

**FROM LECTURE HALLS TO COUNSELLING ROOMS:  
NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION FROM ACADEMIC TRAINING TO  
PRIVATE PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK IN BOTSWANA – A CASE  
STUDY OF JO’SPEAKS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the transition from academic training to private practice in social work within the Botswana context, focusing on the lived experiences of a recent graduate through a case study of Jo’Speaks, a multidisciplinary wellness practice that focuses on motivation, counselling, life coaching and social skills training. The paper highlights the multifaceted challenges that emerging practitioners face ranging from limited business acumen and emotional preparedness to regulatory ambiguity and outlines the strategies used by Jo’Speaks to support early-career social workers. By integrating reflective thematic analysis, curriculum mapping, and policy review, the findings emphasize the need for enhanced mentorship, practical entrepreneurship education, and better academic-practice alignment. The article contributes to the emerging body of work on the localization of private practice in social work, particularly in developing contexts, and suggests pathways to support professional readiness and sustainable practice.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Private Practice, Transition and Jo’speaks

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In many parts of the Global South, including Botswana, social work has historically been centered around state and NGO employment, often influenced by colonial legacies and welfare-focused models. However, there is a growing shift in this paradigm due to an increased awareness of mental health needs, gaps in public service provision, and a burgeoning sense of entrepreneurship among the youth. More graduates are now exploring alternatives to traditional employment, such as venturing into private practice—a largely unexplored professional area. This shift is not just a result of changing mindsets but also driven by the high unemployment rate among Botswana's youth. As of 2023, statistics indicate that 35% of the youth are unemployed in a nation where 70% of the population is under 35. The Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs (2023) reports there are 40,036 unemployed graduates, including at least 1,500 social workers, nudging young social workers toward private practice—a less conventional career path.

This article aims to explore the transition from academic settings to private practice, a realm not thoroughly covered in academic training. It seeks to understand how recent graduates

navigate the demands of private practice, where they must reconcile the notion of charging for services with their training focused on community welfare. The focus will be on Jo'Speaks, a Gaborone-based private practice offering social work and mental wellness services. Drawing on personal experiences as a recent graduate in this environment, the article will detail the realities of blending academic knowledge with the challenges of private-sector service delivery. This reflective piece will be narrated by the graduate, guided by a supervisor who is the practice owner and her former lecturer and research advisor. Ultimately, the goal is to outline the adaptation journey, identify ongoing systemic challenges, and propose institutional and practice-level strategies to facilitate smoother transitions for future practitioners.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Social work education is on a continuous evolutionary path, dedicated to identifying effective methods for adequately preparing students for their professional careers. Despite these efforts, defining and measuring the preparedness of social work students for practice remains a complicated endeavour. This complexity arises from the diverse interests of various stakeholders, including clients, students, academic institutions, employers, governmental agencies, and the broader community (Healy and Meagher, 2007). Internationally, the shift from academic environments to professional social work practice is recognized as a complex and emotionally demanding journey. The transition involves navigating a steep learning curve that encompasses not only technical skills but also the development of personal and professional identities (Beddoe, 2013; Hussein et al., 2014). The Western literature extensively explores these challenges, with Barlow and Hall (2007) highlighting the emotional hurdles and ethical dilemmas faced by novice practitioners and Kadushin and Harkness (2014) emphasizing the critical importance of supervision in facilitating early professional adaptation.

Theoretical frameworks offer valuable insights into this transition. Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory highlights the cognitive transformation professionals undergo as they internalize new roles and values through critical reflection. Schön's (1983) Reflective Practitioner Model further asserts that effective learning in professional settings relies heavily on the ability to reflect both in action and on action—skills essential for adaptive decision-making in complex environments.

However, this transitional experience is less documented in the African context, particularly in Sub-Saharan regions, where systemic constraints often impede professional development. Makusha and Richter (2020) argue that overburdened social welfare systems, insufficient supervisory structures, and high client-to-worker ratios compromise effective practice and undermine new graduates' confidence and competence. Similarly, Osei-Hwedie (2010) critiques the misalignment between academic training and the socio-cultural realities of African social work practice, underscoring the need for curricula that are more contextually responsive. Research in Zimbabwe further reveals that social workers often lack entrepreneurial skills, which contribute to the perception of the profession as one primarily associated with free service provision (Muzingili et al., 2023).

In Botswana, institutions like the University of Botswana and Botswana Open University provide strong theoretical foundations. Yet graduates often feel unprepared for the private practice arena, which demands not only clinical expertise but also entrepreneurial,

administrative, and marketing skills. This gap mirrors a broader African challenge, where private practice in social work remains an emerging and largely unsupported field.

Transition Theory (Bridges, 2004) provides insight into this process, suggesting that psychological adjustment is as vital as logistical preparation during career changes. The model differentiates between change (situational shifts) and transition (the internal adaptation process), emphasizing the importance of identity reconstruction and emotional support. This theory is particularly pertinent in Botswana, where newly qualified practitioners must transition from structured academic environments to the more ambiguous realm of self-managed practice.

Additionally, scholars like Perron et al. (2010) and Gray and Webb (2013) argue that entrepreneurial skills in social work are not optional but essential competencies, especially in resource-limited settings where innovative service delivery models are crucial for reaching underserved populations. Similarly, Jones and May (2017) advocate for integrating business acumen and digital literacy into social work education to equip graduates for diversified career paths, including consultancy, coaching, and private counselling services.

Collectively, these theoretical and empirical contributions emphasize the necessity of a holistic approach to professional transition in social work—an approach that integrates technical skills, emotional resilience, ethical grounding, and entrepreneurial capability. In the context of Botswana, this necessitates not only reforming academic curricula but also developing policy and practice frameworks that support new professionals through mentorship, accessible supervision, and business incubation opportunities.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This study employs an autoethnographic qualitative design to provide an in-depth, reflective account of transitioning into private social work practice. According to Adams, Jones and Ellis (2015), autoethnography is a form of autobiographical academic writing that examines and interprets the author's personal experiences. It links these insights to one's self-identity, cultural norms and resources, communication behaviours, traditions, symbols, common meanings, as well as broader social, cultural, and political issues. Drawing on the author's firsthand experiences at Jo'Speaks, the paper captures nuanced insights into the emotional, procedural, and skill-based aspects of early professional life.

The Data sources for this paper includes among others, personal reflective journals, direct observations, internal practice documents (e.g., client intake forms, operational manuals and interaction with stakeholders), and informal mentorship conversations. Additionally, a review of Botswana's licensure protocols and a curriculum comparison between leading social work programs were undertaken to assess alignment with the realities of private practice.

While the paper does not include formal interviews, it is grounded in authentic practitioner experiences, supported by collaborative team reflections. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymization were strictly observed.

### **4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

#### **4.1 Key Themes Emerging from the Transition Experience**

• **Inadequate Business Preparation**

A significant gap in the transition from academic learning to private practice is the lack of business acumen. Social work training programs in Botswana often emphasize theory and ethics while neglecting to provide practical business skills. As a result, new graduates typically enter the field without essential knowledge in areas such as service costing, budgeting, proposal writing, client invoicing, and brand development—skills vital for managing or comprehending a successful private practice (Gray & Webb, 2013; Perron et al., 2010).

Upon joining Jo'Speaks, an established private practice with over a decade of experience, it became evident to me that its success was supported by a sophisticated framework of financial planning, corporate wellness program proposals, pricing strategies, and client engagement techniques. These elements, crucial for any thriving practice, remain largely unseen by many social work students who lack direct exposure. Notably, social work education at the University of Botswana has traditionally been aligned with government objectives (Jongman, 2015). From as early as 1946, when social work was introduced, the focus was on addressing government social welfare concerns. Even in 1974 and 1986, when social work became part of academic curricula at the college and university levels, it primarily responded to government needs and never truly developed an independent purpose.

In private practice, organizations like Jo'Speaks address challenges as they arise. For instance, they frequently design mental health workshops for corporate clients, necessitating tasks such as drafting detailed proposals, budgeting for transport and materials, and negotiating fees. These are not just administrative activities; they are crucial to the practice's sustainability. Unfortunately, such concepts were overlooked in undergraduate training, leaving graduates unprepared for the entrepreneurial aspects of social work.

This disconnect between training and practice highlights a broader systemic issue: the failure to equip emerging practitioners with the business mindset required to succeed in non-traditional career paths within the profession. Some universities globally are now incorporating modules on social enterprise, nonprofit management, and freelance practice. Implementing similar initiatives within Botswana's social work curriculum could better prepare students for diverse and sustainable practice models.

• **Licensure Confusion and Professional Registration**

Regulation confers title protection and delineates the scope of practice, thus establishing licensed social workers as professionals (Monahan, 2018). Moreover, licensure in social work is essential for safeguarding public safety and fostering ethical and competent practice. It sets a baseline for knowledge and skills, regulates who is permitted to practice, and bolsters the profession's credibility. However, obtaining licensure as a private social work practitioner in Botswana is a confusing and inconsistent endeavour. Many new graduates are met with delays and uncertainty when trying to determine which regulatory body to approach and what steps are required to gain the legal clearance needed for independent practice. Currently, Botswana lacks a dedicated regulatory body for social workers. According to Jongman, a former president of the Botswana National Association of Social Workers (BONASW), the legal framework necessary for regulation has been stalled in Parliament since 2010. This situation leaves new social workers in a quandary over registration options, as the national association does not

function as a regulatory body. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Botswana Health Professions Council (BHPC) only registers specialized clinical social workers who hold a Master's in Clinical Social Work.

Discussions with practitioners at Jo'Speaks and other industry professionals reveal that even seasoned experts face inconsistencies regarding requirements for insurance, billing ethics, and client confidentiality standards. Some practitioners are advised to register under titles like "counsellors," "mental health professionals," or "consultants," as the social work category is not fully developed for private sector applications.

The absence of formal guidelines not only hinders the establishment of private services but also leads to legal and ethical dilemmas. There is no clear framework that outlines ethical billing practices, medical aid interactions, or professional liability insurance for social workers in private practice. Consequently, many young graduates either operate informally or abandon the idea of private practice altogether, fearing legal non-compliance.

Establishing a comprehensive, well-communicated licensure framework could significantly aid graduates transitioning into private practice and enhance the profession's standing within the private health and wellness sector.

#### • Emotional Overwhelm and Case Complexity

In his 2024 study on social work in public health, Ratcliff notes that although many social workers find their careers fulfilling, the daily responsibilities can become burdensome. The study further suggests that social workers experience higher levels of stress and burnout compared to other professions (Ratcliff, 2024). This occupational hazard is a serious health issue affecting numerous social service providers. Observations at Jo'speaks Practice confirm this reality. Managing the transition into private practice is crucial, as the emotional demands of real-life cases far surpass what is encountered in academic simulations. While university programs introduce trauma theory and crisis intervention models, applying this knowledge to cases involving grief, suicide, child abuse, and intergenerational trauma can be overwhelmingly challenging. Furthermore, the University of Botswana, currently the sole institution offering a bachelor's degree in social work, provides students only 18 weeks (720 hours) of fieldwork practice (UB Fieldwork Manual, 2025), which may not be sufficient for adequate real-world exposure, leaving graduates unprepared for hands-on client interactions.

During my tenure at Jo'Speaks, I observed how clients often struggle with multiple, interconnected issues, such as anxiety from academic pressure mixed with unresolved trauma. These situations aren't straightforward but are complex, emotional narratives that demand both clinical expertise and personal resilience. Witnessing experienced practitioners handle these intricate cases with composure emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence, supervision, and grounding practices.

Unfortunately, new practitioners entering private practice often do so without a formal supervisory framework, leading to feelings of isolation. Unlike public institutions that provide in-house debriefings or team consultations, private practice typically lacks this support unless specifically arranged. Without emotional support networks, burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma become significant risks (Bride, 2007; McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

Establishing mentorship programs or peer-support circles for newcomers in private practice could serve as essential coping mechanisms and venues for clinical reflection.

### • Digital and Entrepreneurial Skills Gap

Hassain and Phulpoto (2024) have highlighted a growing concern: the lack of digital literacy and entrepreneurial acumen among social work graduates is becoming increasingly problematic in today's era of digital mental health services. Success in private practice extends beyond providing therapy; it involves managing an online presence, booking appointments through digital platforms, marketing via social media, and maintaining virtual client relationships.

At Jo'Speaks, digital tools such as Canva for content creation, Google Calendar for scheduling appointments, and social media for public engagement are crucial components of their outreach strategy. These tools are now essential professional skills, yet they were completely absent from my formal education. As a result, many new graduates find themselves learning these skills on the job, often through trial and error.

Today's social work environment demands visibility, strategic thinking, and digital adeptness. This includes skills such as creating service packages, optimizing Instagram profiles, and effectively managing client inquiries via WhatsApp Business skills critical for sustaining practice.

To address this gap, universities could offer workshops on digital skills, partner with marketing departments, or even incorporate assignments that require students to develop mock business plans or social impact campaigns.

### • Adapting to Autonomy and Fast-Paced Workflows

In private practice, balancing ethics with profitability means the pace of work is distinct from that in public institutions. The competitive landscape necessitates that employees consistently excel and respond promptly, as high standards of practice serve as effective marketing tools. This dynamic environment presents a significant challenge in transitioning to private practice, as it requires adapting to autonomy and a complex, fast-paced workflow. Unlike in traditional institutional settings, where social workers have defined roles, fixed schedules, and collective accountability, private practitioners often juggle multiple roles—therapist, receptionist, social media manager, event planner, and accountant. This is particularly true in Botswana, where private practice is still emerging, and organizations are relatively small, compelling practitioners to assume diverse responsibilities.

Even at an established practice like Jo'Speaks, staff are required to be adaptable and proactive. On any day, a practitioner might counsel several clients, participate in planning meetings for school wellness programs, update the digital event calendar, and manage follow-up communications with corporate HR departments. This unpredictable, fast-moving workflow can be daunting for new graduates who are accustomed to more organized tasks in academia.

New practitioners frequently report feeling "spread thin" or unsure about prioritizing their tasks, particularly when trying to balance the emotional demands of therapy with various

logistical and administrative duties. Implementing systems for time management, task prioritization, and digital automation can significantly help prevent burnout.

To facilitate this transition, academic programs could incorporate training in time management, simulated practice environments, and workshops on establishing personal and professional boundaries skills essential for sustaining a career in private practice.

## 5.0 STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING SUCCESS

According to Suzanne Dworack-Peck (2019), navigating a career can be daunting for both new graduates and experienced professionals, whether they are looking to secure their first job, transition to a new role, or advance within their current organization. The question of "Where do I start?" often feels overwhelming.

Dworack-Peck points out that mentoring helps fill the gap created by the anxiety surrounding change. Research shows that having a mentor to talk to, share concerns with, and even vent to is highly beneficial. It can reduce stress, offer fresh perspectives, and lead to better decision-making. Mentoring is also fulfilling for mentors, rejuvenating their sense of purpose in their work.

In addition to mentoring, supervision is crucial in helping new social workers integrate smoothly into an organization. Bara (2022) emphasizes that supervision in social work plays a vital role in problem-solving, especially in complex cases. It ensures the quality of work and enhances the skills of social workers. Effective supervision helps both frontline social workers and case managers adhere to professional standards.

At Jo'Speaks, several internal strategies have been implemented to bridge the gap between academic training and real-world practice:

- **Structured Mentorship:** New staff members receive weekly supervision to discuss casework, address ethical issues, and reflect on their practice experiences.
- **Internal Capacity-Building Workshops:** In-house training sessions on topics like record-keeping, client engagement, ethics, and business operations foster confidence and competence among practitioners.
- **Peer Debriefing Culture:** A supportive team environment encourages debriefing after emotionally taxing cases, promoting emotional resilience.
- **Business and Branding Exposure:** Staff are introduced to branding tools, marketing strategies, social media management, and proposal writing to support practice sustainability.
- **Community Integration:** Participating in community seminars, school outreach, and media appearances provides opportunities for public speaking, education, and building a strong professional reputation.

## 6.0 CASE STUDY: JO'SPEAKS

Jo'Speaks was founded in response to the UN Happy People Index (2015), which revealed that Botswana ranked among the world's least happy countries. This insight inspired the founder to consider ways to enhance national happiness, leading to the company's mission: "restoring

human dignity." Initially focusing on the youth, Jo'Speaks expanded its services to include family dynamics, grief counselling, relationship coaching, and parental guidance. It serves as a multidisciplinary hub, offering comprehensive support in areas like grief and trauma counselling, academic mentoring, and corporate wellness programs.

What sets Jo'Speaks apart is its seamless blend of media engagement, motivational speaking, and research within its clinical practices. The organization fosters a culture rich in mentorship, reflective learning, and community-oriented practice, providing a supportive environment for professionals starting their careers.

While Jo'Speaks stands as an exemplary model, its success is partly due to its urban location, strong brand presence, and the founder's vast experience. Implementing a similar model in rural or underserved regions would require further infrastructural support, policy development, and access to financial and digital resources.

The organization is fundamentally guided by two theoretical frameworks: Positive Youth Development (PYD) and the Life Course Model. As per Damon (2004), PYD focuses on the inherent potential of young people rather than their perceived weaknesses, even those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Jo'Speaks applies this framework by emphasizing resilience and the strengths of the youth it serves, rather than attempting to "fix" them. Alongside PYD, the Life Course Model, as defined by the World Health Organization (2021), stresses the interconnectedness of life stages and societal influences across generations. Implementing this approach entails early interventions, timely actions during life transitions, and collective societal efforts to enhance well-being.

## 7.0 DISCUSSION

The transition from academic instruction to independent private practice in the field of social work in Botswana is a complex and challenging journey. It resembles an initiation or rite of passage that highlights the vast gap between theoretical knowledge and the practical demands of real-world practice. Here, amid the clinical environments and beyond the polished exterior of newly acquired degrees, lies a struggle—the tension between aspirations and the reality of executing them, between acquired knowledge and the professional one is expected to become. At the core of this transition is a significant void—a lack of clear institutional guidance that leaves many recent graduates in a liminal space between university and private consultation. The uncertainty of regulatory requirements raises the question: "Am I allowed to do this?" Without defined pathways for licensure, many young practitioners find themselves lost in bureaucratic confusion, unsure of their professional identity as counsellors, consultants, or social workers. This ambiguity in legal and ethical areas not only stalls careers but also undermines confidence and stifles innovation.

Real-world cases involving intense emotional experiences, like those of bereaved parents or traumatized children, reveal the limitations of strictly academic training. Classrooms cannot replicate the experience of managing such emotional complexity nor prepare students for the emotional burden of client interaction. Without appropriate supervision or peer support, practitioners risk burnout, emotional detachment, or early career departure.

Jo'Speaks stands as a beacon in this challenging landscape, offering a model for navigating the transition from academia to private practice with structured support. Through mentorship, business skill exposure, digital literacy, and reflective practices, Jo'Speaks creates a postgraduate learning environment where one can grow professionally and personally. It understands the multifaceted role of the modern social worker as both a healer and an entrepreneur, combining strategy, empathy, education, and community engagement into a holistic approach. However, Jo'Speaks' model cannot be the sole solution. Broader systemic changes are required. Academic institutions must bridge the gap to real-world practice by reimagining social work education with relevance. Curricula should include entrepreneurship as a vital survival skill and teach service marketing, digital client interaction, business proposal development, and brand management alongside traditional social work concepts like case assessment and psychosocial theory.

Furthermore, applied ethics need evolution to address private sector challenges, considering issues such as medical aid partnerships, social media usage, digital client confidentiality, and ethical billing practices. Emotional intelligence should become a fundamental competence taught through experiential learning, reflective journaling, and supervised role-plays that mimic real practice environments. Beyond curriculum updates, forming stronger partnerships between academic institutions and private practice is vital, promoting collaboration, trust, and mutual accountability. Internships should extend beyond government settings to include private organizations like Jo'Speaks, providing multi-faceted learning experiences. Guest lectures by seasoned practitioners can infuse academic teachings with practical insights, and structured mentorships can serve as bridges between education and practice, ensuring no graduate steps into the professional realm unsupported.

This is the challenge ahead—not just to produce graduates, but to nurture complete professionals. Not merely to prepare social workers for jobs, but to empower them for meaningful impact. The future of social work in Botswana—responsive, ethical, and innovative—depends on how boldly and creatively we reimagine the transition from educational institutions to professional practice spaces.

## 8.0 CONCLUSION

Transitioning from academic studies in social work to professional practice is a multifaceted challenge that necessitates both a shift in mindset and an expansion of skills. The journey involves crafting a professional identity, tackling ethical dilemmas, efficiently managing caseloads, and actively seeking guidance through supervision and mentorship. Field placements play a critical role in bridging the gap between theory and real-world application, providing invaluable hands-on experience and instilling confidence.

However, entering private practice requires an entirely different approach, demanding thorough planning and preparation. This involves reflecting on previous experiences, identifying essential skills and resources, and comprehending the business aspects of practice management. Establishing a solid foundation—both personally and professionally—is vital for a successful and sustainable transition into the field.

Jo'Speaks provides a rich example of how mentorship-driven, entrepreneurially minded practice can flourish despite systemic limitations. Its story underscores the urgent need for

reforms in education, regulation, and institutional collaboration to support the next generation of practitioners.

As Botswana strengthens its psychosocial care infrastructure, investing in the development of competent, confident, and business-savvy social workers will be vital to meeting the country's growing mental wellness needs

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