Article

What motivates social workers to become field instructors: Perspectives from Canada

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Abstract
The field education component of social work education is critical to the overall development of social work students' readiness for practice. Field instructors assume great responsibility for the emotional, theoretical, administrative, and clinical development of students who enter field education at either the undergraduate or graduate levels of their social work education. This role is generally subsumed on a voluntary basis concurrent with their occupational responsibilities. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that motivate social workers to take on the field instructor role. Canadian Field Instructors completed an online survey which included a qualitative question to elicit their perspectives on their motivation for becoming a field instructor. Responses (N=58) were grouped into four themes: mentor social work students, give back to the profession, memories of field instruction, and personal and organizational accountability. Implications for field education and social work education are offered.

Keywords
field instructors, mentor, motivation, Canada, online survey

Résumé
La composante formation sur le terrain de la formation en travail social est essentielle au développement global de la préparation des étudiants en travail social à la pratique. Les instructeurs des instructeurs de terrain assument une grande responsabilité dans le développement émotionnel, théorique, administratif et clinique des étudiants qui entreprennent des études sur le terrain au premier cycle ou aux cycles supérieurs de leur formation en travail social. Ce rôle est généralement assumé sur une base volontaire parallèlement à leurs responsabilités professionnelles. Le but de cette étude était d'explorer les facteurs qui motivent les travailleurs sociaux à assumer le rôle d'instructeur de terrain. Les instructeurs de terrain Canadiens ont répondu à un sondage en ligne qui comprenait une question qualitative pour connaître leur point de vue sur leur motivation à devenir un instructeur de terrain sur le terrain. Les réponses (N=58) ont été regroupées en quatre thèmes : encadrer des étudiants en travail

social, donner retour à la profession, souvenirs d'enseignement sur le terrain et responsabilité personnelle et organisationnelle. Des implications pour la formation sur le terrain et la formation en travail social sont proposées.

Mots clés

instructeurs de terrain, mentor, motivation, Canada, sondage en ligne

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Introduction

Field education has long been recognized as a vital and integral part of social work students' education and growth as social workers (Abramson & Fortune, 1990; Kadushin, 1991). The process of field education allows students to harness academic theories and skills and translate this learning to practice with actual clients in an organizational context (Bogo, 2015). Field education introduces students to the concept of professional discipline and assists them in their growth and competence as beginning social workers while concurrently assessing and meeting the varying needs of their clients (Rahman, 2015). As such, the role played by the Field Instructor (FI) is imperative as it can shape the overall trajectory of the placement (Barretti, 2007). Field education in Canada is currently in a state of "crisis" in part because of challenges with FI recruitment and retention (Ayala et al., 2018) along with the availability of appropriate placement sites. Given these realities, the purpose of the present study is to examine the factors for which Canadian social workers choose to take on the FI role.

Literature review

At the heart of field education lays the necessity of progression, that as social work students advance in their theoretical education, they will further advance in terms of the complexity of their experiences and responsibilities during field instruction (Savaya et al., 2003). Under such a process, the student social worker gains information, skills, and values concerning the social work process through reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation, all under the guidance of the FI (Collins & Van Breda, 2010). Social workers who perform the role of FIs are arguably the key educators who prepare students for social work practice to the extent that students often view their FI as a model and imitate their style (Itzhaky & Eliahou, 1999).

The motivation to become a FI and provide supervision during several hundreds of hours of placement involves a complex interplay of personal and organizational factors. An earlier study by Buck et al. (2012) cited altruism as a primary factor while Bogo (2010) and Finch et al. (2019) asserted that FIs can "give back" to the profession, enhance their knowledge, mentor students, and teach social work skills. This, in turn, could improve their own social work practice. Other motivations included an organizational culture of learning and support along with the importance of teaching and giving feedback to shape students' professional practice as well as the opportunity to develop supervisory leadership and management skills (Globerman & Bogo, 2003; Ketner et al., 2017).

The desire to shape the future of the social work profession by promoting quality field education through support and guidance to students as well as encouraging ethical and effective practice constituted another motivating factor (Curtis et al., 2013). Similarly, some social workers become FIs because, historically, they benefited from excellent supervision and mentoring in their own careers and want to share their knowledge. Some social workers expressed commitment to continued growth and development by helping to shape the next generation of practitioners (Develin & Mathews, 2008). The overall common themes are dedication to the profession and the desire to assist others in developing their skills and potential as social workers.

Due to the paucity of literature from social work, we examined motivating factors to accept placement students in the disciplines of education, nursing, and medicine. In education, the motivation of teachers included a desire to give back to the profession by contributing to the growth and development of future educators (Hobson & Malderez, 2013). Additional motivators included the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practices and identify areas for development as well as obtain new insights into effective teaching methods (Boud & Feletti, 1997). Finally, Hobson and Malderez (2013) reported educators desired to pass on their knowledge and experience to those who will come after them.

Similar to educators, nurses also desired to assist in the development of the next generation and add to the nursing community as a whole (Liaw et al., 2017). Another reason nurses accepted students for clinical studies was the chance to advance their own professional growth, reflect on their practice, acquire new skills and knowledge, and receive feedback on their teaching and mentoring abilities (Gretch, 2021). Mentoring nursing students could also show leadership and expertise, which could boost their reputation and career opportunities (Bally, 2007). Finally, Holloway and Wheeler (2013) noted external incentives, such as financial compensation or other rewards, motivated nurses to accept students.

In medical studies, doctors take on students as interns for a variety of reasons. One of the primary motivations is a wish to develop the next generation of doctors and healthcare professionals. According to Busari et al. (2003) many doctors feel obligated to assist medical students and add to the medical education community as a whole. Another reason is the opportunity to further their own professional development. As noted by Scheide et al. (2020) working with medical students can provide an opportunity for doctors to reflect on their own

practice, acquire new skills and knowledge, and remain current on the latest developments in medicine. Additionally, some studies indicate that doctors may be motivated to take on students as interns because it allows them to receive recognition within their hospital or clinic and professional community. Mentoring medical students can show leadership and expertise, which can boost a doctor's reputation and career opportunities (Busari et al., 2003). Moreover, some doctors may also be motivated to hire interns because of external incentives such as compensation. While these factors may not be the main motivators for most doctors, they can help to attract doctors to medical student mentoring programs (Busari et al., 2003).

Overall, irrespective of the discipline, field education contributes to the continuity of the profession. Such practices are generally driven by a sense of obligation to the profession, desire to learn from mentees, the possibility of recognition and career progression, a desire for professional development, and a sense of obligation to assist in the preparation of the next generation of people who will take on the profession.

Theoretical framework

Motivational Theory undergirds this research study. While a plethora of theories of motivation exist, we choose to focus on Sheldon and Elliot's (1999) model, which differentiates four types of motivation: intrinsic, introjected, identified, and external. Intrinsic motivation situates one's action as stemming from the enjoyment of the goal whereas introjected motivation is guided by the need to maintain an image. Identified motivation pertains to goals that have meaning and value to the person and finally, external motivation relates to actions to obtain a reward or prevent a negative occurrence. Given the multiplicity of reasons for which social workers may undertake the FI role as well as the divergence of practice contexts, this theory best reflects the range of social worker motivation.

Study objective

FIs assume great responsibility for the development and growth of the students who enter field education at varying levels of their social work education and have long been argued as the key educators who prepare students for social work practice (Bogo & Vayda, 1998). This responsibility takes place concurrent to the on-going demands of their occupational context and often without remuneration (Reamer, 2012). However, there is a paucity of literature on what motivates social workers to become FIs and existing literature focuses primarily on the relative rarity and quality of field instruction to offer appropriate learning opportunities and experiences for students (Roulston et al., 2021). The research question which guided this study
is: What are the factors that motivate Canadian social workers to become FIs for undergraduate and graduate field education students?

Methodology

Research design and recruitment

The first author obtained Institutional Research Ethics Board approval prior to engaging in the study procedures. A recruitment email was sent to Field Placement Coordinators at all English language schools of social work across Canada requesting that they forward the information letter, consent form, and a link to the online survey to their current roster of FIs. A research assistant emailed these documents four times between December 2020 and April 2021. Study participation was voluntary and self-selected with a $10.00 Amazon e-gift card serving as an honorarium.

Survey design

Participants completed this mixed-methods survey via REDCap, a secure, web-based distribution platform. The survey contained a mix of multiple-choice and short answer questions as well as a series of demographic questions. While the majority of the survey focused on FI training (types of training, barriers to training, challenging supervisory topics), we also asked an open-ended question on what motivated participants to take on the FI role. This article addresses this qualitative question while the results on FI training are published elsewhere (Tufford et al., 2024). With regard to survey development, the first author wrote the initial survey and sent this document to all co-authors for their review. A series of revisions took place until final consensus was achieved.

Data analysis

Two team members (LT, LG) manually analyzed the qualitative data. The chosen data analysis method, reflexive thematic analysis, utilizes a six-phase process with the following steps: data familiarization, coding, initial theme generation followed by thematic review, defining and naming themes, and lastly, writing the results (Braun & Clark, 2019). The two team members involved in the data analysis phase read all participant responses independently to familiarize themselves with the responses to this open-ended question. Following this step, both team members coded participant responses descriptively. This led to the formation of initial themes based on identifying common elements in the codes. The two members met to discuss their respective themes and mutually decided to regroup or remove some themes. To accurately portray participant narratives, themes were then defined and named.

Results

Sample description

This study saw 58 FIs complete the online survey. Participants came from six provinces and one territory in Canada; the largest number (n=32.1%) drew from Ontario (see Table 1 for participant characteristics). One third of participants held an MSW (n=17), BSW (n=17), and Bachelor of Arts (n=17) respectively; however, these were not mutually exclusive categories. Community mental health was the most selected area of practice, endorsed by approximately one quarter of

FIs (n=14). However, more than a third of respondents (n=21) indicated they worked in other sectors such as not-for-profits and a variety of community-based support services. The largest group of respondents (n=23, 41.1%) were early career FIs (1-5 years) while the least experienced FIs (i.e., 0-1 years) were the smallest group and represented 14.3% of the sample (n=8).

Table 1 - Participant Characteristics (N = 58)

Characteristics	% (N=58)
Demographic Characteristics	
Province and Territory	
Alberta	10.7 (6)
British Columbia	19.6 (11)
Newfoundland and Labrador	25.0 (14)
Nova Scotia	10.7 (6)
Ontario	32.1 (18)
Yukon	1.8 (1)
Missing	(2)
Education completed[a]	
PhD	3.4 (2)
MSW	29.3 (17)
MA	12.1 (7)
BSW	29.3 (17)
BA	29.3 (17)
College	15.5 (9)
Sector[a]	
Hospital	12.1 (7)
Elementary/High School	1.7 (1)
University/College	8.6 (5)
Private Practice	3.4 (2)
Children's Mental Health	5.2 (3)
Community Mental Health	24.1 (14)
Rehabilitation/Case Management	3.4 (2)
Child Protection	10.3 (6)
Management/Government	1.7 (1)
Family Health Team	1.7 (1)
Criminal Justice System	8.6 (5)
Long-term Care	3.4 (2)
Gender-based Violence Sector	3.4 (2)
Other[b]	36.2 (21)
Years in Current Position	
0-1 year	14.3 (8)
2-5 years	41.1 (23)
6-9 years	23.2 (13)
10+ years	21.4 (12)
Missing	(2)

Notes: [a] categories are not mutually exclusive; [b] examples of "other" include community based social work, community engagement and development, social planning and research

Approximately 47% (n=26) of the sample had between 1 - 5 years of experience as a FI (see Table 2 for FI characteristics). The majority of FIs supervised between 0-2 students (87.3%, n=48), with similar portion of the sample (82.8%, n=48) supervising BSW students specifically. Slightly more than half the sample (57.1%, n=32) reported feeling "somewhat confident" in the FI role.

Table 2 - Field Instructor Characteristics

Field Instructor Characteristics	% (N=58)
Years as Field Instructor	
< 1 year	18.2 (10)
1-5 years	47.3 (26)
6-10 years	9.1 (5)
11+ years	20.0 (11)
No experience	5.5 (3)
Missing	3.4 (2)
Students supervised at one time	
0-2	87.3 (48)
3-5	9.1 (5)
6+	3.6 (2)
Missing	(3)
Education level of students supervised [a]	
BSW	82.8 (48)
MSW	32.8 (19)
Other – University	19.0 (11)
College	20.7 (12)
Confidence as a Field Instructor	
Extremely confident	41.1 (23)
Somewhat confident	57.1 (32)
Not confident at all	1.8 (1)
Missing	1.7 (1)

Notes: [a] categories are not mutually exclusive

The online survey asked participants to respond to an open-ended question about what motivated them to become a FI. Responses were grouped into four themes: mentor social work students, give back to the profession, memories of field instruction, and personal and organizational accountability.

Mentor social work students
Participants (n=35) overwhelmingly asserted that the opportunity to mentor social work students was the main factor in their decision to become a FI. Many participants voiced this sentiment, "I like being able to share my knowledge" (participant #7), "passion for fostering skills in social

workers" (participant #14), "I enjoy having students and helping them to learn" (participant #15), "provide authentic, transparent guidance" (participant #27), and "I am passionate about learning, and facilitating learning" (participant #28). Some participants described mentoring in specific areas of social work including sexual health, "wanting to ensure students have a solid understanding of [HIV, Hep C], other STBBI and harm reduction" (participant #47) as well as social justice,

> To inculcate values of social justice … To ensure that Ministry social workers do not just become part of the problem. That they feel empowered to question their supervisors when practice does not align with policy and legislation (participant #8).

Further, a participant described "helping others to learn and grow especially in the field of mental health and addictions" (participant #33). Another participant spoke of mentoring in practice contexts as: "the opportunity to provide an alternate learning environment for students and others, who may otherwise dismiss [the] work of community-based organizations" (participant #12).

Still others spoke about mentoring in the context of their worldviews:

> Social workers, teachers, lawyers work in systems that are Eurocentric and when confronted with other worldviews too often provide interventions that only perpetuate the status quo and do not address structural injustices (participant #9).

Finally, some participants described the importance of students accessing a variety of placement experiences,

> Social work is such a broad field, I believe it's important that students have access to a number of different field experiences. I had the opportunity to provide that mental health side of social work in a small community with many complex issues. I also work at the correctional center once a week and at the time was also working in a small clinic in another community, so I was able to provide a number of different experiences with many different populations and cultures (participant #11).

Give back to the profession
Participants (n=7) indicated that being a FI was a way for them to give back to the profession of social work. One participant (#34) shared "it is my commitment to the profession" while another participant (#43) explained "to give back to the industry/field." One participant (#5) indicated "I think it is important to pave the way for future generations of social workers" while a final participant (#1) shared "my passion for the social work field." A subgroup of participants (n=5) characterized the FI role not only to give back to the profession but also as a

professional obligation. One participant (#1) explained "it is part of my role as Family Programs Coordinator for my organization." Other participants saw the role as relating to the profession, "it is part of my responsibility as a social worker" (participant #13), "I feel it is a professional responsibility" (participant #45), and "I have a duty to help build up competent and capable social workers" (participant #3).

Memories of field instruction
Related to the desire to give back to the profession were participants (n = 6) who related the FI role with their own memories of field placement as a social work student. One participant (#18) shared "it helps me remember why I pursued the field" while another participant (#31) explained "I remember being a student and how impactful and helpful my field placement was. I want to give back to students because of my positive experience". One participant (#53) shared "As a former student, I felt grateful for all the teaching and guidance from my supervisors" while another noted "we are fortunate as clinical social workers to have had it ourselves and to be working in the field."

Personal and organizational accountability
Participants (n=10) also discussed how field instruction ensures personal and organizational accountability. With regard to personal accountability, one participant (#6) shared,
"it forces the supervisor to review our own practices, it helps keep us up to date with current trends." Multiple participants also talked about learning from students. One participant (#51) noted they "learn through the students themselves as they are coming to the placement with their own experiences and understanding of our profession" and "reflecting together on practice and discussing cases. It helps me stay current and be on top of new ideas and developments in the field" (participant #56). One participant (#58) commented on reflection and the FI role by noting "I enjoy the experience; it gives me the occasion to reflect on what the student is doing and then on my own reflections. This keeps me attuned to reflection on social work and what it is about, what I contribute." Other participants discussed organizational benefits in that "it keeps organizations accountable to providing best practice services" (participant #5) and "bringing new and diverse skills into the organization" (participant #44).

Discussion

This survey sought to examine the factors that motivate Canadian social workers to take on the role of a FI. Factors included mentoring, giving back to the profession, memories of field instruction, and personal and organizational accountability. Participants overwhelmingly cited helping students learn through the transmission of their knowledge as a process that they both enjoyed and valued. It is noteworthy that participants used the term "mentoring" as opposed to providing "supervision." The former term describes a process that is qualitatively more intimate and places the FI as a model to be emulated, which is consistent with the process described by Itzhaky and Eliahou (1999). It is within this context of mentorship that FIs establish a trusting

and empathic instructor-student relationship as the primary means for teaching and learning. Participants noted that the role of a mentor allows FIs to shape the profession at micro, mezzo, and macro levels through educating individual social work students on a diverse array of issues including Hepatitis C, sexually transmitted diseases, mental health, addiction as well as approaches including harm reduction and challenging Eurocentric worldviews.

While this perspective is laudable, what qualifies as 'mentoring' may or may not be evidence-based with a strong theoretical foundation. Tufford et al. (2024) found that 30% of Canadian FIs (N=58) did not receive training prior to commencing the FI role. FIs require informed training in supervision, either through a university field education office, workplace, regulatory body, or undergraduate or graduate social work program, prior to adopting this role. Indeed, the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (2021) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards stipulate that "social work students have opportunities to consider their potential contribution to social work education through future service, such as becoming field instructors/supervisors" (p. 13). Thus, across the BSW and MSW curriculums, students can become acculturated to this component of their future professional identity. Framing the role of the FI as a means of professional reciprocity may encourage social work students to eventually assume this role.

The theme of giving back to the profession surfaced widely in participant narratives. Participants described having a strong attachment to the profession as a whole and sought to elevate the importance of the profession to social work students. Some participants even used words like "obligation," "responsibility," and "duty" when discussing their motivation for becoming a FI. For these participants, their dedication surpassed an emotional attachment to the profession. Despite the lack of remuneration and workload relief, they viewed field instruction as a role they must assume.

Multiple participants described their personal memories and reflections of their own field education experience. They recalled being a student and having a respected, social work mentor to guide their learning. This process of remembering positive experiences appeared to reconnect them to the profession, propelled them to become a FI and recreate meaningful experiences for students. This aligns with the long-held assertion that field instruction is one of the most impactful aspects of social work education in the preparation of social work students (Abramson & Fortune, 1990; Kadushin, 1991). These strong, positive, and powerful memories appeared to drive them to become FIs and reconnect them to the values of the profession. It is also possible that these memories took them back to their own social work education. The university environment is a concentrative and immersive experience (Tae & Song, 2020) where one can find like-minded peers who share similar worldviews and perspectives on social justice, theory, values, and professional ethics (Kuh et al., 2006). While not all students have positive or satisfying placements due to a variety of factors, it behooves placement coordinators to identify, and support engaged FIs and to make the field placement a good learning experience. This can positively or negatively impact future decisions on adopting the FI role.

Participants noted the personal and organizational benefits of accepting field education students. From the perspective of the individual social worker, life-long learning is integral to the profession (Žorga, 2002) and mandated on an annual basis from provincial regulatory bodies (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, 2023). The FI role allows social workers the opportunity to reflect on their practice, and values, and maintain currency with theories and terminology (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). It should be noted, however, that field instruction is not a standalone learning endeavour but occurs within the context of an organizational structure. This structure must support the decision to become a FI (Ayala et al., 2018). The impacts of neoliberalism and managerialism may undermine the pursuits of lifelong learning, supervision, and reflection, which are paramount for FIs to deliver high quality supervision and training. Organizations need to foster and commit to a culture of competence and continual skills upgrading for their FIs as well as time to mentor students.

Moreover, FIs have the dual advantage of recognizing and sharing their existing knowledge while concurrently learning from students which is consistent with the literature (Ossais et al., 2021). Participants also shared that the organizational benefits to field education include the opportunity to reflect on and re-evaluate their existing operations and in essence, explore why they practice the way they do. In addition, field education students can contribute or complete tasks that social workers cannot, due to on-going occupational demands.

Limitations

This study has several limitations, including the voluntary and self-selective nature of the data collection process. In addition, it was not possible to send the survey directly to FIs but instead, via Placement Coordinators and as such, this limited participation in the study. A response rate of 58 represents a fraction of the FIs across Canada. Moreover, Canada is a geographically disparate country where FIs may be located in rural, and remote areas who may have intermittent or insufficient bandwidth. This may have limited their participation in an online study. An additional limitation is the fact that this study centers on one qualitative question. Additional questions on FI motivation in the survey or individual interviews may have led to more in-depth and nuanced exploration of social workers' motivation to become FIs. In addition, the survey did not include population demographic factors such as race, gender, and age, which would have provided a more enhanced picture of the sample. Finally, the sample included some FIs without social work education. Specifically, some participants only had a Community College Diploma (n=6), Bachelor of Arts (n=6), Master of Arts (n=3), or Doctor of Philosophy degree (n=2).

Future research

This study provides additional avenues for exploration. Further examination could include the definition and meaning of mentoring within the context of field education. In addition, while this study illuminated the factors involved in social worker motivation to become a FI, future research could include the factors that prevent or de-motivate social workers from becoming FIs.

Finally, as field instruction has been identified as a protective factor against burnout (McCarthy, 2022), research could explore if this is a motivating factor.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study sought the perspectives of Canadian FIs with regard to their training needs and supervision challenges. While the findings continue to emphasize ongoing student and structural challenges associated with providing field instruction, it is noteworthy that training does occur through a variety of formats. This study points to the underutilization of the BSW and MSW programs as a means by which beginning discussions can occur on the value of field instruction and the role and scope of the individual FI. However, this situation should improve with the CASWE imperative to include this learning in undergraduate and graduate social work.

This qualitative study examined social workers' motivation for assuming the FI role. Participants noted a confluence of personal, professional, and organizational factors that contribute to their decision to become a FI and the deep engagement they feel when working with undergraduate and graduate students. In a time of increasingly scarce quality field placements and a concurrent intensification of the neoliberal agenda, it is imperative to examine not only the motivation for becoming a FI but also what factors contribute to their retention.

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