

Voices from the Field

Social action field placements: Preparing social work students for macro-level practice

Tanya Smith¹ and Valerya Edelman¹

Abstract

Throughout social work’s professional history, the promotion of social justice has been a central yet challenging endeavour. Contemporary guidelines from the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2024) Code of Ethics, Values and Guiding Principles state “social workers demonstrate respect for all people facing oppression, exclusion, racism, and discrimination *by advocating for: [...] broader system change to policy, social programs, and legislative change* [emphasis added]” (p.11). However, conventional social work curriculums often leave students ill-prepared to fulfill these responsibilities; students learn about social issues though not always how to advance systemic change (Clarke et al., 2017; Dudziak & Profitt, 2012; Greason & Plourde, 2025). This gap can be addressed by expanding macro-level field placement opportunities (Apgar, 2021b; Drolet et al., 2024; Mann-Johnson et al., 2024). Drawing from over 17 years of experience in St. Thomas University’s (STU) School of Social Work, this article describes how a mandatory social action field placement and co-requisite classroom-based course can prepare students for effective political and civic engagement. Recognizing that field education is social work’s cornerstone pedagogy for preparing students for professional practice, this paper aims to support the expansion of macro-level field placements throughout schools of social work.

Keywords

structural social work, social action, social justice, social work field education, experiential learning

Résumé

Tout au long de l’histoire de la profession du travail social, la promotion de la justice sociale a constitué un objectif central, bien que complexe. Les lignes directrices contemporaines du *Code d’éthique, valeurs et lignes directrices* de l’Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux (2024) énoncent que “Les TS font preuve de respect envers toutes les personnes victimes d’oppression, d’exclusion, de racisme et de discrimination en privilégiant: [...] un changement systémique plus général aux politiques, aux programmes sociaux et aux lois [nous soulignons]” (p. 15). Cependant, les programmes d’enseignement traditionnels en travail

social laissent souvent les étudiant·es mal préparé·es à assumer ces responsabilités. Les étudiant·es acquièrent une compréhension des enjeux sociaux, mais n'apprennent pas toujours à appliquer des mesures correctives pour favoriser un changement systémique (Clarke et al., 2017; Dudziak & Profitt, 2012; Greason & Plourde, 2025). Cet écart peut être comblé par l'élargissement des possibilités de stages sur le plan macro (Apgar, 2021b; Drolet et al., 2024; Mann-Johnson et al., 2024). S'appuyant sur plus de dix-sept années d'expérience à l'École de Travail Social de l'Université St. Thomas (STU), cet article décrit comment un stage obligatoire en action sociale, jumelé à un cours connexe en salle de classe, peut préparer les étudiantes et étudiants à un engagement politique et civique efficace. Reconnaisant que la formation pratique constitue la pierre angulaire de la pédagogie en travail social, cet article vise à soutenir l'expansion des stages de niveau macro dans l'ensemble des écoles de travail social.

Mots clés

travail social structurel, action sociale, justice sociale, formation pratique en travail social, apprentissage expérientiel

1 School of Social Work, St. Thomas University

Corresponding author:

Tanya Smith, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Rm 311 Brian Mulroney Hall, St. Thomas University, 51 Dineen Drive, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, E3B 5G3. Email: tdsmith@stu.ca

Introduction

Social work involves micro- and macro-level practices. While micro-level refers to supportive direct or clinical practices that aim to make change on an individual level, macro-level refers to a collective, collaborative practice that aims to change systems (Reisch, 2016). Macro-level social work translates private troubles into public issues, uses a critical lens to question societal conditions that are accepted as inevitable, and promotes “structural solutions to systemic inequalities and various forms of oppression” (Reisch, 2016, p. 6). The practice involves “policy development, research analysis, advocacy, administration or organizing and mobilization that aims to influence the system” (Mann-Johnson et al., 2024, p. 4).

Although macro-level practice embodies social work's commitment to social justice, human dignity, and human rights (Baines & Clark, 2022; Reisch, 2016), over the last forty years, neoliberal discourse on individualism, self-sufficiency, and market interests have permeated social programs in Canada, and consequently, social work's disproportionate concentration on individual and family practice (Greason & Plourde, 2025; Mann-Johnson et al., 2024; Ng, 2017; Reisch, 2016; Weinberg & Banks, 2019). Further, funding cuts through austerity projects left agencies under-resourced; social workers are expected to rapidly process large caseloads and abandon advocacy work (George et al., 2007; Ng, 2017; Weinberg & Banks, 2019). Adapting to job market realities, the majority of social work field education focuses exclusively on micro-level practice (Drolet et al., 2024; Mann-Johnson et al., 2024). Many scholars, educators, and

emerging practitioners raised concerns that social work education often leaves emerging social workers ill prepared for macro-level practice and are calling for its expansion into field placements (Apgar, 2021a; Drolet et al., 2024; Mann-Johnson et al., 2024; Ng, 2017). The problems that social workers encounter, such as poverty, addiction, and gender-based violence, are rooted in systemic injustice that cannot be solved through case management alone. Systemic problems require systemic solutions that social workers must be prepared to engage in.

Despite the pressures to concentrate on micro-level practice (Mann-Johnson et al., 2024), the structural social work program at St. Thomas University's (STU) School of Social Work integrates social action field placements into their curriculum, providing opportunities for students to learn macro-level practice skills (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). Social action includes a multitude of political strategies and activities that focus on institutional change and gaining power to transform oppressive social and economic conditions into humane conditions that foster equity, fairness, and social justice (Apgar, 2021a; Weil et al., 2013). The knowledge gained from learning social action in the field can equip social workers in their efforts to advance human rights, inclusive communities, and robust social welfare policies, programs and legislation. This article aims to bolster fellow educators' efforts by sharing our insights from coordinating STU's Social Action Placements and teaching its accompanying Organizing for Social Action course.

Structural social work and social action

Enlivened by civil rights movements and the rise of radical social workers' interest in Marxism, structural social work was formally introduced by the School of Social Work at Carleton University in 1974 (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). The structural approach offered critical analyses that understood individual problems as resulting from class exploitation within broader social, political, and economic conditions. Moreover, the structural practice called for social action and engagement in political processes with a goal to advance egalitarianism (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). With a critical theory base, structural social work has evolved from viewing class as the primary oppression and towards understanding that domination is predicated on intersecting social identities based on sexualities, race, gender, age, and abilities (Crenshaw, 1989; Shewell, 2022). As such, it guides steadfast integration of social action in diverse social work settings.

Social action focuses on changing institutions such as laws, policies, or those who wield authority (Weil et al., 2013). Despite embedded protections in various structures that serve to maintain the status quo (and stifle those who challenge it), social action has been a core element of social work since the 1800's Settlement House movement, successfully advancing broad system changes and strengthening human rights in Canada (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011; Ng, 2017; Wilson, 2017). Through intentional processes of authentic collaboration, group work, mutual aid, and solidarity, social action aims to rebalance power and transform unjust social, economic, and political conditions (Brown, 2017; Dudziak & Profitt, 2012; Lakey, 2018; Steinberg, 2014; Weil et al., 2013).

There is widespread recognition that exclusive micro-level practice is ineffective for addressing the root causes of day-to-day problems social workers encounter, such as attacks on

social welfare, public health care crisis, poverty and increasing inequality, heteropatriarchy and cisnormativity, racism and colonialism, ableism, and institutional practices that target coalitional relationships (Baines & Clark, 2022; Hanes et al., 2022; Ng, 2017; Pino, 2022; Reisch, 2016). While there is a call for social work to embrace macro-level practices (Apgar, 2021a; Drolet et al., 2024; Mann-Johnson et al., 2024) “that go beyond individual adaptation and resilience” (Reisch, 2016, p. 7), faced with a neoliberal agenda that steers practices away from advocacy deemed as “too political,” social workers grapple with how to engage in macro-level practice (Ng, 2017, p. 155). We argue that social workers can recapture our deep history in social movements, including group work skills and social action focus. Through social action field education, schools of social work can take the pivotal opportunity to prepare students for social action organizing by teaching them how to locate the sources of domination, present an alternative vision, raise public awareness, influence public opinions, and create mechanisms to act collectively, aiming actions towards those who have a responsibility to change them (Lakey, 2018; St. Thomas University, 2024). This paper will show how STU’s social action field placements help develop students’ macro-level practice, enabling them to integrate civic and political engagement into their generalist social work practice skill set, and to purposefully contribute to collective efforts for greater social justice.

Social action field placements at St. Thomas University School of Social Work

In STU’s School of Social Work, we actively resist neoliberal pressures to reduce our profession to cost-effective, efficient managerialism. Instead, we aim to cultivate structural social work education that centers group work, mutual aid, and the raising of critical consciousness to build egalitarian conditions. Following a 2005 curriculum review and recognizing that knowledge of social issues did not automatically lead to the promotion of social justice, the school embedded a mandatory Social Action Placement in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program with an accompanying Organizing for Action with Diverse Groups course (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). These 250-hour field placements focus on community level or macro interventions, rather than individual or family interventions characteristic of conventional micro-level placements, enabling third-year BSW students to learn how to change unjust social and economic conditions (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012).

Project-based social action

Each Social Action Placement at STU involves a project that addresses a social issue. Students participate in a variety of social action activities that could include rallies, public meetings, research, and public engagement. In all Social Action Placements, the project has a clear political goal for change and public facing social action activities. Students learn strategies to raise awareness about issues, including media and political engagement, which bring the project to the attention of decision-makers.

Examples of social action placements

Research-Based Social Action: In 2024 the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research hosted four students to conduct an environmental scan and literature review on experiences of men who perpetrate domestic/intimate partner violence, who experience this type of violence, and the supports available to them in Atlantic Canada. Using critical social work to understand the root structural factors of the issues, and considering the experiences of men, the students identified that men who act violently lack resources that could help them change their behaviour. Their project identified which barriers and gaps are preventing men from accessing services and which strategies could improve access. The students engaged in media interviews to raise awareness, encourage conversations, and promote action-oriented research that could shape policies to effectively address domestic/intimate partner violence. Students expressed that the social action field experience inspired and fueled their passion to understand gender-related issues, challenge norms, and advocate (St. Thomas University, 2024).

Call to Action: In 2025 AIDS New Brunswick hosted four students to create a call-to-action to reform laws that criminalize HIV non-disclosure. In addition to the call-to-action for policy reform around this discriminatory practice, students used media to engage in public education to promote harm reduction and raise awareness of the unjust targeting of people with HIV. The students emphasized the significance of applying social justice theory to practice through active engagement in the Social Action Placement. This field experience enabled the students to utilize strategies to advocate on a broader scale, apply classroom theories, step out of their comfort zone, and know they are part of a team working to effect change (St. Thomas University, 2025).

Group approach to field education

The field education coordinator matches a group of 2-4 students with a community agency for their Social Action Placement. By working together on their social action project, students learn the importance of group work in political activism, social action, community work and effecting social change (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). They develop necessary skills for a group to be successful such as planning, organizing, and communicating (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). Further, they center mutual aid, the process and outcomes of group members supporting and helping each other, by developing the practice wisdom to identify their strengths in group dynamics and how to support the skills of others; viewing success as a group rather than an individual achievement; developing shared goals within the field placement; and developing a sense of collective identity that serves to maintain strength during ebbs and flows of social change (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012; Giacomucci, 2021; Steinberg, 2014).

Field education co-requisite course: Organizing for action with diverse groups

To further prepare students to integrate social action in their professional practice, they are enrolled in the co-requisite Organizing for Action with Diverse Groups course where they learn about social movements, important theoretical concepts, and skills to enact social change in practice (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). Many students struggle with a sense of helplessness when facing unyielding social problems, however, as students learn to connect social action with the rich history of social movements, they develop an understanding that change occurs as a result of collective efforts, and the endeavor becomes achievable (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). Common assumptions among students that social action means “angry protests” is challenged by teaching the multiple activities and roles social workers participate in that target political change (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012, p. 242). In-class activities such as consensus building (Hertzbert et al., 2013), creating a zine library, and writing opposite to the editorial pages (opeds) expand students’ understanding of social action activities.

Through learning about methods such as popular education (Freire, 1981), reinforcing group work that centers the value of mutual aid, integrating critical theories such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), in-class activities and reflective assignments, students learn practical and effective macro-level theories and skills. (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). The culmination of this course is a Social Action Fair where the students present poster presentations on their social action projects from their field placements, engaging in critical conscious raising with community members, university staff and faculty, policymakers, and influencers.

Overcoming barriers in social action placements

Social action field placements can be challenging to secure as most social work practice settings focus on helping people adjust to their environments, rather than engaging in social action to transform structural inequalities (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011; Mullaly & Dupré, 2019; Ng, 2017; Wilson, 2017). Additionally, Canadian governments’ neoliberal projects have restricted funding for advocacy (Ng, 2017; Weinberg & Banks, 2019) and reduced funding for programs, leaving agencies facing high demands for services while often operating with staff shortages (Weinberg & Banks, 2019; Shields et al., 2024; George et al., 2007). Many agency social workers who wish to advance social justice goals do not have the capacity to supervise field education and/or are pressured to maintain the status quo, fearing that engaging in social action would result in material consequences (Ng, 2017). STU is overcoming these barriers by engaging with smaller agencies oriented to social justice, arranging co-supervision, collaborating with agencies to create projects as long-term investments that meet agency needs, building student placement readiness through course work, and providing students with faculty support throughout the placement.

Conclusion

The social work profession has substantial potential to effect system changes if social work education prepares students to engage in social action. Through harnessing field education, the signature pedagogy of social work (Boitel & Fromm, 2014; Canadian Association of Social Work Education, 2021; Wayne et al., 2010), STU's School of Social Work strives to animate the often-abstract ideal of promoting social justice (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). STU's Social Action Field Placements and the accompanying Organizing for Action Course, teaches students to collaborate with community agencies, organize actions in solidarity, engage in advocacy, and confidently integrate the promotion of social justice into their professional practice. STU's approach to social work field education could serve as a model for innovative social work education.

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ORCID IDs

Tanya Smith <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1902-7404>

Valerya Edelman <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6098-2079>

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Author biographies

Tanya Smith is an Assistant Professor and Field Education Coordinator with the Faculty of Social Work at St. Thomas University. Much of her practice and research interests relate to field education, maintaining wellness in trauma-exposed workplaces, and gender-based violence.

Valerya Edelman is an Assistant Professor with the Faculty of Social Work at St. Thomas University. Her social work research focuses on dismantling structures of marginalization among highly stigmatized populations, aiming to inform government policies and service provision.