

Editorial

Transforming field education in social work: A special issue on field education

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I'm very pleased to introduce this special issue on social work field education. Field education is a central component of social work education, providing students with invaluable hands-on experience and the opportunity to apply classroom learning in real-world settings. As we prepare future social workers to navigate complex challenges and facilitate transformative change, field education continues to play an important role. In this special issue, we delve into the key issues and new practices in social work field education.

The special issue features seven articles that examine the current challenges facing field education in social work, such as changing practice environments in the context of limited resources, and the growing demand for new responses and strategies to address inequities and structural issues. The Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) project supported the development of this special issue on field education, promoting the call for papers in our network and encouraging members to share their research. In response to the ongoing crisis in field education, the papers in this special issue explain how continuous pressures on social work field education programs have spurred new ideas and ways to transform field learning opportunities and foster innovation. This special issue highlights opportunities for enhancing field education, including redesigning Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) curriculum in field education, supporting Indigenous field education, facilitating macro placements, exploring self-directed learning, establishing collaborative partnerships, promoting interdisciplinary learning, and developing innovative field approaches and field models.

As the practice of social work evolves, so too must field education. The special issue presents new approaches to field education to better prepare social work students for contemporary social work practice. Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in social work practice call for the complementary inclusion of EDI in field education. Articles within the issue address strategies for promoting EDI in field placements, as well as advancing the role of field educators in this process. Reflections on social work field education promote dialogue and learning within the social work field education community. By highlighting the challenges, opportunities, and innovations in field education, we hope to inspire ongoing improvements in preparing the next generation of social workers.

The article "Student voices within Indigenous social work practicum recommendations and the Seven Grandfather Teachings" by Dawn Goss, Joey-Lynn Wabie, Michelle Montreuil, Shaelynn Noland, Andrea Scott, and Arijana Haramincic considers the intersection of Indigenous cultural values and social work field education. The importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives and teachings in practicum experiences is examined to better support students in their professional development. The Seven Grandfather Teachings – humility, honesty, respect,

courage, wisdom, truth, and love – serve as guiding principles for social work practice, emphasizing the significance of decolonizing approaches in field education. The voices of students provide valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing the practicum experience through a lens of cultural humility, reciprocity, and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems. This article presents a compelling argument for centering Indigenous voices and values in social work education to promote more inclusive and effective practice with (and within) Indigenous communities.

“Integrated developmental and green social work in field education” is an article that provides a holistic approach to social work education by integrating principles of sustainable development and environmental consciousness. Emmanuel Chilanga, Ruth Agather Mbeya, Vitumbiko Adidja Ng’ambi, and Maureen Chilanga share the results of a research study to control for a pest infestation affecting maize crops in Malawi, Africa. The article presents a framework that aims to prepare social work students to address complex social issues while promoting environmentally sustainable practices. By combining the principles of social justice, ecological sustainability, and community development, this approach equipped students with the skills and knowledge to advocate for both individuals and the environment. Through experiential learning opportunities in the context of student field placements, and community engagement activities, students were encouraged to explore the interconnectedness of social and environmental challenges and develop innovative solutions that benefit both people and the planet. Integrated developmental and Green Social Work in field education is an innovative approach to social work education that aligns with the growing need for sustainable and socially responsible practices in the field. The article demonstrates how interdisciplinary research teams provide students with community mobilization and environmental justice advocacy skills in addressing household food security through more sustainable farming practices.

The longstanding separation between micro and macro practice in social work presents a significant challenge, particularly in BSW education. The article “Bridging the divide: Exploring the disconnect between micro and macro practice and implications for BSW field education” by Julie Mann-Johnson, Anne-Marie McLaughlin, Maddie Wandler, and Brenda Vos focuses on the urgency of addressing this division. The authors discuss the current emphasis on micro-level practice in field education that leaves a critical gap in underpreparing students for the multifaceted realities of, and extended reach of, social work. The historical context of the micro-macro divide in the article reveals how deeply entrenched this bifurcation has become. The authors discuss the context of social work practice and argue that a re-envisioning of BSW field education is essential. The integration of micro and macro practice within the social work curriculum is a crucial first step to incorporate macro practice theories, case studies, and projects that challenge students to think beyond individual-level solutions and consider broader systemic impacts. Encouraging and facilitating placements in macro settings—such as community organizations, advocacy groups, and policy research institutions—can provide students with invaluable experiences and skills in policy analysis, community needs assessment, and program development, complementing the clinical skills gained in traditional placements. Field educators and instructors are called upon to put emphasis on a balanced skill set that includes policy advocacy, community organizing, leadership, and clinical practice so that graduates are well-equipped to navigate and address the complexities of social issues at multiple levels. Similar to Chilanga and colleagues, the authors support interdisciplinary collaboration in related fields such as public health, urban planning, and political science. This cross-disciplinary learning can broaden perspectives, enhance critical thinking, provide structure to field educators to support

macro-focused opportunities in field placements, and foster innovative approaches to social and environmental challenges. By reimagining BSW field education, it becomes possible to prepare future social workers who are adept at addressing individual needs and effecting systemic change. This comprehensive approach aligns with the profession's core values and strengthens our collective capacity to promote social justice and holistic well-being.

In the evolving landscape of social work education, innovation is not just desirable—it is essential. As we prepare future social workers to address complex social issues, traditional pedagogical methods often fall short. The article “Self-directed discovery in experiential learning: Innovating BSW curriculum design” by Julie Mann-Johnson and Angela Judge-Stasiak, presents a compelling case for transforming BSW field education through self-directed discovery, an approach that places students at the center of their learning journey. Experiential learning bridges theoretical knowledge with practical application. The authors explain how self-directed discovery involves allowing students to identify their learning needs, set goals, and seek out resources and experiences to meet those goals. This method aligns with adult learning theories that emphasize autonomy, relevance, and self-motivation.

New innovations in hospital field education are discussed in the article “Instructor-led rotational model: Revolutionizing social work practicums in hospital settings” by Kealey Dube, Stephanie Grant, Amy Fulton, Angela Judge-Stasiak, and Andrea Oiffer. The authors introduce a new field model where students rotate through multiple departments within the hospital, guided by experienced social work instructors who facilitate their learning and ensure continuity across different settings. The benefits of the rotational model are highlighted for student learning and for interdisciplinary collaboration. Key implementation elements are provided for academic institutions and hospital social work departments, focusing on structured rotations, qualified instructors, collaborative partnerships, and continuous evaluation. As more integrated and adaptive educational frameworks are designed in field education, students and field instructor supervisors can be supported in new promising ways.

The article “What motivates social workers to become field instructors: Perspectives from Canada” by Lea Tufford, Lori Gauthier, Eloho Ologan, Marion Bogo, Ellen Katz, and Eileen McKee, explores the multifaceted role of field instructors who supervise practicum students. With field education in crisis over its struggle to attract and retain social work field instructors in providing mentorship to practicum students, this article responds. It presents why field instructors are motivated to supervise practicum students with their commitment to professional development, personal fulfillment, reciprocal learning, professional identity and recognition, and commitment to social justice. However, there are significant challenges in attracting and retaining field instructors with high workloads, and the need for training and supports. Field education programs will be interested to learn how they can further develop a robust support system for field instructors. As the landscape of social work continues to evolve, so too must our approaches to nurturing and sustaining the vital role of field instruction. Understanding what motivates social workers to become field instructors in Canada can provide social work programs with insight into how to better support and retain these essential educators.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a transformative period for all, and social work field education is no exception. For students in field education, the pandemic brought unprecedented challenges and necessitated rapid adaptation to new modes of learning and practice. The article “Social work practicum students experiences, challenges, and aspirations during the COVID-19 pandemic by Julie Drolet, Saleema Salim, Mahed Choudhury, David Nicholas, Eileen McKee, Christine Walsh, and Grant Charles shares the results of TFEL survey research conducted with

Canadian students in the first wave of the pandemic. The authors discuss equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in field education, and how the pandemic exposed and amplified inequities. The paper centers student voices on mental health and wellness, field learning during the pandemic, and professional readiness. The pandemic forced a shift from traditional in-person field placements to virtual and hybrid models, and this transition was marked by a mixture of uncertainty and innovation. Many students experienced a sense of loss, missing out on face-to-face interactions with service users and clients, supervisors, and peers. However, they also discovered new opportunities for learning and engagement. Virtual field placements provided new learning experiences, providing students with skills that are increasingly relevant in a digitally connected world. The pandemic showed the importance of digital literacy in social work and a stretching of viable approaches. Field education programs are continuing to develop and refine hybrid models of field education that combine the best of in-person and virtual experiences, invest in technological infrastructure to ensure all students have access to the tools they need for effective learning and practice, develop new strategies for remote supervision that provide support and mentorship, and promote students feeling connected and guided. The article also highlighted the critical need for mental health and well-being of students, and the role of social work programs to provide integrated supports to that end. The pandemic amplified existing social inequalities, fueling a renewed commitment to social justice among social work students.

As we emerge from the pandemic, it is crucial to harness these experiences to create a more flexible, inclusive, and effective framework for social work field education. By supporting the aspirations, and addressing the challenges, of students, we can ensure that the next generation of social workers is well-prepared to meet the evolving needs of society with compassion and care.

As we look to the future, the aspirations and commitments articulated by our contributors in this special issue offer a hopeful vision. The articles in this issue illuminate the adaptability of social work students, educators, researchers and practitioners, particularly in the face of unprecedented global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences have underscored the importance of flexibility in our field educational models and the need for innovative strategies to ensure that social work education and training remains robust and relevant. From the introduction of self-directed discovery in experiential learning to the implementation of instructor-led rotational models in hospital environments, this issue highlights a range of innovative approaches designed to enhance field education. These innovations not only address current challenges but also lay the groundwork for more dynamic and responsive field education programs. There is a collective resolve to integrate lessons learned, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and uphold the principles of social justice that underpin our profession. By doing so, we can ensure that social work field education continues to evolve in ways that are inclusive, effective, and aligned with the needs of our diverse communities.

By embracing these models, we can better prepare our students to navigate and influence the evolving landscape of social work practice.

In closing, this special issue stands as a testament to the creativity, dedication, and resilience of the social work field education community. The insights and innovations shared here are not just academic reflections; they are calls to action. As we read through the breadth and depth of this special issue on social work field education, it seems essential to reflect on the diverse insights, innovative approaches, and profound experiences shared within these pages. As educators, practitioners, and students, we are all stewards of the future of social work. Let us carry forward the lessons learned, continue to innovate, and remain steadfast in our commitment

to preparing competent, compassionate social workers who can make a meaningful difference in the world.

Thank you to all our contributors for sharing your experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Your voices are the driving force behind the continuous evolution and improvement of social work field education. Together, we can build a future where every social work student is equipped, supported, and inspired to contribute to a just and equitable society.

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