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## **The social work student as the wounded healer and their experiences in their integrative practicum seminar: An interpretative phenomenological inquiry**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the practicum education seminar experiences of social work students with histories of childhood adversity (ACEs). The practicum education seminar is also referred to as the integrative seminar or field seminar in existing literature (Fortune et al., 2017). The premise for this study was that an increasing number of students entering social work programs have experienced adverse childhood experiences. Social work programs across the globe are grappling with how best to meet the learning needs of students with symptoms consistent with experiences of childhood adversity, including mental health diagnoses, burnout, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatization, while also maintaining the professionalism of social work and ensuring that client's needs are effectively met. Social work practicum educators are in a challenging position, as they are responsible for ensuring that emotionally ready social work students deliver quality social work practice. Using an interpretive-phenomenological lens, the researcher interviewed 18 social work students with self-identified ACEs from schools across the United States to shed important light on their experiences in their practicum seminar course. The results of this study emphasize the transformative role childhood adversity can have on social work students' professional development. The participants' voices highlighted the strengths and challenges of their practicum education seminar. They also advocated for enhancements in social work practicum seminars to better support their learning and emotional needs.

### **Keywords**

social work, adverse childhood experiences, wounded healer, practicum seminar, integrative seminar, field education, trauma-informed care framework, self-care, practicum education

## Résumé

Cette étude qualitative explore les expériences vécues dans le cadre du séminaire de formation pratique par des étudiants en travail social ayant des antécédents d'expériences défavorables durant l'enfance (ACEs). Le séminaire de formation pratique est également désigné dans la littérature existante comme séminaire intégratif ou séminaire de terrain (Fortune et al., 2017). L'hypothèse de départ était qu'un nombre croissant d'étudiants en travail social intègrent les écoles de travail social avec des expériences d'adversité durant l'enfance. Les programmes de travail social à travers le monde cherchent à déterminer comment répondre au mieux aux besoins d'apprentissage des étudiants présentant des symptômes associés à des expériences d'adversité durant l'enfance, notamment des diagnostics de troubles de santé mentale, l'épuisement professionnel, le traumatisme secondaire, la fatigue de compassion et la traumatisation vicariée, tout en maintenant le professionnalisme propre au travail social et en veillant à ce que les besoins des clients soient efficacement satisfaits. Les formateurs responsables des stages en travail social se trouvent dans une position délicate, car ils doivent s'assurer que des services de qualité sont offerts par des étudiants émotionnellement prêts à exercer la profession. En adoptant une approche phénoménologique interprétative, la chercheuse a mené des entretiens auprès de dix-huit (18) étudiants en travail social s'identifiant eux-mêmes comme ayant vécu des ACEs, provenant d'établissements situés aux États-Unis, afin de mieux comprendre leurs expériences au sein du séminaire de formation pratique. Les résultats de cette étude soulignent le rôle transformateur que l'adversité vécue durant l'enfance peut jouer dans le développement professionnel des étudiants en travail social. Les témoignages des participants ont mis en lumière à la fois les forces et les défis associés au séminaire de formation pratique. Ils ont également plaidé pour des améliorations des séminaires de stage en travail social afin de mieux répondre à leurs besoins d'apprentissage et à leurs besoins émotionnels.

## Mots-clés

travail social, expériences défavorables durant l'enfance, guérisseur blessé, séminaire de formation pratique, séminaire intégratif, formation sur le terrain, cadre de soins sensibles aux traumatismes, soins personnels, formation pratique

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## Introduction

According to the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards (2022), practicum education is the signature pedagogy of social work education. This designation underscores the role of the internship as a bridge connecting the theories and concepts of generalist and advanced practice from the classroom to practice skills in

the practicum placement. As such, practicum education is thoroughly designed, supervised, organized, and assessed based on criteria by which students demonstrate mastery of the program's core competencies operationalized by the competence behaviors outlined by the school and CSWE. When students are in their practicum education placements, they are largely evaluated on their ability to integrate knowledge into practice, including theory, values, ethics, professional behavior, and a strong sense of self-awareness in client interactions. One area lacking in the literature is how schools effectively teach and model integration for social work students.

The practicum seminar is an integrative measure used by schools of social work to help students connect what they learn in the classroom with their practice experiences in their placements. Practicum seminars have also been referred to as field and integrative seminars (Fortune et al., 2017). The practicum seminar is often highlighted as the ultimate classroom experience for enhancing field education and facilitating students' integration of knowledge into assignments (Moen et al., 2016). There is no doubt in the literature that the practicum seminar is invaluable to the quality of the student's practicum education experience. The practicum seminar can assist students in integrating what they learn in the classroom in practice with their clients and their practicum site. However, few studies evaluate the students' integration of classroom learning in field education. Further, there is little research that explores students' perceptions of their practicum seminar as a vehicle for integrating knowledge and practice. The results of this study indicated that students have mixed experiences in their practicum seminar classes, which they consider an essential but overlooked part of the social work curriculum.

## **Literature review**

The primary goal of this study was to explore the experiences of social work students with histories of childhood adversity in their practicum education seminars. Students with ACEs were chosen because globally, social work programs in higher education report a rise in the number of students enduring mental health challenges as a manifestation of unresolved childhood adversity (Anand, 2022; Dill & Murphy, 2022; Horton et al., 2009; Lewis et al., 2022; Rinfrette et al., 2021; Thomas, 2016; Watkins et al., 2012). Research indicates that social work students with early life challenges, including ACEs, describe these experiences as influencing their choice of study (Branson, 2019; Newcomb, et al., 2019; Thomas, 2016).

ACEs have been described as potentially traumatic events such as abuse, neglect, witnessing violence in the home or community, or having a family member attempt or die by suicide (Center for Disease Control, 2023). In addition, ACEs can include risk factors in the child's environment that jeopardize their sense of safety and ability to establish a secure attachment. This may include exposure to substance abuse, mental health problems, or instability due to separation from a parent or a member of the household being in jail (CDC, 2023). The ACEs scale was designed to measure negative early life experiences. It is important to note that the phrase ACE has been used interchangeably with childhood trauma (Petrucci, 2019). Research shows that the cumulative effect of ACEs has the greatest impact with individuals who

experience four or more ACEs facing a significantly higher risk of chronic stress and physical and mental health challenges in adulthood (Anda et al., 2004; Chapman et al., 2004).

The existing literature suggests that ACEs are prevalent among Bachelor and Master of Social Work (MSW) students nationally and globally (Gilman & Kaufman, 2015; Lyter, 2021; Newcomb et al., 2019; Thomas, 2016). Across study samples, ACE scores ranged from 40 - 80% (Gilin & Kaufman, 2015; Lyter, 2021; Newcomb et al., 2019; Thomas, 2016). MSW students' ACE scores were found to be higher compared to the general population, with as many as 42% of MSW students reporting four or more ACEs (Thomas, 2016).

Evidence from the literature suggests that social workers with a history of adverse childhood experiences may be more susceptible to vicarious traumatization. A social worker working with individuals that have experienced trauma may experience significant psychological effects that are disruptive and persistent (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Additionally, social workers may struggle to establish clear boundaries with their clients and face ethical dilemmas in practice (Esaki & Larkin, 2013). Another concern for social work students is their ability to make clinical decisions based on knowledge rather than their own lived experiences or emotions (Branson, 2019; Esaki & Larkin, 2013).

Social work students with ACEs may be more vulnerable to the latter in their practicum education placements if they do not receive the proper support, such as consistent and trauma-informed practicum instruction (Bogo, 2015; Knight, 2010, 2012 & 2015). If students with a history of adversity are left unaddressed, those same students may compromise the delivery of quality social work services, resulting in their potential removal from their practicum placement and, worse, failure in the social work program, and harm to the client (Sanders, 2021). Thus, schools of social work have an ethical obligation to understand how experiences of adversity influence students' practicum education, and what they can do to safeguard access to quality social work education and protect the profession from unfit social workers (Bogo, et al., 2007; Regehr, et al., 2001; Sowbel, 2012).

Studies demonstrate that social work students, in general, experience a major learning transition when they begin their practicum placements (Foote, 2015). Students describe their practicum education experiences as the most meaningful in preparing them for future practice roles on a multi-systemic level, transforming their ability to connect knowledge, theory, skills, and ethics in practice with their clients (Foote, 2015, Bogo, 2015; Tham & Lynch, 2014). They encounter educational, logistical, and emotional challenges while engaging with clients and adapting to the social service environment (Foote, 2015). Students are learning and developing their social work practice skills while also being assessed and evaluated on their performance by their practicum instructors (Foote, 2015).

Students described experiencing both strengths and vulnerabilities in practicum education. For example, students expressed developing more self-awareness, knowledge, values, and ethics because they applied what they learned in the classroom with real clients in real-time (Williamson et al., 2010). In addition, students demonstrated a growing sense of confidence in their ability to practice social work after they completed their practicum placements (Tham &

Lynch, 2014). On the other hand, students described their practicum education placement as emotionally, mentally, and physically difficult (Shannon et al., 2014). For example, studies using qualitative interviews with students reveal that they felt distressed and worried when hearing about their clients' traumatic experiences (Barlow & Hall, 2007; Shannon et al., 2014; Williamson et al., 2010). They also shared struggles when their clients' problems were comparable to their own (Barlow & Hall, 2007). Another major concern of students was their overall lack of competence in their practicum education placement hindering their effectiveness with clients (Barlow & Hall, 2007, Shannon et al., 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Williamson et al., 2010)

Students are exposed to the challenges in the profession early in their careers. Students who are already vulnerable due to a history of adversity may face more significant challenges than their peers. For example, in Van Breda and Feller's (2014) exploratory study on countertransference, their participants, who were third year social work students in practicum education placements, expressed increased feelings of countertransference when dealing with client situations that closely mirrored their own lived experiences. The participants described feeling confused, overwhelmed, "with a blurring of boundaries, roles, and experiences," (Van Breda & Feller, 2014, p. 475). As a result, students often felt incompetent and helpless in their interactions with their clients (Barlow & Hall, 2007; Bennett, 2008; Van Breda & Feller, 2014). Countertransference can lead students down a treacherous path where they may be confronted by ethical dilemmas and make poor decisions based on emotion and lived experiences rather than knowledge and skills (Bennett, 2008; Van Breda & Feller, 2014). In addition, they may be more prone to burn out, endure compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress. Students with ACEs are also more susceptible to vicarious traumatization which can interfere with their performance, academic success, and emotional well-being (Knight, 2010, 2012, 2015 & 2018). Vicarious traumatization describes the negative changes that can occur in the social worker's cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being due to exposure to their client's trauma (Pearlman, 1995). Researchers are gaining insight into what factors contribute to vicarious traumatization and how to prevent it (Knight, 2018; Pearlman, 1995).

One area of focus is whether a student's lived experiences of adversity increase their vulnerability to vicarious traumatization (Thomas, 2016). The latter is a major concern for practicum educators, especially when a student's practicum education placement may trigger their history of adversity, interfering with their performance and potentially harming a client. Students are required to complete the practicum placement to graduate. Thus, it is important to ensure their emotional readiness in addition to their knowledge of social work skills and values in practice.

One element of the social work curriculum often overlooked in the literature is the significance of the practicum education seminar for social work students' professional development. The practicum seminar is highlighted as the ultimate classroom experience to enhance field learning and facilitate student integration of knowledge into practice (Voshel & Hurand, 2016). Practicum seminars allow students to share their experiences and reflect on

strengths and challenges (Bowers, 2017). It is a unique class meant to be more reflective in nature, helping students integrate knowledge and practice and develop self-awareness to be objective practitioners with people they work with.

However, there is minimal guidance on facilitating an educational approach that creates space for students to integrate their knowledge and practice through a reflective learning process. In fact, Bogo (2015) points out that while integrative seminars are offered as a vehicle to assist students in connecting theory and practice, “accreditation standards have not yet required this pedagogical approach,” (p. 13-14). Thus, schools of social work and faculty are often left to their own devices to determine how best to conduct integrative seminars, leaving little uniformity across schools regarding curriculum, purpose, and structure of the seminar (Poe & Hunter, 2009).

The practicum seminar is offered in both BSW and MSW programs and viewed as a key support in helping students connect theory and practice (Dill & Bowers, 2020). In surveys with practicum education directors, 96% of BSW programs reported offering seminars, and 81% of MSW programs included seminars in their curriculum (Dalton et al. 2011). However, implementing the practicum seminar varies depending on frequency, curriculum location and delivery model, credit and grading, student group composition, instructor, and assignments (Moen et al. 2016). There is no doubt that the practicum seminar is invaluable to the quality of the student’s practicum education experience. The practicum seminar can assist students in integrating what they learn in the classroom into practice with their clients and their practicum site. However, there are few studies evaluating students’ integration of classroom learning in field education or students’ perceptions of their practicum seminar as a means for integrating knowledge and practice.

## **Methodology**

This study used Smith et al.’s (2009) interpretive phenomenological approach to explore social work students’ experiences with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in their practicum placements. This approach allowed the researcher to explore the nuances of the phenomenon and discover shared themes across participants. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 participants to elicit their narratives about the relationship between their histories of childhood adversity and their practicum education experiences. The researcher selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for this study because it has the potential to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of social work students who have endured childhood adversity and how they perceive the impact of those experiences on their practicum education placement.

IPA has a rich history within social work research largely due to its focus on understanding the essence of human experiences and the meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences (Houston & Mullan-Jefferson, 2012). IPA affords researchers the opportunity to consider the intricacies of individual experiences and develop interpretative insights of those experiences. Prior research has used IPA to explore social work students experience and management of

countertransference (Van Breda & Feller, 2014); resilience in community college students with ACEs (Brogden & Gregory, 2019); and the social work student's perspective on self-identity, embodiment, and the development of resilience (Rankin, 2014).

### **Sampling method**

This study used purposive sampling, which is a widely used qualitative approach that helps researchers target the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is often used to explore a particular phenomenon in depth with a small sample. The sample in an IPA research study is typically homogenous to identify a “more closely defined group for whom the research questions will be significant” (Smith & Osborn, 2009, p. 56).

The sample size was determined by saturation or the point at which no new data or themes emerged from the participant interviews (Padgett, 2008). The researcher collected data through in-depth interviews with 18 social work students who shared the same phenomena of ACEs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Typically, IPA studies rely on small sample sizes, enabling a researcher to complete a detailed analysis of each individual interview and delve into the phenomenon being explored (Smith & Osborn, 2009).

Participants met the following criteria: they were either advanced standing or second-year MSW students; they were unknown to the researcher; they were not current or past students of the researcher; and they had a history of ACEs by self-report. This is in alignment with the ideology of IPA data collection, which emphasizes the importance of enabling participants to describe their lived experiences from their own lens rather than the socially constructed meaning of ACE.

For this study, the researcher elicited descriptions of the participants' experiences of adversity, which may or may not be an experience identified on the original ACEs scale. There is ample evidence that other common childhood adversities that are not on the original scale also have long-lasting negative impacts on child development (Finklehor, 2015). The goal was for participants to identify what constitutes adversity from their perspective and how the essence of that experience influenced their practicum experience.

### **Descriptive statistics of the sample**

The sample included 15 female and three male-identifying participants. Nine participants identified as white, four identified as Hispanic/Latino, one identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, two identified as Asian and two identified as other. Eight of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 24, eight were between the ages of 25 and 34, and two were between the ages of 55 and 64. All the participants had earned a bachelor's degree, while two had other master's degrees, and one held a doctorate degree in a profession other than social work. Sixteen participants reported being single, while one identified as married and another identified as divorced. Two out of the 18 participants reported having children. Five participants reported working full-time, while seven indicated working part-time in addition to being a student. All the participants self-reported a history of ACEs.

**Table 1. Study demographic characteristics and descriptive statistics**

<b>Demographic Variables</b>	<b>N (18)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	8	44.44%
25-34	8	44.44%
55-64	2	11.11%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	3	16.66%
Female	15	83.33%
Other		
<b>Hispanic Ethnicity</b>		
Yes	4	22.22%
No	14	77.77%
<b>Race</b>		
Caucasian	14	77.77%
Asian	1	5.55%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	5.55%
Other	2	11.11%
<b>Highest degree of school completed</b>		
Bachelor's degree (BA, BS)	18	100%
Master's degree (MA, MS, MEd)	2	11.11%
Doctorate Degree (MD, DDS, PhD)	1	5.55%
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	16	88.88%
Married or domestic partnership	1	11.11%
Divorced	1	5.55%
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Employed full time (40 or more hrs a week)	5	27.78%
Employed part time (up to 39 hours a week)	7	38.89%
Unemployed and currently looking for work		
Unemployed not currently looking for work		
Student	18	100%
<b>Do you have children?</b>		
Yes	2	11.11%
No	16	88.88%

A descriptive analysis of the interview data revealed that 88% of the students (n = 18) reported experiencing four or more ACES. In Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), descriptive analysis plays a crucial role in the initial stages of understanding participants lived experiences (Smith et al. 2009). While the primary goal of IPA is interpretive, descriptive analysis is used as a foundational step to ensure a clear and accurate representation of the participants' accounts before deeper interpretation occurs. Thus, the researcher read and reread her participants' accounts of their lived experiences and how they ascribed meaning to their history of childhood adversity.

All of the participants (n=18) reported a mentally ill, depressed, or suicidal person in their home. It was found that 88% of the participants endured childhood emotional abuse. Just over half or 55 % of the participants were challenged by separation, divorce, or loss of a loved one. In addition, 55% of the participants reported having a family member struggling with alcohol or drug addiction, while 50% experienced childhood physical abuse. The participants' accounts are supported by the literature, indicating that social work students have a high prevalence of ACES. It is worth noting that several participants had siblings with mental health challenges, which influenced the participants perceived role within their families. Table 2 highlights the adverse experiences among the participants. Participants reported additional adverse experiences beyond those on the original ACES scale. For example, multiple participants discussed challenges with immigration, cultural differences, bullying, sexual identity, and racism that left enduring marks on their sense of self and professional development as social workers. Aliases, as outlined in Table 3, are used to protect the participants' identities and introduce them to the reader.

**Table 2. Characterization of ACE responses**

<b>Self- reported Adverse Childhood Experiences</b>	<b>n=18</b>	<b>%</b>
Mentally ill, depressed, or suicidal person in the home	18	100%
Child emotional abuse	16	88.88%
Loss of a parent to death or abandonment by parental divorce	10	55.55%
Drug addicted or alcoholic family member	10	55.55%
Child physical abuse	9	50%
Emotional neglect	7	38.8%
Child sexual abuse	6	33.33%
Witnessing domestic violence against the mother	4	22.22%
Incarceration of any family member for a crime	2	1.1%
Physical neglect	2	1.1%

**Table 3. Aliases and introduction of participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>MSW/Advanced Standing</b>
Shannan	Female	White	20-25	MSW
Pearl	Female	White	25-34	MSW
Hillary	Female	Other	25-34	MSW
Jeremy	Male	Native	25-34	Advanced Standing
Mariah	Female	Latina	25-34	MSW
Victoria	Female	Other	20-25	Advanced Standing
Julissa	Female	White	20-25	Advanced Standing
Stephanie	Female	Asian	20-25	Advanced Standing
Lejla	Female	South Asian	20-25	Advanced Standing
Carlos	Male	Latino	20-25	Advanced Standing
Maria	Female	Latina	25-34	Advanced Standing
Sharon	Female	White	55-64	MSW
Virginia	Female	White	20-25	Advanced Standing
Rhianna	Female	White	25-34	MSW
Brianna	Female	White	25-34	MSW
Kalil	Male	White	20-25	Advanced Standing
Mary	Female	White	55-64	MSW
Caitlin	Female	White	25-34	MSW

**Data analysis**

To analyze and interpret social work students' lived experiences, the researcher used the six-step approach developed by Smith et al. (2009), which includes (1) reading and re-reading, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emerging themes, (4) search for connection across themes, (5) moving to the next case, and finally, (6) searching for patterns across cases. The latter follows an idiographic method of analysis, starting with specific examples and gradually establishing more general categorizations (Smith, 1995). IPA uses the participants' descriptions of their experiences as the substance of the data that the researcher reflects to discover the essence of the phenomena, discern their underlying meaning, and describe them (Smith, 2004). The researcher was more concerned about making meaning of the content rather than measuring the frequency of shared themes (Smith, 2004). The researcher did a deep dive into the transcript of each individual interview before looking across cases for shared meaning. This process confirmed that the analysis was thorough and grounded in the participants' narratives and shared meaning of the phenomena.

## **Results**

### **Theme 1: Peer support and community building**

Participants highlighted the value of practicum seminars as spaces for peer support and faculty guidance. Jeremy emphasized the sense of “community” he built with his peers in his BSW program, where group discussions provided a comfortable environment for processing experiences. He noted that discussing practice-related topics with peers was beneficial in ways that conversations with a field advisor could not replicate. Similarly, Lejla found her practicum seminar supportive, particularly because her field advisor also served as her professor in other classes. Regular interactions allowed her to seek informal guidance, further strengthening her support network.

### **Theme 2: Structural barriers and inconsistencies**

Many participants expressed frustration with the structure of their practicum seminars. Lejla described her disappointment with the limited opportunities to process experiences, meeting with her seminar class only three times a year. Maria echoed this concern, noting that her seminar primarily focused on completing projects instead of facilitating discussions about challenges and emotional experiences in practicum. Julissa expressed a preference for using her seminar time for self-care rather than attending sessions that did not provide meaningful opportunities for reflection. Stephanie further criticized the inconsistent facilitation by field advisors, pointing out that unproductive sessions diminished the potential benefits of the seminar.

### **Theme 3: Desire for reflective and process-oriented discussions**

Participants consistently voiced a desire for seminars to emphasize reflective conversations. While seminars often included reflective writing and structured topics like poverty, homelessness, and cultural competency, these formats limited authentic sharing. Students like Julissa noted the lack of comfort in expressing emotions and discussing personal stressors in class. Participants expressed the need for facilitators to create supportive environments where students could openly reflect on their practicum experiences.

### **Theme 4: Impact of modality on seminar experience**

The modality of practicum seminars influenced participants’ experiences. Lejla attributed the effectiveness of her BSW practicum seminar to its in-person format, which fostered stronger connections with peers and faculty. In contrast, she described her MSW seminar, conducted online, as lacking opportunities for informal check-ins and organic conversations. Participants indicated that the shift to virtual learning environments diminished the sense of community and support.

### **Theme 5: Need for comprehensive self-care education**

A major concern raised by participants was the absence of meaningful self-care education in the curriculum. Multiple students described the self-care resources provided by their practicum

professors as superficial, referencing examples like “Pinterest bath bomb ideas” and generic tips for relaxation. Virginia criticized these resources as inadequate, calling for genuine conversations about the importance of self-care and its impact on mental health. Caitlin successfully advocated for an elective on self-care at her school, emphasizing the need for students to understand the objectives behind self-care practices. Sharon supported this perspective, expressing her wish for self-care to be a required course focused on developing resilience and managing challenges in practicum placements. Participants agreed that self-care education is essential for preventing burnout, managing countertransference, and sustaining long-term well-being in social work practice.

### **Theme 6: Recommendations for improvement**

Based on their experiences, participants suggested several ways to enhance practicum seminars. They recommended a balanced seminar structure that incorporates both project-related tasks and reflective discussions. Consistency in field advisement and standardized facilitation approaches were highlighted as essential improvements. Additionally, students advocated for the integration of a dedicated self-care course into the curriculum, with evidence-based strategies and practical guidance. Participants also emphasized the importance of fostering informal faculty-student interactions, especially in online programs, to provide additional support and mentorship.

### **Discussion**

While some participants described the practicum seminar as supportive, others indicated frustration in the structure and course content. Some of the participants did not feel the structure provided them with the support or education they wanted or needed to complement their practicum experience. Many students also described choosing social work as a field because of their own personal histories, which shaped their expectations for deeper reflection and support within the seminar. Other participants noted inconsistencies in the format of their seminar from their BSW to their MSW program, often describing the cohort structure of their BSW program, combined with having the same professor for both seminar and practice, as being beneficial. They found their MSW seminar lacked cohesiveness and intimacy that would allow them to be vulnerable and share their experiences.

A lack of substantive education on self-care was undoubtedly the biggest concern amongst the participants of this study. The results indicated a need and a want for a curriculum focused on the purpose of self-care, not just what they can do to take care of themselves. Some participants noted that professors “glazed over the topic” or posted Pinterest pictures of how to take care of yourself rather than discuss why self-care is so imperative as a social worker, especially for students with ACEs. The results suggest students are eager for education and support on self-care to understand the implications of their early experiences of adversity on their practicum education. The latter will help them transform from survivor to healer.

## **Implications for social work education**

The results of this study confirm that many students seek social work because of their lived experiences of adversity. People choose social work because they want to give back the help they receive. While the “wounded healer” phenomenon is not new to social work educators, the results of this study demonstrate that there still lacks a consistent framework with which to successfully educate and prepare social work students with histories of adversity. There is a plethora of literature about the benefits of using a trauma-informed care framework in practicum settings, supervisory relationships, and in the classroom (Berger & Quiros, 2016; Carello & Butler, 2015; Lewis et al., 2022; Knight, 2018, 2019; Sanders, 2022). There is also a significant amount of data supporting the need for social work educators to implement a curriculum on self-care strategies in the classroom (Newcomb, et al., 2019; Shannon et al., 2014). The results of this study demonstrate that a gap persists between what is in literature and what is practiced in social work education. The participants clearly see the practicum seminar as an important component of their social work education and one that can help them develop professionally if implemented successfully. Thus, educators are in a unique position to provide a safe learning environment in which students transform from survivors to wounded healers (Goldberg et al., 2015; Newcomb et al., 2017).

There is no doubt that the practicum seminar is invaluable to the quality of students’ practicum education experiences (Poe & Hunter, 2009). The practicum seminar can assist students in the integration of what they learn in the classroom into practice with their clients at their practicum site. Unfortunately, the participants in this study reported the opposite about their seminar experiences, noting that there was a lack of open space to talk about cases. Participants described a lack of certainty about the purpose of their integrative seminar and described a lack of comfortability in reflecting on their practicum experiences. The variations in the practicum seminar reported amongst the participants draw attention to the persistence of field seminar as “neglected area of pedagogical analysis in social work education,” (Poe & Hunter, 2009, p. 31).

In the literature there is a clear consensus that self-care strategies are necessary skills that should be embedded into daily practice to alleviate the risk of developing burnout or vicarious traumatization (Humphrey, 2013; Lewis & King, 2019). Social work students are exposed to the challenges of the profession early in their practicum settings. As such, it is important they are taught the significance of self-care practice in protecting themselves both personally and professionally. As in many areas of social work education, there seems to be a gap between what we preach and what we teach. The participants’ experiential statements in this study indicate that faculty do not go in-depth enough about the professional benefits of self-care as students require, especially students with ACEs. A sentiment echoed throughout the participants’ statements and validated in the literature is the need for “sustained and systemic curricular attention” to self-care in practicum education to help students develop self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and professionalism (Lewis & King, 2019, p. 98).

A universal concern among participants in this study was the lack of substantive, high-quality education on self-care, indicating a clear need for more guidance and specifications on how to

teach self-care to emerging social work professionals. Additionally, participants questioned why self-care is not considered a core competency, especially given the high rates of burnout and vicarious trauma experienced by social work students. The literature identifies several barriers, including the need for social work programs to balance theory and practice teaching, and a lack of clarity about who is responsible for teaching self-care (Lewis & King, 2019; Street, 2019). Should it be the professor, the practicum advisor, or the practicum supervisor? The literature also suggests supervisors may be hesitant to engage students, especially if they have a history of childhood adversity (Street, 2019). Also, participants in this study indicate that students are reluctant to engage in deeper discussions about their reactions to clients, for fear they may be viewed as lacking competence.

While CSWE (2022) notes the importance of self-care, a gap persists in social work practicum education that could have significant repercussions for students. Burnout is a real phenomenon, and students with ACEs are more susceptible to experiences of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization (Knight, 2018). Given the rise in students enduring mental health symptomatology because of experiences of adversity, this is a critical time for professional social work associations to re-evaluate the core competencies to include self-care. The results of this study, together with the existing literature, demonstrate a growing need for guidance on how to teach the why and purpose of self-care. It is not enough for educators to give ideas of what students can do for self-care; there needs to be a more systematic approach with targeted outcomes from professional social work associations to help students connect the purpose of self-care with their professional development.

Another area for future research is the practicum seminar which appears to be a very overlooked essential part of the curriculum. From the results of this study, it appears the content of the seminars does not always match the educational or emotional needs of the students. A few areas to probe deeper with regards to the seminar are the different experiences with online versus in person practicum seminars as it was reported by some participants that they felt the online modality of their seminar did not always foster the connection they were seeking with their peers or professor. Also, the results of this study demonstrated disparities in the BSW and MSW practicum seminar, indicating a need to explore more deeply the differences between BSW and MSW students' experiences in practicum. An additional area to explore is whether having a more uniform curriculum for seminars would ensure it benefits more students. Also, would having a practicum required on a weekly basis, much like their core classes, be of benefit to their practicum education?

The education of self-care requires more attention. There is an abundance of literature supporting its importance. There have been studies demonstrating the benefits of self-care modules, but the results of this study suggest that the approach is inconsistent and does not delve as deeply as students are looking for. Students want to understand the "why" of self-care. They know how to take bubble baths and go for walks, but they want to understand why it is so important in social work practice. A pertinent area of research may be assessing the faculty

members' comfort in teaching self-care in a way that allows for a deeper level of vulnerability in the social work classroom.

Another area to investigate is systems that do not allow self-care. For example, social work students are encouraged to practice self-care, but too often the faculty members offering this encouragement are also overloaded and may be lacking in time, money, and resources to practice their own self-care effectively. The participants of this study expressed their concern about feeling like "unpaid labor" but there are parallels to supervisors, faculty, and social workers in general feeling overworked and underpaid. Often, we talk about self-care to remedy the feeling of being overburdened, but one must question if it is self-care we are seeking or if it is to be valued monetarily in a more equitable way.

## **Limitations**

A potential limitation of this study may be the small homogenous sample size making it not generalizable to all social work students with ACEs. This potential limitation is grounded in evidence from the literature in which many IPA studies have small homogenous sample sizes given the nature of the methodology. A further limitation of the sample was that all the participants identified as having ACEs. Thus, this study does not capture the experiences of students without ACEs. In addition, the study included a large percentage of students in advanced standing programs limiting the data on traditional two-year MSW students' experience in practicum education.

Another limitation is bias. Due to the phenomenological nature of this study, the researcher is mindful of any bias that may negatively impact data elicited from the participants. The researcher employed bracketing prior to and throughout the research process to maintain objectivity. Participants may have also experienced recall bias as they were recounting childhood adversities. It is possible that participants either embellished their experiences or minimized them. In addition, due to the vulnerable nature of the study, participants may have been reluctant to share their experiences with full transparency.

A final limitation may be the decision not to use the original 10 item ACE scale to determine experiences of adversity. While the ACE scale is widely used and validated, it does not account for every adversity that social work students may have endured, which is why the researcher chose not to include it in this study. In addition, the item selection on the original ACE scale did not follow a systematic process and some of the more important ACEs to consider were not included such as peer victimization, exposure to community violence, and lower socio-economic status (McLennan et. al, 2020). The exclusion of poverty is concerning as is the exclusion of experiences of oppression and discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, and ability (McLennan et al., 2020).

To follow the philosophy of IPA, which emphasizes subjectivity, personal meaning-making, and the exploration of lived experiences, the researcher feels it is imperative to create a safe space for students (Smith, et al. 2009). This environment allows them to share their experiences of adversity and the perceived effects on their physical, emotional, and social well-being. The

researcher was transparent, mindful, and reflective throughout the recruitment and data collection processes. In addition, the researcher recognized that the sociocultural environment of college campuses is changing and there are more diverse students regarding race, gender, sexuality, ability, and socioeconomic status and more first-generation students. Thus, it was critical to consider the varied student experiences of adversity and have been interpreted by the individual student as traumatic.

## **Conclusion**

This study used an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the relationship between ACEs and social work students' practicum education. The sample included 18 social work students from various social work programs across the United States. Through the application of IPA, the researcher created a space for the participants to reflect on the nuances of the relationship between their childhood adversity and professional development as social workers in their practicum placement. IPA allows in-depth exploration of the essence of the phenomena, and the meaning individuals ascribe to it. The results of this study can be used to inform a best practice model using a trauma-informed and inclusive pedagogy approach to integrative seminar.

Overall, this study further supports the existing research on social work students with ACEs and sheds light on multiple areas of practicum education where there are gaps that require further research and intervention. With the changing demographics in social work education, it is a pivotal time to reassess how best to support students completing their practicum education. The integrative seminar has been used by schools of social work to complement students' practicum placement experiences. However, the results from this study, consistent with the literature, demonstrate that the practicum seminar is an essential but often overlooked part of the social work curriculum.

The personal experiential statements from the participants illuminate the influence of their childhood adversities on their professional development shedding light on their educational and relational needs. The results of this study highlight multiple areas in practicum education that require further assessment and intervention to better meet the needs of social work students who have experienced adverse childhood experiences. Through the participants lived experiences and reflections on what does and does not work for them in practicum education, we can develop an integrative seminar framework that is transformative and empowers students to shift from being a survivor to a healer.

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There were no conflicts of interest.

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### **Author biography**

**Dr. Emily Murphy** joined the Mercy University Social Work Program as a full-time faculty member in August 2015. She has over 13 years of experience working directly with children and families in the New York City child welfare system. She defended her dissertation, “The Practicum Experiences of Social Work Students with Adverse Childhood Experiences: An Interpretive Phenomenological Inquiry” in April of 2024 and graduated with her doctorate degree, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024, from Yeshiva University. Emily is currently the co-director for the Center of Social and Criminal Justice at Mercy University. Her research interests are emerging adulthood, adverse childhood experiences, anti-racist social work practice, and inclusive pedagogical practices in the social work classroom. She also does private practice work with adults with histories of childhood trauma and mental health challenges.