

Article

Bridging the divide: Exploring the disconnect between micro and macro practice and implications for BSW field education

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Abstract

The social work profession addresses wellbeing at individual levels, or the micro, as well as structural and systemic levels, the macro. By addressing the micro and macro, social workers work towards social justice for individuals and communities to create structural systemic change. Yet, there is an increasing focus on micro and clinical-focused content in social work education. This focus creates various challenges when social work students are placed in macro-focused field education placements. A study into the experiences of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students, field instructors, and faculty liaisons considered the experiences of participants in their involvement of macro-level field education. The study found two emerging themes: macro-level practice is undervalued and underrepresented in the BSW curriculum, and yet at the same time there exists a deep desire for more understanding and integration of macro social work in social work education and field education. Implications for social work education, regulation, and the profession are also considered.

Keywords

field education, macro practice, social work education, social work profession

Résumé

La profession de travailleur social aborde le bien-être aux niveaux individuels, ou au niveau micro, ainsi qu'aux niveaux structurel et systémique, le macro. En abordant les aspects micro et macro, les travailleurs sociaux œuvrent en faveur de la justice sociale pour les individus et les communautés afin de créer un changement systémique structurel. Pourtant, l'accent est de plus en plus mis sur le contenu micro et clinique dans la formation en travail social. Cette orientation crée divers défis lorsque les étudiants en travail social sont placés dans des stages de formation sur le terrain axés sur la macro. Une étude sur les expériences des étudiants du baccalauréat en travail social (BSW), des instructeurs de terrain et des agents de liaison avec les professeurs a examiné les expériences des participants dans leur implication dans l'enseignement sur le terrain au niveau macro. L'étude a révélé deux thèmes émergents : la pratique au niveau macro est sous-évaluée et sous-représentée dans le programme d'études BSW, et pourtant, il existe en même

temps un profond désir de mieux comprendre et d'intégrer le travail social macro dans la formation en travail social et la formation sur le terrain. Les implications pour la formation, la réglementation et la profession en travail social sont également prises en compte.

Mots-clés

formation sur le terrain, macro-pratique, formation en travail social, profession de travailleur social

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Introduction

The social work profession aims to improve individual and collective wellbeing by responding to social issues and advocating for social justice and human rights (CASW, 2023). The Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), the profession's accrediting body for degree programs, describes social justice as promoting respect for the worth, agency, and dignity of all, which may be achieved by targeting systems and structures through a "critical analyses of power relations" and the "dismantling of inequitable social structures" (CASWE, 2021, p. 3). Social work education in Canada prepares students to achieve these aims. This vision articulates a high-level, structural, systemic and macro perspective, and should translate to a strong focus on macro-level, structural and systemic practice in social work education. Yet, there is a dominant discourse in social work education, regulation, and other professional activities privileging micro-level practice focused on individuals, families, or smaller groups (Miller et al., 2008). This discourse results in the perception of increased job opportunities for micro practice and work favouring individual, families, or small groups, as well as higher wages and advancement (Reisch, 2016). The marginalization of macro practice simultaneously elevates micro-level skills and knowledge, often leaving social work students devaluing opportunities for learning and unprepared for macro practice. In practice, both sets of skills are required to achieve socially just outcomes for service recipients.

Field education is considered a crucial component of social work education in Canada (Bogo, 2006) and social work's signature pedagogy in most jurisdictions (Ledger et al., 2017).

Considering the dominant focus in social work education on micro-practice, we wondered how social work students were able to apply and integrate macro-level skills in their field education opportunities and activities. Social work students, field instructors, and faculty liaisons often identify particular challenges applying macro perspectives to the learning agreement, articulated learning objectives, and other structures of the field practicum. They describe an inability to participate in learning activities provided to their peers in micro-focused placements such as interviewing clients, goal setting, or completing assessments. These challenges can become barriers to the placement of students in macro-level placements and create perceived obstacles

for those placed in macro-related settings leading to reluctance in pursuing this type of placement (Bhuyan et al, 2017; Hurst et al., 2019). While there have been challenges, there are also examples of successful macro-level settings and field instructors who have regularly accepted student placements in these settings.

In this article, we report the findings of a project that explored the experience of undergraduate social work students who were placed in macro-level practicum settings, as well as their field instructors and faculty liaisons. This research was conducted by two faculty members who have a declared interest in the expansion of macro practice for the attainment of social justice, and two MSW research assistants who likewise share the authors commitments to social justice: one, a self-described queer, neurodiverse yet privileged white settler, the other a seasoned practitioner with concerns about the macro/micro divide. Our discussion focuses on the narratives and tensions arising in considerations of macro-level practice in the context of field education.

Literature review

Much of the research in social work education as well as in field education has focused on clinical work (Regehr et. al., 2012). Internationally, most students have expressed preferences for clinical work in field education (Shdaimah & McCoyd, 2012). This focus has persisted despite social work's professional obligation and commitment to reduce structural and systemic barriers, pursue social justice, and influence social policy. Social justice is one of the core social work values in our code of ethics (CASW, 2005) and working to improve social structures at local, national, and international levels is included in the Social Work Scope of Practice (CASW, 2008). While the regulatory bodies and professional associations of social work recognize the significance of macro-level perspectives on social justice, policy and community-organizing, field education has not evolved to reflect this accordingly (Mertz et al., 2007). Rather, field education has continued to focus on more clinical-focused practicums as per the majority of student preferences.

Complexities in field education have created a crisis in social work field education (Ayala et al., 2018). These complexities include shortages in the number of available practicums and an increase in competition among social work programs. This has been complicated by the proliferation in distance delivery of social work education programs (Morris et al., 2020). Furthermore, agencies who typically host student practicums struggle to have the capacity to support students due to budget cuts, which in turn leads to increased pressure on field educators (Ayala et al., 2018; Regehr, 2013; Walsh et al., 2022). The growth and complexities in social work programs with practicum components leaves field educators dealing with “overwhelming expectations and impossible workloads” (Walsh et al., 2022, p. 12).

Due to student demand for clinical-focused placements, and the impact of neo-liberal philosophies and practice that prioritize individual functioning, field education has responded by prioritizing the development of micro and clinical placements (Austin et al, 2005; Austin at al., 2016; Weiss-Gal, 2008) in spite of the profession's obligations to social justice and structural

change (Sulimani-Aidan & Feldman, 2021). An alternative approach is to expand macro-level field placements while integrating micro-level opportunities and pedagogy.

Methods

With financial support from the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work Teaching and Learning Grant, research activities began with a literature review to identify a common definition of macro-level social work practice. Informed by various authors (Apgar, 2020; LaTosch & Jones, 2012; Miller et al., 2008), the following definition for macro-level social work was created:

social work practice policy development, research analysis, advocacy, administration or organizing and mobilization that aims to influence the system.

This definition assisted in the identification of our sample participants involved in macro practice. Five focus groups exploring the experience of students, field instructors, and faculty liaisons in macro-level practicums were held between 2020 and 2021. Two focus groups were with field instructors, two focus groups were held with past BSW students, and one focus group was with faculty liaisons. All participants had been involved with practicums through the University of Calgary's Faculty of Social Work. Ethics approval was received and informed consent was sought from all participants. Coffee gift cards were provided to participants to honour the time and energy spent on the research.

Potential student and field instructor participants were identified by field education coordinators who reviewed their database of previous field instructors from the previous two years. Using the definition of macro-practice as noted above, field coordinators selected students and field instructors who met those criteria and shared their contact information with the research team. The research team then emailed these individuals to invite them to a Zoom focus group.

For the student focus group, only graduates, former students or alumni were recruited in order to avoid potential conflicts of interests. Current students were excluded as they might feel pressured to speak about their current practicum or the BSW program in a positive light or fear impacts to their success in the program. Recruiting former students and alumni was challenging as current contact information was not always available. Social media and word of mouth were used to recruit these individuals. Recruitment advertisements sought participants that had been placed in macro-level practicums using the definition used for macro-level practice. Two student focus groups with a total of nine undergraduate student participants were held and two field instructor focus groups were held with a total of 12 field instructor participants.

Faculty liaisons are the individuals, either faculty members or sessional instructors, who support students in their learning, support field instructors and build rapport with agency hosts. They assist field instructors in their role as social work educators (Walsh et al., 2022). All faculty liaisons who had been assigned to the undergraduate field education courses over the previous two years were invited to participate if they had supported these types of placements. Five faculty liaisons participated in one focus group.

All focus groups were held via Zoom and audio and video recordings of these virtual focus groups were made using the Zoom platform. These recordings were then transcribed manually. Transcribed files were uploaded to qualitative data analysis computer software, NVivo 12.0, for coding. While coding, research assistants regularly exchanged information about what themes were emerging in their respective transcripts. After coding into themes, analysts met to discuss the themes they respectively identified, combined and adjusted the themes to form a set of master themes, and co-developed preliminary descriptions for each theme. Master themes were then reviewed and approved by primary investigators and research assistants re-coded each transcript using the set of master themes. Once re-coded, research assistants exchanged transcript files to review the other's theming to reduce researcher bias and finalized the definition of each code.

This project was reviewed and approved by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB).

Results

A number of themes and stories about macro social work in social work education emerged through analysis and the synthesis of this study's data. The first is a story of how macro practice has been undervalued and underrepresented in social work education, as well as in the social work profession. The other story, a counter narrative, reflects an aspiration and desire for increased representation of macro social work in social work education. Many social workers and students resist narratives undervaluing macro practice. Rather, they express keen interest and recognize a gap when it comes to macro-level practice.

The findings have been organized and grouped according to these themes: undervaluing and underrepresenting; and uplifting and aspiring. Other subthemes emerged in each of those two overarching themes. Subthemes included seminar, undervalued: structure, program promotion, and systemic subverting of macro.

Undervaluing and underrepresenting

A dominant narrative that emerged in the thematic analyses of our data was that macro social work practice is not highly valued within the Faculty. Indicators of this lack of value included participant reflections that it was not visible in coursework, was not discussed by faculty, and not represented in the language of the BSW program. Comments such as the following suggested this sentiment of the undervaluing and underrepresentation of macro-level practice:

I thought, social justice, like the scope of social justice, was the missing component of the BSW program. (Former BSW student)

Faculty liaisons and field instructors echoed a similar sentiment regarding the lack of integration of, or support for, macro level practice in the structure of social work education, including field education. This resulted in efforts on field faculty's part to compensate and augment. It was also noted that undervaluing and underrepresentation was observed in other

professional structures and bodies such as the regulatory body. Many perceived the focus to be predominantly the clinical aspect of social work practice:

Everything about what they [the BSW program and regulatory body] do, as organizations, is clinically focused and we struggle to fit a square peg in a round hole and I don't think it's doing the students a good service and it's not supporting us. (Field Instructor)

We have to do a better job of educating social workers as they come in, like socializing students into what the whole breadth of social work is because we are fighting a lot of times, a very, very narrow perspective. (Field Instructor)

Seminar

Students in macro-focused practicums often described feeling isolated in practicum related seminars when a majority of students were in micro placements. Conversations and learning opportunities tended to revolve around issues of a clinical or individual nature. This was occasionally mitigated by field liaisons or peers who valued, understood, and created space for macro perspectives. Students in seminars where most students were likewise in macro practicum valued the macro-focused space and wanted to protect that space from the micro-orientation that is typical of the rest of the BSW program. Students needed to work extra hard to have space made for systemic discussions and to meet the learning objectives laid out in the learning agreements:

I have to really push them [students] to think about like the broader systems and how their practicum might be situated within those [...] the learning agreement really doesn't allow for, for some of those types of goals to be stated explicitly. (Faculty Liaison)

I think students struggle with creating their learning agreement and plan. [...] Students try to make things fit in boxes or create additional objectives that don't necessarily fit very well with the structure. I think it takes a bit of creativity to get it [macro work] reflected because [...] learning objectives themselves and the activities are, are not well designed or suited for macro work. (Faculty Liaison)

Undervalued: structure

The structure of the BSW program perpetuates the micro-macro divide through a lack of representation of macro content in the coursework and macro-level practitioners in the Faculty. One participant described the macro as a "square peg" and the program as a "round hole." Suggestions for improvement included more coursework on leadership and management, integrating micro/macro perspectives into each course, and more exposure to macro-level practitioners via faculty hiring practices and guest speakers.

I was always the one and only person practicing at the micro [sic] level at the time, so I was very isolated, and it was very difficult. And even a lot of the

instructors never really knew how to manage it because most of them practice primarily in the micro levels. So, it created barriers, but it also allowed me to take a lead in opening-up those learning objectives. (Field Instructor)

I don't even see why there isn't just like a policy section of each course. (Former BSW Student)

Program promotion

Participants commented that the BSW program promotes itself with a strong focus on micro skills and practice and therefore does not promote the macro aspects of the social work profession. This approach therefore fails to attract students who may be drawn to a macro-level framework and de-emphasizes and devalues potential macro-level placement opportunities.

I didn't even realize it [macro practice] was an option when I went to the program. (Field Instructor)

I think there is such a yeah, large volume of more micro, like clinical practice, and a lot of people enter the program for that. (Former Student)

These comments suggest macro social work is not visible or apparent in the promotion of the program, and rarely by the social work profession. The underrepresentation of macro social work in the BSW program begins even prior to students' entry into the program.

Systemic subverting of macro

Focus group participants, particularly field instructors, described a systemic issue within the social work profession where professional associations and regulatory bodies, and by extension the post-secondary institutions that train social workers, are not seeing, understanding, or conceptualizing macro level social work in a way that is meaningful, relevant, and valued in juxtaposition to micro work:

This is actually something that's not specific to practicums. It is much bigger issue than that [...] with the [social work regulator], [...] we're almost like second tier, second class. [...] They pay attention to us because they have to. They have to offer something to us, but it's just not what it could be or should be [...] And you know, a lot of the practicum supervisors we work with who work with the macro students in particular, [...] they're trying, working on the inside, as well, and they just get nowhere. It's a much bigger issue than the practicum setting. It's the value of macro social work period! (Field Instructor)

When I think of how social work, and I've never seen, for example the [social work regulator] do really good advertisement for social work. Everything that is shown about our profession is predominantly, it's things like child welfare and family social services. It's working with the homeless and poverty populations.

It's working with the Indigenous population. And I think sometimes those are stereotyping, just once again, the work that we do [...] and I don't think it represents our work." (Field Instructor)

Systemic structures favour micro practice over macro practice. This theme is present in broader literature and describes an imbalance in micro and macro curriculum content and field education experiences leaving students less satisfied with their learning about macro practice, compared that of their learning in micro practice (Miller et al., 2008).

Uplifting & aspiring

The second theme indicates that there is resistance to the further marginalization of macro social work, and students and practitioners who value and aspire to embrace macro practices. These stories included ideas for building better curricula and supports for macro practice.

Flexibility

Participants in this study identified a need for flexibility within the structure and content of learning plans and agreements if macro-level field placements are to be valuable and desirable. The following student was eventually given flexibility by her instructor to tailor her learning agreement to the Indigenous work she was involved in.

For me, the learning agreements are so rigid ... I just struggled to come up with goals and a process for it. And it was so much more easier when I did it based on the four realms and was able to look at some of the Indigenous program evaluation frameworks that are already out there and use that to then adapt and fit it to who I am and what I want to learn, as opposed to taking a Western framework and trying to make that fit when it comes from an entirely different worldview. (Former BSW Student)

The field practicum is an ideal area for students to meaningfully understand where and when macro interventions may occur, if instructors have the flexibility and knowledge to help... I think in terms of helping, ... students seem to need a lot of support and a lot of pointing out, like this is, you know, a macro thing that you're doing. Even students in, in a micro placement are doing macro level things at times, right? (Faculty Liaison)

The flexibility to structure classes differently may aid learning as this participant indicates:

I even think that seminar can be less rigid and structured and I honestly, we did our seminar in circle process. And it was so nice just to have a place to bring our experiences, our struggles and just put them there in that circle and have our field liaison, as well as our peers to consult with, to converse with, and just feel that we're in the same place, and regardless of if we were in, so it was all child welfare workers in my seminar, but some were doing micro and macro, but it was cool in

those circles to make the connections between our practice and that some of our, you know, micro placements were doing macro level advocacy. (Former Student)

Guides and mentors

Providing a guide or guidance navigating a macro-level field placement, including during development of the learning plan and agreement was suggested by participants. For example, including sample learning plans/agreements for macro-level placements would be helpful. Participants also saw utility in being assigned a student or faculty mentor who has experience with macro-level social work as an opportunity for mentorship.

I didn't even realize it was an option when I went to the program. I was prepared for micro practice and left as a macro practitioner because I learned, and that's because we actually have faculty members that worked at the macro level that had instilled that in me in a couple courses, and it got me really fired up and excited and so, I think if you, if, if you have the faculty that supports, encouraging students to think across that spectrum of practice, it will be very helpful. (Field Instructor)

Skill-transferability

For those who resist the marginalization of macro practice, a desire for more macro social work curriculum was evident. Demonstrations of creative and clever ways to counterbalance and shift this framework were noted by all participant groups. Faculty and field professionals were helping students to recognize the skills they draw on in their macro placement are complementary and tantamount to those used in direct clinical settings. Students were also drawing those linkages through discussions about their practices in their respective settings. This study found that despite having transferable skills, students struggle to recognize and apply them across levels of practice. Increased literacy around skill-transferability in the BSW program, including among faculty and in coursework, was proposed to help address the conceptual and functional micro-macro divide.

I think macro work would appeal to more people if, especially inexperienced social workers, because it feels like this isn't something I can really put on my resume that I have a really good skill in this or really, how to articulate those learnings from a macro perspective, without saying I got really good at interviewing or you know, I learned this site sort of software, stuff like that. Just having, probably before we pick our practicums, I think it would make people a little less weary about choosing macro because it will feel like it is more transferable, even though it's not a direct skill. (Former Student)

I think about the parts of the learning agreement they seem to struggle with more [...] like how to find those linkages [...] Sometimes I really have to help them think about the skills that they are learning, in macro placements, even sometimes

what are the micro skills you're learning even though it's more of a macro-oriented placement. (Faculty Liaison)

Continuum

While many focus group participants articulated an affinity for macro-level practice, there was also discussion rejecting the notion of a micro and macro practice as binary entities. Rather, there was a recognition that uniting these approaches as being complementary, and not conflicting, served to underpin the profession's values as well as challenge neoliberal constraints.

The dual purpose of our profession, which makes us so powerful. (Field Instructor)

It's a continuum and even if you work at the macro level, you have a micro impact. Vice-a-versa. Everyone that you work with at the micro level, they go back into the world and everything that happens in the world is macro. And so, there is no division, and we have to find a way to better connect how we work collaboratively, as a profession across that spectrum, not in, in silos... (Field Instructor)

...it was so nice just to have a place to bring our experiences, our struggles and just put them there in that circle...to consult with, to converse with and just feel that we're in the same place ... but it was cool in all those circles to make the connection between our practice and that some of ... micro placements were also doing macro level advocacy. (Former Student)

Discussion

The undervaluing/underrepresentation of macro social work reported in this study is well-supported by available literature (Apgar, 2021; Knight & Gitterman, 2018; Miller et al., 2008). In Miller et al.'s (2008) 4-year study of bachelor-level student evaluations of their social work education program, results revealed a perceived imbalance in micro and macro curriculum content and field education experiences, leaving students less satisfied with macro educational content, compared with that of micro content. Similarly, in their study on a social work education program, Bhuyan et al. (2017) identified the lack of integration of a social justice lens as a significant theme that emerged from the data. Furthermore, the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2015) has been met with criticisms for neglecting to sufficiently define, establish, and support macro practice's place in social work pedagogy (Apgar, 2021).

Interestingly, Apgar (2020) described the importance of student attitudes and motivations when entering social work programs, and how recruitment efforts and materials therefore play an important role in whether students will value macro practice. Apgar (2020) highlights the importance of program promotion by describing the impact recruitment materials have had on prospective students' attitudes and motivations when entering social work programs.

What has been shared by focus group participants may be examined through Bhuyan et al.'s (2017) concept of the implicit curriculum: a term used to describe how students are "socialized into the profession through their daily routines, interactions with teachers and school administrators, the allocation of resources, the organizational structures" (p. 375). In the context of social work education, Bhuyan et al. (2017) identified management of field education, program structure, and the university in which the program is situated, as shaping the implicit social work curriculum. This means that while institutions, including universities and regulatory bodies, may explicitly state the importance and relevance of macro work to social work practice, it is equally important to examine the implicit messages transmitted through institutional practices. Our data suggest that the implicit curriculum of the BSW program may be forming and reinforcing the story of macro work as undervalued and underrepresented in the social work profession.

Similarly, literature also suggests a prevailing marginalization of field education. This can manifest in the experiences of field education staff who feel "overworked, under-resourced, and devalued in their roles" (Walsh et al., 2022, p. 2). Within post-secondary institutions, field education's profitability when compared with research and teaching endeavors, has been questioned leading to impacts in its resourcing (Morley & Dustan, 2013, Walsh et al., 2022). Practices and policies that have de-centralized field education through relegating field faculty to administrative roles and increased demands, have in turn created challenges in the delivery of this crucial component of social work education (Holosko & Skinner, 2015). In considering the marginalization of macro practice, layered with the relegation of field education, we witness a compounding of factors for undervaluing macro-level field education.

Macro social work within the profession continues to be systematically marginalized and subjugated, impacting social work's ability to resist instances of societal oppression (Apgar, 2020; Bhuyan et al. 2017; Corley & Young, 2018). Consider the difficulty of instilling the value and urgency of supporting macro practice, which aims to influence systems, in those occupying positions of influence over the very institutions that train and regulate social workers. Those in power who are not experiencing the consequences of systemic oppression, such as the limited opportunities constraining those with marginalized status, may not feel compelled to change the status quo.

This assertion is supported by Apgar's (2020) finding that white social work practitioners are over-represented in the realm of micro social work practice, and social work practitioners with visible minority status are over-represented in the realm of macro social work practice (p. 719). Is it therefore possible that the messages embedded in the implicit curriculum of social work education (Bhuyan et al., 2017), in relation to macro practice, are tools of oppression? Is the de-valuation and underrepresentation of macro practice in the social work profession inextricably linked to the de-valuation and underrepresentation of marginalized people in society? An in-depth exploration of these questions is outside the scope of this paper, though it presents an important area of future research. Until then, Corley and Young (2018) posit that "the social

work profession will be susceptible to allegations of negligence as long as it continues to leave it to groups most burdened by systemic oppression to instigate and implement change” (p. 232).

In the current study, macro-oriented students attributed the observed undervaluing and underrepresenting of a macro perspective in coursework, in part to other students’ lack of interest or knowledge of the macro-level and strong preferences for micro-level. The lack of student interest in macro-social work practice was described as a contributing factor to its marginal status in the curriculum (Apgar, 2020; Austin, 2005; Weiss-Gal, 2008). The majority of social work students appear to prefer clinical social work, a common form of micro social work practice, over macro work (Weiss-Gal, 2008). Reasons for student preferences for micro practice included a desire to specialize, peer pressure, the ability to achieve licensure (specifically in the United States), and employment opportunities in the job market (Austin et al, 2016; Ayala et al., 2018). According to Bhuyan et al. (2017) both social work education and student preferences are becoming increasingly entangled with market demands.

Uplifting & aspiring

The second dominant narrative, a counter-story, about macro practice describes resistance against the subjugation of macro social work education and aspirations for the beneficial effect of integrating micro and macro level social work in education and the profession. Students struggled to bridge the micro/macro divide, while faculty liaisons struggled to facilitate that connection in seminar. Knight and Gitterman (2018) have similarly observed that social work clinicians and students who practice at the micro level struggle to integrate macro-level interventions and vice versa. In our study, students who completed a macro-level practicum described the value of and desire for more micro/macro integration. Others rejected the idea of micro and macro as separate binary entities that require bridging or integration and suggest the notion that it is more aptly considered as a continuum. There is a recognition that uniting these practice approaches as complementary rather than conflicting serves to support social worker’s efforts to withstand the challenges of working under neoliberal related economic constraints. It is “the dual purpose of our profession” (participant) grounding us in the values of social work.

Burghardt (2014) urges social workers to adopt a practice framework that encompasses both micro and macro. CASWE’s (2021) accreditation standards for social work program curriculums include components of both micro and macro-level social work; however, social work students are often taught about these areas of practice in isolation from one another (Austin et al., 2005). Social work courses, faculty, curriculum, and entire graduate programs are often separated into distinct topic areas: direct (or clinical) practice, policy, or research (Shdaimah & McCoyd, 2012). As a result, this structure of social work education inadvertently reinforces the conceptual divide between micro- and macro-level social work, impeding students’ ability to integrate the two in their minds and in practice. Instead, students may perceive a choice between micro- and macro-level social work, and after choosing to pursue one, may neglect rather than integrate the other.

Structural and practical implications under a neoliberal sociopolitical framework have been felt across all social work contexts, including field education. Field educators contend with fiscal

constraints culminating in cuts to staffing, time, and resources along with increased workload demands from increasing enrolments and ensuing requests for practicum placements (Ayala et al., 2018). Concurrently, financial austerity measures have overwhelmed health, social and human services, as well as government agencies limiting their capacity to offer practicum opportunities (Ayala et al., 2018). Alternate and innovative placement models and strategies have been proposed to keep pace with these demands and address the challenges including collaborating with field coordinators at national, provincial and local levels to exchange insights, resources and ideas around recruiting placement coordinators and procuring placement opportunities (Ayala et al., 2018) with a renewed emphasis on expanding macro-level opportunities.

Limitations

This study reports findings from one Faculty of Social Work offering social work education across the province, and predominantly reflects the experiences of social workers within that province who have been educated at one of a number of social work educational institutions. Schools in Canada, while all accredited by the CASWE, may put greater or lesser emphasis on macro practice than is reported here. However, the identified themes find resonance in the scholarly literature and reflect the experiences of our participants. A further limitation is that we have purposely sought out those respondents who embrace macro practice and therefore do not represent all perspectives.

Conclusion

The task of social work education, and the profession, is to find a way forward that invites students and educators to explore and embrace avenues for change at all levels of practice. The sentiment, as stated by one participant, “the dual purpose of our profession, which makes us so powerful” is one that social work education can reinforce through social work curriculum and in reclaiming macro practice into an integrated social work profession. While social work education plays a significant role in this integration, we also call on social work regulators and professional social work associations to foster perspectives that enhance this integration of micro and macro practice as foundational elements of our profession and to challenge the systemic subverting of macro social work and societal oppression.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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