



**University of KwaZulu-Natal third-year male social work students’  
experiences of group work practice with school children**

**Masters Dissertation**

**By**

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE MASTERS OF SOCIAL WORK

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## **Abstract**

The Social Work profession in South Africa has been generally dominated by females. However, various studies have evidently revealed that over the recent years men have been slowly occupying this female dominated field of work. This has influenced the gender expectations of the profession and the roles of men in it, especially when men enter this field. Societal perceptions of males place in society and the type of jobs that are appropriate for men may influence the experiences and service of men involved. When looking at the number of social work students, males are a minority in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programmes, a reality that warrants exploration as the academy strives for greater diversity within preservice social work. Male social work students are studying in what may be considered a female-dominated profession, and indirectly experience fear of feminization and stigmatization. This study focused on the experiences and challenges of UKZN male social work students during their group work practice with school children. This study explored the experiences of third-year male social work students' involvement in group work practice in their practicum at Nsimbini, Wiggins, and Mayville primary schools. These primary schools are situated in Durban, (Mayville, Chesterville and Cato Manor) respectively. As one of the three methods employed in social work, the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal's social work department established a program which intends to equip and familiarise students about group work practice. A qualitative approach was used, with purposive and snowball sampling used as methods of sample selection whilst interviews were utilized for data collection. Findings suggest that gender played a factor that shaped and influenced the experiences of male social work students in children's group work sessions. Culture also played a significant role on how children perceived and interacted with male social work students. The study revealed some underlying socially constructed perceptions on gendered cultural norms where children continue to treat male figures with great respect. The research also highlighted some gender stereotypes, stigmas and gendered perceptions which formed an important finding that related to the study. Male social work students' gender did influence how children responded to and participated in group work session. This study has demonstrated a need for further research which will focus on the gender stereotypes, stigmas and gender perceptions of the social work profession as experienced by male social work students.

**Keywords:** Social work; male social work students; group work

## **Declaration**

I, Zakhele Charles Thobela, hereby confirm and declare that this dissertation is my original work. All references to the work of others has been appropriately acknowledged. This work has been carried out exclusively by me under the supervision of Dr N Ngcobo.

I also declare that:

(i) This dissertation has not previously been submitted to any other University for any degree or examination purposes.

(ii) This dissertation does not hold another persons' data or other information unless precisely acknowledged as being sourced from other research.

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Zakhele Charles Thobela (218083910)

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Date

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Place

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to every individual who has supported me in putting this work together. I thank you all for believing and instilling perseverance in me.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people whose support made this study possible:

- I thank God Almighty, the Creator, Finisher of my faith who gave me the strength to persist with my studies, the heavenly father for guiding and protecting me throughout the writing of this dissertation. I thank the Lord for creating an opportunity for me to fulfil my dream. Without him none of this would have been possible.
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## **List of abbreviations**

ANC	African National Congress
BSW	Bachelor of Social Work
DSD	Department of Social Development
IASSW	International Association for Schools of Social Work
ICSW	International Council on Social Welfare
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
SACSSP	South African Council for Social Service Professions
SANC	South African Nursing Council
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1. Introduction**

The Social Work profession in South Africa generally has been dominated by females. However, various studies have evidently revealed that over the recent years men have been slowly occupying female dominated field of work such as nursing and social work. On the other hand, women are increasingly occupying traditionally male-dominated jobs such as engineering, medicine, law, and business. The increase of males and the nature of their participation in female-dominated professions, social work to be specific, has been a centre of academic inquiry and interest (Schaub, 2017; Zhang & Liu, 2016; McLean, 2003).

According to Christie (2006) Men's relationships to work in the social work profession, particularly in child welfare, are often ambiguous and at times, inconsistent. After such a statement by Christie (2006), one would expect further insight into this ambiguity. According to Brown et al. (2016), social work remains an occupation associated more with women than men. This association influences the gender expectations of the profession and the roles of men in it especially when men enter into a seemingly feminine occupation as was the case in the early days of the computer programming profession. Therefore, societal perceptions of men's place in society and the type of jobs that are seen to be appropriate for them may influence their experiences and service (Kulik, 1998). For example, normative and dominant societal constructs of men as emotionally distant while avoiding 'feminine' qualities and in a way maintaining stringent roles which may be considered as fierce (Ratele & Clowes, 2012). Therefore, the infiltration of men within a space historically occupied and dominated by women raises academic points of inquiry, particularly on how male social workers adjust their societal indoctrination within the much-feminized social work profession and what challenges they encounter during group work practice.

### **1.2. Background**

Formal social work education began at the turn of the century almost simultaneously in Europe and United States, by the 1920s it was developing in South America, India and South Africa (Ramanathan and Link, 1999). However, the training of social workers in South Africa was not only gender-based but was also racially skewed. According to Lombard (2015), the 1959 Extension of University Education Act, which was created by the National Party, was a driver

in creating institutions of learning based on colour. This has been attributed to the persistent shortages in personnel and lack of equitable gender and racial representation within the social work profession to date. The founding figure of the social work profession in South Africa is Professor Bateson of the University of Cape Town (representing liberalism) and Professor Verwoerd of the University of Stellenbosch (representing Afrikaner nationalism) in 1924 (Smith, 2004). Other institutions of training were the Dutch Reformed Church, the Minnie Hofmeyr College for "coloured" women and the Huguenot College for "white" women (previously Friedenheim College) in 1931, the Transvaal University College in 1929 (the University of Pretoria), the University of the Witwatersrand in 1937, Jan Hofmeyr College for "black" social workers in 1941, De Coligny Training Institution (Dutch Reformed Church Seminary in Transkei), and the Strydom College Training School (ibid).

The shortage of social workers has been in the mainstream media and in academic literature even though there are many training institutions in South Africa offering social work studies (South African Council of Social Service, 2005). This attracted government policies such as the declaration of Social Work services as a critical skill allowing for more entrants of male social workers in a perceived female profession. From 110 social workers in 2005, there is now 18,213 social workers, 5,239 auxiliary social workers and 2,189 student social workers who are registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) in 2014 (State of the Social Service Workforce Report, 2015). The male social work graduates trend is by all fairness not peculiar to the South African situation. For example, in 2012, Chilean universities produced 1,875 graduates holding diplomas in social work; of this number, 291 were men, accounting for 16 percent of the total number of Chilean social work graduates for that year (McLean, 2017). Data supplied by the South African Nursing Council (SANC) regarding the growth in total student numbers over a nine-year period from 2005 until 2014 indicates that the numbers have increased from 27 481 to 48 619, a total increase of 21 138 (76%) (SANC Statistics, 2014). According to the SANC (2014), the total number of undergraduate male nursing students and social work students on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2014 was 1 758 versus the female nursing and social work students which was 14 415 (ibid). The figures above reveal the comparative analysis of both nursing and social work professions, and how both professions are highly dominated by female students. The above statistics evidently shows that less enrolment and attrition rate among male social work students have played a role in high disparities of gender in the profession of social work in South Africa.

Rehn and Kalman (2016) state that indeed there are challenges that face social work students, particularly, male students when doing fieldwork practice; it was found that they became overwhelmed when interacting with clients. Specifically, these are the needs of the black majority in South Africa who are historically the most disadvantaged portion of the population (Collins and Millard, 2013). However, there was a need to look at these disadvantages by assessing group work practices with children, as group work practice plays a fundamental role in the social work profession. According to Huyssteen and Strydom (2016), increasing challenges amongst families especially challenges that affect children require a multi-skilled individual that can use various intervention strategies which include group work.

Huyssteen and Strydom (2016) state that group work can help based on its uniqueness. Furthermore, group work has proven to be an effective tool in dealing and helping vulnerable people, it can further assist in making clients envisage that they have the capacity to help themselves. In addition, Crawford et al. (2014) mentions that group work in social work has evolved over the years, makes it a good platform in addressing some of the fundamental issues in social work especially when it comes to children and vulnerable individuals. Therefore, consistent with Williamson-Ashe and Ericksen (2017), this study sought to explore how male students experience group work practice with children.

### **1.3. The rationale of the study**

In the history of the field of social work profession, women have always been the majority, and this has, amongst other things, been perpetuated by the enrolment and graduation gender-skewed numbers with women out ruling men. Geisler (2013) reported that when looking at the number of social work students, males are a minority in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme, a reality that warrants exploration as the academy strives for greater diversity within social work. Drawing from Myers (2010), male social work students are studying in what may be considered a female-dominated profession, therefore, they indirectly experience fear of feminization and stigmatization. According to Buscatto and Fusulier (2013) men who are in women-dominated fields are often stigmatized, as in most cases their sexuality is also questioned. However, patriarchy is not without its advantages even in female-dominated professions. Williams (1992) found that there are hidden advantages for men in female-dominated professions. Therefore, this study paid more attention to the experiences and challenges of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) male social work students during their group work practice with school children.

The study explored the experiences of third-year male social work students' involvement with group work practice in their practicum at Nsimbini, Wiggins, and Mayville primary schools. These primary schools are situated in Durban, (Mayville, Chesterville and Cato Manor) to be specific. As one of the three methods employed in social work, the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal social work department established a program which intends to equip and familiarise students about group work practice. Prior to the placement of students from the social work department in schools to facilitate group work with learners, students first undergo group work preparation within the university. They facilitate groups taking turns, allowing them to furnish each other with adequate skills to convene a group. For guidance purposes, students also facilitate these groups under the supervision of lecturers and tutors. For further guidance and preparation, each student is allocated a supervisor when they run group work in schools.

The persistent and dominant perception of the social work profession in society remains a profession for women. Khunou and Nethononda (2012) found that as a result, it is still a puzzling thought in society why a man would want to pursue a career in social work. These perceptions have influenced the expectations society has on male social workers, which in turn present challenges when male social workers engage with clients within the scope of their work. Therefore, drawing from these experiences, working with children in schools as a male social work student was challenging. For example, when you are conducting a group session you may encounter scenarios whereby both females and males find it hard to participate. Drawing from the experiences of male social work students, the study was better positioned to provide insight on the causes associated with these challenges and thus duly inform the appropriate solutions in dealing with sensitive subjects such as a male social work student's. There was also a need to look at the dynamics of male social work students in dealing with female and male children when they carry out their activities in group work practice. The researcher was interested in understanding how these dynamics play out themselves in relation to the experiences of male social work students in their group work practice with female children. Furthermore, Geisler (2013) points out that there was a lack of literature about men's experiences in social work programmes and that this paucity in literature limits the scope of awareness about the topic. Hence this study was used as an ingress from which other studies can be developed on the topic

#### **1.4. Problem statement**

Men in social work, particularly in direct child and family welfare practice are the minority (Christie, 2001). Limited literature exists regarding the experiences of male social work students on their group work practice with children. Although there has been a change in the ratio of male to female social work education over the years, with more men enrolling for social work, little is known about the male student's adaptation to challenges and experienced privileges within a profession that is dominated by females. Generally, women are usually deemed as people who are nurturing, justifying their association with social work practice (Gillingham, 2006). While there have been several studies, such as *The problem of privilege male social work student's undergraduate experiences* (Geisler, 2013) and *Male social workers in child and family welfare* (Gillingham, 2006), that investigated experiences of men who choose feminised professions like nursing and social work broadly, very little is known about the experiences of male students within the social work profession especially in group work practice. With the increment in male social workers in South Africa, despite the societal demand, it is fundamental that the issues experienced by male social work students are highlighted not to further alienate male social workers and discourage those who are keen to fill in the void to adequately service society. This could be achieved through research studies on the issues experienced by male social workers.

#### **1.5. Location of the study**

The study was conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Howard College Campus in Durban. UKZN consists of 4 campuses namely Westville, Pietermaritzburg, Medical School, and Howard College. The discipline of social work, which is situated at the Howard College campus and is located within the School of Applied Human Sciences under the College of Humanities. The course of Social Work (Bachelor of Social Work) at UKZN takes a period of four years. In the course, it is required for students to have fieldwork practices and these practices start in the third year of study. This is where students are required to go to surrounding schools to conduct group work practice with children. The fieldwork practice was initiated in the third year and carried over to the fourth year, this is when students were placed in different organizations for their fieldwork practice. The prospective participants of the study, as part of their level 3 practice have undertaken six group work sessions with school children from Cato Manor. These schools are Nsimbini, Wiggins and Mayville.

## **1.6. Aims and Objectives of the study**

### **1.6.1. Aim(s) of the study**

The main aim of this study is to explore and focus on the various challenges encountered by male social work students in their group work practice with school children, thus allowing them an opportunity to strive within the female-dominated profession.

### **1.6.2. Objectives**

- To explore the nature of male social work student's involvement with group work in their practicum.
- To examine how male social work students, interact with school children during group work practice.
- To investigate the challenges encountered by male social work students in group work practice with school children, particularly female children.
- To determine how male social work students, perceive their preparation for group work practice with children.
- To explore how male social work students, adapt to the challenges they encounter during group work practice

### **1.6.3. Research questions**

- What is the nature of UKZN male social work students' involvement with group work in their practicum?
- How do UKZN male social work students interact in group work practice with children?
- What are the challenges UKZN male social work students in group work practice with children?
- How do UKZN male social work students perceive their level of preparedness for group work practice with children?
- How do UKZN male social work students adapt to the challenges encountered during their group work practice?

## **1.7 The theoretical framework of the study**

The study is framed within the social constructionism theory. Social constructionism originally comes from sociology and has been mainly associated with qualitative research (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). It first emerged as an attempt to understand the nature of reality. Social

Constructionism theory proposes that knowledge is socially constructed and should not be confused with social constructivism which posits that knowledge is individually constructed through cognitive processes (Young and Colin, 2004). However, social constructionism can also be used at a personal and cognitive level by individuals to compliment social constructionism. Social constructionism posits that the world is better understood through the experiences of those being researched. In this case, the level three male Social Work students would have undertaken their six-week group work practice at schools, which then qualifies as their experiences (Berger and Luckmann, 1991).

Moreover, social constructionism focuses on “the process by which meanings are created, negotiated, sustained and modified” (Schwandt 2003, p. 66), hence the researcher’s interest in how these meanings are negotiated during group work practice by male social work students. The researcher was also aware that there was no single truth and change in meanings, which renders this framework applicable for the study. Utilizing social constructionism theory for this study enabled the researcher to understand how socially constructed gender roles influence how male (and female) Social Work students carry out their third-year group work practice. Berger and Luckmann (1991) posits that reality is socially constructed. Subjective experiences of everyday life are not devoid of personal interpretations of the world around us, more so the interpretations of individuals and groups that inhabit a particular world.

Thibodeaux (2014) suggests that social constructionism can both separate and combine a subject and their environment. He suggests the use of objective conditions when analysing how perspectives are motivated. Perceptions of gender roles and occupations are socially constructed. Caring professions such as nursing, social work and kindergarten teachers are perceived to be for the female gender whereas ‘strong’ and ‘technical’ duties such as engineering, and surgery are perceived to be for men. With the rise in literacy and education levels, these gender roles for professional duties are becoming less rigid, however this is not without some resistance. With the entrants of men in an erstwhile female-dominated profession, the dynamics of the profession starts to change, but this is not without some challenges for the new entrants. Furthermore, Berger and Luckmann (1991) note that human activity brings about change. Therefore, individuals and groups define social reality in that people’s presentation of themselves and events is always based on dominant and prevailing versions (Burr, 2003). Accordingly, this suggests that social constructionism supports the idea that people can indeed be agents of change but nonetheless, Burr (2003) argues that this is one of the least developed areas of constructionism.



According to Stam (2001), social constructionism has internal contradictions as it is unable to declare anything at all given its claims on the nature of language, reality, and objects. Moreover, Social Constructionism fails to differentiate content from the process, in that the content self is different in many ways across cultures but with the process it maintains that self is universal and is applicable in any culture (Stam, 2001). However, looking at gender roles this theory was good for this study. Gender roles are socially constructed (West and Zimmerman, 1987). However, change in the context is bound to influence change in one's perspective, as in the case of male social workers within the identity of social work. Therefore, social constructionism theory was the appropriate lens from which the study draws these arguments. This assisted the researcher to understand the socially constructed and taken for granted assumptions about gender within the social work profession.

## **1.8 Structure of the Dissertation**

The proposed dissertation will be divided into five chapters namely:

### **Chapter one**

This chapter briefly introduces and gives an overview of the study. It further gives an insight to the background of the study, the rationale of the study, problem statement, the location of the study, aims and objectives, research questions and theoretical framework.

### **Chapter two**

This chapter focuses on the review of the literature including the comprehensive discussion of the theoretical framework. It will include a brief introduction of the contents of the chapter, social welfare history of the problem, policies and legislation and review of the literature related to the research questions.

### **Chapter three**

The chapter focuses on the research methodology, research design, sampling strategies, data collection techniques and methods of data analysis and methods of data verification of the study. It will also state whether ethical considerations that are set as a standard by the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Social Science Research Ethics Committee were considered in the proposed study. Potential value and potential limitation will be presented.

#### **Chapter four**

This chapter presents the data collected, discussed and interpreted for this study. Findings of the proposed study will be presented and interpreted through thematic analysis.

#### **Chapter five**

This chapter summarises and concludes the study with recommendation to study, where research questions were answered, and determination of achievement based on the study aims and objectives were made.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

In research, a literature review is basically studying existing scholarly work or available body of knowledge that assists the researcher to see how other scholars have investigated the research problem (Mouton, 2001:87). The study reviews scholarly works based on male social work students' experiences of group work practice with school children, with its relevance to this current study, reviewing existing literature assisted the researcher to familiarize and get acquainted with other scholars research on this topic. Further providing justification for current and future studies. This review evaluates the current condition of the social work profession from statistics globally from existing literature. It looks at the historical antecedents of the racial and gender representation of the social work profession and traces the changes over time from the Carnegie commission of enquiry to the present. It traces the evolution of the professional landscape and the impact of social work education to the profession and how these feed into the changing landscape. It also interrogates the dominant construction of social work in literature and the emerging construction of social work students, especially black, male undergraduate students in completing group work.

### **2.2. The State of the Profession: From a Semi-Profession to a Noble Profession**

The complexities of history and the rapid social change going on in South Africa makes it challenging to write about the social work profession. Smith (2014) has observed discontinuities and gaps in the origins of the social work profession in South Africa which has been dominated by colonial, feminism, individualist and white discourses. This current study adopted a critical view on the conventional study on social work practice. The interconnection of the social and political sphere of life is necessary to get a better background of the history of the discipline. Prior to the 1920s, Drower (2002) argues that social work was a distinct profession that did not entirely exist in South Africa. Welfare needs were met in the familial and communal level. The rising incidence of poverty among the white population owing to the famine during that period was the head start of the establishment of social work. This led to an establishment of an investigation into the causes and ways to ameliorate the impoverishment of whites in South Africa. Subsequently, the commission of enquiry which was led by the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York led to the establishment of the social welfare department as one of the recommendations from

the Carnegie enquiry in 1932. This later metamorphosed into the formal establishment of the Department of Welfare in South Africa.

Prior to that, there were several charitable organizations and mutual aid societies which had their antecedents in America and Britain (Gray, 1998). McKendrick (1987) has listed the different stages of the development of social work in South Africa from the family and mutual aid method from 1652-1800, modelled after the charitable organizations in America established by mutual aid societies, fraternities and religious organizations. However, the Dutch Reformed Church had established an orphanage in 1812 in South Africa to cater for white orphans and juveniles akin to the establishment of a working and visiting society and a reformatory by Mary Carpenter in Britain based on religious and philanthropic liberalism. The urbanization rising from the expansion of capital and the displacement of others into poverty between 1801 and 1902 expanded the need for more philanthropic liberalism, paving the way for the Carnegie Commission and the establishment of a social welfare system, and for social work sometime between 1903 and 1936. The establishment of the Department of Welfare brought more impetus into social work with more state funding and direct involvement around 1937-1950. All these developments were previously established to focus on the indigent white population, unfortunately, they are no longer in existence (McKendrick, 1987).

While McKendrick (1987) lists the period between 1951 and 1980 as a period of modernization, it is paradoxical that this is when race-based inequalities in the provision of social services were entrenched. Since Poitgieter (1968) states that history of social work can be traced to the provision of supplies to the free burghers in 1657 by the Dutch East India Company through the Dutch Reformed Church in Holland. Questions such as what sort of aid helped the natives to get through the famine and were there familial assistance and what manner of mutual aid the natives employed during this period may rise. This is to question the dominant narratives of the natives as cattle-raiders (McKendrick, 1987). The social system of the native had inbuilt a mutual aid system that was disrupted with the integration of the extant agricultural-nomadic economy into the colonial economy.

### **2.3. The State of the Profession**

The determination is to recognise and respond to the "profoundly unjust, unfair and above all unsustainable social, economic and political system of the contemporary world" stated by the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development established the Global Agenda in 2012 (Tasse, 2014:283). Social workers and social development specialists are in the cutting

edge to lighten the hardships and difficulties that individuals, network communities and social orders are confronted with. In getting ready for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, the International Association for Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) teamed up and counselled over a three-year time span on the division's job in adding to the Post-2015 Development Agenda. These three bodies speak to social specialists, social advancement professionals, instructors, and worldwide, national and local associations.

In progressing in the direction of a superior future, the beginning stage was to perceive all in all the unequal outcomes of political, financial, social and social requests in explicit settings and the adverse effects these results have for individuals, as is obvious in worldwide, national and local network communities (Global Agenda, 2012). The Global Agenda is not intended to be an unbending record, however, is fairly, "with every one of its inadequacies and limits", a stage "to make a space for discussion in the professions and beyond with each one of those focused on social, financial and political equity" (Tasse 2014, p283). Generally, the Global Agenda (2012) was intended to fill in as a typical stage for discourse and as an Agenda of Commitments to Action from 2013 onwards. The Global Agenda was formally submitted and perceived by Helen Clark in March 2012, the leader of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) at the central command of the United Nations (UN) in New York on World Social Work Day. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (The Agenda), designed explicitly to strengthen the profile and visibility of social work and social development, to help these organizations to acquire new partnerships, to boost the confidence of social workers and to enable social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development.

However, due to globalization, there is an acknowledgment that social work has a global outlook especially with the migration of workers as they are confronted with similar challenges and developments and may benefit from similar interventions (Blok, 2012). The increase in international migration flows has increased the mobility of skills and social workers across borders (Wojczewski, Pentz, Blacklock, Hoffmann, Peersman, Nkomazana, and Kutalek, 2015). As a result, this has implications for cultural sensibilities and economic tensions between host countries such as South Africa and the migrant social workers (Mangena & Waria, 2017). The desire for better economic conditions and improved income with better working conditions has led more social workers to move beyond borders where they earned their qualifying degree (Tevera and Chikanda, 2009). While studies have focused on the

migration of unskilled workers (Khan, 2008; Mawadza, 2008; Neocosmos. 2010) and skilled migrants (Dodson, 2001; Rasool & Botha, 2011; Tinarwo, 2011), studies on the gender dynamics of social work has recently started gaining traction in popular press (Fischl, 2013) and scholarly journals (Simpson, 2004; 2005 and Williams, 1992).

There comes the establishment of the global regulatory bodies of the profession namely, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) have come up with a global agenda. The aim is to ensure that the experience and skills of social professionals are recognized and applied to achieve sustainable, collaborative outcomes drawing on the acknowledged skills of social workers in creating multi-faceted, pragmatic solutions to highly complex problems, both individually and socially. Central to the achievement of building capacity and extending influence as stated in the Agenda is to examine how gender influences impact on the performances of the roles of the profession. Occupational segregation by gender remains the most pervasive aspect in the labour market. In the past, most research on this topic has concentrated on explanations of women's segregation into low paid and low-status occupations, or investigations of women who have crossed gender boundaries into men's jobs, and the potential impact on them and the occupations (Cross and Bagihole, 2002).

Historically, in the field of social work, women are perceived to have always been a majority in the profession, and this has amongst other things, been perpetuated by the enrolment and graduation gender-skewed numbers that are viewed to be bias to women. Insights from the SACSSP affirm that women fill the larger part, with men making up between 11 to 13% of the aggregate population enlisted for social works in the years 2007 to 2010. The number of men entering the social work profession is step by step expanding. This moderate increment can incompletely be credited to the presentation of the Department of Social Development's Bursary for social specialists. A comparative bursary in the UK was contended to be a motivating force for enhancing access and expansion in the calling (Furness, 2007). Likewise, sexual orientation assorted variety additionally assumed job in social work in South Africa especially. It was revealed by Khunou, Pillay, and Nethononda (2012), that gender and racial imbalances in social administrations has been raised as a worry all through the world (McLean, 2003 and Cree, 1996). In South Africa, the historical backdrop of race and sexual orientation has been the foundation in the expectation to build a special and predominant whiteness and a sub-par and impeded darkness. This implied a privileging of social ills experienced by whites,

as shown by the Carnegie Commission of Inquiry into the 'poor white issue' in 1934 (Potgieter, 1998), which prompted the arrangement of a social welfare division and the preparation of social specialists during the 1930s.

These improvements reverberated the effectively existing examples of racial preferred standpoint and drawback that saturated South African culture (Patel, 1992). The upkeep give that pursued these foundations was likewise paid out, with whites accepting twofold what was paid to Indians and Coloured's, though African were not included to benefit from this development (Bozalek, 1999). Today in contemporary South Africa, the term black alludes to Coloureds, Indians and Africans, nonetheless, in the politically-sanctioned racial segregation of apartheid period, all residents were characterized into four racial classes that included 'whites, Coloureds, Indians, and Bantu (those local to South Africa). These classifications were utilized to isolate and give or deny citizenship rights. This implied that the advancement of social administrations was not comprehensive, with African people being rejected as recipients and social specialist co-ops. This selectiveness was additionally delineated in how the calling of the profession of social function was principally a white man's' environment. Dominelli (1989) in an examination of bigotry in the social work calling accurately demonstrates that social work neglected to satisfy its guarantee of thinking about the entirety of its clients, she shows that blacks were underrepresented as clients and suppliers of social administrations. Attributing to rising poverty, joblessness, continuing imbalances and unbendable ideas of gender, access to social administrations is changing gradually with black African men yet lingering behind.

These patterns are like those in the United States, where race and sexual orientation add to the feminisation of the calling into the profession and this prompts the enslavement of specific needs, particularly of youthful African men (Hall, 2010). Comparative sex predispositions likewise hinder the enrolment and maintenance of men in nursing (Strong, 2004). These partialities are kept up through gender generalizations that pigeonhole men who apply to the profession and the individuals who utilize social administrations as 'gay', while ladies are seen as frail hindered exploited people (Kosberg, 2002 cited in Hall, 2010). Previous studies have been conducted to explore gender imbalances within the field of social work. Brunn (2013) indicated that the proportion of male and female social work students is skewed in favour of females and this trend continues to thrive. A typical example is a study conducted in Swedish universities to investigate the gender representation in the field of social work (Statistics Sweden, 2015), the study showed that 86% of the social work students are females, however,

females fall behind when it comes to climbing higher up the hierarchy and securing the managerial position as it is still predominantly occupied to male social workers. This phenomenon is generally referred to as leaky pipeline (Abukar and Wedin, 2016). Notwithstanding the leaky pipeline, skewed gender representation is also prevalent in many countries and South Africa is no exception.

The adoption of the Sustainable Development goals 2030, envisages the need for a more nuanced social work profession regarding gender cannot be overstated as it demands all the effort needed to deliver on the eradication of poverty and sustainable growth. The State of the Social Service Workforce report (2015) states that there is a need for more social workers notably in Sierra-Leone, Liberia and South Africa because of health pandemics that compound the social problems of poverty and inequality. Globally, the social work profession has not been able to recruit as many social workers to the profession, for the MDG to achieve its goal on social cohesion. It was noted by a Senior Disability Advisor from UNHCR, Lange (2017) that Social work has a rich history of working with network of communities to advance social union. This experience is presently more applicable than any time in recent memory in settings of constrained removal, with quantities of individuals coercively dislodged amounting to 65 million in the year 2015. Overwhelmingly, most displaced people are facilitated in poor or underdeveloped regions, with slightest developed nations giving shelter to about 26% of the aggregate worldwide population of exiles (Lange, 2017).

The previous Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, has alluded to this as an 'emergency of solidarity', and this setting offers ascend to a pressing need to assemble social union among dislodged and host populaces. Social work, with its solid acknowledgment of the significance of connections between individuals, has a critical job in such manner. It was further expressed by Kirstin (2017) that exiles and other dislodged people can be specialists of constructive change, with the possibility to add to the social and monetary improvement of their host network communities and to reconstructing endeavours in their nation of origin on return. Through the different strategies and procedures of social work, including a network of community work and limit to capacity building, social workers have an imperative job in supporting uprooted people, families and networks, to encourage their strengthening to end up specialists of constructive change in their social orders.

Furthermore, social work has a vital commitment to make to the worldwide discourse on issues of constrained relocation. Social work's barrier of human rights and spotlight on standards of



aggregate obligation have a critical place in the present setting, where banter about constrained removal are time after time guided by dread and xenophobic talk (Lange, 2017). However, in taking part in the global discourse, social work can add to moving the discussion further toward a path that regards the inalienable poise and worth of individuals and advances solidarity or promotes a spirit of unity. The shortage male in the field may further be compounded by the extant feminization of social work. Women constitute 81.6% of social workers, 69.9% of counsellors, and 82.4% of social and human service assistants. Moreover, men account for less than 10% of social workers under the age of 34, suggesting that their numbers will dwindle even more in the next couple of decades in America. The government of China has thus decided to train three million social workers by 2020 (Shek, 2017).

In South Africa, due to the intervention of the Department of Labour by listing the social work profession as a critical skill, the number of social workers have increased tremendously from their numbers between 1997-2005 when there was a shortfall in the number of social workers needed in the country to a crisis of unemployment of social workers in 2018 despite the need for them. As such, a report in the Independent online reports thus: “As the country struggles with drug and alcohol abuse, thousands of social work graduates trained at a huge state expense are languishing at home without work. The number of these unemployed youth, who should be absorbed by the Department of Social Development, looks set to jump from 3 800 to 8 600 this year” (IOL, March 2018). The study reported that in October 2005, according to the South African Council for Social Services Professions (SACSSP), there were only about 11,100 social workers registered in South Africa. This statistic is a matter of concern in relation to the ever-increasing social challenges faced by individuals, families and communities in South Africa as well as the high turnover rate for social workers.

High caseloads have also been reported in social workers leading to burnout and frustration, resulting in most of them either leaving the profession altogether or emigrating to practise in other countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia (Engelbrecht, 2006). In the light of this, South Africa has been able to absorb social workers from other countries, especially from Zimbabwe. Other countries such as New Zealand, Canada, the UK and Australia have also been actively recruiting social workers to fill shortages that cannot be met internally (Bartley et al., 2012 and Pullen-Sansfacon et al., 2012). The development of interest in the role of gender in social work is not new. This is evident ever since the early days of professional social work training in the UK, social work academics have been writing about the necessity of bringing men into what was predominantly viewed as a ‘women’s profession’.

Men were critical to the professionalization project in social work, since only then would social workers be able to command a salary better than that of a shorthand-typist (Youngusband, 1947).

Since that time, a succession of studies has examined the role of gender in social work education and practice. Walton's classic (1975) study discovered that men were more likely to be found in settings which required a measure of control—as probation officers, school attendance officers and civil servants—while women were found in more caring roles—child care, allowing (hospital social work) and moral welfare work. In the 1980s, a new generation of feminist social workers and academics, including Brook and Davis (1985), Hanmer and Statham (1988) and Dominelli and McLeod (1989), highlighted women's central role in the social work discourse, whilst Howe (1986) charted the hierarchical and vertical segregation that existed in statutory social work agencies, where men were found in management positions and women worked as practitioners.

In the 1990s, the discussion has moved forward by looking in more depth at the position of men in social work, and new edited collections such as Cavanagh and Cree (1996) and Christie (2001) argued that women and men must together seek to challenge and change the inevitably sexist and patriarchal nature of social work. Whilst there has been some progress in encouraging black and Asian students into social work education and other careers, such as law and medicine, continue to offer greater opportunities for black and Asian professionals to progress (Panaser, 2003). The implications are that women (working-class and middle-class, white, black and Asian) may continue to be the social work students of the future, while working-class and middle-class white, black and Asian men may remain in the minority. Organisations remain deeply inflected with gender traditionalism (Halford and Leonard 2001).

Hence it is not surprising that social work is still seen today as a 'woman's occupation', and men may be reluctant to apply for social work training for all the reasons which we have discussed, and more. But we believe that this is not the whole story. If social work is becoming less middle-class, and if black and Asian men and those who see themselves as different to conventional expectations of masculinity are making their way in different professions, then this is to be applauded. In our postmodern world, 'gender' and 'social work' are always contested and always changing. The profession of social work in the future may have more women in it, but it will not be the same world as the one inhabited by the late nineteenth century middle-class women philanthropists. According to the Bureau of Labour Statistics (2019),

employment for social workers is expected to grow at a significant rate, and the overall employment of social workers is projected to grow 16 percent from 2016 to 2026. It is likely that with the projected racial and ethnic demographic shift across the life span and the continual need for diversity within the workforce, the social work profession will offer great employment opportunities. In addition, because of the underrepresentation of social workers of colour within the profession, there is the increased likelihood that practitioners who are prepared to provide services to and motivated to work with diverse populations will find employment opportunities.

Social justice is at the core of the social work profession. In South Africa under apartheid, social service values were increasingly at odds with politics and, to survive, organizations and individuals compromised with or accommodated prevailing laws and policies. Social justice requires that basic human needs are met and that resources are equitably distributed. Social workers thus must ensure equal access to public services and social welfare provision in accordance with the resources of national and local governments. The welfare system in the past has for decades allocated national welfare resources unequally. Vast discrepancies prevailed in the amounts paid for all forms of social security provision, including old-age pensions, disability grants, single care grants, foster-care grants and maintenance grants. Gray (1996) argues that social work is political; firstly, because it is regulated by and deals with the implementation of social policy and, secondly because it seeks to change both policy and social structure, which gives rise to, maintains and exacerbates social problems. She further states that the political nature of social work derives from the activities in which social workers engage to remove social injustice (Gray 1996:35).

One can therefore deduce that social work in South Africa evolved out of a political process which gave it legitimate sanction to offer social welfare services. In fact, the development of social work as a profession was intimately tied to the development of social welfare provisions (Gray, 2000:9). Howes (1996) pointed out that values are not abstractions that social workers prefer to adhere to but are enacted in practice. Values are reflected in the principles of practice that are direct and command action, and it can, therefore, happen that conflicts of values and duty arise. Throughout the profession's history, social workers have embraced a set of values central to the profession and have been concerned with ethics and values. Of these, social justice seems to be a core value of social work. Social justice is the primary principle which guides the relationship between equality and equity. Social justice is defined as the "ideal conditions in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, security, opportunities,

obligations and social benefits" (New Dictionary on Social Work, 1995:58). Under apartheid, South Africa's social service became grossly distorted by laws and policies which emanated from this system. Injustices which had been in place under early colonial systems were entrenched and compounded during this period. Workers were subjected to or dictated to by apartheid constraints.

According to Lombard (2000), discrimination took form not only of inequalities in the social welfare benefits paid but also of differences in the procedures and policies applied by the different State departments. An example of this was revealed in the greater Johannesburg Welfare Social Service and Development Forum which submitted in 1998 to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that all black pay-outs were made on a fixed date at communal payout points often in inhumane conditions. Loffell (2000) claims that social service values were trodden underfoot in favour of policies founded on racial domination and the preservation of privilege. Social workers and welfare personnel at every level of authority were involved in the daily implementation of all the racial aspects of the various welfare statutes. They were required daily to implement statutes which formed the foundations of the apartheid system (Lombard, 2000: 129). All social services rendered by the apartheid government were linked to the ideological paradigm of Afrikaner Nationalism. According to this approach, the white person's need was regarded as a priority. While certain sectors of social workers, such as the South African Black Social Workers' Association and Concerned Social Workers, united in their attempts to challenge the status quo, there was a general blindness among social workers in addressing the basic needs of most of the population and the empowerment of disadvantaged communities.

The social work profession in South Africa during the 1980s was reflected as being in disunity. Lund (1994:7) points out that some welfare organizations continued to operate on a multi-racial basis, while endeavouring to rectify "shortfalls in their organizations, for example parity in salaries of their social workers". There had always been racial and gender discrimination in the subsidy given for social workers' salaries, with White men receiving the highest, followed by White women, then Coloured and Indian men, Coloured and Indian women, then African men, with African women receiving the lowest subsidy (Lund, 1994). Any rebellion was suppressed through banning and detentions. During the 1980s, welfare gradually became more organised. The State began to realise the importance of reform and in 1989 there was a convened conference of non-governmental organisations to debate "the Place of Social Welfare in the

Future in the Republic of South Africa". It was, however, criticised for the lack of representation from smaller grassroots organisations.

It was stated by Jaggernath (1995:144), that the conference stressed (a) the need for a single Department of Welfare, (b) the rationalization of National Councils, (c) the development of grass-root services, (d) improved research input, (e) improved primary care and work in rural areas, (f) parity between grants and pensions, and (g) the development of a national welfare scheme. Once the African National Congress (ANC) was un-banned in 1990, the welfare agenda for a new South Africa gained momentum. It was clear that welfare policy in South Africa developed essentially along two parallel systems, one being for whites and the other for blacks. The ideologies and rationalization of the policy was often contradictory. It is apparent that the system for whites was institutional and based on Western-style social welfare, while the system for the other race groups was residual. The State also realized the importance of the relationship between economic and social development for the white community. Race was unfortunately entrenched in every segment of South African society, and welfare became a mechanism of control. Resistance to the apartheid-based welfare policies was slow to gather momentum. The State created racial divisions and used force to impede the mobilization of the people.

### **2.3. Men in Female-Dominated Professions**

Debatably, the traditional male and female jobs are usually assumed to be distinguishable through status and level of pay with men being lucrative and high in status. The consequences of these trends have raised identity issues for individual men who are employed in non-traditional male-dominated jobs (Segal, 1990). Accordingly, this has made it relatively easy for women to move into non-traditional jobs rather than men. Thus, the trend of movement between females and men into traditionally dominated jobs by the other gender has seen more women than men crossing over (Kauppinen-Toropainen and Lammi, 1993). However, the noticeable trend for men when crossing over to traditionally women jobs is that men tend to occupy managerial or supervisory positions which is less the case with women who venture into male-dominated jobs (Bruckner, 2002). Men who, when crossing over, do not occupy these positions because homosexual men have mainly made inroads into most feminized jobs such social work, nursing, catering, and hairdressing (Kauppinen-Toropainen and Lammi, 1993).

The inference drawn therefore has been that these workplaces are specifically gendered and marginalized (ibid).

Perry (2003) posits that women colleagues are more welcoming and encouraging of men in women-dominated jobs because their presence can possibly enhance the occupation's status, prestige, and pay. However, on the other hand, women are often at odds with the special treatment that men receive. Women often argue that men use the support and encouragement from women for personal gains, inhibiting women's career opportunities (Simpson, 2004). Men in non-traditional occupations feel that they bring different perspectives, challenges, and ideas, but they often have difficulty coping with female work cultures and the lack of male companionship. Furthermore, a concern about men's ability and suitability to execute certain duties within the social work profession has been raised. This is despite the positive reception and perceived the advantage of increasing the proportion of men in social work (Rehn, 2016).

#### **2.4. Men in Caring Work**

The social service profession is dominated by women and most of the issues to be addressed by it such as child care and care of dependent adults are women-focused. The focus on men is often minimal and restricted to men as abusers, drugs, and alcohol abuse (Crabtree, 2012). Traditionally, therefore, men within the social work profession have been limited to occupied managerial and supervisory positions or in the controlling aspects of work with adolescents or with people with mental health problems or severe learning difficulties. This has been the trend even with other women dominated jobs such as librarianship, teaching, and nursing (Brukner, 2003).

It was argued that the male social workers play an important role in dealing with an infant or adolescent boy because they are perceived to provide a positive role model, give balance and improve the quality of life (Schaub, 2017). In contrast to this argument, there are cases where boys become more receptive female social workers, because are generally seen as mothers, which naturally draw boys to female for comfort and care (Schaub, 2017). However, when male social workers displayed sensitivity and care, they were labelled as too feminine which created a dilemma for them, for example, this dilemma is seen as one of the social factors that leads to the issue of violence in the society. To the extreme some advocate for the exclusion of men within the profession citing men's association with violence and child sex abuse as a reason to disqualify them from the profession (Schaub, 2017). These incidents have perpetuated the belief that all men are potential abusers. As Dionisio (2014) found, this has

created a more difficult work environment for male social workers, sometimes by limiting the level of physical contact when they work with young children.

#### **2.4. Social Work Education in South Africa**

South African social work education dates to the 1920s, but the Carnegie Report led to its formalization (Seekings, 2008). The first university training was offered at the University of Cape Town in 1924. Founding figures of social work education were Professor Bateson of the University of Cape Town (representing liberalism) and Professor Verwoerd of the University of Stellenbosch (representing Afrikaner nationalism). Other training institutions followed, such as the institutions of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Minnie Hofmeyr College for “coloured” women and the Huguenot College for “white” women (previously Friedenheim College) in 1931, the Transvaal University College in 1929 (the University of Pretoria), the University of the Witwatersrand in 1937, Jan Hofmeyr College for “black” social workers in 1941, DE Coligny Training Institution (Dutch Reformed Church Seminary in Transkei), and the Strydom College Training School (Ntusi, 1997; Van der Merwe, 2011).

The curriculum content was based on British and American models, with a clinical approach inhering in the philosophy of personal responsibility (Kotze, 1998). The basis for training was the welfare system of the day, using therapeutic and restorative approaches (Lombard, 1998:17), and with a strong focus on the hegemonic discourse of the Carnegie Report. Social work education had to adhere to policies such as separate higher education institutions and services according to racial categorisation (Social Welfare Post-War Planning Conference Proceedings, 1944). “Early moves were largely stimulated by a genuine desire to train ‘black’ social workers to work with the problems experienced by ‘black’ people” (McKendrick, 1990:182). Such statements may be interpreted as (liberal) Gramscian “common understandings” which have a privileged location in the uninspected realm of the consciousness (Hill, 2009).

A prominent institution at the time was the Jan Hofmeyr School of Social Work in Johannesburg, opened in 1941 by Rev. Ray Phillips and supported by, among others, Job Richard Rathebe (trained as a social worker in the USA and member of the South African Institute of Race Relations) and A.B. Xuma (President of the ANC in 1940) (Jan Hofmeyr School of Social Work pamphlet, 1940). Some well-known graduates from the college included Ellen Khuzwayo, Joshua Nkomo, Winnie Mandela and Gibson Kente. Funders included the Union government, Transvaal Chamber of Mines, the Phelps Stokes Fund and the Carnegie

Corporation (Phillips' News, 1943), all institutions with clear liberal ideological positions. In a newspaper article about the School, the evidence of hegemonic liberal discourse and the misrecognition of relations of conflict and exploitation are evident: The need for such a school has long been felt. The impact of Western civilisation upon us has uprooted us from the anchor of the ancient life of our race, and thus has created social problems that can only be dealt with by trained men and women.

A number of separatist legislations and anti-segregation and revolutionary movements transpired in South Africa's socio-political landscape; all of which had an impact on social work education. These included:

The Population Registration Act; Immorality Act; Group Areas Act; Suppression of Communism Act 1952, Launch of defiance campaign 1955, Congress of the People in Kliptown and the adoption of the Freedom Charter 1956, the Mass demonstrations of women against Pass Laws 1956-1961, Rivonia treason trial 1959 Formation of Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) 1959 Extension of University Education Act 1960, Sharpeville shootings and banning of ANC, SACP and PAC 1969 Formation of South African Students Organization led by Steve Biko 1976 Student protests in Soweto 1977, the murder of Steve Biko and banning of Black Consciousness organizations 1983 Formation of United Democratic Front Further development of Afrikaner nationalism and Afrikaner ethnic identity transcended economic concerns and was not only connected to the material realm of capitalism – it was “firmly planted in a worldview determined by ethnicity” (Lester, 1996:98).

Apartheid objectives preserved Afrikaner identity, protected white supremacy and economic privilege, prevented African urbanization and social advancement and elevated the Afrikaner community (Lester, 1996). The Bantu Authorities' Act of 1951 undermined local chiefs by making them responsible for tax collection and agricultural “betterment schemes” (Worden, 2008). Rural and urban protests such as defiance and pass laws campaigns failed to adequately challenge the state and the ANC was “uneasy in its proletarian alliance” (Worden, 2008:113). The Non-European Unity Movement advocated for boycotts and noncollaboration, focusing on working-class interests and refusing to recognize race and gender in the transforming landscape of the social work profession.

#### **2.4. Working with Groups in Social Work**

Group work is important especially amongst children as it can enable them to have the confidence they need in advancing in life. According to the British Columbia Institute of



Technology (2010) group work in children has the potential to make them critical thinkers, academic achievers and improve their teamwork skills. Taqi and Al-Nouh (2014) state that even though group work practice in Kuwait did not show improvements in the students that participated in their study, it showed that children that participated in it had more confidence and wanted to continue learning using it. However, it must be mentioned that group work is not only beneficial to the people that are expected to participate in it, e.g. children in schools but it is also beneficial to the people that carry out. Williamson-Ashe and Ericksen (2017) state that group work has shown to be beneficial amongst Baylor College of Medicine social work students that carry it out, as it has shown to have made them be good in team learning, communication, problem solving and class engagements. Moreover, Williamson-Ashe and Ericksen (2017) research show that group work has helped college students to perform better in exams and to work ethically.

Based on the literature reviewed, the researcher argues that the socially constructed meaning of being a male may shape and influence their group work practice with children. It is therefore important to ascertain how male social work students negotiate their gender identity while in group work practice with children from Cator Manor. Therefore, this research study has a full potential to contribute to the current literature in exploring the already identified complexities and challenges of being a male within a woman-dominated profession but locating them within an educational setup to highlight and develop solutions to challenges encountered by the male social work students. Thus, allowing them an opportunity to strive within the female-dominated profession both in university and when employed. The next chapter discussed the research methodology and the critical procedure applied to collect from the 3<sup>rd</sup> student at the university who are the major participants in this study with regards to group work assignment in the field of social work.

## **Chapter Three: Research methodology**

### **3.1. Introduction**

Research methodology reflects the entire approach for the research procedure. A research methodology is utilized by the researcher to get answers to the research questions (Kerlinger, 1986:279). It is a procedural arrangement received by the researcher to give substantial goal and exact responses to investigate questions and it involves information gathering systems and examination and also elucidation of discoveries. This chapter of the study is designed to carefully mirror the method applied to understudy this current research based on male social work students' experiences of group work practice with school children, with the 3rd year student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. First, the chapter will present the research paradigm employed by this study. This will be followed by a discussion of the purposive sampling technique which has been used to recruit participants.

### **3.2 Research paradigm**

Qualitative methodology refers to research that produces thick description directly from participants' narrated experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The study used a qualitative methodology. De Vos, Schurink and Fouche (2011) state that qualitative research relies on the participant's account of meaning, perceptions or experiences. This approach was deemed appropriate for the researcher because it was explorative in nature. This approach was very useful when exploring subjective meanings that male social work students attached to their experience during group work practice in schools. Contrary to quantitative research which is positivist in nature, qualitative research is within non-positivism and allows for deeper meanings of human experiences and thus generates theoretically richer observations that are not easily reduced to numbers (Rubin & Babbie, 2013). Maree (2016) also concurs that qualitative research is mainly concerned with the interpretation of subjective meanings that male social work students attached to their group work practice with children.

The researcher was interested in exploring the practice experiences and challenges of male social work students in their group work practice at the University of KwaZulu-Natal therefore, the qualitative model was the optimal and appropriate tool to employ in carrying out this research project. A qualitative or non-positivism paradigm enabled the researcher to uncover in-depth knowledge about the experiences and challenges of male student social workers. Furthermore, the study intended to explore the experiences of male social work students'

involvement with group work in their practicum. Furthermore, this study was also concerned about how they (social work students) navigate group work practice within a profession and practice not only dominated by females but also considered by many to be feminized. Based on the reasons provided above, the researcher was convinced that the qualitative method will be appropriate in gathering the information that is needed to answer the research questions. According to Ritchie and Lewis (2005), one would use a qualitative research approach, when the phenomenon is ill-defined/not well understood. In this study, the researcher was able gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of male social work students in their group practice with children. The researcher uses qualitative research when the phenomenon being studied is deeply rooted in the participants' personal knowledge or understanding. Only the participants (male social work students) knows better about their challenges and coping strategies with children in schools. Therefore, the researcher relied on research participants in gaining an understanding of their experiences of group work practice with children from Cato Manor, KwaZulu-Natal.

### **3.3 Research design**

The research design sets out the plan that the researcher aims to follow in conducting the research study. In addition, Punch (2014) refers to the research design as all the issues involved in planning and executing a research project, from identifying the problem through to reporting and publishing the results. To ensure that the research study answers the research question posed, a descriptive-exploratory research design was utilized. According to Burns and Grove (2012), descriptive-exploratory research is conducted to gain new insights, describe to increase knowledge of a phenomenon. This type of a research design is consistent with social constructionism theory as it assumes that the “true meaning of phenomena can be explored through the experience as described by the individuals” (Denzin and Lincoln 2011:50). This design enabled the researcher to account for individual challenges and experiences of male social work students in their group work practice with children.

Mouton (2001), like Kerlinger (1986), shows that the point of a research design is to plan, and structure a given research venture in such a way, to the point that the possible legitimacy of the examination discoveries is expanded. This is essentially the methodological strategy which is the rationale by which the researcher approaches noting the research questions. Research designs happen toward the start of the exploration venture and it includes all the steps of the consequent undertaking (Babbie, 2001:97).

### **3.4. Sampling strategies**

In a qualitative research, participants that are selected must give the researcher access to a special perspective, experience or condition which the researcher intends to explore. It is essential to have a clear definition of your research population to ensure that the sample that will be selected represents the target population (De Vos et al., 2011). In view of the above, male social work students who were enrolled for their third year of their qualification at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in the Department of Social Work were selected as a sample of this study. The sample of fifteen (15) third year male social work students from the discipline of the Social Work department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College) were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling can be defined as "a process of selecting a few individuals from the bigger group to become the basis for estimating or predicting the prevalence of an unknown piece of information, situation, or outcome regarding the bigger group." (Maree 2016: 228). Therefore, level three male social work student who had recently practiced group work with children in schools were purposively selected for this study. To recruit participants, a short description of the study aims, and objectives were presented to students during their lecture period and, those willing to participate were given consent forms and thereafter screened using the criteria discussed below.

#### ***Purposive sampling technique***

Palys (2008) states that purposive sampling signifies that one sees sampling as a series of strategic choices about with whom, where and how one does one's research. Furthermore, Maree (2016) argues that purposive sampling is a technique used in special situations where the sampling is done with a specific purpose in mind. Here, the researcher selected a sample that can be judged to represent the actual population that is under study, which includes male social work students who have undertaken groupwork practice. Palys (2008) also points out that when using this sampling technique, the researcher uses his/her own judgment and handpicks participants from a target population for inclusion in the study based on the criteria for inclusion. Therefore, the researcher's purposively sampled population included:

- 15 male students who have undertaken group work practice with children at Cato Manor schools.
- These recruited participants willing consented to participate in the study and be willing to share their experience of having conducted group work practice.

- The number of participants, and the similarity of questions asked during interviews, ensured data saturation where enough information was collected to replicate the study (Walker, 2012).

### **3.6. Method of data collection**

The process of collecting data involves “gathering and measuring information on variables of interest in an established systematic fashion that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes” De Vos et al (2011: 65). Since the proposed study is qualitative, the researcher systematically gathered information on the experiences of male social work students which shed light on the research question. The study used semi-structured interviews as a tool for data collection (see Appendix D). Rubin and Babbie (2011) define semi-structured interviews as an interview guide that lists and outlines the form of topics and issues the interviewer should ask about, but that allows the interviewer to be flexible, informal, and conversational and to adapt the style of the interview and the sequencing and wording of questions to each interview. This is also supported by De Vos et al. (2011) that this type of interview offers both the researcher and participant more flexibility.

Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews, the researcher provided participants with the necessary information about the research study and obtain consent from them to participate in the study. This process also included the planning for logistics such as the place where the interviews will be held, duration and to allow participants to make a choice. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ different university residences, and the researcher had to set up appointments with the participants. Furthermore, the intention was to build a rapport and trust with the participants as they are expected to freely participate in the study with the correct information as to what is it that they are part of. The researcher asked permission from the participants to use audio tape during the interviews so that he will not lose the important information they will share. Regarding the latter, the researcher ensured that he takes down notes and transcribes the data immediately after the interview.

The participants were approached and interviewed in their different university residences. The challenges experienced during the data collection process was that some participants have roommates and some roommates could not allow the researcher some space and privacy to conduct the interview. This led to some interviews being conducted in residence common areas which were noisy and full of disturbances. Another challenge faced was that two participants

ended up withdrawing from the interviews, citing that they were too busy and did not have time. Therefore, the researcher had to recruit two more participants who would fill in the gap.

As part of their Africanization agenda, the University of KwaZulu-Natal encourages individuals to converse in their preferred language, therefore, participants were allowed to use English or IsiZulu during the interview. This was then translated and transcribed in a form of verbatim.

### **3.7. Method of data verification-Trustworthiness of study**

Babbie and Mouton (2001) state that a trustworthy study is one that is at once credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. These four concepts are interlinked. Thus, “a qualitative study cannot be called transferable unless it is credible, and it cannot be deemed credible unless it is dependable” (Babbie & Mouton 2001, p. 277).

#### **3.7.1. Credibility**

Credibility is demonstrated when participants recognize the reported research findings as their own experiences (Bryan, 1998). The researcher ensured that the study is believable and appropriate by involving participants to verify the accounts through member checking. Babbie & Mouton (2001) state that member checking is a process used by researchers to ensure credibility, trustworthiness, validity and transferability of the study. The researcher achieved this member checking process by referring back the data and interpretations to the participants to review the findings. Furthermore, the researcher also looked for different material with which to document his findings, example audio recording or taking notes to document nonverbal communication.

#### **3.7.2. Dependability**

Lincoln and Guba (2017, p. 121) argue that "dependability involves participants' evaluation of the findings, interpretation, and recommendations of the study such that all are supported by the data as received from participants of the study." The researcher ensured that the research findings are consistent and could be repeated in measuring the standard by which the research will be conducted, analysed and presented. Dependability was ensured by ensuring that proper research practices were followed and recorded, in order to assist future researchers to repeat the study.

### **3.7.3. Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to a confirmability audit trail as one in which ensures that "...conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources" (p. 20). Heigham and Croker (2009) define confirmability as a process where the researcher makes available their raw data they are basing their results and interpretations. The researcher accomplished confirmability by making available all recorded interviews, verbatim transcripts and field work notes to ensure that the results of the findings are not the researcher's biased opinion but are those of the participants. Through the data collection and research process, the researcher kept a journal to keep track of reflections and documents.

### **3.7.4. Transferability**

The potential user, not the researcher, determines if the findings are transferable (Bryan, 1998). Transferability refers to the extent in which the findings of the study can be transferred to other contexts with other participants (Lincoln and Guba, 2017). This refers to the extent to which results apply to other similar situations. The researcher provided comprehensive details on of the findings of the study, including verbatim quotations on Chapter 4 – Findings. Research findings generated from this research can be applied by other higher education research institutions addressing similar research questions.

### **3.7.5. Reliability**

The researcher's position, perspective, beliefs, and values have been said to be contaminants on the reliability of data analyses and subsequent findings and results in bias and unreliable research findings. This according to Malterud (2001, p. 483-484), is because "A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions". Therefore, the researcher employed reflexive research techniques. Reflexive research techniques refer to a process where a researcher reflects on him/herself to eliminate bias and give an analysis of data that is reliable and impartial (Barry et al. 1999). To this regard, the researcher kept the diary to document the researcher's feelings on each day of the research. This helped the researcher to reflect on his emotional state on the day when writing up the findings. Consequently, this assisted the researcher to adjust his interpretation not to reflect his personal emotions but that of the participants. Furthermore, during the write up of findings report, the researcher reflected on how he has interpreted the responses from the interviews through considering how his own experiences in life might have an influence on what he extracts from the participants' responses.

This helped the researcher to become aware of the over-emphasis that he has unwittingly documented in his report.

### **3.8. Ethical consideration of the study**

The ethical principles of research namely: Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study, Benefits of Being in the Study, confidentiality and anonymity, payments, right to refuse or withdraw, consent form and ethics of no harm. The study used data from the field (primary) source, and the researcher is aware of the ethics policy of the institution and had abided by the rules and regulations of the various groups within the university community where data was collected. To make sure that everyone who is targeted to respond to the questionnaires/interviews, an English version of the questionnaire were used, reason being that, the participants are educated, they can speak, read and write in English medium of communication. This is mainly done because the people are university undergraduate students who are currently enrolled to the department of social work, they are also conversant to the topic of discussion under research, and they are much vested or comfortable in English. Participants interviewed through the questionnaires were done so with permission from them, and the researcher explained to them the objectives of the research so that they could willingly participate or refuse to participate if they feel like it was infringing on their private life or right.

#### **3.8.1. Benefits of Being in the Study**

The researcher informed participants that their participation will contribute to the development of knowledge which is fundamental for purposes of teaching and practice on this topic. Further, their participation will also help in ameliorating the experience of future male third-year students.

#### **3.8.2. Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Participants were told that everything that will be discussed in the study will be treated with high precautionary measures so that their identity is protected. The researcher did not use the participant's real names and the researcher provided each with a code name e.g. participant A. Rubin and Babbie (2011) state that a respondent has anonymity when the researcher cannot identify a given response with a given respondent. Therefore, their names were coded, all information that might identify them personally was removed from the report so that no one could be able to link them to any of the information that was shared during interviews. However, it must be noted that the findings were published as a research dissertation which will be the property of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.



### **3.8.3. Payments**

Participants were informed that there will be no remuneration or any form of reward for you to participate in the study, however participants that needed to travel to meet the researcher were provided with transport fare.

### **3.8.4. Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

Participants were told that they have every right to ask the question where they do not understand. If there is a need to refuse or withdraw from the study, they were permitted to do so even after consenting to participate.

### **3.8.5. Consent form**

The researcher wrote letters to participants highlighting what the research is about and how it will be conducted, the venues, time and the estimated duration. The researcher clearly explained to the participants that they are not obliged to participate in the study, as it is voluntary. Interested participants were requested to sign the informed consent form. Participants were given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators

### **3.8.6. No Harm**

The researcher ensured that participants were not harmed by participating in the study. The first step in doing no harm was to obtain ethical clearance by the UKZN Research Office. This helped the researcher to ensure that the research is ethically feasible. Therefore, the researcher gave participants both verbal and written information to understand the nature of the study. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that participants are comfortable with the subject before starting the interviews. Should participants show any signs of having experienced harm whether because of the research study or any other influences, the researcher will refer them to the UKZN student counselling unit. Follow up was made with participants to ensure that they have been attended to.

## **3.9. Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of the study were that the level of analysis were male social work students, and not female social work students. Therefore, the findings only reflect the experiences encountered by male social work students. The other possible limitation may be that the study population and area is the UKZN third-year male social work student's experiences in their group work practice with school children, particularly in KZN. Meaning that the findings may

not translate to other male students from other institutions doing social work group practice somewhere else in South Africa. However, the South African school environment is the same throughout all the provinces and male social work students are a minority throughout the country which might be translated to similar perceptions thus similar challenges shared by all-male social work students during group work practice. Accordingly, the results of this study may still be applicable across the country.

## Chapter Four: Findings

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter will present the findings of the study under question. The in-depth analysis and presentation of the study findings are the results of the data collected through interviews with third-year male social work students on their experiences in group work practice with school children at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College campus. To understand the experiences of the third-year social work students in a female-dominated environment or profession, this section of the study will be demarcated into two spheres. The first section will give statistic subtleties of the members, while the second part will focus on communicating the themes that came out of the data collected as explained in the methodology chapter.

A thematic data analysis method was employed to develop themes from patterns that emerged in the raw data (see chapter three). A thematic analysis method was employed to arrange raw data into themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data collection process. Various themes and sub-themes emerged from the data collection process which utilised the interview guide as a tool to explore experiences of male social work students who had done group work practice in schools. A total of fifteen participants were interviewed using the semi-structured interviews conducted. Major themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data research were:

**Table 1: Themes and sub-themes**

Themes:	Sub-themes:
Perceptions of social work practice	Motivation to pursue social work
	Gendered stereotypes of social work profession
	Social work skills
	Social work experiences
Experiences in group work practice	Engagement and facilitation
	Applying acquired skills and knowledge
	Difficulties in conducting sensitive topics
	Gained social work exposure and experience
Challenges in group work practice	Difficult behaviour during group work
	Participation during group work
	Facilitating sensitive topics

	Communication
	Group work logistics
Perceptions of male social work students in group work	Gendered perceptions by children
	Cultural norms and beliefs
	Interaction and trust by children
Preparation and adaptation in group work practice	Adaptation by male social work students
	Preparedness of male social work students

#### 4.2. Demographic profile of participants

**Table 2: Demographic profile of participants**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Name (pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Participant Residential Location</b>
1	Thandazani	24	Manguzi
2	Bongani	23	Mhlabuyalingana
3	Siyanda	24	Jozini
4	Sandile	23	Mtubatuba
5	Kwanele	22	Ladysmith
6	Njabulo	21	Tongaat
7	Smanga	20	Ulundi
8	Mfanakhona	26	Hammarsdale
9	Sanele	23	Mbumbulu
10	Sizwe	21	Umlazi
11	Khulani	23	Newlands east
12	Sbusiso	22	Newlands west
13	Musa	23	Jozini
14	Simphiwe	24	Ulundi
15	Africa	23	KwaMashu

As per the inclusion area, all participants were male social work students who had completed their group work practice with children at Cato Manor schools. This is as a result of the nature

of the study, since the study sought to explore the experiences of third year male social work students. Table 2 lists the participants and their pseudo names which were allocated for the purpose of ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. The age of participants ranges from 20 – 26 years, while they come from an average family size of 5. Majority of the participants were funded by National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Most of the participants (10) were funded solely by NSFAS, while two (2) students were recipients of the Department of Social Development (DSD) bursary, and two (2) students received support from both NSFAS and their parent.

### **4.3. Perceptions of social work practice**

A number of sub-themes emerged under the perceptions of the social work profession which included: gendered stereotypes of social work practice, social work influence, gained skills in social work profession, and male student experiences of social work profession.

#### **4.3.1. Motivation to pursue social work**

Participants were asked what factors influenced them into enrolling for a degree in social work. Some of the participants' responses to the factors that influenced them in enrolling for social work profession were as follows:

*“Firstly, I was influenced by my teachers at school because they said I have a skill to change a person’s mind and behaviour. At school I used to help other learners not financially but psychologically and emotionally. Therefore, they advised me to enrol in this profession, even though Social Work was not in my mind, but they made a huge effort in encouraging me to enrol for this field.” (Thandazani)*

*“I was influenced by my Mother who is a community care giver and she started as uNompilo (community health worker) in the community. Another thing that influenced me to enrol for this profession is my background because I always had a wish to change the standard of living in my family and I observed that I am a person who is good in solving a problem and always come up with possible solutions.” (Sanele)*

The findings of the study communicate that some study participants were influenced by their impoverished family background and unemployment status within their families.

*“I come from a poor background where both my parents are unemployed, and this made them to open their vegetables market to maintain the standard of living. I saw a*

*need to do Social Work to change the situation at home and to better their life.”*  
(Njabulo)

*“I won’t lie to you and say other things, but I was only influenced by background. Okay at home we are not stable, and many people are unemployed, and they have many children they can’t even afford to support. This influenced me to enrol in this profession in trying to be a better person and be able to change the situation we are facing at home.”* (Smanga)

Njabulo and Smanga quoted above were motivated by personal circumstances and suffering while growing up to pursue social work as a profession. These findings resonate with a study by Alpaslan and Lombard (2011) who found that social work students develop a passion for helping others in response to their own challenging experiences. Christie and Kruk (1998:25) also classified this motivation under “personal motives” for studying social work.

#### **4.3.2. Gendered stereotypes of social work profession**

Most participants indicated that they were comfortable pursuing social work as a profession, even though they still maintained that family and community still perceived social work as a female-dominated profession. Participants were asked how they had experienced studying social work so far, and the responses varied from challenging to comfortable. In some responses, issues of gendered stereotypes revolving around the social work profession emerged. These were some of the narratives regarding some gendered stereotypes:

*“It feels good to be a male a student in Social Work profession but at times you feel like ‘ispani sama cherry (work for women)’ and when you go for practical’s, it is where you see that this profession is dominated by women. This is where you see that it a profession for women ‘abathanda kukhuluma (people who like chatting).”* (Kwanele)

*“Studying Social Work is great and challenging at sometimes since many people think that Social Work is for females only. Most people from our communities especially, other males who have no idea about Social Work. As you go through this profession, you easily see that this profession is not based on one gender, everyone can do it.”*  
(Njabulo)

*“You can come across people who will demotivate you and say Social Work is for ‘abantu besifazane” and if you not sure about your goals, you can end up leaving the profession because of people.”* (Smanga)

The above responses communicated by these participants which qualify that public knowledge holds the view that social work is a profession suitable for women. This notion that social work is a profession for women resonates with Hall (2010) who critically discussed the feminisation of the social work profession by stating that sexual orientation of social work profession has been raised as a worry all through the world. Responses from participants also indicate that most participants also subscribe to these socially constructed notions of social work being a profession for women.

The findings of the study suggested that the feminisation of the social work profession has led to the stigmatisation of the profession. Indeed, some of the narratives provided by the participants concurred with this literature by stating that:

*“The young guys within the community they always have that thing in mind that if you are doing Social Work you are gay and sometimes they say ‘uyinkonkoni’ (gay person).” (Kwanele)*

This was also qualified by Kosberg, cited in Hall (2010) who stated that men who pursue the social work profession are labelled as 'gay'. Buscatto and Fusulier (2013) also state that men who are in women-dominated fields are often stigmatized, as in most cases their sexuality is questioned. Even though like Kwanele, Smanga had experienced the stigma of being called “isitabane” (gay), he remained motivated to pursue the social work profession:

*“Personally, I don’t have a problem with this profession as a male because I chose it with love, passion and dedication. Therefore, I don’t feel demotivated when people say that this is a profession for “izitabane” (gay people) even though other males always criticize this profession and ask how you are going to be a male Social Worker since that field is dominated by females.” (Smanga)*

Both Kwanele and Smanga stated that the social work profession has been highly stigmatised as a profession for “izitabane/izinkonkoni” (gays). However, Smanga’s response indicated that he is not discouraged by the criticism and homophobic stigmatisation of the social work profession. The feminisation and stigmatisation of the social work profession emerged significantly in most of the participants’ responses. Although most of the participants indicated that they were comfortable with pursuing social work as a profession. The gender stereotypes

which have emerged in this data correspond to the social constructionism theory which acknowledges that gender roles are indeed socially constructed (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

### 4.3.3. Social work skills

Social work is a learned skill that is acquired through knowledge and practice, and as third year students who have embarked on theoretical knowledge and group work practice, a sub-theme regarding the gained experience emerged during the data analysis process. Participants expressed various skills that they have gained so far in the social work profession. While other participants stated that they have gained personal management skills, this was uncovered when participants stated that:

*“Academically social work is tough for me, but it gave me an experience in improving how to handle issues of people and how to interact with them, even to look beyond a person’s situation.” (Thandazani)*

*“I also learnt that when you are a Social Worker, you need to be professional always and there are ethics you need to follow in this profession. What I can say is that, this profession teaches you many things in life... Okay first, it teaches you on how to deal with your personal problem, psychological problems, spiritual, and emotional problems.” (Sanele)*

*“I learnt how to communicate with people because most of the time I am alone, I am not used to many people and I don’t participate mostly in group work. As I grow and develop, I am learning that communications skills are very important when dealing with people to maintain a professional relationship. At first, I was nervous to address these learners, but my co-facilitator helped me in gaining confidence to work alone.” (Sbusiso)*

The existing literature has communicated that social work is a multi-skilled profession which was at an earlier stage of South Africa’s democracy listed as a critical and scarce skill (Earle, 2008). This was as a result of a limited number of African social workers serving an overwhelmingly large African population. Therefore, the attainment of skills by social work students in group work facilitations forms the basis or foundation of social work practice. As some participants replied, these skills not only enhanced their social work profession but also improved their levels of communication and interaction. During the attainment of skills, social



work students also experienced the social work profession and shared some of their experiences with the researcher.

#### **4.3.4. Social work experiences**

The experiences of participants reveal the socially constructed gendered roles within the social work profession. These social constructs impact the way male social work students are able to participate meaningfully and contribute well in a predominantly female dominated profession. When participants were asked on how it feels like to be a male student in the social work profession, participants shared some of their experiences which included the following:

*“This profession is dominated by females and most of the time when we are in class, they are the ones who are always raising concerns and always participate... I feel that I am being overpowered by females and that makes me to think that I am useless as a male in this profession.” (Sizwe)*

The above response indicates that female domination in the social work profession is visible in the higher education environment where female students are overwhelmingly larger in numbers than male social work students. This in turn affects the participation of male social work students who are often the minority gender in higher education institutions (Geisler, 2013). Another student who concurred that the social work field is dominated by females stated the following:

*“I have no choice but to try and understand that this field is dominated by females. Even on the field, most clients are females and it seems like there are the ones who are mostly faced with problems. Most of time these female clients present problems which are hard to attend by a male Social Worker.” (Khulani)*

However, the findings of the study uncovered that some male social work students tend to be victims of socially constructed ideologies. Khulani’s response above is rather gender stereotypical as he also assumes that female clients are often faced with problems in comparison to male clients. Khulani proceeds by sharing one of his experiences:

*“I remember doing practice around June and [male] clients came to the office to seek help and they saw that they were many females and they ended up saying they need a person who is physical fit they can’t relate their problem to a female who will just cry*

*and not give them the help they need. These clients were serious, and they were fighting, unfortunately the security guards were not present. This is where I observed that males are needed in profession and certain cases need males since they are brave, and people cannot just take advantage.” (Khulani)*

This finding indicates that in some cases, men were still not comfortable to be helped by female social workers. Khulani’s experience suggests that some African men still subscribe to cultural norms and beliefs, which are also socially constructed, thereby refusing to be consulted by female social workers. However, Khulani’s observations that certain cases require male social workers further perpetuate the prescriptive gender stereotypes on how males and females should act. These prescriptive beliefs of gender stereotypes state how males and females should act (Koenig, 2018). In this case, Khulani is suggesting that men are braver and stronger than women. Koenig (2018) further states that such prescriptive gender stereotypes often lead to prejudice and marginalisation.

#### **4.4. Experiences in group work practice**

During the data collection process, participants were asked about their experiences in group work practice. Some sub-themes that emerged in their responses included: engagement with children, facilitating children’s group work, applying acquired skills and knowledge, dealing with sensitive cases, and gained social work experience during group work. Group work practice plays a fundamental role in the social work profession. According to Huyssteen and Strydom (2016), increasing challenges amongst families especially challenges that affect children need a multi-skilled individual that can use various intervention strategies which include group work.

##### **4.4.1. Engagement and facilitation**

Engagement and facilitation of group work was a sub-theme that emerged during data analysis. Participants shared their experiences in engaging and facilitating children’s group work sessions. The responses indicate that some participants faced difficulties in engaging with children, while others simply engaged with children with ease. Some of the participants who faced difficulties in engaging with children stated that:

*“What I can say is that engaging with children beside being a male Social Work student was not going to be easy for me or give an idea how deal with children and to treat children in a simple way and be friendly to them.” (Sanele)*

*“At first it was quite hard for me to interact and to understand them... Engaging with children is different from the adult because I didn't realize that I had to be on their level to make them understand things easy and at first everything was tense but by the time I was engaging with them they tried to concentrate, they were happy and relaxed.” (Thandazani)*

The finding of the study however discovered that a few study participants did not encounter any challenges mentioned by Sanele and Thandazani when they engaged with children during group work. This was validated by the following responses from the study participants:

*“It was so great, children were engaging with us all the time. Every time they were asking questions if they do not understand. They were able to answer to our questions. Children were very competence with their work.” (Njabulo)*

*“Children are easy because when you are engaging them into activities and at the some having role plays, they get the full attention compare to elder people who easily loose concentration.” (Smanga)*

Responses from Njabulo and Smanga indicate that children were actively engaging and participating with male social work students in group discussions. Another participant who was more interested in how people perceive or respond to male social workers stated the following:

*“Another thing that I experienced as that working with different children as a male Social Work student does help, for instance you are able to see how other people perceive or respond to you as a male Social Work.” (Khulani)*

A substantial number of participants provided positive facilitation experiences, including some pedagogies used during facilitation. One participant described his experience as follows:

*“I facilitated the group very well there was not much challenges in my group. My involvement was so productive because every time when I am conduction a session I was dividing them into groups and they must brainstorm and discuss, thereafter they*

*will choose one member in group who will represent the whole team during presentations.” (Bongani)*

Bongani shared his facilitation pedagogies, which included group brainstorming and presentations, assisted him in conducting productive facilitation. Other participants felt that being a male social work student enabled them to facilitate group work effectively than their female counterparts. These participants replied with the following narratives:

*“I think I made a huge influence in my facilitation with children and this made me to realize that one way I can become a good male social worker since I was able to work with children effectively and to observe their level of capacity in session’s discussions.” (Sandile)*

*“I had to start by doing ice breakers that are related to the previous session, so that I will draw their attention and it was easy for them to remember everything that was discussed... As a male when you are facilitating these sessions with children you end being their example especially to male learners.” (Kwanele)*

Kwanele’s group was predominantly male children, and these learners looked up to him as a role model. This is synonymous with Schaub (2017) who argues that the male social workers play an important role in dealing with an infant or adolescent boy because they are perceived to provide a positive role model, give balance and improve the quality of life.

The study found that some children’s groups were facilitated by male and female student pairs, and children responded neutrally to both social work students without taking gender into consideration. A few participants shared these facilitation experiences by stating that:

*“What I observed is that they did not feel the gap or the space that their group was facilitated by male facilitators because they were treating all of us the same... As we were applying our skills and knowledge we have learnt, children didn’t notice the different between males Social Work and female Social Work students.” (Smanga)*

*“I meant they didn’t perceive or respond to me in such a way that I can see or feel that they are replying to a male student, they just treated me as a Social Worker and they cooperated not focusing on gender and this is what I observed about my children.” (Sandile)*

Both Smanga and Sandile agreed that children were gender neutral and treated both male and

female social work students equally. Children's behaviour towards male social work students did not resemble any of the gendered stereotypes which were mentioned by Smanga, Njabulo and Sanele, who subscribed to the socially constructed notions of social work being a profession for women.

#### **4.4.3. Applying acquired skills and knowledge**

During facilitation, participants reported to have encountered various situations such as encouraging children to participate in group discussions and debates and identifying children who were reluctant to participate in sensitive topics such as sexual abuse. This was evident in the following narrative:

*“At first it was not easy to talk to the children. Some of the topics were hard to address... sexuality and sexual abuse, and my group was dominated by females, lucky my partner was a female facilitator. Although there were times where children find it hard to participate in some of the topics as I mentioned earlier, and they were finding these topics very sensitive, but my female partner did help me to address these topics and children were free to participate.” (Mfanakhona)*

The researcher probed the participants by asking them how they managed to overcome such situations, and some participants replied by stating that they had to apply some of the skills and knowledge they had already gained in Social Work lectures and practical tutorials. One participant stated the following:

*“I had to use all the Social Work skills I learnt to overcome such situations... A skill of interviewing, respect, listening, empathy, non-judgmental and a skill of acceptance where you accept a learner as an individual and with whatever situation he/she may come with... Using these skills helped me in my facilitation because I was able to identify if a learner is touched by a sensitive topic and I called that person aside after the discussion.” (Sandile)*

Sandile listed some communication skills such as interviewing, listening and empathy that he was able to apply during his facilitation of children's group work. Another participant listed similar skills to those of Sandile by stating the following:

*“I had to use my skills as a Social Worker and be on their level so that they will feel comfortable... Communicating skill which helped me to make other talk and I used a*

*skill of interviewing so that all children will be able to relate and share their thought about a given theme.” (Sanele)*

The outcomes of the study the study revealed that the communication and interviewing skills that were learned at the University enabled participants to effectively facilitate children’s group work and assisted in handling challenging situations. This reveals the level of preparation which social work students received prior to engaging in group work practice with children.

#### **4.4.4. Dealing with sensitive cases**

Participants indicated that some children were touched by certain sensitive topics that were discussed, such as bullying and sexual abuse. Dealing with sensitive cases thus emerged as a sub-theme during data analysis, whereby participants had to provide brief counselling and refer learners to qualified Social Workers. Dealing with sensitive cases proved to be an issue for most male social work students during group work practice, since learners are more likely to find comfort in female social work students rather than male social work students. One participant described his experience by stating the following:

*“Children were sharing their experiences regarding the environment since Mayville is known as a place that is full of criminals, so learners were not comfortable and safe at school most of time, although these children we united, they shared their views in groups and team work was built.” (Siyanda)*

Siyanda’s narrative indicated that group work assisted the learners in relating to each other’s struggles. Huyssteen and Strydom (2016) state that group work has proven to be an effective tool in dealing and helping vulnerable people and it can also help in making clients envisage that they have the capacity to help themselves. Through group work, learners were able to unite, share their views and develop team work. When asked to share a sensitive case that he had to deal with, one participant described in detail a sensitive case of sexual abuse by responding with the following:

*“Yes, there was this young lady who was very quiet in the group and by the time I was discussing this topic about effective communication, I asked her why you do not participate in our discussion and she said I am not well Thandazani. Okay I said to her could you please see me after we done with this discussion because I had to hear the whole situation why she is not well. The child reported that her uncle is abusing her sexually and the uncle said she must not tell anyone even her teachers at school, but*

*she failed not to address this issue to me as a social worker since she was touched by our topics.” (Thandazani)*

Another respondent shared a sensitive case that he had to deal with, whereby a female pupil stated that men are abusive, and as a result she would rather date other females than date males:

*“I identified that some children come from a family that has serious issues and there is a lot that is going on in that family, for example there were females who said they don’t which to date a guy in their life they rather date other females... That child was in grade six, even though I could not get more time to speak with her, but she did mention that majority of males are robust, they do not have heart, they always lie, they hurt females and they are abusive. I think that is why she said she rather date females.” (Bongani)*

Some participants however revealed that as male social work students, it was not easy to gain female learners’ trust. As a result, these female learners were reluctant to share some of their problems with male social work students. One participant stated the following:

*“Another experience I observed is that children are faced with different problems... Since I was facilitating a group that is dominated by females, most of them they didn’t want to share their problems with me instead they went to talk to my female co-facilitator.” (Sizwe)*

Another respondent also had a similar experience of facing reluctance from female learners. He was also assisted by his female co-facilitator, and both had to deal with sensitive cases on at a time:

*“It because by the time we were conducting these sessions, some children were raising issues of sexual abuse and these issues affect them since they can’t open up and most of them are reluctant when it comes to presenting their problem... I had to deal with one learner at a time and my facilitator was also attending some learners who were faced with the similar problem. This issues also affect their self-esteem and the performance in class, which is why it is very important for children to be taken care of at an early stage, this will help them in their growth and in solving any matter.” (Sbusiso)*

Being a male social work student created a barrier for Sizwe and Sbusiso, whereby female learners were not comfortable in discussing their personal issues. However, having a female

co-facilitator seemed to help, as children were able to relate their problems and receive guidance and assistance. Sbusiso's latter response also resonates with the British Columbia Institute of Technology (2010) which stated that group work in children has the potential to make them critical thinkers, academic achievers and improve their teamwork skills.

#### **4.4.5. Gained social work exposure and experience**

Social work exposure and experience, which was gained during the children's group work, emerged as a sub-theme during the data analysis process. Participants indicated that they had gained significant exposure and experience during the children's group work. The responses from participants were as follows:

*"I gained a lot of experience because I was working with children and it was our first practice in social work after so much theory that we were doing... I gained a lot of experience because these children every time when they are answering questions they basically refer to something that is currently happening at school or in their families."*  
(Bongani)

*"What I experience as well is that working with children it a great experience and great exposure because you begin to gain self- confident in communication with people that have different problems. I also learnt that when you are dealing with children you need to be open and make the conversation flow but also tell them that we all here to learn and exchange information and views about our themes, not that you are only here to feed them because they easily get bored."* (Musa)

Another respondent, who stated that children's group work served as a first phase intervention among children, stated the following:

*"Lastly what I have experienced is that group work practice with schools is very important, it serves as a first phase in intervention and this is where you are able to train yourself whether are you a real Social Worker or not, this practice is very important to us as males especially the ones who are not good in communicating with other people."* (Sizwe)

Sizwe's emphasis on the importance of social work group practice in schools is synonymous with Kemp (2013) who emphasises that school social work assists in crisis intervention and counselling, support services to learners and their families. Jonson-Reid et al. (2005) also agree



that school social work interventions can play a vital role in supporting the learner academically. Male social work students gained significant exposure through facilitating children's group work and dealing with sensitive cases. Participants' overall responses were positive, and some of them managed to problem solve using the skills that were taught in lectures and practical's. However, there were numerous challenges that social work students faced during group work practice with children.

#### **4.5. Challenges in group work practice**

Challenges in group work practice with children was the main theme that emerged during the data analysis process. Participants were asked to describe the challenges they had faced in conducting children's group work. Several sub-themes emerged from this theme, and these were coded to illustrate some patterns that existed in the participants' responses. These sub-themes included: children's behaviour during group work, children's participation during group work, facilitating sensitive topics, lack of communication, group work logistics and time allocation.

##### **4.5.1. Difficult behaviour during group work**

A significant number of participants listed the difficult behaviour of children during group work practice as an initial challenge that they encountered during group work. Behavioural challenges included groups that were difficult to control and reluctant to participate during group work. One participant acknowledged that children behave differently than adults by stating the following:

*“What I found as a challenge is that school children do not think like I do, and do not behave like I do, and at first I thought I needed to be harsh on them to make them respect me and pay attention.” (Thandazani)*

Another respondent stated that his group, which was predominantly males and difficult to control, stated the following:

*“When it comes to groups, children were violent and like fighting... It was very hard to control all of them because some were running around, and some needed to choose each and join that favourite group. By doing all this our time was wasted because we had to address them respectfully in making them behave in these groups.” (Siyanda)*

However, Siyanda further stated that he was able to use his skills and techniques such as role play to control the group process:

*“There is a certain way of addressing them because if you are harsh on them, they won’t listen to you and they will lose concentration. On my side I did some activities and role plays to draw their attention.” (Siyanda)*

Kwanele also faced a similar challenge of that faced by Siyanda whereby learners were misbehaving during group work. Kwanele responded by stating the following:

*“Another challenge was that some children were not behaving well, they were only misbehaving by forgetting to come straight to the group, so we had to go and collect them while they know that they were supposed to report to their respective groups. They were few learners that were coming to the group without being instructed and most of them they will even forget that there are groups in progress and we ended up collecting some in the grounds and some near the school gate.” (Kwanele)*

One respondent stated that he faced a challenge of children misbehaving and using vulgar language during group work discussions. He responded with the following narrative:

*“Okay, the first problem was that some of the children were speaking things that are beyond their age and I did not know how to deal with that... Some were raising topics about condom and sex and some are talking vulgar language, so by myself I was confused that how do these children know this language.” (Khulani)*

The outcomes of the study declared that difficult behaviour by children during group work presented a challenge for some male social work students. However, there are some participants such as Bongani who facilitated a group that sometimes behaved and at other times misbehaved. Despite the difficulties, group work proved an effective methodology of dealing with difficult behaviours. Toseland and Rivas (2017) state that social group work practice can create norms that stabilise behaviour and help shape behavioural expectations of group members. Sajid (2010) also emphasises that the use of group work practice experiences is very useful and effective for working with behaviourally disordered children.

#### **4.5.2. Participation during group work**

Participation by children during group work was another challenge that male social work students encountered. Participation is a key component in group work as participation creates group cohesion and learners feel motivated when their participation is valued (Toseland and

Rivas, 2017). However, participation emerged as a challenge for social work students, and some respondent provided an account of this challenge by stating the following:

*“Another challenge I had is that some of the group members were not fully participating in the group, most members were very active, but some were not active, and this makes group to lack in group dynamics.” (Thandazani)*

*“Another challenge I faced is the lack of concentration to these children because they are being distracted about different venues. Some will be checking things that are pasted on the wall and end up not paying attention to what I am facilitating.” (Bongani)*

Some participants revealed that they felt that being a male social work student somehow influenced children’s participation, whereby some female learners were reluctant to participate. These participants replied with the following narratives:

*“Another challenge is that some children in the group were not willing to talk, always quiet, and they were shy to participate in the group.... Some children were very reluctant in participating to the group and I think it due to the fact that my co-facilitator was also a male and our group was dominated by females.” (Njabulo)*

*“Males were okay, and females were not comfortable, they were calling me Sir. Most females were not flexible to participate in group.” (Khulani)*

Both Njabulo and Khulani revealed that being a male and facilitating children’s groups that were predominantly female had a negative impact in the participation of female learners, as some female learners were reluctant to participate. Therefore, this lack of participation during group work practice created a challenge for social work students.

One respondent stated that this challenge of participation and concentration was also worsened by other nearby groups who were doing other activities. He responded with the following narrative:

*“When my co-facilitator is conducting the group at that time I had to check every member and make sure that he/she does participate in the group. Make them concentrate not in a harsh way but politely. These challenges were caused by other groups who were doing other activities while we also facilitating other topics.” (Siyanda)*

The findings of the study discovered that most groups were conducted in one classroom, and this setup created a lot of confusion and challenges. Therefore, children were most of the time disturbed by what was being facilitated by nearby groups, thus losing concentration.

#### **4.5.3. Difficulties in conducting sensitive topics**

Participants also faced difficulties in conducting sensitive topics during group work practice. Some participants revealed that they had to be assisted by their female co-facilitators in facilitating sensitive topics during children's group work. Some participants stated the following:

*“At first it was not easy to talk to the children. Some of the topics were hard to address... Sexuality and sexual abuse, and my group was dominated by females, lucky my partner was a female facilitator.” (Mfanakhona)*

*“Another challenge is some of the topics were sensitive to children... They were not participating in sexuality theme and if I asked them why they are not participating, and they said they are not comfortable.” (Sanele)*

*“I also had a challenge in discussing one of the themes... sexual abuse and sexuality. For me as a male it was hard to conduct this theme because these female children were not flexible to talk.” (Sizwe)*

Both Sanele and Sizwe also struggled in facilitating sensitive topics such as sexuality and sexual abuse. Their children expressed that they were not comfortable in discussing or participating in these sensitive themes. The study discovered that the lack of openness from children when it comes to topics of sexuality and sexual abuse suggests that these topics remain a taboo among African communities. This was also found by Mudhovozi et al. (2012) who also stated that some African communities still perceive sexual communication as taboo, and these communities also display negative attitudes to mothers who discuss sexual issues with their daughters. Meanwhile, some men in African households remain in denial on the issue of sex and sexuality, and end up not discussing sexuality issues with children, as these men also view them as taboo (Chiweshe and Chiweshe, 2017). Male social workers also face a challenge in discussing issues of sexuality with female children since men are viewed as majority perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse (Gillingham, 2006). This was a challenge that was experienced by male students rather than their female counterparts.

#### **4.5.4. Lack of communication**

Another sub-theme that emerged from the participants' data analysis process was the lack of communication between the university and the schools in which the children's group work was being conducted. Some participants expressed this lack of communication as a challenge and stated the following:

*"There was a lack of communication between the school and the University's Social Work department." (Smanga)*

Another respondent went in-depth and responded with the following statement:

*"One of the major challenges before I mention the ones I found in groups, there was a lack of communication between UKZN students, school teachers and lecturers... because at sometimes we were not finding learners in class since they were released earlier on that day, due to communication breakdown good between students and school teachers." (Siyanda)*

Sandile, who also faced a similar challenge of a lack of communication between the university and school teachers stated the following:

*"Another challenge is that the level of communication between us and teachers was not good at all, it seems like teachers were not concerned and they did not take us seriously... Communication was very weak because we used to start our sessions late and we had to collect our children and put them in classes and start with our session, but teachers were never helpful" (Sandile)*

The outcomes of the study yielded that the lack of communication between these stakeholders had a negative impact on the facilitation of children's group work by social work students. Equally the study participants communicated that teachers were hardly helpful in providing oversight and ensuring that learners attend group work sessions.

#### **4.5.5. Group work logistics**

Group work logistics emerged as a sub-theme under challenges in children's group work. Some participants listed challenges regarding the venue and transportation to the school destination. Some venues were not cleaned, and busses that transported male social work students were sometimes cancelled with no reason provided. One respondent stated the following logistical challenge:

*“I had a challenge of changing the classrooms, every time when I get there they will tell me to change to another class due to the fact that the class is dirty. Sometimes I would find them cleaning the class while my time is being wasted.” (Bongani)*

Other participants stated that group work logistics such as venues were not properly organised; as a result, groups had to share classrooms. These participants replied with the following narratives:

*“Another challenge we had is the issue of the venues which were not organized properly. We were sharing the class with other groups and that caused a lot of destruction and disturbance.” (Sbusiso)*

*“The environment was not good at all because if I remember very correctly, there were six groups in one class and this made our group not to communicate well because we heard everything they were saying, and our children couldn’t cope well because there were distractions from other groups, it was chaotic because the other groups were also facilitating other sessions and I can say this is my negative experience regarding my group work practice.” (Sandile)*

*“Another challenge was that we were allocated in one class and caused so much distractions and disturbance because our children could not concentrate properly, and their attention was no longer present... Another challenge the environment they gave us was bad because we had to move the desks every time we get there but we were given limited time to conduct these sessions.” (Mfanakhona)*

Poor organisation of group work logistics such as classrooms and time allocation presented a challenge which can be linked to the challenge of participation, where children lacked concentration due to a number of groups being in a single classroom, thereby causing chaos and disturbances during group work sessions. The logistical challenges were experienced by both male and female social work students as some shared classroom spaces that were used to facilitate children’s group work.

#### **4.6. Perceptions of male social work students in group work practice**

The perceptions of male social work students during group work highlighted some gendered social constructs emanated by children. Participants were asked if being male influenced their involvement with children during group work. Several sub-themes emerged from the

perceptions of male social work students when reflecting on their group work with children. These sub-themes included the gendered perceptions of male social work students by children, children's cultural norms and behaviour, interaction and trust by children. These sub-themes shed some light on how children treated male social work students compared to their female co-facilitators. Also, the research highlights some pre-existing issues of gender perceptions, masculinity and cultural or traditional beliefs and trends towards male social work students.

#### **4.6.1. Gendered perceptions by children**

Participants were asked if being male influenced their involvement with children during group work. Some participants stated that gender did influence the way children responded and participated during group work. Some participants who felt that gender did influence his involvement with children stated the following:

*"I think my gender did influence how children responded to me... Some children were very reluctant in participating to the group and I think it due to the fact that my co-facilitator was also a male and our group was dominated by females." (Njabulo)*

*"What observed is that children were nervous at first, because when they see a male student or any other professional person who is a male, they respect too much, and some do not feel comfortable around me." (Siyanda)*

*"I was observing that learners were not comfortable and confident when answering to a given question. Children have this thing in mind that if you are male teacher or male social worker, it very hard for them to relate any problem because they think you will be hard on them or maybe they won't what they need." (Musa)*

Njabulo, Musa and Siyanda's responses suggested that some learners in their groups were not comfortable in participating with them on the basis of them being male. However, there are some male social work students who contradict Njabulo, Musa and Siyanda narratives by stating that:

*"What I can say is that children will always be children and what I observed is that they did not differentiate whether I am male or female. I meant they didn't perceive or respond to me in such a way that I can see or feel that they are replying to a male student, they just treated me as a Social Worker and they cooperated not focusing on gender and this is what I observed about my children." (Sandile)*

*“Dealing with children is not an easy thing but children were happy to see a male social work student... They were concentrating and engaging in every discussion and some were even asking me that how does it feel to be a male social worker. I really enjoyed working with children because they listen and even showed some interest about the group or maybe I can say it because my group was dominated by males and they were so interested in knowing everything. It was easy to communicate with them.” (Sbusiso)*

Sandile and Sbusiso’s narratives suggest that some learners’ participation was not influenced on whether their facilitator was male or female. Sbusiso’s response further states that his learners intrigued to have a male social work student and were eager to participate in group work. However, most of Sbusiso’s learners were male; unlike Njabulo, who faced reluctance in participation where his group was dominated by female learners. This observation however does not conclude that the lack of participation by female learners could be attributed to children’s constructed gender identities. However, it resonates with literature from (Myers, 2010) which suggests that male social workers face difficulties interacting with female clients since they often lack emotional qualities associated with social work. Myers (2010) further states that male social workers possess qualities of insecurity and uneasiness, which contrasts women’s natural caring qualities associated with social work and will often face challenges in trying to gain recognition for professional caring abilities.

A respondent who had a female co-facilitator stated that children often preferred interacting with the female social work students instead of him. This respondent provided the following narrative:

*“My co-facilitator was a favourite of these children because every time when they need to communicate something they were approaching her instead of me.” (Mfanakhona)*

However, one respondent contradicted Mfanakhona’s observation by stating that children paid attention to him rather than his female co-facilitator. This respondent stated the following:

*“What I can say is that I had a female co-facilitator and every time when she was talking, learners were not paying attention to her like they did to me and that is why I say learners listen more and pay more attention to a male person than a female person.” (Sandile)*

Participants have portrayed that gender perceptions in children’s group work could influence



children's participation. Also, gender dynamics in children's groups could potentially influence how children interact with male social work students.

Another respondent shared his experience of being a male social work student in group work with children's, including how he managed to challenge the gendered perceptions that emerged by stating the following:

*"I tried to challenge all these perception by becoming friendlier to them so that they won't spot the different between a male and female because there is this saying which says that males are hard to smile... This shows that the gender has an influenced in this profession that if you are a male social worker you are untrusted, and that belief still exist in people from the community and even in schools we were attending." (Musa)*

Musa's response suggests that he had pre-existing perceptions of gender as a factor which influences children's involvement and participation. His response also portrays some gender stereotype which states that male social workers are untrusted by communities. This untrustworthy view of male social workers speaks to a study by Caballero (2018) who recognises that there are reluctances from female adolescent victims to enter a trusting relationship with a male social worker. Caballero (2018) further describes this as having implications for social work practice. (Courtois, 2001) concurs and states that the male social worker may be perceived as a type of replacement for other untrustworthy and abusive authority figures to be feared, tested, disregarded and sexualised.

#### **4.6.2. Cultural norms and beliefs**

Cultural norms and beliefs emerged as a sub-theme during group work practice with children. The study has learned that culture in African communities plays a significant role in how children develop and interact with either male or female adults (Ramokgopa, 2001). Participants observed how some children in groups treated male social work students with respect like how they would treat their fathers and uncles. One respondent stated the following:

*"They showed some respect when they were answering the questions. Sometimes they will refer us as 'abomalume' (uncles)." (Bongani)*

Bongani states that children treated male social work students with respect because they were male adults, and often referred to male facilitators as uncles. Another respondent who agrees with Bongani's observation stated the following:

*“What I observed is that when you are a male, children will always have that respect for you. Before we even start with our sessions, they were greeting us in a respectful manner.” (Njabulo)*

One respondent provided a detailed observation on how male social work students were treated by children in group work:

*“I think it a culture we survive through it. Some of the children they even stood up when I was talking to them and I think it something that was installed in their minds long time ago since they have male teachers in that school. When you speak to them or ask any question regarding a theme instead of answering the question maybe one would stand up before he/she answers that question. This made me to see that it’s about culture to them since they are used to male teachers.” (Siyanda)*

Siyanda’s response indicated that children are often used to treating male figures with respect, as male social work students were treated with respect in comparison with male teachers that children are accustomed to. This reveals the underlying socially constructed gender stereotype, and masculinity associated with patriarchy, dictating that men should always be treated with the highest form of respect by adolescent children.

#### **4.6.3. Interaction and trust by children**

Gender also played a significant factor on how children in group work interacted and trusted male social work students. Interaction and trust emerged as a sub-theme during the data analysis process. Participants shared some observations on how children in group work treated them as male social work students. One respondent provided the following narrative:

*“Okay as I said earlier on that children decided to take us as their brothers and another thing is that children when they see a male person they see someone whom they could trust and lean on because of the stereotype that says a man must protect everyone.” (Thandazani)*

Thandazani’s response indicated that children in his group trusted him as a male social work student. His observation is also based on a socially constructed gender stereotype which portrays men as providers and protectors of the society (Clatterbaugh, 2018). Another respondent who experienced trust issues from female children stated that:

*“If you are male and dealing with children, trust issues will be present, they have this fear which you can never take away from them especially because they are young... it’s because I observed by the time we were selecting them at the beginning, I saw that most of them especially the female learners did not want to join our groups, which shows that they have a fear males.” (Musa)*

Musa’s response regarding female children not wanting to join his group, and his belief that this indicated that female children fear male social work students, further adds to the gender stereotype that men are viewed as perpetrators of abuse (Morris, 2009). Furthermore, male social workers discussing issues of sex and sexuality with female children is also contentious given that the vast majority of men commit physical and sexual assault against women and children (Gillingham, 2006). As a result, this creates a more difficult work environment for male social workers, and sometime limiting their level of contact with children (Dionisio, 2014).

One respondent who approached the issue of trust and interaction differently during group work stated the following:

*“As a male Social Work my duty was to show that this field does not focus on gender but to make them understand and feel comfortable, not that they must respect me because I am a male student.... So, we gave them an environment where they will feel comfortable and gave them a space where they will see that we are on their level.” (Smanga)*

Smanga’s effort was to provide an environment where children feel comfortable and do not focus on gender. This enabled children to trust and interact with male social work students in an effective manner.

#### **4.7. Preparation and adaptation in group work practice**

Participants were asked how effective their preparedness was for group work practice with school children. They were also asked how they have adapted in a social work profession that is predominantly dominated by females. Hence, a theme of experiences of male social work practice emerged from the research. Also, sub-themes such as preparedness of male social work students, and adaptation by male social work students emerged from the data analysis.

#### 4.7.1. Preparedness of male social work students

Most of the participants stated a good level of preparedness for their group work practice with the school children. There are efforts put in place to prepare well before any session. Responses gathered implied that guidance given by lecturers and tutors also go a long way in aiding their facilitation activities with the school children. This was evident in the participants' narrative accounts:

*"I was super prepared Zakhele because we were trained, and we did more role plays regarding this group work practice with school children. We were given guidance on how to deal with children and to comfort them." (Siyanda)*

Two more participants agreed with Siyanda's response that the university prepared male social work students prior to their engagement with children at Cato Manor, and he provided the following narrative:

*"The university prepared us very well because we started doing these practices at the University before we went to schools and we even discussed all the topics. We were divided into groups of 10/20 members and each group was given a tutor and they real helped us in knowing exactly how to conduct these sessions in schools." (Sandile)*

*"At the university they prepare us very well I can, it all depended on our seriousness and hard work, because they taught us about the session plan before the session begin and the proposal of the group." (Kwanele)*

The preparation of male social work students received at the university enabled participants to effectively conduct group work sessions with school children. The preparation of social work students did not take into consideration the different genders students will encounter during group work practice. As much as social work students felt comfortable regarding their preparation, they still viewed preparation as vital to overcome challenges that may arise in the field. This was revealed in the following narratives:

*"I think the preparedness is very important because when you are conducting your sessions without preparing yourself, children will challenge you and you would need to answer each and every question but when you are not prepared, you will end up confused and children will make a joke of you and they will never take you serious." (Mfanakhona)*

*“What I can preparation is very important in this practice, because children do challenge you and they get really shocked when they see that you are not prepared and that ruins your reputation as a Social Worker.” (Khulani)*

Preparation proved to be crucial for both Mfanakhona and Khulani, and the lack thereof could cause challenges during group work practice. This was evident in the following students who were not prepared:

*“I was not well prepared... it because I and my facilitator were doing things on last minutes and that real killed us because in some sessions were not perfect.” (Sbusiso)*

*“I was not prepared at all. I think it because I was not ready to conduct these sessions since I am shy, and I am not good in communicating.” (Sizwe)*

Despite the preparation received from the university, Sbusiso and Sizwe felt out of place in the field. Both stated that they were not prepared, and this affected their group work sessions. Since preparation is crucial for group work practice, the accounts of male social work students provide an opportunity to prepare future social work students. Especially on the male social worker perceptions by children, which revealed some gendered stereotypes whereby males are untrustworthy and viewed as perpetrators of physical and sexual assault; thus, affecting the social work profession (Courtois, 2001; Morris, 2009; Caballero, 2018). Well prepared male social work students could gain confidence in group work practice with children and would ultimately challenge male social work students' strongly held gendered constructions of viewing social work as a profession for women.

#### **4.7.2. Adaptation by male social work students**

Responses from the participants reveal that gender is not a barrier to adapting in social work profession. According to a number of the participants, working with the female social workers is an opportunity to learn and gain new insight into how female students think and operate, which they believe will assist them in helping female clients. When asked how male social work students have adapted in a social work profession that is predominantly dominated by females, some participants provided the following narratives:

*“I think I don't see any problem, I adapted very well, I take them as my partners in profession, I don't see gender as a barrier to adapt in this profession. Even though this profession is dominated by females, but I don't mind working with them because you*

*are able to learn and gain new knowledge and develop caring skills if they are lacking on your side. Working with opposite gender is enjoyable.” (Thandazani)*

Another respondent, who agreed that it's been relatively easy to adapt in the social work profession, provided a similar sentiment:

*“I am adapting well in this profession and I am happy... I am not the only male in Social Work and there are not few males who are enrolled in Social Work profession and I find it easy to adapt because you don't feel left out.” (Sandile)*

Both Thandazani and Sandile shared similar sentiments of adapting well within a predominantly female dominated perception; deconstructing socially constructed gender perceptions which proclaim that social work is a female profession.

Meanwhile, other participants disagreed with the above narratives and stated that they have found it challenging to adapt in the social work profession. These participants provided the following narratives:

*“Sometimes it becomes very difficult to adapt to this profession... It's not easy to adapt in this profession since it is dominated by females, you end up feeling uncomfortable and think that your voice won't be respected or taken serious.” (Njabulo)*

*“It's is not easy for me to adapt in this profession because I don't have a passion about it and I am not good in communicating with people, all I can say is that I am trying to adapt so that I will finish. Another thing that make me not to adapt well, is that I feel inferior in this profession since it is dominated by women and I feel like they have power in everything, however there are males in this profession, but I feel overpowered as a male.” (Sizwe)*

Njabulo and Sizwe's responses indicate that as male social work students, they often feel uncomfortable and overpowered by females in the field of social work. These male social work students face challenges in constructing their own gendered identity in a profession highly dominated by females.

#### **4.8. Conclusion**

This chapter provided an evidence-based data analysis with narratives from male social work students who participated in the study. The outcome of the data analysis process was a set of themes and sub-themes that emanated from the data collected. These themes and sub-themes

have demonstrated the trends and patterns in data that were coded using thematic analysis methods. The chapter has thus reflected on these themes and sub-themes, supported by narratives from participants. What was eminent from the research was how gender roles are constructed and reconstructed to influence male social work practice. However, the resilience portrayed by participants suggest that some male social work students are not affected or influenced by gender stereotypes and perceptions. Nonetheless, gender perceptions in children's group work interactions proved challenging, as some school children prescribed, consciously or unconsciously, to gender stereotypes and cultural beliefs regarding male social work students. Therefore, this research study has a full potential to contribute to the current literature in exploring the already identified gendered complexities and challenges of being a male within a female-dominated profession and locating them within an educational setup to highlight and develop solutions to challenges encountered by the male social work students.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion of findings, Recommendations and Conclusion**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter will provide a discussion of the overall findings that emerged from the study, together with a discussion of the recommendations that emanated from the study. The chapter will critically evaluate the findings that emanated from the data analysis and align these with the research aim, objectives and theoretical framework that underpin this study. First, the chapter will discuss the findings from the themes that emerged during the data analysis process. Second, the chapter will discuss some recommendations that emanated from the study. The summary of the findings will be discussed in the following categories: perceptions of the social work profession, experiences in facilitating children's group work, challenges in facilitating children's group work, children's perceptions of male social work students, and preparedness and adaptation of male social work students in social work practice.

The study explored the experiences of third-year male social work students' involvement with group work practice in their practicum at Nsimbini, Wiggins, and Mayville primary schools. The main aim of this study was to explore and focused on the various challenges encountered by the male social work students in their group work practice, thus allowing them an opportunity to strive within the female-dominated profession.

The study is framed within the social constructionism theory. Social constructionism focuses less on cognitive processes but places more focus on society. Social constructionism posits that the world is better understood through the experiences of those being researched. In this case, the level three male Social Work students would have undertaken their six-week group work practice at schools, which then qualifies as their experiences.

The study used a qualitative methodology. This approach was deemed appropriate for my study because it was explorative in nature. This approach was very useful when exploring subjective meanings that people attach to their own experiences and this method was also non-numerical in nature. Various themes and sub-themes emerged from the data collection process which utilised the interview guide as a tool. A total of fifteen (15) participants were interviewed using the interview guide which was supplemented by follow-up questions for in-depth analysis.



## **5.2. Research findings and discussions**

### **5.2.1. Perceptions of the social work practice**

The study investigated the experiences of third-year male social work students' involvement with group work practice in their practicum. This included exploring and understanding male social work students' perceptions of the social work profession. From the study, it was evident that the social work profession still attracted significant gendered stereotypes and homophobic stigmatisation. A majority of the male social work students still perceived social work as a female-dominated profession; thereby feminising the profession. These findings regarding the feminisation of the social work profession concur with Hall (2010) who critically discusses the feminisation of the social work profession by stating that sexual orientation of social administration has been raised as a worry all through the world.

The study found that male social work students were influenced by various factors into pursuing social work as a profession. The factors which influenced male social work students from enrolling in social work studies included factors such as family, the community, Social Workers, persisting household poverty, and individual passion to assist those in need of social services. Findings resonate with a study by Alpaslan and Lombard (2011) who found that social work students develop a passion for helping others in response to their own challenging experiences. Christie and Kruk (1998:25) also classified this motivation under "personal motives" for studying social work. These factors influenced male students to pursue social work despite all the gendered stereotypes associated with the social work profession. The study also found that third-year male social work students had already acquired some skills and knowledge through group work practice. Communication and personal management skills were among the highest mentioned skills that were acquired by male students. This finding also concurs with Williamson-Ashe and Ericksen (2017) who state that group work has shown to be beneficial amongst Baylor College of Medicine social work students that carry it out, as it has shown to have made them be good in team learning, communication, problem solving and class engagements. Williamson-Ashe and Ericksen (2017) also state that group work has helped college students to perform better in exams and to work ethically.

The marginalisation of the social work profession as a profession for homosexual men was another finding that emanated from the study. It was evident that some male social work students' perception of social work reflected homophobic stigmatisation. This stigmatisation

has been caused by the feminisation of the profession, thereby labelling males who join the profession as homosexual. This finding resonates with Kosberg (2002) who states that men who apply to the profession and the individuals who utilize social administrations are labelled as 'gay' (Kosberg, 2002 in Hall, 2010). Buscatto and Fusulier (2013) also state that men who are in women-dominated fields are often stigmatized, as in most cases their sexuality is questioned. Despite these gender stereotype and stigmatisation findings, most male social work students were not deterred from pursuing social work studies.

The study also explored male social work students' experiences so far in the social work profession. The study found that male students shared similar sentiments and experiences of social work as a female dominated profession. This finding resonates with literature from Geisler (2013) who concur that the social work profession is a female dominated field that is highly gendered and marginalised. It was also evident that the domination of females in social work studies affected some male students' participation. These experiences by male social work students are parallel with the study's social constructivism theoretical framework which focuses on understanding the world through shared experiences which continuously shape and reshape social constructs.

A conclusion can be drawn from the findings, that the perceptions of the social work profession could potentially have an impact on male social work students' role in a female dominated field as male social work students also battle to locate their gender identity. Cook, Higgings, Matthews, Wilding, and Whiteford (2016) also argue that social work remains an occupation associated with more women than men and this is having an impact on the gender expectations of the profession and the roles of men in it especially when men enter into a seemingly feminine occupation. Also, societal perceptions of males' place in society and what type of jobs should be appropriated to males may influence the experiences and service of men involved (Kulik, 1998). Therefore, the infiltration of males within a space historically occupied by women in the social sphere raises academic points of inquiry in as far as how they are to navigate and adjust their societal indoctrination within the much-feminized social work profession and what challenges do they encounter.

### **5.2.2. Experiences in group work practice**

The majority of male social work students expressed similar experiences in children's group work practice. These findings included experiences such as engaging with children in group work, the facilitation of children's groups, applying some skills and knowledge acquired at tertiary level, responding and dealing with sensitive cases during group work, and gained social work exposure during children's group work.

The findings of the study revealed that one of the experiences male social work students encountered was their engagement with children during group work. Some male social work students encountered difficulties in engaging with children, while others expressed that they did not encounter any difficulties engaging with children as their groups were actively participating in group discussions. The issue of gender was raised as a finding, where some male social work students were particularly interested on how children would respond to male social work students compared to their female co-facilitators. The results of this finding were astonishing, as some male social work students expressed that being a male assisted them to have a better understanding on how children perceive and respond to male Social Workers. Other male social work students who faced challenges engaging with children in group work had to resort to other methods such as role playing to promote active participation.

Another finding was the experiences of male social work students in facilitating children's group work. A majority of male social work students had positive facilitation experiences which were complemented by various learning pedagogies such as group brainstorming and group presentations. Other male social work students expressed that being male enabled them to facilitate group work effectively and efficiently compared to their female co-facilitators. However, these male social work student's children's groups were predominantly male learners. Some of these learners viewed their male social work facilitators as role models. This finding resonates with Schaub (2017) who argues that male social workers play an important role in dealing with an infant or adolescent boy because they are perceived to provide a positive role model, give balance and improve the quality of life. There are other male students who felt that children responded neutrally both to them and their female co-facilitator. These male students observed that children treated both them and their female co-facilitators equally and were not particularly focused on their respective genders. In this finding, children's behaviour towards male social work students did not resemble any of the gendered stereotypes which were found in the perceptions of the social work profession.

The findings also revealed that male social work students had to apply certain skills and knowledge they had already gained in Social Work lectures and practical tutorials. These skills were found to be useful in facilitating sensitive topics such as sexuality and sexual abuse. The skills that were mentioned by male social work students included communication skills and interviewing skills they had learned and acquired at tertiary level. These skills that were applied by male social work students enabled them to effectively facilitate children's group work and also assisted in handling challenging situations, such as identifying learners who were affected by a sensitive topic and consulting with those learners after group discussions.

Another finding that emerged from the study was male social work students' experiences in dealing with sensitive cases that were reported by children during and after group work sessions. Group work assisted some learners in relating to each other's struggles, thereby creating a platform to share their issues. Huyssteen and Strydom (2016) state that group work has proven to be an effective tool in dealing and helping vulnerable people and it can also help in making clients envisage that they have the capacity to help themselves. Some male social work students had to consult with learners privately and either provide brief counselling or refer learners to Social Workers. Cases that were reported by learners included sexual abuse by family members, and physical abuse in school. Some female learners confessed during group work that they did not trust males as most of them were abusive and would rather pursue relationships with females. However, some male social work students revealed that their gender caused a communication barrier whereby female learners were uncomfortable in reporting sexual abuse cases to them. Nonetheless, having female co-facilitators seemed to help, as children were able to relate their issues to female social work students and receive assistance. Another male social work student also revealed that children's personal issues affected their performance in group sessions, and it was crucial to assist children who are faced with sensitive issues of sexual abuse at an early stage, so as to not hinder their childhood development.

Lastly, male social work students revealed that they had gained social work exposure and experience in group sessions, particularly on how to engage and interact with adolescent children. This was their first social work practice as third-year male social work students, and their experiences shed some findings on the experiences and challenges faced in children's group work. Some male students admitted that children's group work served as a first phase intervention among children. This finding is synonymous with Kemp (2013) who emphasises that school social work assists in crisis intervention and counselling, support services to

learners and their families. Jonson-Reid, Davis, Saunders, Williams, & Williams (2005) also agree that school social work interventions can play a vital role in supporting the learner academically. Group work sessions not only enhanced male students' skills but also significantly contributed to the development of children they interacted with. This finding concurs with the British Columbia Institute of Technology (2010) which stated that group work in children has the potential to make them critical thinkers, academic achievers and improve their teamwork skills.

### **5.2.3. Challenges in group work practice**

The study's investigation of the experiences of male social work students revealed some challenges faced in conducting children's group work sessions. Rehn and Kalman (2016) state that indeed there are challenges that face social work students, particularly, male students, when doing fieldwork practice. The findings of the study revealed that among the challenges found in group work practice was the children's behaviour or attitude towards male social work students. Other challenges found were children's lack of participation during group work, issues in facilitating sensitive topics, lack of communication between stakeholders, and issues regarding group work logistics.

The findings of the study revealed children's behaviour or attitude towards male social work students during group work sessions. Most male social work students acknowledged that children behaved differently than adults. Therefore, these male students had to adjust their behaviour towards children to encourage them to attentively listen and actively participate. Some male students confessed that their groups, which were predominantly male learners, were misbehaving, constantly squabbling and using vulgar language during group work discussions. However, group work became a platform to stabilise behaviours and help shape behavioural expectations of group members (Toseland and Rivas, 2017). Sajid (2010) also emphasises that the use of group work practice experiences is very useful and effective for working with behaviourally disordered children.

Another finding that emanated from the study was the lack of participation by children during group work sessions. Some male social work students felt that some children were not fully participating in group discussions. Children struggled to concentrate in group work sessions which were conducted after school hours. Other male social work students, whose female

dominated groups were reluctant to participate, thought that their gender had an influence and often became a barrier hindering these female learners from actively participating in group discussions. Some male social work students blamed the lack of children's participation to the manner various groups were organised in a single classroom, thereby causing disturbances and lack of concentration.

The study found that some male social work students faced challenges in facilitating sensitive topics such as sexuality and sexual abuse. Some male social work students stated that the topics of sexuality and sexual abuse were difficult to facilitate. Fortunately, some of these male social work students had female co-facilitators who were able to assist and take over the facilitation of these sensitive topics. However, those male students who had male co-facilitators struggled to facilitate these topics, and when they asked the children why they were not participating in the sexuality and sexual abuse themes, the children stated that they were not comfortable discussing these issues. Two conclusions could be drawn from this finding; either female learners were reluctant to participate because both facilitators were males, or the lack of participation from female learners when it comes to topics of sexuality and sexual abuse suggests that these topics remain a taboo. The latter conclusion resonates with Mudhovozi et al. (2012) who state that some African communities still perceive sexual communication as taboo, and these communities also display negative attitudes to mothers who discuss sexual issues with their daughters. Meanwhile, some men in African households remain in denial on the issue of sex and sexuality, and end up not discussing sexuality issues with children, as these men also view them as taboo (Chiweshe and Chiweshe, 2017). Male social workers also face a challenge in discussing issues of sexuality with female children since men are viewed as majority perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse (Gillingham, 2006).

Lack of communication between stakeholders, who were involved in organising and coordinating group work sessions between male social work students and children, was another finding that emanated from the study. Some male social work students stated that this lack of communication between stakeholders led to some challenges such as school teachers not helping, and sessions being delayed. The lack of communication was between UKZN students and Lecturers, and school teachers. These challenges had negative impacts on children's group sessions and affected the effective delivery of group sessions by male social work students.

Other findings of the study which were raised as challenges were the group work logistics

regarding the venue and transportation of male social work students to school destinations. Most male social work students stated that some venues were not cleaned, and busses that transported male social work students were sometimes cancelled with no reason provided. Learners had end up cleaning the classrooms and this wasted a lot of time which would have been utilised for group work. Some male social work students stated that stated that group work logistics such as venues were not properly organised; as a result, groups had to share classrooms. Poor organisation of classrooms presented a challenge which can be linked to the challenge of participation, whereby children lacked concentration due to a number of groups being located in a single classroom, thereby causing disturbances during group work sessions.

#### **5.2.4. Perceptions of male social work students in group work**

The study investigated whether male social work students perceived if being male influenced their involvement with children in group work sessions. The findings that emanated from the study included gendered perceptions of male social work students by children in group work, children's cultural norms and beliefs pertaining male social work students in group work, and interaction and trust by children in group work. These findings are supported by Reid (1997) who argues that through group participation, individuals may get "psychological information", then gain information about how others see them and figure out how to enhance their relational aptitudes (Reid, 1997).

A major finding of the study was that male social work students' gender did influence how children responded to and participated in group work session. Some male social work students revealed that learners, particularly in female dominated groups, were very reluctant to participate in group discussions; indicating that their gender negatively influenced group work processes. Female learners were more reluctant in participating especially in cases where both group facilitators were males. This untrustworthy view of male social workers is confirmed by Caballero (2018) who recognises that there are reluctancies from female adolescent victims to enter into a trusting relationship with a male social worker. Caballero (2018) further describes this as having implications for social work practice. (Courtois, 2001) concurs and states that the male social worker may be perceived as a type of replacement for other untrustworthy and abusive authority figures to be feared, tested, disregarded and sexualized.

Some male social work students claimed that children often preferred to interact with their female co-facilitators instead. While other male social work students stated that children paid

more attention to them rather than their female co-facilitators. Therefore, this finding remains inconclusive to the idea that the lack of participation by female learners could be attributed by the learners' constructed gendered perceptions of male social work students. As Christie (2006) stated, men's relationships to work in the social work profession, particularly in child welfare, are often ambiguous and at times, inconsistent. What was evident from the study was that gendered perceptions by children in group work could potentially influence children's participation. In addition, gender dynamics in children's groups could also have an impact on how children engage with male social work students.

Another finding of the study was the children's cultural norms and behaviours towards male social work students during group work sessions. Some male social work students revealed that some children in groups treated them with the respect similarly to how they would treat their fathers and uncles at home. Sometimes children showed some respect by referring to male social work students as uncles. This finding reveals the socially constructed gender stereotypes, which are also culturally-based, where children conform to gendered cultural norms by treating male figures with respect. Ramokgopa (2001) confirms this by stating that culture in African communities plays a significant role in how children develop and interact with either male or female adults. These gendered cultural norms, which are associated with patriarchy and masculinity, remain embedded in African communities and continue to be intergenerationally transferred.

The findings of the study on the perceptions of male social work students in group work revolved largely around gender. Gender played a significant factor on how children in group work interacted and trusted male social work students. Some male social work students confessed that children in their groups trusted and treated them as their older brothers. His observation is also based on a socially constructed gender stereotype which portrays men as providers and protectors of the society (Clatterbaugh, 2018). This finding is also based on a socially constructed gender stereotype which portrays men as protectors of the society. While other male social work students revealed that female learners were reluctant in joining groups where both facilitators were male. These male social work students stated that this reluctance to join groups with male-only facilitators depicted female learners' fears about males. This finding further adds to the gender stereotype that men are viewed as perpetrators of abuse (Morris, 2009). Furthermore, male social workers discussing issues of sex and sexuality with female children is also contentious given that the vast majority of men commit physical and



sexual assault against women and children (Gillingham, 2006). As a result, this creates a more difficult work environment for male social workers, and sometime limited their level of contact with children (Dionisio, 2014). Despite this finding, some male social work students tried to provide an environment where children become comfortable regardless of the gender differences of group work facilitators.

### **5.2.5. Preparation and adaptation in group work practice**

The study also investigated the level of preparedness and adaptation of male social work students in social work practice. The findings emanated from the study revealed that most male social work students were well prepared prior to conducting children's group work sessions. Most male social work students stated that there was ample guidance and training provided by UKZN lecturers, and this training and guidance aided in their facilitation of children's group work sessions. This finding concurs with Coyle (1980), Lukens and Prchal (2002) who argued that it has been noted from the period of the profession's inception or commencement that training is necessary to social work practice with a group.

Part of the training that was provided included role plays facilitated by tutors, and these role-playing sessions included some scenarios male social work students might encounter during children's group work session. However, it was unclear from the study whether this training included any topics on gender dynamic challenges male social work students might encounter during children's group work practice. This finding suggests that any training provided by social work educators prior group work sessions should incorporate topics or scenarios of gender identity, gendered representations and gendered stereotypes male social work students might encounter in the social work profession. As argued by Williamson-Ashe and Ericksen (2017), there must be emphasis from social work educators on group work as there are gains and benefits in students that participate in it especially those that are male.

The finding of the study also revealed that most male social work students did not view their gender as a barrier to adapting in the social work profession. This finding emanated from the study despite arguments by Buscatto and Fusulier (2013) who state that men who are in women-dominated fields are often stigmatized, as in most cases their sexuality is questioned. Some male social work students viewed working with female social work students as an opportunity to learn and gain new insights in a female-dominated social work profession.

Arguments from male social work students who adapted well in social work practice deconstruct socially constructed gender perceptions which proclaim that social work is a female profession.

Some male social work students revealed that they found it challenging to adapt in a female-dominated social work profession. These male social work students indicated that as male social work students, they often feel uncomfortable and overpowered by females in the field of social work. This finding revealed that some male social work students face challenges in constructing their own gendered identity in a profession highly dominated by females. In conclusion, this research study has a full potential to contribute to current literature on exploring the already identified gendered complexities and challenges of being a male within a female-dominated social work profession and locating them within an educational setup to highlight and develop solutions to challenges encountered by the male social work students.

### **5.3. Realisation of objectives**

#### **5.3.1. Objective 1: To explore the nature of male social work student's involvement with group work in their practicum.**

This objective was realised because the study found out that a significant number of male social work students still viewed social work as a female profession, thereby feminising the social work profession. Some male social work students also stated that there is a homophobic stigmatisation attached to the social work profession, whereby society still questions the sexuality of men who enter the profession. However, despite the stereotypes and stigmatisation, male social work students were not deterred in pursuing social work as a profession. Male social work students have been influenced by various factors in pursuing social work as a profession. These factors include family influence, persisting household poverty, and individual passion to help those in need. The skills that have been gained by male social work students in their group work practicum included communication and personal management skills.

#### **5.3.2. Objective 2: To examine how male social work students interact with school children during group work practice.**

This objective was realised by the study as experiences of male social work students revealed how they engage and interact with children during group work. These experiences included

how male social work students engaged and facilitated children's group work sessions. The issue of gender was a major finding that influenced how children interacted and participated in group work sessions. Some male social work students expressed that being a male assisted them to have a better understanding on how children perceive and respond to male Social Workers, while others faced difficulties in engaging with children, particularly in female learner dominated groups. In these cases, male social work students had to resort to communication and interviewing skills in promoting active participation among children in group work.

Additional experiences were documented, including how male social work students responded to and dealt with sensitive cases during children's group work. Some male social work students had to consult with learners privately and either provide brief counselling or refer learners to Social Workers. Cases that were reported by learners included sexual abuse by family members, and physical abuse in school. Some male social work students revealed that their gender caused a communication barrier whereby female learners were uncomfortable in reporting sexual abuse cases to them. Nonetheless, having female co-facilitators seemed to help, as children were able to relate their issues to female social work students and receive assistance.

### **5.3.3 Objective 3: To investigate the challenges encountered by male social work students in group work practice with school children, particularly female children.**

This objective was realised as there were a number of challenges that emanated from the study. These challenges included difficulties in children's behaviour and attitude towards male social work students. Where some male learners were violently misbehaving, constantly squabbling and using vulgar language during group work discussions. Another challenge was the lack of participation by some children in group work sessions. Male social work students felt that some children were not fully participating in group discussions. The reasons behind the lack of participation included gender being a barrier between male social work students and female learners, and disturbances caused by other groups who were allocated in a single classroom. Facilitating sensitive topics such as sexuality and sexual abuse was another challenge that emanated from the study. Some male social work students stated that the topics of sexuality and sexual abuse were difficult to facilitate. Female learners confessed that they were not comfortable to discuss topics of sexuality and sexual abuse to male social work students. Another challenge was the lack of communication between group work stakeholders such as

UKZN lecturers, students and school teachers. This challenge affected the effective delivery of group work sessions as there was a lack of support provided to male social work students. Lastly, group work logistics such as venues for group work sessions and transportation of male social work students to school destinations negatively affected the delivery of group work sessions. Some venues were not cleaned, and busses that transported male social work students were sometimes cancelled with no reason provided.

#### **5.3.4. Objective 4: To determine how male social work students, perceive their preparation for group work practice with children.**

This objective was realised because there were some perceptions of male social work students that emerged from the study. These included gendered perceptions of male social work students by children in group work, children's cultural norms and beliefs pertaining male social work students in group work, and interaction and trust by children in group work. Male social work students' gender did influence how children responded to and participated in group work session. Male social work students revealed that some female learners were very reluctant to participate in group discussions. Some male social work students claimed that children often preferred to interact with their female co-facilitators instead. Therefore, gender played a significant factor on how children in group work interacted and trusted male social work students.

Culture also played a significant role on how children perceived and interacted with male social work students. Some male social work students revealed that some children in groups treated them with the respect similarly to how they would treat their fathers and uncles at home. Sometimes children showed some respect by referring to male social work students as uncles. The study revealed some underlying socially constructed perceptions on gendered cultural norms where children continue to treat male figures with great respect.

#### **5.3.5. Objective 5: To explore how male social work students adapt to the challenges they encounter during group work practice**

This objective was realised as the study revealed how male social work students adapted to a social work profession that is predominantly female. Some male social work students admitted that gender was not a barrier to adapting in the social work profession, as they adapted very well. While other male social work students confessed that that they found it challenging to adapt in a female-dominated social work profession. These male social work students indicated

that as male social work students, they often feel uncomfortable and overpowered by females in the field of social work.

The training and guidance that was provided by UKZN social work educators prior to children's group work sessions assisted male social work students in preparation and adaptation. This training included role playing on some possible scenarios that male social work students might encounter during children's group sessions. I was unclear from the study whether this training included some scenarios regarding gender challenges male students might encounter. Therefore, any training provided should include topics of gender stereotypes and gender representations, since the findings indicated that gender played a major role on how children interacted and participated with children in group work sessions.

#### **5.4. Recommendations**

The study highlighted the experiences and challenges male social work students face in children's group work sessions. From these experiences and challenges, gender stereotypes and perceptions seemed to play a central role on how children interacted to and perceived male social work students during group work sessions. The issue of gender was a major finding that influenced how children interacted and participated in group work sessions. Since male social work students revealed that some female learners were very reluctant to participate in group discussions as they felt uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics with males. Although some level of training was provided to male social work students prior to group work sessions. It was unclear whether this training included any topics on gender dynamic challenges male social work students might encounter during children's group work practice. One of the major experiences identified by the study was how male social work students had to respond to and deal with sensitive cases that were reported by children during and after group work. These included cases of sexual abuse by family members, whereby male social work students had to intervene and provide some assistance and referrals. In light of these findings and observations, it is recommended that:

- Awareness on gender stereotypes regarding the social work profession should be included in the discourses on males entering female-dominated professions. This could be achieved through the building of knowledge by further research and literature focusing on gender stereotypes and perceptions of male social workers. This awareness process should also include female social work students.

Any training provided by UKZN social work educators to male social work students prior to actual group work sessions should incorporate topics or scenarios of gender identity, gendered representations and gendered stereotypes male social work students might encounter in the social work profession.

- Incorporate counselling and mentorship training as part of the training provided to male social work students prior to conducting children's group work sessions. This counselling and mentorship training will provide social work students with the necessary skills to respond and deal with sensitive cases as and when presented. These skills could also potentially assist male social work students in facilitating sensitive topics of sexuality and sexual abuse, as some male social work students often faced difficulties in facilitating these sensitive topics.

Some challenges that emerged from the study included the lack of communication from stakeholders involved, and issues with group work logistics such as venues and transportation social work students to the schools. These stakeholders include the university, social work lecturers, school teachers and the school principal where the children's group work takes place. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- All stakeholders be involved in the planning process of the children's group work. The planning process should include an action plan to be presented to all stakeholders, which will include the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved.
- This action plan should be implemented within agreed timeframes and should be monitored during the group work sessions and evaluated after the sessions have been completed.
- A report on the children's group work sessions should be compiled with all challenges, suggestions and recommendations, and should be presented to all stakeholders involved.

### **5.5. Suggestions for further research**

The research explores male social work experiences and challenges in conducting children's group work sessions. Most of the findings of the study revolved around the gender of male social work students. Even though gender was not a key focus area of the vision and objectives of the study. Nonetheless, gender emerged as a factor that influenced how children perceived, participated and interacted with male social work students.

The research has highlighted some gendered stereotypes, stigmas and gendered perceptions that emerged from the findings. These issues highlighted also dominate the discourse on men entering female dominated professions. As Buscatto and Fusulier (2013) argue that men who are in women-dominated fields are often stigmatized, as in most cases their sexuality is questioned. Further research is required on the gender stereotypes, stigmas and perceptions of the social work profession as experienced by male social work students. Also, there is a need to establish how female students experience groupwork practice, and to make a comparative analysis on their experiences to those of male students.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

This chapter looked at the findings of the research and one of the major findings was how gender played a factor that shaped and influenced the experiences of male social work students in children's group work sessions. Some male social work students expressed that being a male assisted them to have a better understanding on how children perceive and respond to male Social Workers, while others faced difficulties in engaging with children. Culture also played a significant role on how children perceived and interacted with male social work students, as study revealed some underlying socially constructed perceptions on gendered cultural norms where children continue to treat male figures with great respect. The research also highlighted some gendered stereotypes, stigmas and gendered perceptions which formed an important finding that related to the study. Male social work students' gender did influence how children responded to and participated in group work session. Male social work students revealed that some female learners were very reluctant to participate in group discussions. Some male social work students claimed that children often preferred to interact with their female co-facilitators instead.

The vision and objectives of the study were realised as the findings that emerged were able to answer the research questions presented in Chapter 1. The experiences in interacting with children during group work included how children engaged with male social work students, and how male social work students facilitated the sessions. Some challenges that emanated from the study included facilitating sensitive topics, difficulties in engaging with and participation from children in group work sessions. This study has demonstrated a need for further research which will focus on the gender stereotypes, stigmas and gender perceptions of the social work profession as experienced by male social work students.

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## Appendix A: Ethical clearance certificate



13 November 2018

Mr Zakhele Charles Thobela (218083910)  
School of Applied Human Sciences – Social Work  
Howard College Campus

Dear Mr Thobela,

Protocol reference number: HSS/1847/018M

Project title: UKZN third-year male Social Work students' experiences of group work practice with school children

In response to your application received 11 October 2018, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**

**Approval Notification – Expedited Application**  
Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

.....  
Professor Shenuka Singh (Chair)

/ms

Cc Supervisor: Ms Nolwazi Ngcobo  
Cc Academic Leader Research: Dr Maud Mthembu  
Cc School Administrator: Ms Ayanda Ntuli

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

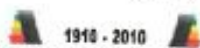
Professor Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/8360/4557 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 200 4609 Email: [ximbhsc@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbhsc@ukzn.ac.za) / [anymarm@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:anymarm@ukzn.ac.za) / [mohunco@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:mohunco@ukzn.ac.za)

Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)



Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville



## Appendix B: Gatekeepers letter



2 November 2018

Mr Zakhele Charles Thobela (SN 218083910)  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
College of Humanities  
Howard College Campus  
UKZN  
Email: [charlesthobs12345@gmail.com](mailto:charlesthobs12345@gmail.com)

Dear Mr Thobela

### RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) towards your postgraduate studies, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

*"The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) third-year male social work student's experiences in their group work practice with school children."*

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting interviews with third-year male students in the Discipline of Social Work on the Howard College campus.

Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Public Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely

MR SS MOKOENA  
REGISTRAR

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#### Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 8005/2206 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 7824/2204 Email: [registrar@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:registrar@ukzn.ac.za)

Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)



100 YEARS OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

## **Appendix C: Consent form**

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**Title of the Study:** Masculinity in Social Work Practice: The third-year male social work students' experiences of group work practice with children at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

#### **Introduction**

- You are being asked to be in a research study of the experiences of third year male social work students when doing their group work practice with children.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are a third-year male student in social work at the University KwaZulu-Natal.
- I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

#### **Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of third year male social work students in group work practice with children.
- Ultimately, this research will be published as a dissertation for my study.

#### **Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

It must be noted that this study is on a voluntary basis and if it happens that you feel at risk or uncomfortable with the study, you have a right to withdraw.

#### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

The benefits of being in the study are that you will be contributing to knowledge, specifically teaching and practice on this topic. You will be also helping in improving the experience of future male third year students.

#### **Confidentiality**

It must also be noted that everything that is discussed in the study will be treated with high precautionary measures, so that your identity must be protected. However, it must be noted that

the findings of this study will be published as a research dissertation which will be property of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

**Payments**

There will be no remuneration or any form of reward for you to participate in the study.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

You have every right to ask question where you do not understand or if you need further clarity, the researcher will explain. If there is a need to refuse or withdraw from the study, you will be permitted to do as per your rights.

**Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Participants Names: .....

Participants Signature: ..... Date: .....

**Permission to audio-record**

I .....

give	do not give
------	-------------

permission for the session to be audio-recorded

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide**

### **Interview Questions:**

1. How has studying Social Work been for you so far?
2. What influenced you to enrol in the social work profession?
3. How does it feel to be a male student in social work profession?
4. Tell me about your experience in group work practice with children?
5. How has being a male social work student influenced your involvement in group work practice with children?
6. Tell me about some of the challenges you face when doing your group work practice with children?
7. To what extent has your gender influenced how children perceive or respond to you in group work practice? And how did you adapt to these challenges?
8. How effective was your preparedness for group work practice with children?
9. Tell me more about how you have adapted as a male in a profession that is predominantly dominated by females?
10. What recommendations can you make when it comes to male students and social work practice?