouraged to understand the challenges and offer

appropriate responses to the support and development needs of recent graduates. A distinct advantage in developing NQSWs was observed where management demonstrated an understanding of the profession's demands. This supports Manthorpe et al. (2014), who argue that managers, particularly senior social workers who recognise the value of training and support, play a critical role in facilitating professional development. NQSWs, in turn, must recognize their learning needs and commit to lifelong learning (Grant et al., 2017). Internship programs, or as suggested by Alpaslan (2019), a year of community service, and structured orientation initiatives hold the potential to ease workplace adjustment and the transitional process of entering the workplace (Carpenter et al., 2015; Glassburn, 2018; Hunt et al., 2017).

Organizational factors that influence successful transitioning into the workplace include how graduates are perceived by the employing organization, along with their access to quality and timely orientation or induction, effective supervision, and manageable caseloads. Tham and Lynch (2019) support the participants' views that orientation and induction are essential to the support and development of graduates. Orientation or induction programs are to be offered as graduates enter the workplace, to ensure their timely understanding of the organization's expectations. Supervision, especially development-focused supervision, helps NQSWs manage early career demands and foster long-term stability, satisfaction, and retention (Radey & Schelbe, 2017). An open-door policy for supervision is valued, facilitating communication and information-sharing to address the multitude of challenges that NQSWs face. Supervision enhances adjustment during the transitional process and promotes professional and personal development. Both NQSWs and supervisors identified high caseloads as a major challenge. In South Africa, social workers report high caseloads ranging from 1:40 to 1:100 (Ntsekhe, 2024; South African Human Rights Commission, 2023), meaning one social worker may manage between 40 and 100 cases at any given time. The reality of high workloads makes it difficult to protect NQSWs' caseloads; however, gradual integration and an increase in workload remain ideal (Radey & Schelbe, 2017).

The CPD of NQSWs requires a balance between professional and personal growth. Limited funding and the absence of mandated financial support often result in self-funded training (Beddoe et al., 2020), influencing the feasibility and access to training. NQSWs and supervisors supported the notion that they hold dual accountability for the development of the recent graduates, and that, despite funding constraints, access to training is essential.

As previously mentioned, professional development often includes acquiring specialist knowledge and skills that are not taught at the undergraduate level. Participants reflected the need for training in specialized service delivery fields, including administrative skills, working with vulnerable and minority groups in social work, and policy and workplace procedures. Developing flex-skills (also referred to as soft skills or transferable skills) is valuable for NQSWs. Flex-skills, often underdeveloped in graduates, facilitate successful adjustment and retention in the workplace (Tulgan, 2015). Participants recognized the value and importance of developing flex-skills, such as conflict management, communication, teamwork and administrative skills, and suggested that the process starts at the undergraduate level.

An important development within the social work profession is the growing recognition of personal development as a component of professional competence.

Given the emotional demands and risk of burnout in the profession (Cook, 2023; Ravalier et al., 2024), self-care and resilience training are considered imperative (Cleveland et al., 2019; Hitchcock et al., 2022). Participants acknowledged that working in the field of social work requires self-awareness and care, and includes dealing with their own personal insecurities and self-doubt.

Solution-based strategies for addressing the support and development of recent graduates require a collaborative approach. Retention strategies underline the importance of support systems and access to professional development (Thoburn et al., 2021). Participants echoed this view, highlighting the role of supportive supervisors, who acknowledge the importance of self-care, as crucial to the retention of NQSWs. In the absence of mandated support structures, innovative approaches, such as graduate internships, should be explored to ease the transition into practice. Multi-modal training opportunities as well as flexible approaches to managing training costs are suggested. Given the high-risk and high-stress environments faced by many social workers (Pulman & Fenge, 2024), a comprehensive risk management policy is essential to support NQSWs in navigating their careers within healthy boundaries, especially since risk management is not comprehensively addressed during their training.

Limitations

The study's limitations include using the online format for data collection. The online World Café, despite being convenient and enabling participation across the country, may have limited participant engagement and interaction. Additionally, the study's research design, capturing data at a single point in time, restricts its ability to reflect the evolving challenges that NQSWs face over time. Although participants present a typical representation of NQSWs' circumstances, and it is plausible that the findings may resonate with other lower-middle-income countries' resource-related contexts, there are no empirical grounds to confirm transferability.

The findings presented point to several important implications for professional social work practice.

Implications for Social Work Practice

It is recommended that NQSWs receive structured support and development opportunities as they transition into practice. Given that undergraduate training provides a generic foundation rather than specialist expertise, further professional learning should be prioritized. Emphasizing lifelong learning can enhance NQSWs' confidence and competence while promoting a constructive and collaborative approach to early professional development.

The training and development of NQSWs should involve multiple stakeholders. Employer organizations are encouraged to allocate budgets for newly qualified social worker training. A reasonable retention contract, ensuring NQSWs remain with the organization for a period following training, could be explored. External training providers should be supported to offer accessible, cost-effective, entry-level training tailored to NQSWs' needs. Moreover, research should investigate the potential of hybrid learning formats such as online professional courses and podcasts as viable CPD options (Hanley, 2024).

As part of a collaborative development process, strong relationships between practice educators and students during undergraduate studies are essential for improving workplace readiness (Joubert, 2017). Internships or community service placements for new graduates may further facilitate the acquisition of specialist knowledge and workplace preparedness. It is recommended that the feasibility of such models be investigated within the context of resource-constrained lower-middle-income countries (Alpaslan, 2019). To effectively meet the support and development needs of NQSWs, the study proposes that a contextually relevant, customized CPD framework be developed. All stakeholders, including educators, employer organizations, regulatory bodies, and NQSWs, are required in the collaborative process of framework development, with potential for adaptation across other lower-middle-income countries.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should address the growing demand for flexible and cost-effective CPD for early-career practitioners. Studies should explore the potential of multi-modal formats, such as online courses, interactive webinars, and professional podcasts. Targeted research is also recommended regarding specialist skills, core flex-competencies, and personal resilience training during workplace transitions. Evaluating these learning formats will help establish accessible, high-impact development pathways for newly qualified social workers.

Furthermore, research is needed to address critical gaps in undergraduate risk management training to better prepare graduates for complex practice environments. Empirical studies evaluating curriculum alignment with frontline realities can help strengthen pre-service preparation. Priority should also be given to developing and testing a contextually relevant CPD framework tailored to South African NQSWs. This framework could offer valuable insights for adaptation in other lower-middle-income contexts facing similar systemic challenges.

Conclusion

This study underscores the need for stakeholder collaboration in supporting and developing NQSWs as they transition into practice. The findings call for a realistic understanding of NQSWs' readiness for specialist practice and advocate for targeted support structures, including internships, accessible training opportunities, and a tailored CPD framework. These recommendations are crucial for enhancing NQSWs' readiness, well-being, and retention within the social work profession.

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