

Special Issue on Social Work Field Education

Jessica Ayala and Julie Drolet

As the guest editors we are very pleased to introduce this special issue of *Currents: Scholarship in the Human Services* on Canadian social work field education. This journey began approximately two years ago when we agreed there was a need to document innovations and promising practices in field education; to contribute to scholarship by sharing knowledge and experiences; and to ground social work field education in the Canadian context. We wish to acknowledge the important role played by social work faculty who are engaged in research on field education – those who know how to practice and to conduct research, and who know the literature.

The Canadian Association for Social Work Education's (CASWE) national conferences held in 2014 and 2013 provided an opportunity for social work educators to discuss the state of social work field education in Canada. A number of presentations highlighted the national crisis in field education due to several factors. It has been known for some time that the demand for social work field placements exceeds the supply, and field coordinators and directors are facing local and national saturation points for placements. The growth of social work programs across Canada due, in part, to various on-campus, satellite, and distance delivery formats, has led to an increase in the number of student placements. At the same time field agencies continue to face challenges in this neo-liberal period of fiscal restraint with fewer staff, overwhelming workloads, and limited support and resources. The choices made in this socio-economic context affect the availability of placements with field instructors having less time for student supervision. In a recent article Cheryl Regehr (2013) discusses a number of trends affecting Canadian social work education including the increased relevance of practice-based learning and the integration of practicum to enhance employability and labour market readiness. Regehr states "given the increased demands for limited field practice placements, creative approaches to designing social work practica are urgently needed" (p. 705). While Field Coordinators and Directors continue to manage a complex and dynamic academic workload with increasing numbers of students, they also meet time-consuming counselling requests, student advising, referral and monitoring tasks. Shari McConnell, Sheila Sammon, and Nancy Pike (2013) argue that

limited financial resources and budgetary constraints are often applied first to field education in Canada. Reduced budgets too often translate into fewer supports for field education, which manifest as less dedicated administrative support, more students in field sections, and reduced budgets for annual appreciation events, field instructor training, and faculty liaison. Despite the challenges, Field Coordinators and Directors who are faculty members are actively researching, writing, and presenting about field education and remain committed to creatively co-creating and implementing new strategies to address current challenges. Social work educators are actively passionate about and committed to field education, social work education, students, and field instructors. Marion Bogo (2013) identifies social work educators as full time faculty members, sessional instructors, participating agency-based field educators, and thousands of students studying social work (p. 697). In this special issue we have strived to include a diversity of voices. The national network of dedicated and committed Field Coordinators and Directors - and their allies in CASWE – provide a forum for sharing successes and challenges. We would like to thank this group for sharing our call for papers nationally. In order to address new and long-standing challenges faced by social work educators it is necessary to share experiences, practices, and methods. Social work faculty members in Canadian universities are committed to developing new models of teaching and learning in contributions to scholarly journals and national and international conferences on social work education (Regehr, 2013, p. 706).

In Canada, the Canadian Association for Social Work Education has accredited 64 social work programs consisting of 34 baccalaureate social work programs and 27 master's social work programs, with three programs in candidacy status (Regehr, 2013, p. 697). Of these programs, 16 are delivered in French. As the cornerstone of social work education, field education belongs not just to Field Coordinators and Directors, students, and field instructors but to all of CASWE, all social work programs across Canada, all social work educators, the Deans and Directors, the Commission on Accreditation, the Board of Directors, and the CASWE National Office. Each of us needs to own the challenges in field education and take an active role in finding and implementing the solutions.

The papers in this special issue are from Canadian faculty who are engaged in social work field education and address key developments, challenges, and creative approaches. The papers address trends in field education in Canada and reflect on how student learning can benefit from new opportunities while addressing constraints. The articles also examine pedagogical issues and approaches.

The special issue begins with an invited contribution by Grant Charles, Carla Alexander, and Carolyn Oliver, which discusses the potential benefits of blending service learning and interprofessional practice experiences into field education to meet effective health and social care work. A reconceptualization of field placements is needed to address criticisms of social work education that create a disconnect between schools of social work and “service users” in diverse communities. Specifically, the authors call for a redefining of these relationships with partners. Examples of undergraduate student learning in service learning and interprofessional experiences are presented based on field experiences in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary and the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia.

Jessica Ayala, Jasmine Ing, Ellen Perrault, Grace Elliott, Lorraine Letkeman and Myra Baynton’s article presents the results of a study that explores how technology can be harnessed to support and train field instructors in urban and rural environments. Field education coordinators and directors are seeking to develop new knowledge on the use of online technology to engage, support, and deliver training opportunities for social work field instructors, who may not be able to participate in traditional face-to-face methods given time constraints, limited resources, and travel requirements. In past decade, online education has become more common, and with the development of interactive technology opportunities for online collaboration and innovation have flourished. As face-to-face methods are not always possible due to time, resources, and distance, Tumin and Fung (2011) suggest evidence that the potential for advances in engagement, collaboration and transformation through developing technological tools are high. This study seeks to expand knowledge in the underdeveloped area of the use of online technology in engaging and educating social work field instructors. It focuses on the potential of online training and development by examining the learning and support needs of field instructors in rural and urban locations in Alberta.

Natalie Clark and Julie Drolet present the findings from a qualitative study that considers the experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous social work and human service field education coordinators on reconciling social work field education. The article considers how critical frameworks such as cultural safety and intersectionality can assist to better understand reflexive experiences in placing Indigenous students in field placements and non-Indigenous students in Indigenous field agency settings. The importance of relationships, and working in relationship, is discussed, and the need for transformative structural change in order to meet the learning needs of students.

We hope the articles in this journal will contribute to our shared goal of promoting excellence in social work education and ultimately in social work practice.

References

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Authors' notes

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