

*Article*

## **Research integration into undergraduate and graduate-level social work curricula: Reflections and perspectives of a social work graduate student**

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### **Abstract**

With limited opportunities for research engagement for some social work students in both undergraduate and graduate education, it remains imperative to consider innovative field and practice approaches to promote student involvement in research. Macro and systemic level practice through research and policymaking is informative and influential for direct practice and client-facing work. Without involving students and prospective researchers in the development, conduct, and implementation of social work research, the possibility for students pursuing research-focused and/or macro-level positions may be limited. In being exposed to research-related experiences through practicum opportunities and embedded in their coursework, students are better positioned to understand how to integrate research into their direct practice. The author is a doctoral student, research assistant, and active practitioner who provides their unique insight on this topic. From my experience of participating in qualitative research, my practice has been increasingly enriched and research-informed. The aim of this article is to explore the existing literature to advocate for increased student involvement within research. Increased exposure and involvement in research may improve social work students' understanding of applying theory to practice and provide a holistic understanding of the connection between social work research and practice.

### **Keywords**

social work research education; research-based placements; field education; student experiences; critical reflection; research integration into practice.

### **Résumé**

Avec des possibilités limitées de participation à la recherche pour certains étudiants en travail social, tant au premier cycle qu'aux cycles supérieurs, il demeure essentiel d'envisager des approches novatrices en matière de stages et de pratique afin de favoriser l'engagement des

étudiants dans la recherche. La pratique aux niveaux macro et systémique, par le biais de la recherche et de l'élaboration de politiques, est à la fois informative et influente pour la pratique directe et le travail auprès des clientèles. Sans impliquer les étudiants et les chercheurs en devenir dans le développement, la conduite et la mise en œuvre de la recherche en travail social, les possibilités pour les étudiants de poursuivre des carrières axées sur la recherche et/ou à l'échelle macro peuvent être limitées. En étant exposés à des expériences liées à la recherche, notamment dans le cadre des stages et intégrées à leur formation académique, les étudiants sont mieux outillés pour comprendre comment intégrer la recherche à leur pratique directe. L'auteur est doctorant, assistant de recherche et praticien actif, et apporte un éclairage unique sur cette question. D'après mon expérience de participation à des recherches qualitatives, ma pratique s'est progressivement enrichie et est davantage éclairée par la recherche. L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner la littérature existante afin de plaider en faveur d'une plus grande implication des étudiants dans la recherche. Une exposition et une participation accrues à la recherche peuvent améliorer la compréhension des étudiants en travail social quant à l'application de la théorie à la pratique et offrir une compréhension globale du lien entre la recherche et la pratique en travail social.

### **Mots-clés**

éducation à la recherche en travail social ; stages axés sur la recherche ; formation pratique ; expériences des étudiants ; réflexion critique ; intégration de la recherche dans la pratique

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## **Introduction**

Gibbs and Sterling (2013) astutely state that research refers to asking questions and finding something out. Social workers are natural researchers in their everyday practice, through observation they ask insightful and informed questions to acquire further knowledge regarding their clients, approaches, and communities. Practice and research are often misconceptualized as separate entities within the social work context due to the siloing of social work research and field work (Gleeson et al., 2023). With the emergence of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) in social work, the longstanding split between research and practice as separate entities has increasingly been called into question (Drisko, 2014). Social workers are consumers of research to improve the knowledge and applicability related to their practice, suggesting that the early integration of research into students' educational and practical learning is crucial. This article examines how research can be more intentionally integrated into social work education through a review of relevant literature, exploring innovative approaches to student engagement in research, and structured reflection on the author's concurrent roles as a graduate student, active practitioner, and emerging researcher.

This article first reviews the literature on High-Impact Practices (HIPs) as conceptualized by Kuh et al. (2013, 2017), and High-Impact Teaching Practices (HITPs) as identified by Fink (2016), exploring their relevance to social work education. The literature review describes and explores social work students' perceptions of research, barriers to engagement, and approaches to fostering research integration in practice. Johns' (2000) model of structured reflection is employed as both a methodological framework and organizational structure, examining the author's concurrent experiences as a social work researcher, doctoral student, and practitioner. The paper concludes with implications for social work educators, field coordinators, and students regarding the integration of research into social work curricula and practice.

### **High impact practices for teaching and learning**

Kuh (2008) originally identified ten HIPs: first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing and inquiry intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/study away/global learning, service learning/community-based learning, internships and field experiences, and capstone courses and projects. Kuh et al. (2017) subsequently revisited and reaffirmed this framework, and included the addition of e-portfolios, bringing the total to 11 HIPs. These HIPs are conceptualized to engage students in deep learning, alongside their peers and others, and present an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in real settings, positively contributing to the student's interpersonal relations, and an overall increased sense of competence surrounding critical-thinking and technical skills (Sobeck et al., 2023).

Building on Kuh's framework, Fink (2016) distinguishes between HIPs and High-Impact Teaching Practices (HITPs), which are strategies individual instructors can incorporate into their own courses. Fink (2016) identifies five HITPs: helping students become meta-learners, learning-centered course design, using small groups in a powerful way, service learning with reflection, and being a leader with students. Central to this framework is the concept of "integration" which aims to connect ideas, course experiences, and realms of life (Fink, 2016, p. 7). Together, Kuh and Fink's frameworks suggest that high-impact learning operates at both the institutional and instructor level, with each reinforcing the other. The following section explores how these frameworks apply to social work practice, research, and education, with particular attention to undergraduate research, internships, and field placements as high-impact learning experiences.

### **High impact practices and social work practice, education, and research**

Kuh et al. (2013) highlight that a considerable dedication of students' energy and time throughout an extended time interval is a key characteristic of what constitutes a learning activity as a HIP. For context, social work practicums take place in both Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs and require a substantial commitment of time. To fulfill the credentials to obtain a degree at both levels, a minimum number of hours are required: for BSW programs the minimum amount is 700 hours, and for MSW programs the minimum

number is 450 hours for the one-year program and 900 hours for the two-year MSW program (CASWE-ACFTS, 2021).

Finley and McNair (2013) found that cumulative engagement in HIPs significantly increased students' perceived learning gains, including general education, practical competence, and personal and social development. Among the HIPs examined by Kilgo et al., (2015), undergraduate research was one of two practices with significant positive effect across learning outcomes, including critical thinking, need for cognition, and intercultural effectiveness. Comparatively, Miller et al. (2011) posit that both undergraduate research activities and internships are more engaging compared to service learning, as research and internships include active participation, collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, relevance, and intrinsic interest for students.

The benefits of undergraduate research extend beyond individual learning outcomes. Fischer et al. (2021) highlight that undergraduate research builds social capital, providing students with valuable information, opportunities, and resources through their connections with faculty and peers in research contexts. Multiple studies have identified that there are significant benefits of the involvement of students in undergraduate research, specifically noting the mentor-based relationship between the student and research advisor (Craney et al., 2011; Fischer et al., 2021; Linn et al., 2015). Kuh et al. (2013) identify key characteristics of HIPs as interacting with faculty and peers about substantive matters, frequent, timely, and constructive feedback, and periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning. Undergraduate research experience has been positively associated with overall student satisfaction, inclinations to enroll in graduate education, and completion of undergraduate education (Hu et al., 2008; Zilvinskis, 2019). The integration of HIPs into social work education helps bridge research and practice for students.

## **Engaging social work students in research: Perceptions, challenges, and alternative approaches**

Earley (2014) reviewed 51 articles spanning different disciplines and identified five recurring perceptions among students enrolled in research methods courses: perceived irrelevance, anxiety, lack of interest, negative attitudes, and misconceptions about research. The perceptions that students hold regarding research prior to engaging in the course significantly impact their understanding and impact of learning through their educational experience (Earley, 2014). Earley (2014) noted that these negative attitudes and perceptions are widely understood to hinder student learning in research methods courses. However, these attitudes are not necessarily fixed. Wisecup (2017) found that while students' attitudes towards research were "lukewarm" (p. 76) prior to course completion, engagement with a research methods course was associated with more positive affect and a greater sense of cognitive competence toward research. Similarly, Wishkoski et al. (2022) note that student anxiety decreased and positive attitudes toward research increased over the course of a semester, particularly as students began to recognize the relevance to their professional practice. Addressing students' initial perceptions of research, including

misconceptions, anxiety, and perceived irrelevance, is therefore essential for educators aiming to foster meaningful engagement with research and its application to professional practice.

Students' misconceptions regarding the relevance of research in social work practice may contribute to their hesitancy to participate in research opportunities (Hall, 2015; Morgenshtern et al. 2015; Shree Chhetry et al., 2022). Engaging both students and social work practitioners in scholarly pursuits and research has proven to be challenging (Bolin et al., 2012; Gredig et al., 2020), with studies indicating that students often experience anxiety, reluctance, and resistance when considering research courses (Gredig et al., 2020). Moreover, the social work profession has been slow in developing and adopting knowledge related to EBP (Gray et al., 2009). Match-Maroney and Moore (2016), reflecting on their roles as faculty members and research instructors, noted that their collective teaching experiences have shown that the research course tends to be the least preferred and most resisted within the social work curriculum.

Research has identified that social work students in particular, as compared to students in other practice domains, have adverse reactions to research including anxiety, fear, resistance, and a belief that research is irrelevant to their professional practice (Maschi et al., 2013). Factors such as having limited knowledge of research methods prior to starting the course have been reported to contribute to students' anxiety (Wishkoski et al., 2022). Gredig and Bartelsen-Raemy (2018) found that social work students report negative attitudes, anxiety, and uncertainty regarding the relevance and applicability of research to their professional practice. Students' attitudes and concerns about the course itself, including worries and perceived challenges, strongly influence their level of interest in enrolling in such courses (Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2018). Einbinder (2014), in a study examining research anxiety among MSW students, found that meeting students where they are, utilizing humour through teaching, making research content practical and concrete, and incorporating collaborative processes of learning (e.g., small group assignments) are effective strategies for reducing research anxiety.

### **How to engage students in research**

The literature identifies three key considerations for promoting social work students' engagement with research: exposure and orientation, applicability of research to practice, and resource mobilization. Firstly, studies have indicated that social work students' unfamiliarity and lack of prior exposure to research methodologies fosters feelings of anxiety about research courses, which can lead to avoiding certain research courses due to these experiences of uncertainty and apprehension (Gleeson et al., 2023; Gredig et al., 2020). The decision to enroll in research courses is influenced by students' perceptions of relevance and practical application in social work practice, as well as their beliefs about its objectivity (Gredig et al., 2020). Despite research being a crucial skill for professional practice, its integration into social work education has historically been inadequate (Flanagan & Wilson, 2024).

Secondly, it is important to bring clarity to the applicability of research into practice for social workers. Trevillion (2008) has stipulated that as the pursuit of educating social workers to implement a 'research-minded' approach and EBP has impetus, there has been a notable

divergence between practice and empirical research. When reflecting on curriculum design for undergraduate and graduate social work courses, there exists a misunderstood binary that may muddle the incorporation of research, theory, and practice for qualified social workers (Gleeson et al., 2023). However, it is important to frame research within the context of practice; all social work practitioners are consumers of research, regardless of their scope of practice and knowledge (Csiernik & Birnbaum, 2024).

Lastly, organizational context and ongoing training have been identified as critical factors in supporting practitioners to integrate research evidence into practice, suggesting that the responsibility for bridging the research-practice gap extends beyond educational preparation alone (Wike et al., 2019). Other research indicates that social workers are inadequately prepared to engage with and apply research in practice, a gap attributed to insufficient emphasis on research training within social work educational programs (Teater, 2017). Furthermore, once in practice, they encounter challenges accessing pertinent academic research that could inform their work (Wike et al., 2019). A significant amount of the content and academic vernacular was unfamiliar to students, which caused reported feelings of anxiety and the need for additional effort for learning of novel ideas and terminology (Gleeson et al., 2023). Furthermore, acquired familiarity with practical research applications and technical language was noted to reduce feelings of anxiety (Gleeson et al., 2023).

### **Alternative approaches to student engagement in research**

In an alternative course delivery model, Matich-Maroney and Moore (2016) share their approach called “flipped learning” (p. 24). This approach centers principles of active learning, student engagement, intentional course design, and collaboration between and with students. The aim of this model encourages students to engage with learning material at a pace that meets their needs, outside of the classroom, and in their own learning environment which they control. The researchers in this study desired to utilize their teaching to learn more through research; to demonstrate to their students the connection between research and practice (Matich-Maroney & Moore, 2016). This alternative approach allows students to oversee and direct their own learning, resulting in increased engagement and relevancy to students’ learning related to their research courses (Matich-Maroney & Moore, 2016). Ultimately, students are most adept to understand what strategies are optimal for their own educational and practical needs.

COVID-19 created a significant shift within social work field education (De Fries et al., 2021). Fronek et al. (2023) highlight the increase of research-based field placements during COVID-19, which arose out of the need for innovative field education opportunities due to the pandemic restrictions but the continuous need of meeting placement requirements for their degree completion.

Research-based placements are not the first option that registers for students when they contemplate their field educational options (Lomas et al., 2022). Research-oriented placements provide students with opportunities to enhance their research knowledge and skills, apply theoretical concepts and methodologies in practical contexts, challenge stereotypes and negative

perceptions, and actively engage with the social work community through research endeavors (Lomas et al., 2022). As research holds significant importance within the social work profession, involving students in research activities becomes essential to uphold the values of social work and promote EBP (Hewson et al., 2010; Lomas et al., 2022). Research-based placements underpin the profession's commitment to EBP and likewise play a crucial role in propelling students' academic and professional trajectories. Shree Chhetry et al. (2024) suggest that student placements that are research-based increase student's aspirations for pursuing higher level education in social work and eventually pursuing a career in academia. In addition, students learn to manage data, information, research skills, and project management skills within research-based placements that are directly translatable to their social work careers (Shree Chhetry et al., 2024).

### **Applying Johns' (2000) model of structured reflection framework**

This article employs Johns' (2000) model of structured reflection as both the methodological framework and organizational structure. Written reflections generated during the author's MSW education, collegial discussions, and preparation for a conference presentation served as the primary sources of reflective data. These reflections were reviewed and organized according to the five components of Johns' model to examine the author's experiences across concurrent roles of graduate student, research assistant (RA), and registered social worker. Key insights emerging from these reflections were then interpreted in relation to the existing literature on research integration in social work education.

Specifically, Johns' (2000) framework consists of five key components: (1) description of experiences, (2) reflection on aims and consequences, (3) examination of influencing factors, (4) consideration of alternative strategies, and (5) identification of learning outcomes. This reflective model was originally applied to nurses for reflecting on their practice experiences (Johns, 2000). However, this model has also been utilized with social work students as a model of structured reflection (e.g., Nicholls, 2020). Further, Johns' (2000) model has been noted to encourage and empower individuals to engage in critical thinking through utilizing guided questioning (Duffy, 2008).

### **Description**

The following description outlines the concurrent professional experiences that form the basis of this structured reflection. My unique positionality within this discussion stems from simultaneously maintaining roles as an RA, first-year social work doctoral student, and registered social worker. In my RA role(s), I have contributed to various qualitative research projects under faculty supervision, engaging in activities to support participant recruitment, developing survey instruments using Qualtrics, data collection and analysis, and knowledge translation. As a registered social worker, I have maintained an active clinical caseload, providing direct practice services including individual psychotherapy. As a graduate student, I was simultaneously enrolled in graduate coursework while developing my own research identity

and scholarly knowledge base. Within social work, research and practice have historically been characterized as split (Drisko, 2014), making my concurrent immersion in academic, practice, and research a distinctive perspective to observe their intersections.

## **Reflection**

Through the simultaneous navigation of these roles, I have developed an integrated understanding of how theoretical knowledge, research methodologies, and direct practice intersect within social work. My involvement as an RA during my social work education provided an opportunity to directly apply theoretical knowledge to research settings, while my research experience deepened my appreciation for scholarly inquiry. For instance, frameworks such as feminist standpoint theory encountered in coursework naturally surfaced during data analysis and informed how I interpreted and discussed findings with supervisors and colleagues. In this way, my social work education and research projects became mutually reinforcing. Overall, the integration of these experiences has strengthened my confidence across all professional domains, including as a practitioner applying research-informed approaches, as a researcher drawing on practice-informed insights, and as a student bridging both. While this growth in confidence was not uniform, as each context presented its own distinct challenges, the simultaneous immersion across practitioner, research, and student roles created a compounding effect on my knowledge development that practice alone could not have afforded.

Through applying research insights within direct practice settings (e.g., case management or support group facilitation), I have experienced a growing sense of grounding and validation in my work. Further, being a social worker has facilitated the opportunity to ground theoretical insights into everyday contexts, understanding firsthand the challenges and opportunities that occur when connecting research findings with everyday practice.

Through writing this article, I have balanced the voices and perspectives of the three professional versions of myself that are integrated, yet nearly impossible to compartmentalize. These three identities, while distinct, continuously inform one another and have become increasingly interconnected through the iterative nature of learning and experience. Each identity nonetheless offers a unique perspective that enriches this discussion: (1) the student brings curiosity and emerging scholarly knowledge, (2) the researcher brings analytical thinking and evidence base, and (3) the practitioner brings direct practice and client experiences.

## **Influencing factors**

Several factors have influenced my experience navigating the set of three roles. My innate inclination toward continuous learning has created a self-reinforcing process of knowledge and skill development. Learning within one role naturally encourages professional development across the others, generating a self-reinforcing cycle of growth. To illustrate this, completing a trauma and violence-informed care (TVIC) certificate, intended to support my practice with survivors of intimate partner violence, also deepened my understanding of how trauma is conceptualized within research contexts. The transferable nature of this learning reinforced how

professional development in one role can meaningfully inform the others. For instance, the transfer of certain skills such as data management and organization, research team coordination, and time management that were imperative to engaging in rigorous research have proven advantageous to my practitioner roles, such as when I was in a case management role. The transferability of these skills has facilitated my ability to function effectively and confidently across environments.

My RA roles also connected me with faculty who served as principal investigators, some of whom had previously taught me in coursework. Through these mentorship relationships, I was simultaneously engaged in learning research methodology and real-life research processes, including participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and knowledge dissemination. Notably, my mentors were intentional and invested in my broader development as a researcher, both within and outside of our shared research work. For instance, some offered opportunities to engage in aspects of the research process I had not previously encountered, such as contributing to a Research Ethics Board application and developing interviewing skills, while others provided feedback on my scholarly writing beyond the scope of my formal RA roles. These mentorship-based experiences reflect what Kuh et al. (2013) identify as key HIP characteristics: substantive faculty interaction, timely and constructive feedback, and structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning.

### **Alternative strategies**

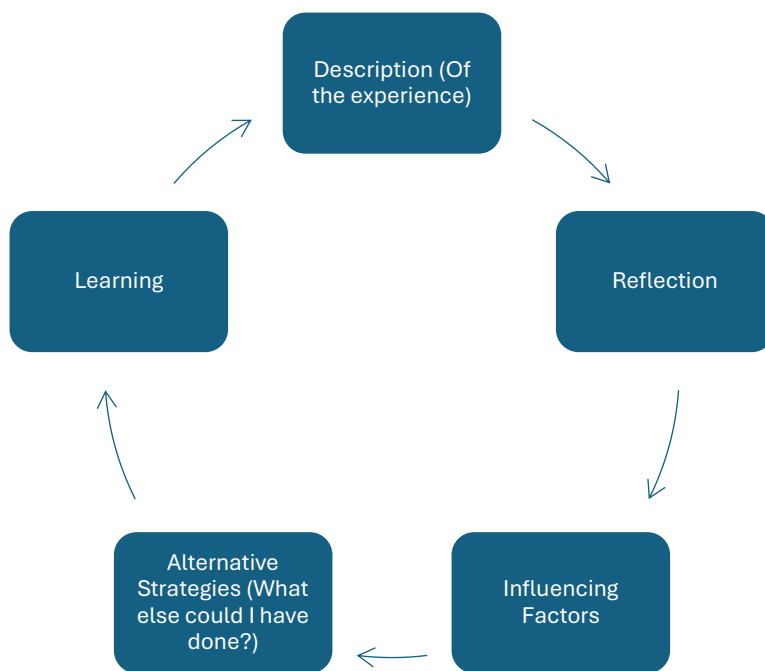
While my experience of concurrent immersion in research, education, and practice has been valuable and transformative, there were disadvantages that are important to acknowledge, such as increased demands from holding these three roles concurrently with having limited resources (e.g., time or energy, etc.). Further, it is important to recognize that it is not always feasible to simulate these circumstances for future social work students to have a similar integrated learning process. However, such learning is possible through the intentional application of these research elements within the social work programs in varying capacities. For instance, alternative approaches may include a more formalized research-based field placement, as discussed by Fronek et al. (2023) and Lomas et al. (2022). An additional approach might involve the more explicit integration of research components into the course curricula, such as implementing the flipped learning model described by Matich-Maroney and Moore (2016), with the aim to enhance students' engagement with research content. Both approaches offer different advantages and considerations for bridging the research-practice gap within social work education.

### **Learning**

Reflecting on my professional trajectory across all three roles, the cumulative experience has provided substantial benefits that continue to shape my identity and approach as a practitioner, researcher, and doctoral student. As both a researcher and student, I have come to recognize a reciprocal relationship between research knowledge and practical experience, with each continuously informing the other. This integrated experience has transformed my professional

identity and approach in several ways. First, I now recognize the reciprocal and interconnected relationship between social work research and practice as essential, rather than my prior conceptualization of them as separate and non-integrated entities. Relatedly, research informs practice through the provision of evidence-based interventions and theoretical frameworks, whilst practice experiences generate and inform critical questions for research to consider and provide contextual insights that enhance research applicability. Second, my research experience has improved my practice through acquiring the insider knowledge regarding theories and their applications. Conversely, my practice experiences have enriched my research roles and comprehension by highlighting the gaps in existing knowledge. Further, the reciprocal relationship between practice and research underscores the importance of integrating diverse knowledge bases and skill sets to foster informed decision-making and effective interventions in social work (Csiernik & Birnbaum, 2024).

**Figure 1.** Johns’ model for structured reflection (2000) depicting the cyclical relationship between description, reflection, influencing factors, alternative strategies, and learning



Johns’ (2000) reflective model aligns with Kuh et al.’s (2013, 2017) concept of HIPs, particularly in its emphasis on the integration of experiences and structured opportunities for deep reflection. Kuh et al. (2013) identify both a “significant investment of time and effort” and “periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning” as key characteristics of HIPs (p. 8), which are described in the reflective process undertaken in this article.

## **Social work education and research implications**

Evidently, there remains a need for further research on social work students' perspectives and interests related to research courses and their integration into practice. Gredig et al. (2022) note the need for further research into the factors that influence social work students' interest in research courses, to better inform how educators design and implement them. In addition, it is essential to better understand both undergraduate and graduate students' learning and professional needs from the students' perspectives themselves. Students' insights can ensure that research integration aligns with current educational needs and societal challenges, making it more relevant and effective for them. Understanding students' perspectives helps tailor teaching methods and content to better engage them, fostering motivation and their active participation in learning.

My own concurrent experiences underscore the importance of intentionally embedding research into social work education through diverse and meaningful opportunities, including mentorship, research-based placements, and innovative strategies (e.g., the flipped learning approach). By utilizing models such as the flipped learning approach, which emphasizes interactive and self-directed learning, educators can tailor learning opportunities to better equip students as critical consumers of research in their professional roles. This approach enhances students' understanding of research methodologies and cultivates their ability to apply research findings effectively in real-world social work practice. Both initiatives are essential in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, thereby enhancing the overall competency and preparedness of emerging social work professionals. While not all students will navigate multiple roles simultaneously, the intentional design of research-integrated learning experiences within social work programs can similarly foster the kind of reciprocal understanding between research and practice that this article has sought to illustrate. Ultimately, bridging the research-practice divide in social work requires a shared commitment across educational institutions, field settings, and individual educators to ensure that research is experienced as an integral dimension of professional practice.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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