



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

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## Enhancing Equity and Accessibility in Field Education: Reflections on Mobilizing Local Research Findings in One School of Social Work

*Alise de Bie, Janice Chaplin, and Jennie Vengris*

In this chapter, we reflect on our experiences implementing locally-derived research findings and recommendations to our field education programme — with a focus on the beginning stages of setting-up and matching students to placements. In doing so, we contribute to several conversations in the social work education literature, including those pertaining to the field education “crisis,” advancing equity and accessibility in field education, and equity-salient connections between placement learning and student employability after graduation.

As has been widely observed and analyzed, we are facing — in Canada and internationally — a scarcity of field learning opportunities for students (Ayala et al., 2018). Neoliberal policies are having a devastating impact on the social welfare sector, resulting in programme funding cuts and the elimination of social work positions which reduce the availability of placement sites and supervisors. These forces are also prompting academic institutions to expand enrollment in order to increase revenues, with a resultant expansion in the number of social work students seeking field placements (Ayala et al., 2018). This means that there has been an

heightened competition for, and lack of choice in field placements. This is having a significant impact on student learning experiences, with students from equity-deserving groups (e.g., racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and/or disabled students) facing particularly detrimental effects (e.g., Srikanthan, 2019). The aspirations of equity-deserving students are becoming increasingly difficult to support.

The situation is exacerbated with the understandable desire of students to have placements that will enhance their employability for preferred positions. As Ayala et al. (2018) report from their conversations with field education coordinators, students often request placements in particular sectors (e.g., hospitals and government) that they anticipate will prepare them well for secure and well-paid employment; placements in non-traditional settings are perceived as less beneficial to this goal. Hill et al. (2017) similarly found that faculty members report that students are not selecting macro concentrations due to perceptions of fewer jobs and lower salaries. This is notable in a context where many students enter social work with the hope that a professional degree will facilitate access to job security, career development, and upward mobility (Karki et al., 2018).

These decisions are especially weighty for students from equity-deserving groups who are looking for a route out of precarity, debt, and multigenerational poverty. Nashwan and Bowie (2018) found that Black social workers are more likely than white social workers to pursue a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree to increase their income. Limb and Organista (2006) found that racialized MSW students rank above-average earnings as a more important job characteristic than white students, with its overall importance increasing between their entry and exit from the program. Daniel (2011) similarly found that racialized MSW students, many of whom having grown up with financial difficulties which they still face, were attracted to the social work profession because of its focus on addressing poverty in communities and also its perceived flexibility as a career — making it possible to easily move from one job to another. At the same time, these students were concerned about supporting themselves and their families on an average social work salary and having their career mobility impeded by discrimination (also see Karki et al., 2018).

The evidence in support of students' fears, whereby macro placements or specializations indeed decrease access to well-paid employment, is

limited and inconclusive. Choi et al. (2015) found that graduates with specializations in micro/direct practice were more likely to find a job matching this focus (91%), compared to graduates with a macro specialization matching related employment (64%). However, Zerden et al. (2016) report that while MSW students with a macro concentration were less likely to find a macro-oriented job directly after graduation, they continued to use macro-related skills 58% of the time, with no significant difference noted either in the time it took to find employment or the salary of graduates with micro and macro concentrations. Pritzker and Applewhite (2015) found supporting evidence that macro-trained social workers compete well for jobs and report higher salaries than the social work averages.

These findings may offer some reassurance to students pursuing macro or social justice-focused community placements that their decision may not negatively impact their career progression. However, research on the experiences of Canadian social work graduates transitioning into employment is limited (Newberry, 2011), and the literature, both Canadian and international, does not disaggregate their reporting for graduates with marginalized identities. While students from equity-deserving groups may be more likely to pursue macro practice to bring about systemic changes to the injustices they have faced (Apgar, 2020), there is limited research tracing — critically and in-depth — this decisional process (e.g., whether occurring through voluntary choice and/or discriminatory streaming to macro placements based on identity; Razack, 2002; Srikanthan, 2019) and their impact on future employment satisfaction and salaries. There is a need for further research into how racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and/or disabled recent graduates and early career social workers fair in the workplace and how their placement experiences impact these trajectories.

The experiences of field instructors from equity-deserving groups are another important consideration with regards to enhancing accessibility and equity in field education, although to date there has been limited discussion in the social work literature in this area. It has been noted that marginalized social workers may not be perceived as suitable for practice education teaching; they may also be refused this opportunity for career advancement by their manager or agency (e.g., Healy et al., 2015; Stokes, 1996). Stokes (1996) reviews how Black social workers may face heavier workloads and demands (e.g., to work with Black clients, be the

“race” experts) that leave little time, energy, or motivation to supervise student placements; alternately, their mentorship of Black students may go unrecognized. Singh (2004) describes how internalized racism among Black students can lead them to hold low expectations and regard for the abilities of a Black field instructor. Conversely, students may hold such high expectations of the person doing the supervision that, when unmet, lead them to disrespect a Black role model for “selling out.” Black practice teachers have also reported racism from white student supervisees (Singh, 2004). While potentially challenging, field instruction opportunities are both desired and pursued by social workers from marginalized groups in order to empower, mentor, and act as role models for students — both those similarly located and from majority groups (Healy et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2008; Singh, 2004; Stokes, 1996).

Finally, it is important to note that, although the literature offers research-based recommendations for enhancing the field learning experiences of students from equity-deserving groups (e.g., Newman et al., 2008; Srikanthan, 2019), there are few examples (e.g., Razack, 2002, as one notable exception) of how Schools of Social Work have endeavoured to incorporate these recommendations into practice. This may be due to a gap between those conducting research into field education and those facilitating field education; or, an overall lack of mobilization and implementation of research findings; or, that many fields education teams do not have the dedicated time to publish about their work. Written by two members of our Field Education team at the School of Social Work at McMaster University and a postdoctoral fellow in our university’s teaching and learning centre with field instructor responsibilities, this chapter offers an example of how one School of Social Work has sought to implement research findings to further support students from racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and disability communities in placement learning.

## Project Context and Methodology

McMaster University, a mid-size institution, is located in the urban centre of Hamilton, Canada, on the traditional territories of the Mississauga and Haudenosaunee nations. Our Field Education team (Janice Chaplin and Jennie Vengris) place approximately 150 undergraduate and six to 10 graduate social work students per year in local field settings, leading to the

completion of two placements of 390 hours each for BSW students, and the completion of one placement of 450 hours for MSW students in our leadership stream. In addition, student organizing in the school, over its 50+ year history, has led to a number of important initiatives to advance equity and accessibility. Recent efforts have included the development/re-activation of student-led caucus groups for racialized, Indigenous, queer/trans, and disabled students. These caucus groups have resulted in student-led research projects, reports, presentations, and events on 2SLGBTQ+ inclusiveness in field education, accessibility and disability inclusion in the social work program, and social work students' experiences of racism. All of this work has implications and recommendations for field education (de Bie, 2015; de Bie et al., 2020b; Watt et al., 2014). In 2016, our Field Education team applied for and received a two-year teaching fellowship from the Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching at McMaster to conduct research responsive to student recommendations for supporting greater equity and accessibility in field education.

The project team included Chaplin and Vengris, two student partners (de Bie, a PhD student at the time, and Dagnachew), and Dr. Randy Jackson, an Indigenous faculty member and researcher. Together, in 2017, we conducted an online survey and in-person focus groups and interviews with approximately 30 racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and/or disabled students, and recent alumni to learn about their experiences of field education. In 2018, we sent an online survey to our field instructors, in which 40 people participated, 19 of whom identified as belonging to one or more equity-deserving group. This survey was administered to field instructors to understand practices they already had in place to support equity and to explore the resources they would need in relation to the themes identified in the research conducted with students. Both aspects of the project were reviewed by, and received clearance from our university's research ethics board.

While the rest of this chapter presents our efforts to implement these research findings in the chronological order of their impact on a student's trajectory through our field education processes, facilitating change has been an iterative, rather than linear, practice. For example, when conversations about and in response to our research prompted us to begin

asking students explicitly about identities/experiences informing their placement preferences, we learned that some students were interested in being matched with a field instructor who shared a similar identity. This provoked a need to increase representation among our field instructors. We elaborate some of these complexities and contextual factors through our discussion of the research findings below.

## Mobilizing Research Findings to Enhance Equity and Accessibility in Field Education

### *Getting Students Ready for Placement*

We offer several orientation activities and documents to support students in entering the social work program. These include our *Important Considerations for BSW Students at McMaster* document on program structure, goals, and expectations that students read, ask questions about, and sign upon admission and initial academic advisement, as well as an orientation opportunity before classes start to meet faculty, staff, and fellow students and learn more about the School of Social Work. A second orientation session at the end of the first month of studies focuses on expectations specific to being in a professional program (e.g., professional communication and the importance of self-care). There is also an orientation to field placements at the end of first term.

Over the course of our research, a number of students challenged messages they were receiving that they should treat placement like a job; instead, they called for a greater emphasis on, prioritization of, and support for placements as “learning” experiences, not employment. At the same time, students expressed considerable worry about facing prejudice and inaccessibility in their placement that would impact their chances at obtaining social work employment. They were clearly very concerned about future career prospects (see de Bie et al., 2020a). For the students’ sake, we want to treat placements as supportive and flexible learning opportunities rather than high pressure employment; yet, in our current context of significant competition for placements, particularly in Southern Ontario where the density of social work programs is high, students are required to treat placement matching seriously at the risk of losing placements to another school. Rather than expect students to navigate this context on

their own, we have been supporting them through resume writing and interview preparation workshops facilitated by our university's career skills centre. We have also offered individual support to students from equity-deserving groups, encouraging them to highlight their community/activist work and skills in their resumes and interviews so that prospective field instructors can recognize students' unpaid work as valuable and significant preparation for competitive placements.

Additionally, in light of ongoing conversations with faculty and students about the impact of students' identities on their learning, we have recently been focused on having more explicit conversations about equity and accessibility in placement. During placement orientation sessions, we now highlight that sometimes students might prefer to be placed with a field instructor who shares a similar identity as a racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and/or disabled person. Although we explain how this may not always be possible given historic underrepresentation of these groups in social work and amongst our field instructors, we invite students to share this optional information, if they so choose, so that we can best attempt to meet their needs. We also encourage students with disabilities to consider how any academic accommodations they receive for their coursework might translate into field placements, encouraging them to reach out to their accommodation advisor and/or the field education team for assistance.

### *Recruiting and Training Field Instructors*

**Recruiting Field Instructors.** In our research, students from equity-deserving groups talked about the burden of “diversity work” they felt they were expected to perform within their placement — for example, to educate staff and speak as an expert on equity issues or to support service users from particular groups a student is perceived to belong to. Many others described feeling pathologized when they expressed concern with this type of work and coming to doubt their field instructor's ability to support them. They also faced significant “emotion work” as they sought to manage their worries about discrimination and inaccessibility in their field placement. Overall, 79% of student survey participants indicated that further recruitment of field instructors who identify as racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and/or with disabilities would help to support



them and their experiences (see de Bie et al., 2020a). Likewise, 75% felt that the creation of further placement opportunities explicitly focused on social justice issues affecting equity-deserving communities would be helpful to them.

In response to these students' concerns, we have been working more intentionally to increase the number of placements in these areas. This has been supported by the creation of a new faculty position with field education responsibilities to develop new macro, community, and justice-focused placement opportunities. Relationships are central to our approach to placement development, in accordance with an emphasis on relationality in field education scholarship (e.g., Asakura et al., 2018) and the six principles encouraged by our university's Office of Community Engagement (2021): Relationships build community, reciprocity, equity, continuity, openness to learning, and the commitment to act. We tapped into our existing relationships in the field while being explicit about our interest in increasing the number of placement offerings focused on equity. Additionally, over many years of discussions at faculty meetings and the School of Social Work Director's advisory council, we have kept the field program front and centre, encouraging the rest of the faculty group to consider field as applicable to them as well. We have specifically sought support to increase the number of placements focused on equity from our faculty colleagues who are connected to equity-deserving communities because of their own identities and affiliations. We know that a formal email to a generic address will not yield the kind of results that careful, relational approaches do — both in terms of the number of new field placements and the quality and connection of those placements.

While we have had some success developing new placement opportunities in organizations that do racial justice work and work with 2SLGBTQ+ communities and Indigenous community partners, some significant challenges remain. Many of the organizations involved in social justice work experience precarity in our neoliberal funding context, which can and often does result in high staff turnover because of under-resourcing. This means that our offerings within these more politicized spaces are often not secure and require ongoing connection and negotiation, as well as additional student supervision and support when staff in these settings do not hold a BSW or MSW degree (Mehrota et al., 2018). Finally, the

challenge with our reliance on colleagues from equity-deserving groups to facilitate and establish new placement-generating connections is that they are already over-subscribed to represent and provide access to their communities within the university context. This work would benefit from increased representation of faculty from equity-deserving groups to share this labour more equitably.

Another challenge is that while we spend time fostering these new placement opportunities, some years we have no students interested in filling them. This upsets an organization that has started to imagine the projects they could complete with the support of a student and, in turn, this may disincentivize them from offering any placement in the future. There are complex reasons for this student disinterest in new placement options. We have heard from students — and the literature confirms this (Srikanthan, 2019) — that while students’ politicized identities are central to who they are, the realities of job precarity mean that to secure future employment, many equity-deserving students want placements in “mainstream” organizations (e.g., hospitals, child welfare, school boards) that hire the greatest number of social workers and often pay higher salaries. Students, particularly those concerned about facing prejudice or discrimination in the hiring process, perceive that having more conventionally recognized placement experiences, referees/mentors, and clinical social work skills will facilitate a more successful school-to-work transition. One response might be to further encourage students from majority backgrounds, who benefit from existing social structures and may be less motivated to develop the macro-level skills needed to make systems-level change, to enter macro placements and practice settings (Apgar, 2020).

Another approach in our recruitment of field instructors is the recent development of a more robust alumni engagement strategy, an idea that was presented as part of a brainstorming session of field teams across the country at the 2019 Field Education Committee Meeting of the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) Conference. We need to improve our ability to stay in touch with graduates from our BSW and MSW programs to facilitate their engagement as field instructors. Over the last several years, in addition to recruiting placements via email communications with our alumni, we have also begun attending 4<sup>th</sup> year practice seminars towards the end of the academic year to provide a brief

interactive presentation on becoming a field instructor. We focus both on the reflective components of why they might want to be a field instructor and the technical components involved when the school begins to contact alumni about their interest in field instruction. Given our research findings, we are now explicit about our interest in finding mentors for social work learners from equity-deserving groups.

It is too early to make any claims about the effectiveness of this approach; we are unsure if it has resulted in any new field instructors — especially with respect to field instructors from equity-deserving groups — but it is a low resource, easy process with many possibilities for enhancement. Moving forward, requiring 4<sup>th</sup> year students to complete the CASWE field instructor training as part of their practice seminar might present a new opportunity to encourage their interest and prepare them to offer field instruction. We can also further support and resource our school's existing caucus/peer support groups (United in Colour, Indigenous Social Work Students Community, Social Work Queer Trans, and Disability Action Group) and work with them to develop and extend an intergenerational mentorship network of students and alumni.

Prior scholarship affirms the contribution of peer mentorship schemes to support racialized social work students in practice learning (e.g., Thomas et al., 2011), and the value of alumni engagement programs for strengthening connections between alumni and schools of social work (e.g., Skrzypek et al., 2020). There have also been calls to offer peer support groups for new social work graduates as they negotiate the challenging transition of bringing a critical perspective into the workplace (e.g., Gallop, 2018; Richards-Schuster et al., 2015). The limited social work literature on alumni engagement and early career professionals does not specifically focus on new graduates from equity-deserving groups. However, we suspect inter-cohort peer initiatives composed of current and former students from racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and/or disabled communities may offer alumni valuable support and connection while also facilitating mentorship and placement opportunities for registered students.

**Training Field Instructors to Provide Effective Supervision.** As part of our online survey of field instructors, we asked them how their identities (e.g., race, sexuality, gender, age, disability status) and community affiliations impact the manner in which they offer field supervision and support

to social work students. The vast majority (90%) of our respondents who identified as belonging to one or more equity-deserving groups provided a response to the question, in contrast to only 38% of respondents from majority backgrounds (e.g., white, heterosexual, nondisabled). This finding suggests that explicit discussions about identity (and associated power) in field instruction are important, particularly for the participants who did not see this question as relevant to them or were uncertain about how to reply. In response to these and other aspects of our research findings, we have revised and added several new equity-focused components to our 15-hour field instructor training, which is organized around the beginning, middle, and ending of field placements with an emphasis on teaching and supervision.

One addition is a module on the challenges we heard from student participants and the proposed recommendations for mediating them. In engaging with this content, attendees encouraged us to discuss early-on and explicitly how student experiences of discrimination, isolation, and witnessing oppression can manifest as behaviours that may be misperceived as a performance problem (e.g., lateness, not taking risks in meetings). We also developed an interactive group activity that invites participants to reflect on the complexity of power and how it flows between various roles in a field placement (e.g., student, field instructor, other staff, service users, organization management, community partners). We spend time debriefing dimensions that impact power — for example, what happens when a student is white and the field instructor is racialized. As well, we have had students from equity-deserving groups review the field training slides and provide feedback on how students are represented, the language used, and ideas for future modules.

There exist several challenges in providing training to current and potential field instructors. Finding 15-hours to complete training can be difficult and onerous for social workers who are already working in time- and resource-constrained settings and so, thus far, we have elected to integrate equity content into the existing training rather than add additional time. Moreover, while we ask field instructors to complete training within the first two years of supervising a student and add them to a distribution list to learn of upcoming opportunities, participation in any training is not presently mandatory. Other schools similarly grapple with this decision

in a context of placement scarcity (Dalton et al., 2011), with the possibility that those who may most benefit from the training and its support to develop their equity analysis may not attend. As well, while we do ask attendees to evaluate the training to improve future iterations, we have not conducted research into how the training informs field instruction and whether those who complete training provide better field instruction and supervision. However, we have heard from a number of participants in our research that ensuring “that all field instructors have to take a training before being allowed to work with students” (S3 - disabled)<sup>1</sup> and setting and holding a “high standard” (FI35 - racialized) for field instruction are important strategies for supporting students from equity-deserving groups.

Finally, we have offered field forums once a year to stay connected with our field instructors and demonstrate reciprocity by providing workshops on topics relevant to their practice or field instruction. For the past couple of years, these sessions have focused on mobilizing themes and recommendations from our research (e.g., sessions discussing project findings, accessibility and accommodations for placement learners), which we intend to continue. Moving forward, many field instructor survey participants expressed an interest in online resources, the provision of which has become increasingly possible given the technological upskilling that has occurred in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Openness to engage with online formats will enable us to provide additional, more accessible training opportunities (e.g., webinars, lunch and learns, communities of practice) on equity-relevant topics and to link our field instructors with national field instruction training and resources.

### *Matching Students to Placements*

While discussion of “matching” or finding a “fit” between students and placements has received little attention in the social work literature (Hay, 2020), we have found that spending time on matching students to placements and field instructors/agencies leads to more positive experiences for everyone involved. Teaching required courses in the social work program, as we both do, Chaplin and Vengris, in our roles as teaching faculty, helps us build relationships with students that become key when matching them to a placement. We get to know them, and they get to know us. In addition, we meet them individually for placement planning.

These 30-minute meetings allow us to deepen our understanding of the student's interests, needs, and concerns. Over time, and with intentional effort, we have also come to meet and know each field instructor (150 in any given year) and their practice contexts. We spend considerable time thinking and talking to each other about students' expressed needs and preferences with regards to practice context and supervision, as well as the knowledge we hold about students and potential agencies and field instructors.

Our research findings raise a number of considerations regarding potential opportunities and challenges of students from equity-deserving groups working with a similarly located field instructor, which has thus far received little attention in the social work literature (e.g., Black et al., 1997; Newman et al., 2008; Singh, 2004; Stokes, 1996). Ninety percent of field instructor survey respondents from equity-deserving groups indicated their willingness to supervise a student interested in being matched to an instructor with similar identities. Seventy-one percent of student survey respondents likewise affirmed interest in working with a field instructor who shared their identities (de Bie et al., 2020a).

We heard how helpful matching can be, if it is attentive to these considerations. For example, an "out" field instructor described their desire to mentor 2SLGBTQ+ students in navigating their identities in the workplace and facilitate opportunities to work with 2SLGBTQ+ service users and employees (FI11; see Newman et al., 2008). A field instructor with mental health disabilities described how it could be "helpful for students to be matched with someone who understands their experiences without them always having to explain or self-identify. ... It is good to see yourself reflected in someone with similar experience in a successful career" (FI8). As a racialized field instructor suggested, pairing similarly located students and field instructors can also mitigate the power differential between them, which "can be potentially empowering" for students, particularly racialized students, who may not see themselves reflected among their social work faculty/instructors (FI35). Matching in this way may also be "mutually supportive and beneficial" (FI33) and "provide opportunities for growth for both the instructor and the learner" (FI66).

We also heard that matching based on identity is complex. For example, some communities are small and identity-related matching might

result in multi-faceted and complex navigation of relationships, such as when service users, providers, and students cross paths in social spaces (FI11). A field instructor with mental health disabilities also noted the potential for stigma at work and from the School of Social Work if they were to disclose their condition (FI31). As a racialized field instructor elaborated, working with a similarly located student may bring up reminders of the way the system discriminates, as well as cause field instructors to fear students' judgment with respect to the decisions the former may have made to survive the work landscape (e.g., following the status quo as a means of negotiating safety and emotional labour) (FI33). An additional limitation may be "that the student and instructor do not challenge each other's beliefs because they are too similar" (FI8). Lastly, a student "warn[ed] against identity matching unless the student wants it," given the potential negative impact on employment pathways (S8 – student identifying as racialized/pansexual).

In light of these research findings, and in consideration of both the potential opportunities and challenges of identity-based matching, all students complete a newly developed placement planning form, which invites them to optionally name aspects of their identity they would like to have considered as part of the matching process (Table 3.1). Given the range of reasons why students may be reluctant to talk about identity, we provide some context and rationale for the questions. In our trial of the form this year, equity-deserving students seem to be making use of the option to name preferences for field instructor matching.

Another consideration regarding identity-related matching pertains to different understandings and experiences of a seemingly shared identity — informed by generational differences, intersections of identity, forms of politicization, etc. We heard from one lesbian-identifying field instructor about their dislike of being grouped into a 2SLGBTQ+/queer movement or referred to as a member of an equity-deserving group, because they saw themselves as more than this and felt they had already achieved equity in their employment context (FI19). A disabled field instructor similarly contested identity-based pairing as a way of being "siloe[d]": "[M]y disability is not my identity, and it does not define my needs. A person with a disability is no more able to 'understand' or 'relate' to me than any other person" (FI61) (for another example regarding this concern, see Healy et al., 2015).

**Table 3.1:** Equity/Identity-Focused Placement Planning Questions

- Is representation an important aspect of supervision for you? What does that look like? For example, if you identify as racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and/or with disability, would you like us to try to find a field instructor who shares some aspects of your identity? We cannot ensure that you will always be matched with a field instructor with a similar representation due to availability, but we can try our best.
- From speaking with previous students, we know that placement experiences can include unique needs and barriers for equity-deserving individuals. If you identify as an equity-deserving student, what considerations should we take into account?
- Are there any other experiences or aspects about your identity that would be important for us to consider in terms of your placement?
- Are there any specific accommodations or equity measures that you may need in place to be successful through this placement process?

We thus recognize that any identity-related placement matching also needs to consider potentially significant differences between how any two people — student and field instructor — understand and experience their identities. For example, it is important to know which aspects of a social movement they may affiliate with, if any (e.g., disability movement efforts at desegregation; efforts to build disability-specific student community), and their relative experiences of precarity and discrimination. For this reason, it has become important for us to invite prospective field instructors to share, if they wish, their identities, backgrounds, and what these mean for them as a consideration during placement matching, as well as to



recruit recent graduates from equity-deserving groups as field instructors who may share an understanding of students' politicized identities.

**Pre-Placement Interviews.** A critical step in the matching process is the pre-placement interview where a student and prospective field instructor meet to discuss whether the student's existing experience, desired learning objectives, and learning needs are a good fit for the placement opportunity. While students need to engage fully and professionally in this conversation to protect their chances of being offered the placement, we also suspect that if they can adequately assess the learning opportunity in this meeting, we will have fewer concerns and possible placement breakdowns later on.

Unfortunately, there is a significant power imbalance in this dialogue, further aggravated by the reality of placement shortages, and students often struggle to ask questions that allow them to adequately determine whether a placement will be a good fit. A majority (67%) of student survey participants worried about disclosing their identities/experiences in the context of placement or people at placement finding out. While some students expressed a preference to proactively disclose their needs early-on to best facilitate support for their learning, many others were fearful and held significant reservations about how disclosure might provoke prejudice with implications for placement success and future employment. Disclosure was especially difficult when students felt they did not have a choice, when they experienced regret after a disclosure, or when the disclosure did not result in desired changes or support.

Importantly, several field instructors valued and desired proactive disclosure as it facilitates their ability to provide effective supervision. Some described past experiences of student disclosure as "voluntarily shared" (FI18), "c[oming] up organically in conversation" (FI9), or as emerging when the student felt comfortable and trust was established (FIs 11, 29, 35, 36). The potential risk is that these perceptions may underreflect and overlook the significant worry and involuntariness that some students felt around disclosure, such as when they disclosed reluctantly or out of desperation and a need for support. As one field instructor explained, "I am now realizing my reliance on self-disclosure, as though this is an easy thing. I think I just realized how easy it makes supervision for me, but not necessarily for the student" (FI 58). Nolan et al. (2015) have noted a

similar difference in perspective with field instructors wishing for disclosure to happen prior to placement and in a timely way as it makes arranging accommodations easier, while students delayed disclosure or did not disclose (disability and other obstacles) because they did not have an opportunity to discuss their needs or feared being judged or facing other negative consequences.

We heard from students that they wanted tools for engaging in conversations about their learning needs with field instructors, particularly in preparation for their first placement when, owing to limited experience, they could not anticipate what they might need. In our initial focus groups, 67% of our survey participants endorsed the recommendation proposed by students whereby we should develop a list of questions about accessibility, wellness, and learning needs that students might review during a pre-placement interview with a prospective field instructor. Having a school-developed and endorsed form where these questions were raised and discussed as standard practice really mattered to students, who felt it could reduce their worries about how they should disclose. Students additionally recommended that field instructors be encouraged to make gestures of openness to disclosures of equity/identity-related needs so that students could more easily assess and determine the relative safety of providing this information earlier in the placement process (see Newman et al., 2008, for similar recommendations). They also hoped for field instructors to proactively enhance the accessibility and flexibility of a placement rather than wait for students to disclose a need.

In our relationships with, and training of field instructors, we have likewise heard their uncertainty regarding what they should and should not ask in a pre-placement interview to assess for potential accommodation needs, and signal their openness to engage in conversations about identity and access. In response, we have engaged in additional consultation to develop two pre-placement interview guides, launching in the fall of 2022, one for students and the other for field instructors. We hired a student partner who consulted with other BSW students in equity-centred conversations about the kinds of questions they might want to ask or be asked. In addition, over the past four years, participants in field instructor training have engaged in a small group activity to identify what they would want to explain and ask in a pre-placement interview. We

are also developing an evaluation strategy to see how these guides support conversations about student learning, equity, and access.

## Conclusion

Since starting our research in 2016, we have moved the needle on equity in our field education program, implementing concrete strategies to open the conversation, while also recognizing how change processes are perhaps more complex than we anticipated. While our unique faculty positions do not require significant engagement in research, we have found this change-oriented project valuable. It became a way of holding time in our calendars for broader and deeper conversations on equity, beyond the hectic day-to-day of managing our local field education program amidst placement scarcity. Grant funding enabled us to collaborate with paid student partners from equity-deserving groups, and to gather and apply local research findings that confirmed and extended what we knew informally from our relationships with students and field instructors.

As is common in research, we are left with more questions than we have answered. Further research into how our social work graduates, particularly those from equity-deserving groups, are doing may prove vital to recruiting new field sites and supervisors, and to addressing students' concerns about employability and placement-to-workplace transitions. For example, research is needed to determine how students' placement experiences inform future career pathways and satisfaction, to understand the barriers they face in seeking employment, and to gauge the proportion of graduates who become field instructors for us. Additionally, while we have endeavoured to implement insights and recommendations from students and field instructors (e.g., integrating further equity content into field instructor training, inviting disclosures to facilitate identity-related matching when desired, and developing pre-placement interview guides), we have yet to formally evaluate whether and how these changes might enhance student and field instructor experiences. One significant implication of our work for field education, then, is recognition and promotion of the value of field education coordinators working in partnership with students and field instructors in ongoing change-oriented research and evaluation projects to enhance equity and accessibility in placement teaching and learning.

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#### NOTE

- 1 Here and throughout, we use the code FI for a field instructor survey participant and S for a student survey participant.

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