



TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION: NEW INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

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ISBN 978-1-77385-440-3

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Field Education, Disability, and COVID-19: Navigating a Virtual World

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In the last year, we have seen immense shifts in our local communities, as well as globally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Canada, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Ontario on 25 January 2020, and the World Health Organization declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (CTV, 2021). Following this, Ontario and Alberta were the first two provinces in Canada to declare a “State of Emergency” (CTV, 2021). Attempting to “flatten the curve,” governments asked people to practice physical distancing to stop the spread of the virus. In Alberta, 571,806 COVID-19 cases and 4,321 deaths have been recorded as of May 2022 (Alberta, 2022). In addition to loss of life, COVID-19 has also had social and economic impacts as many people lost their jobs and had to isolate from their natural support systems.

Among all aspects of society impacted by the COVID-19 measures was higher education (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Day et al., 2021). Schools and Faculties of Social Work had to adjust course delivery to respect public health restrictions (Canadian Association for Social Work Education [CASWE], 2020; Tortotelli et al., 2020). This posed unique challenges for field education as many students had to cancel their practicum placements and/or find ways to complete their hours through remote work. Effective 20 March 2020, the Canadian Association for Social Work Education

(CASWE) asked that all “field education placements be suspended and/or moved to Remote Learning Plans (RLP)” (2020, n.p.). In addition, they noted that “students who have completed 75% of the required placement hours to a satisfactory level will be evaluated as having met the field placement requirements” (n.p.). This decision offered uniform guidelines for Schools/Faculties of Social Work to follow.

Although data from Canadian Social Work programs do not exist, at the very beginning of the pandemic, the US Council on Social Work Education (2020) administered a survey to the deans and directors of MSW and BSW programs ($N = 197$) and field directors ($N = 235$). Key findings suggest that only 3% of student placements were unaffected by the pandemic, thus most students had to modify their placements and/or cancel them altogether. To this end, 72.8% of deans and directors and 67.5% of field directors communicated that they had a continuity plan if further disruptions to field placements were to occur (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020).

Studies that examine the impact of COVID-19 on field education in Canada give us a glimpse into both the challenges and opportunities brought about by the shift to virtual course delivery (Day et al., 2021; Drolet et al., 2020; Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020). In this chapter, I contribute to this body of scholarship by offering key insights I gained while supervising two social work practicum students during the 2020 winter and the fall terms. Considering that social work field education is varied, my reflections offer specific insights into the impact of COVID-19 within the disability sector. I write these reflections to centre social justice goals during a period of uncertainty that was brought on by COVID-19. To do this, I begin by grounding myself in critical disability theories. I will then provide an overview of the importance of field education in social work and discuss the impact of COVID-19 on field education. Lastly, I will share key insights related to my experience of COVID-19 as a field supervisor, the construction of disability, and the use of Information and Communication Technologies to facilitate practicum placements.

Critical Disability Studies

Critical disability studies (CDS) refer to a varied set of approaches which seek to engage with disability as a cultural, political, and social

phenomenon (Goodley, 2013; Schalk, 2017). CDS holds that “disability is *the* space from which we think through a host of political, theoretical, and practical issues that are relevant to all” (Goodley et al., 2012, p.3, emphasis in original text). As such, CDS seeks to scrutinize “not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations” (Minich, 2016, p. 3).

CDS is largely informed by Foucault, who highlighted how relations of power impact the way a given society constructs disability (Carlson, 2001; Tremain, 2017). Grounded in this, critical disability scholars note that the sociopolitical construction of disability has historical roots and is shaped by the context in which we live. Goodley (2013) recognizes

that we are living in a time of complex identity politics, of huge debates around the ethics of care, political and theoretical appeals to the significance of the body, in a climate of economic downturn that is leading yet again to reformulations of what counts as disabled. (p. 632)

Therefore, CDS recognize that disability is not a fixed identity category because anyone can acquire a disability during their lifetime (Garland-Thomson, 2002). In addition, rather than merely acknowledging how people with disabilities are constructed, CDS scholars seek to transform the conditions which oppress people with disabilities. They do this through relying on an interdisciplinary approach, often drawing links to other critical theories such as critical race theory, postcolonial theory, and queer theory (Hall & Zalta, 2019; Sleeter 2010).

CDS is an important framework to use within social work because, despite their commitment to social justice, social workers are often critiqued for their reliance on medical models of disability (Hughes, 2017; Shakespeare, 2006). The medical model of disability views disability as an individualized, medical concern, thus directing attention to diagnosis, treatment, cure, and recovery while neglecting the potential of people with disabilities (Hughes, 2017; Shakespeare, 2006). In addition, many scholars have called for “a critical renewal of the profession” (Morley & Clark, 2020, p. 1049), which focuses on challenging neoliberal practices in

order to depoliticize social work practice and encourage managerialism within social work agencies (Hanesworth, 2017; Morley & Clark, 2021). Indeed, Ayala et al. (2018) note that even prior to COVID-19, field education within social work was in “crisis” because of budget cuts, increased enrollments, and fewer practicum opportunities (Ayala et al., 2018). Thus, being grounded in CDS, which questions neoliberal practices, was especially useful for both myself and the students as we experienced the shift to a virtual format and the changes that occurred to funding schemes.

Importance of Field Education

Field education is an important aspect of the social work degree in Canada, and internationally. In 2008, the Council on Social Work Education in the US recognized field education as a signature pedagogy for social work (CSWE, 2008). First coined by Shulman (2005), signature pedagogies refer to unique ways of teaching and learning used in a particular profession. Within the Canadian context, CASWE does not construct field education as a signature pedagogy but promotes “field education as a central component of social work education” (CASWE, 2021, n.p.). Field education is central to social work because it helps students develop their professional identities by allowing them to experience frontline work and interaction with clients (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021; Wayne et al., 2013). For this reason, field education has received significant attention within social work, with most studies reinforcing the transformative role that field education can play in student learning (Barlow & Hall, 2007; Didham et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2007; Pooler et al., 2012; Svoboda et al., 2013).

Current studies also highlight limitations to current models of field education in social work (Archer-Kuhn, 2021; Boitel & Fromm, 2014). For example, Wayne et al. (2010) examined Shulman’s criteria for signature pedagogy and argue that there are both congruence and disparities in how field education fits as a social work signature pedagogy. For example, there is congruence with social work students’ requirement to complete field placements, but disparities with students’ public performance and peer-to-peer accountability (Wayne et al., 2010). Similarly, Archer-Kuhn et al. (2021), in a mixed-methods study which explored the understanding of students, field education staff, and faculty members, suggest that while

these stakeholders understand the importance of field education, they do not always agree as to what is signature pedagogy for social work.

Commenting on current limitations, scholars also suggest that many field placements are more concerned with risk-management than creating an environment where practicum students can engage in reflective practice (Hay et al., 2019). Student supervision, therefore, may often “be viewed as an ancillary activity when agencies are stretched thin” (Davis & Mirick, 2021, p. 3). Thus, social work students have expressed that many field placements lack a social justice lens (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021). In addition, and most relevant to this paper, another critique is that there are certain fields of practice which are not integrated well within field education. In particular, a limited number of students complete field placements in the disability sector (Moyle, 2016; Roulstone, 2012). Scholars suggest that this could be because social work education and training continue to maintain an “us versus them” approach, which tasks social workers with fixing clients rather than working with them to challenge ableism (Meekosha & Soldatic, 2013; Roulstone, 2012). In addition, social work curriculum, more generally, lacks a focus on disability (Morgan, 2012; Moyle, 2016) which often leads social workers to perpetuate ableist practices and discourses (El-Lahib, 2020). As ableism was something obvious during COVID-19, it is important to consider the role of field education in challenging ableism perceptions.

Impact of COVID-19

Field education, like social work practice, is impacted by the contexts in which it occurs, and must respond accordingly. To respond to COVID-19, most social work placements had to transition to a virtual format, thus leading to new challenges for all those involved in this process (Dempsey et al., 2021). Studies suggest that field education is, under normal circumstances, a stressful encounter for students as they experience anxieties related to their decision-making abilities, establishing and maintaining boundaries, and the quality of relationship with the field supervisor (Baird, 2016; Goodyear, 2014; Knight, 2018). These stressors were heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the disruption caused to field education and the public health crisis, which asked social workers to

serve others while ensuring their own health and safety (Dempsey et al., 2021; Davis & Mirick, 2021; Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020).

Emerging research offers insights into the impact of COVID-19 measures on social work field education. Within the Canadian context, Schools/Faculties of Social Work were able to respond to the pandemic in innovative ways. Offering an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on social work education, Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020) recognize that relationships were impacted because of the uncertainty brought about by COVID-19. In addition, they note both challenges and opportunities that emerged with regard to pedagogy and collaboration. They highlight that clear and accurate communication with students, which was at times missing because of the chaos caused by COVID-19, was necessary to help students navigate the fear and uncertainty caused by the virus (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020). Regarding field education, they discovered that a virtual self-directed practicum placement, which the faculty had started to pilot, “is a viable option to help support both student learning and relieve some of the pressures experienced by the field staff in trying to find enough agency placements” (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020, p. 1016).

Drolet et al. (2020) also comment on the innovative approaches that emerged as field education transitioned to a virtual format. Specifically, they share how the Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership, which was established in 2019, responded to the pandemic. TFEL is a project that aims to bring together various local and international stakeholders interested in exploring social work field education. During COVID-19, TFEL offered remote field education opportunities for students, allowing many faculty members and students to find innovative ways to carry out TFEL activities (Drolet et al., 2020). These activities included virtual partnership among collaborators of the program, networking opportunities for students, and mentorship opportunities. Importantly, Indigenous participants point to the emergence of an “Indigisphere” that allowed individuals to continue practicing Indigenous ways of knowing and doing in virtual format, whereas racialized students highlighted that those virtual spaces offered a safe space for them to engage in discussions around social work field education.

Kourgjantakis and Lee (2020) and Tortorelli et al. (2020) explain that among the opportunities created by the shift to a virtual format was the

increasing use of simulation in field education. Tortorelli et al. (2020) offer findings from a scoping review of studies that examine the use of simulation in social work education. They note that simulation is fitting for practice education as it allows students to bring their own experiences into the classroom and offers them a chance to experiment with new ideas and activities (Tortorelli et al., 2020). In addition, simulation is an important way to integrate theory and practice, suggesting that the successful use of simulation during COVID-19 warrants exploring it as an alternate field placement option, even after the pandemic (Tortorelli et al., 2020).

Offering a more specific elaboration of simulation, Kourgiantakis and Lee (2020) describe “Practice Friday” as a useful tool for Master of Social Work students whose practicum placements were disrupted. Two groups of 10 MSW students met for 3.5 hours each Friday to engage in case formulation, assessments, intervention, and termination stages of a given case study. These cases were situated within the COVID-19 pandemic and the global anti-racist movement, thus their discussion helped “students enhance meta competence, including self-awareness, self-reflection, emotion regulation, and professional judgment” (p. 763).

All these studies highlight the importance of clear guidelines and communication among stakeholders involved in the field education process (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020; Tortorelli et al., 2020). Indeed, literature coming from outside of Canada also emphasizes the importance of clear communication. Dempsey et al. (2021), for example, relied on the concept of shared trauma to review how the Field Learning and Community Partnerships (FLCP) at New York University addressed challenges related to COVID-19. Among the key learnings for the FLCP, their paper suggests, was the importance of “providing clear and consistent communication to students in a timely manner” (p. 7). To this end, Morley and Clark (2020), with a focus on Australia, share that timely communication allowed Queensland University of Technology to continue offering placements with critical pedagogic approaches.

Reflections on Supervising Students During COVID-19

To add to the existing literature, I share in this chapter insights into the shifts that occurred in field education within a disability agency in Alberta, Canada. During the COVID-19 pandemic I supervised two BSW

social work practicum students. Ari (pseudonym) was completing her practicum during the winter 2020 term and had to transition to a remote placement while Kaitlyn (pseudonym) completed her entire practicum remotely during the fall 2020 term. The activities that students completed were: calling clients for mental-health check-ins; attending and co-facilitating a parent-support group for parents of children with disabilities; co-facilitating a support and social group for adults (18+) with disabilities; and participating in advocacy work for people with disabilities who experience poverty. The agency where I worked had offices in two of the largest cities in Alberta — Calgary and Edmonton. While before the pandemic the offices worked mostly independently of each other, the move to online service delivery required us to coordinate more closely in order to offer streamlined services.

In general, transitioning to an online format was not difficult for me because I was familiar with both of the programs we used to make this transition, Zoom and Microsoft Teams. My experience as a supervisor, however, had its challenges. This is because in addition to keeping up to date and being familiar with the guidelines that our agency created, I had to remain updated of the guidelines set by the university. This meant that I spent hours outside of my usually work-time to make sure that I was being fair to Ari and that she had all the supports that she needed. While doing this, I had to ensure that I was still offering the necessary services to our clients on the one hand, and that I was taking care of myself and supporting my family, on the other, as we dealt with the uncertainty of the pandemic. I felt validated when I read about these tensions in emerging literature:

As educators, we had to facilitate teaching and learning around crisis response, appropriate termination, and self-regulation as part of holistic competence in social work practice. As trained clinicians, we were pained by the loss of service to clients and the meaning of that loss for students and agency partners. (Dempsey et al., 2021, p. 2)

To balance my commitments to clients, students, my family, and myself, I chose to write about the dilemmas I was experiencing. Journaling is a key

aspect of my commitment to reflexive practice, as it allows me to make sense of my feelings and thoughts and become aware of how my own biases and ways of being exacerbated or helped me cope with stressful situations. Indeed, existing literature points to the benefits of journaling, highlighting that writing about difficult situations we experience can facilitate cognitive processing (Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). Studies also suggest that journaling can support the development of reflective practice for helping professionals as it allows them to dialogue with themselves (Billings, 2006; Woodbridge & O'Brian, 2017). Being aware of this, I committed to write about how I was feeling at the end of each workday. Knowing that I would have some time, at the end of the day, to reflect on the sudden shifts that were happening to my workspace, helped me navigate the rapidly changing reality of social work practice. These reflections, in particular, made me aware of how I relate to practicum students, which allowed me to foster meaningful supervision relationships in an online format.

I often feel the pressure of acting like a role model for the students I supervise, yet, at the same time, I tend to treat them as colleagues. This means that, like Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020), I found myself oscillating between (1) ensuring that Ari completes all her learning agreement tasks, and (2) telling myself that, when dealing with a pandemic, other things were more important than the learning agreement. As I dealt with these dilemmas, I was also acutely aware that “research has consistently shown that a supportive field instructor relationship is crucial to student learning. Indeed, student satisfaction has been directly linked to their perception of the quality of supervision being provided” (Dempsey et al., 2020, p. 4). Since I had already established a relationship with Ari, I decided to discuss these dilemmas with her and let her know why I thought completing the learning agreements was important while also recognizing the strain caused by COVID-19.

Establishing a relationship with Kaitlyn felt different because we had never met her in person. I had to be more intentional about the questions I asked, especially when it came to how she imagined her practicum and how COVID-19 had impacted her. In addition, establishing a relationship with her was complicated because of the tensions between the priorities of the leadership team at our agency and Kaitlyn's learning needs. Kaitlyn started her practicum in September, and the agency was awarded a grant

around the same time. As part of this grant, the social services team were required to call all our clients (around 1,000) to ensure they were doing well and had their needs met. The families that were struggling with food insecurity and/or did not have access to technology were supported through food boxes and computers. The grant covered an important need, but the leadership team at the agency applied for it without asking the social services team if we had the capacity to cover such a need. This happened partly because there was fear that if we did not apply for all the grants available, we might not make it as an agency. When they realized that both social workers and community program coordinators were extremely busy with offering one-on-one support and facilitating online programs, they bypassed me and directly asked the student to make these calls. While Kaitlyn enjoyed making these calls because she was in direct touch with the clients, she expressed concern that this activity was not allowing her to engage in other aspects of her practicum.

Having read the literature which examines the role of funders in social service agencies (Harlow et al., 2013; Preston et al., 2019), I was aware that while the leadership team wanted to respond to funder needs, my role was to respond to the needs of the student. Thus, in addition to reaching out to my manager to state that such practices hinder student engagement in their practicum, this situation gave me a chance to ask Kaitlyn about how she balanced her own needs (in this case her learning needs) with the priorities set by the agency. I felt this was an important discussion because social workers often must navigate social service agencies which might not have the same values as they do (Harlow et al., 2013; Rogowski, 2011). Social service agencies are increasingly led by business-minded people whose first aim is to fulfill donor criteria, often to the detriment of field education (Preston et al., 2019). Indeed, the majority of those in the leadership team at our agency did not have a background in social work or a related profession.

Previous studies have recognized the impact of managerialism in field education. Within the Alberta context, Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020) note that “prior to COVID-19, due to our provincial economic cutbacks (Government of Alberta, 2020), we were seeing diminished community capacity and struggled with sufficient and adequate student field education opportunities” (p. 1012). In addition, some have argued that practicum

students are often used as free labour and asked to respond to the priorities of agencies rather than their own learning needs. Considering this, Asakura et al., (2018) considered field educators as having to navigate “new managerial institutions and the values and daily practice of the profession” (p. 152). For me, this was the first time I was dealing with a huge discrepancy between what we had promised the student and what the leadership team was doing. This offered me a chance to reflect on how I could best navigate this situation while ensuring that I was responding to agency needs and student needs. Ultimately, other team members offered to make some of the calls that Kaitlyn was asked to make, so she could return to her other practicum activities.

The Construction of People with Disabilities

COVID-19 measures showcased that governments rarely considered the impact of such measures on people with disabilities. For example,

when individuals are expected to use face masks and physically distance, people with hearing loss who cannot lip read or people with visual impairment who use guide dogs can find it difficult to follow these rules and as a result they might be stigmatised. (Shakespeare et al., 2021, p. 1332)

In Alberta, only those who need assistance with using a mask and/or are unable to wear a facemask due to a physical or mental limitation were exempt from wearing masks (Alberta Health Services [AHS], 2021). While other countries had specific guidelines for those who are deaf and/or hard of hearing, the Government of Alberta did not have such guidelines (AHS, 2021). In addition, there was a lack of public awareness about the exemption made for people with disabilities, often leading to stigma (Koshek et al., 2020).

As these measures came into effect, students became aware of how Alberta’s government constructs people with disabilities. During this time, relying on CDS when supervising students was a key aspect of my work. During her practicum, Ari had been involved with initiatives seeking to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities; this gave her a chance to see the innovative ways through which disability agencies had

responded to the challenges faced by people with disabilities. However, once the pandemic was announced, she noticed incongruences between the government's statements about the importance of inclusion of people with disabilities and their lack of attention to the needs of people with disabilities during COVID-19. Indeed, a report released by the Alberta Council of Disability Services notes that the Alberta Health Services lacked an understanding of disability services and was, therefore, not able to respond to the emerging needs of this sector (Alberta Council of Disability Services [ACDS], 2020).

Grounded in the intersectional lens adopted by CDS, Ari recognized that while people with disabilities were more vulnerable to COVID-19, this was not always because of their impairment, but because of the challenges that are associated with having a disability. That is, due to the stigma and discrimination that people with disabilities face, they are more likely to experience poverty and lack access to health and social services (Shakespeare et al., 2021). Interestingly, Ari was struck by how quickly clients adjusted to social distancing measures. Relying on CDS, however, helped her realize that people with disabilities adjusted well to COVID-19 measures because isolation is something that they experience on a daily basis. As such, they had coping mechanisms in place which enabled them to navigate the beginning of the pandemic a lot better than able-bodied people. Similarly to Ari's experience, Davis and Mirick (2021) report that students in the US who completed their practicums during the pandemic were better able to identify systemic issues. They conducted a survey with 1,522 BSW and MSW students in universities across the US, 565 of whom commented on completing their field placement remotely (Davis & Mirick, 2021). The key themes emerging from the survey suggest that students became aware of systemic issues social workers need to challenge. While students in existing studies highlighted the increased vulnerability experienced by those living in poverty, students under my supervision remarked on the disparities affecting people with disabilities.

I also noticed a difference between how Ari and Kaitlyn engaged with respect to the impact that COVID-19 had on the communities they live in: the pandemic allowed them both to discuss the importance of context in one's experiences. However, while Ari — whom I only had contact with during the first month of COVID-19 — believed that both service

providers and clients were sharing the same experience, Kaitlyn was able to see how, although we were all impacted by COVID-19, those who were marginalized were more negatively impacted. Kaitlyn noted that while she was able to continue her education, for example, this was not the case for many people with disabilities who lacked access to adequate technology. I felt that she was able to see this partly because, as the pandemic went on, it became apparent that those who enjoy certain privileges in our society had more access to protective equipment and were more likely to work from home — both elements that shielded them from the pandemic (Allen, 2020; Chandler et al., 2021).

Although Ari and Kaitlyn had different understandings of how the pandemic impacted us, both students appreciated the use of a critical disability lens when working and advocating with people with disabilities. How critical disability studies engage with creating systemic change was an eye opener to them. At the beginning of her practicum, Ari had been more interested in direct practice because she found macro practice daunting; towards the end of her practicum, she was more interested in better understanding the role of policies in shaping social work practice. The shift that happened for Ari is addressed by McGuire and Lay (2018), who note the transformative power of field placements:

In social work education, the learning process must both challenge previous inaccurate meanings as well as integrate new knowledge for competent social work practice. Educators must understand how knowledge is applied and what happens when new learning conflicts with previous knowledge or personal beliefs. (p. 523)

The Role of ICT in Field Education

A transition to an online format meant that Ari had to cut her practicum short and could not finish all the tasks that she had started to work on. For Kaitlyn, who completed her entire practicum online, remote delivery of services did not give her a chance to meet people with disabilities in person. I have found, as a supervisor, that the reluctance of social work students to work in the disability field is often lessened once they interact

with people with disabilities. In-person interactions seem to be the best way to challenge some of the misconceptions that exist with regard to what social work within the disability field looks like. Yet, as has been recognized by other scholars, the transition to remote delivery of field education came with opportunities for innovation (Archer-Kuhn, 2020; Mian & Khan, 2020).

For the disability sector, transition to online service delivery meant that some of our services became more accessible for people with disabilities. Because I was most familiar with Zoom, one of the programs that I facilitated was the first one to transition to an online format. This was a weekly program which offered adults with disabilities the chance to socialize and attend workshops on topics that interested them. Before the pandemic, the program included social dinners, visits to museums and galleries, and volunteer opportunities. In addition, once a month, I offered personal development workshops with topics including unlearning negative behaviour, challenging ableism, and adapting yoga for people with mobility limitations. The week after we had started to work from home, I asked my own supervisor if I could facilitate this program through Zoom. Zoom was still a new concept at the time, but I was given permission to give it a try. The clients showed adaptability and quickly learned how to use Zoom as well as navigate other virtual supports. They also asked if they could invite friends who did not live in Calgary to join. A month after we started offering this program online, the group had become so large that we had to split it in two.

The increase in attendance pointed to two important factors. First, the fact that people with disabilities not only adapted quickly to virtual supports, but also found ways to engage others in programs was a testament to their adaptability and resourcefulness. This is in contrast to dominant discourses which merely construct people with disabilities as vulnerable. Second, those who attended this program suggested that a virtual format of programs and service delivery would be something that people with disabilities might benefit from, even after the pandemic. For example, program attendance was low during winter months in Calgary because sidewalks were not always cleared, thus making it difficult for those who use wheelchairs to get to the bus/office. In addition, those who used Calgary Transit Access, a public transportation service for people with disabilities

(Calgary Transit, 2021), noted that trips often took as long as two hours to get them from their homes to our office. Lastly, some of our past clients who had moved to areas which did not offer disability services were able to join our programs. For example, we had a family who had moved to a rural area in Nova Scotia join our weekly programs regularly. While we initially thought of virtual service delivery as a barrier, it turned out to be an innovative approach to service delivery. Other studies share similar insights. For example, an MSW student in Davis and Mirick's (2021) study shared that

I believe we need to move toward having telehealth services more available for everyone's safety and well-being. ... [N]ot only is telehealth incredibly helpful during a time like this pandemic, but it would be beneficial in general for clients who feel sick or for clients with transportation or child-care concerns. (p. 11)

In addition to increased program attendance, using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) made certain aspects of advocating for change easier during COVID-19. Rather than relying solely on support from local agencies, as it was the case before the pandemic, online advocacy campaigns included anyone in the province, and beyond. Indeed, the ACDS organized several town halls between September and December 2020 (ACDS, 2021), making it easier for people with limited mobility to attend, thus increasing the inclusion of people with disabilities. Many of the agencies I collaborated with when supporting clients also noted that reliance on ICT facilitated collaboration as it cut down travel time between agencies, and it helped service providers learn more about available resources. Similarly, Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020), when commenting on collaboration among field education staff, note that online meetings allowed their team to discover their "strength and confidence as we gravitated and clung to one another like magnets in a force field moving forward together, growing in shape and size with each passing hour, day and week" (p. 1013). In addition, Morley and Clark (2020) share that working from home allowed students to get involved in a broader range of practicum placements, including international social campaigns.

A virtual format gave Kaitlyn the chance to join the parent support group. The parent support group consisted of parents who had children with disabilities and met once a week, during the evening. In the year before the pandemic, attendance in the parent support group was low, with many parents sharing that while they felt the need for such a group, they could not find the time to attend. Many of them noted that although the meeting place rotated in order to include each quadrant of the city, with Calgary being so widespread, getting to the parent support group from one part of the city to the other took a long time. In addition, most parents who attended the in-person group did not feel comfortable having a student join their group. This was understandable since it had taken the group time to establish trust and feel safe enough to share their stories. In addition, even when parents felt comfortable to have students join for certain sessions, the students were often not able to join because the parent support group met in the evenings and that conflicted with the students' own schedules.

During the pandemic, a few factors came together to enable students to join the parent support group. First, the fact that Alberta was on a lockdown meant that everyone was at home during the evening, thus timing was not an issue. In addition, there was a shift that happened when the group moved online that allowed parents to feel comfortable having a student join their weekly meetings. While I am not sure what led to this shift, this was highly beneficial for Kaitlyn as she had a chance to learn directly from parents. Kaitlyn noted that being part of the parent support group allowed her to better understand the intricacies of living with a disability, and the fact that disability does not only impact the individual who experiences it, but their families as well. In addition, meeting virtually also meant that parents who joined the group were from various places in Alberta, and this gave Kaitlyn a chance to see the difference in service provision across the province. Among the key insights that she gained, was the fact that services offered in rural versus urban settings vary. Many parents who lived in rural areas noted the difficulties in finding caregivers for their children, realizing that many caregivers did not want to travel to rural areas.

Listening to parents' stories about their struggles and resilience highlighted for Kaitlyn the fact that funding offered for people with disabilities

is often not enough to cover their basic needs. Hearing this directly from parents, whom she got to know over the four-month practicum, made a larger impact than simply reading about the difficulties that parents of children with disabilities face. Indeed, previous research suggests that students enjoy learning directly from those they serve, as evidenced in a recent study which examined the experiences of social work practicum students in Canada (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021). When noting the importance of aligning social work knowledge, skills, and values “some participants identified service users as influencing and co-creating an effective learning environment in social work education” (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021, p. 390). One of the students in a focus group shared that “I learn social work best when I’m learning from the people that we work with because the people that we work with are the closest, they know the best about our services because they are receiving them” (Archer-Kuhn, 2021, p. 391).

In addition to benefiting student learning, having Kaitlyn as part of the parent group was helpful for parents as well. Experiencing first-hand the dedication with which social work students approached their work, parents expressed their confidence in the next generation of social workers. Indeed, Kaitlyn would often do research on subjects that parents discussed, and then would come to the next meetings with information about new government decisions on the kind of support that people with disabilities were offered in the context of COVID-19. At other times, Kaitlyn would look up information on key issues while parents were discussing such issues, so she could offer information to parents right away. Doing this in person, which would require her to be on her phone or computer, would have most likely been frowned upon because it would have seemed that she was not present. However, the fact that, during the virtual meetings, she could use discretely her computer gave her the chance to engage in double tasking without appearing as rude.

Conclusion

The disruptions that COVID-19 caused to field education provided both challenges and opportunities for innovation. Within the disability field, COVID-19 allowed students to engage with how people with disabilities are constructed, and the shift to a virtual format created opportunities which previous practicum students did not have. As a supervisor, this allowed

me to see how students navigated power dynamics within the agency and gave me a chance to reflect on the impact that neo-liberal practices have on my experience. Despite the challenges it presented, COVID-19 also offered a space to experiment with field education opportunities which were conceptualized as unconventional. Fortunately, the transition toward a virtual format was successful as it offered students access to a wider range of experiences, while allowing them to complete their field education requirements. This helped ease the uncertainty and stress that COVID-19 caused. In fact, both students and clients at our agency highlighted that virtual service delivery might be something that would be helpful in the future as well.

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