



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

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# Conclusion

*Sheri M. McConnell, Julie Drolet, and Grant Charles*

In this book, each chapter and each author addressed privilege, oppression, and inequity at systemic, institutional, and agency levels. From their own perspective and context, the contributors did so with a focus on social work practice and field education. By acknowledging and exploring disparities resulting from social identities and intersectionality, the authors brought forth recommendations to instigate change in social work and field education, in educational institutions, and in broader social systems.

The following discussion highlights the research presented in each chapter and their ensuing recommendations. These discussions are divided into five themes, which represent the focus or location of change: (1) access to education; (2) colouring outside the lines: innovative models for field education; (3) integrating Indigenous and anti-racist knowledges, methodologies, and perspectives; (4) encouraging students to step/think outside of their comfort zone; and (5) integrating research into social work field education.

## Access to Education

Several chapters addressed disparities within educational institutions, particularly those experienced in social work educational programs and within field education. Shiferaw, Asrate, and Eyasu (chapter 7) explored the impact of gender, poverty, health and disability, and geography on access to and support for education. Their research focused on the lived experiences

of three women completing PhDs in Ethiopia, each of whom encountered many hurdles in completing their education. They proposed that:

To reduce gender-based discrimination, higher education institutions need to create an empowering climate on the issues of gender and disability. They have to train their staff members and students on gender equity, and craft new policies to enhance women's involvement. (p. 153)

Sharing some of the same concerns, Aguilera, Medley, Gage, and Hutchison described economic injustice in social work educational programs and field agencies (chapter 1). They asserted that “higher education systems today replicate and reflect inequality and oppression, even though the social work departments within them teach students to fight against these social issues” (p. 23). Further, they described how, “while having academic discussions about how to serve economically oppressed people in the field, some social work students themselves are simultaneously experiencing economic oppression, which is then exacerbated by practicum requirements” (p. 24). In response to this economic oppression, the authors identified “a need to adopt more innovative and sustainable models in social work field education, as the historical model that continues today has proven to only benefit those with economic means” (p. 31). Suggesting a way forward, they asserted that “economic justice starts with us confronting our own critical issues within social work field education. As demonstrated, supporting students' material needs is imperative to their educational and professional success” (p. 31). Making concrete change in the lives of students necessitates exploring options within field agencies, universities, and government to provide financial support to social work students participating in field practicums.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made more visible the challenges and changing contexts in field education, including barriers to accessibility and inclusion. In order to respond to these challenges and barriers, it is essential to (re)imagine creative approaches and pilot new models for developing and providing field education. These new ways of thinking and doing often require revising field education processes, policies, and practices. We were reminded by Janse van Rensburg et al. (chapter 12), who

described a PhD advocacy field practicum involving consultations with autistic adults, that “accessibility is not a hurdle — it is a commitment” (p. 242).

In furthering that commitment to accessibility, de Bie, Chaplin, and Vengris (chapter 3) recommended concrete, practical strategies for engaging with and supporting students and field instructors from racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and disability communities. Integral to their chapter is a critical analysis of the benefits and possible pitfalls of students and field instructors discussing their intersecting identities. Noting that change processes are more complex than they anticipated, the authors provided thoughtful suggestions for how to create safety and openness within field agencies, including new practices around field orientations, student interviews and matching, field instructor recruitment and training, and pre-placement interview guides.

Gooding (chapter 8) also addressed how racialized students and field instructors discuss their intersecting identities and use of self, by integrating Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT). In order to do so, the author invited

field instructors and students to explore non-dominant ways of social work practice during supervision. ... When race is included in conversations about use of self, it gives social workers, BIPOC and otherwise, the freedom to bring race into the room explicitly because it informs social life. (p. 168)

Furthermore, Gooding

encourage[s] field instructors to consider issues of structural and interpersonal power across difference, as well as within shared identities. ... Discussing use of self both within and across difference will allow field supervisors to support and challenge students in their development as social workers and facilitate a critical praxis. (p. 168)

## Colouring Outside the Lines: Innovative Models for Field Education

Field practicums traditionally have consisted of a social worker providing field instruction to one or more students in an agency offering in-person case management or clinical services to individuals, families, or groups. However, challenges in field education, as described in the introduction and addressed in each of the chapters, demand that field coordinators explore other practicum delivery models.

As Kusari observed in chapter 14, while the pandemic “posed unique challenges for field education, as many students had to cancel their practicum placement and/or find ways to complete their hours through remote work” (p. 273), it also provided a unique context in which many long-standing field education practices were critically analyzed, and new practices emerged within a very short time frame. The author addressed the challenges and opportunities for innovation that she experienced while working within the disability sector and supervising two BSW practicum students. Kusari explained that “despite the challenges that COVID-19 presented, it also offered a space to experiment with field education opportunities which were conceptualized as unconventional” (p. 290), including remote, virtual field practicums. Her experience with Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), both in supervising practicums and in delivering services to program participants, led the author to support the implementation of a mix of in-person and virtual program/service delivery in the future. The PhD advocacy practicum, described by Janse van Rensburg et al. (chapter 12), also introduced a new model of engaging in virtual field education. This model, inspired by *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2018), involves a four-phase process (problem posing to the student, student problem-solving, problem posing to the community, and community problem-solving).

Stepping outside of traditional ways of offering field education, Wong (chapter 2) invited us to consider the benefits and limitations of matching social work students with non-social work field supervisors. To illustrate her points, Wong shared her experiences of completing an MSW practicum in two agencies where there were no social workers onsite. She concluded that developing and supporting field practicums supervised by

non-social workers creates opportunities to expand the number of available field agencies, opens doors to engage with non-traditional practicum sites, offers students greater access to engage with and learn from marginalized peoples and communities, and enhances interdisciplinary learning and practice.

As described in the previous section, in response to the economic barriers faced by students in unpaid practicums, Aguilera, Medley, Gage, and Hutchison (chapter 1) advocated for new models of field education that financially support economically disadvantage students. They assert that “providing an economic safety net for students will also increase diversity in the social work field, as students from underrepresented groups who previously could not afford an unpaid practicum will be able to pursue the profession” (p. 30).

In Ethiopia, like many countries across the globe, students tend to be placed in large institutions in urban centres. Shiferaw, Asrate, and Eyasu (chapter 7) advocated that “Ethiopian universities need to revisit their ‘business as usual’ practicum trend, by focusing on communal settings in rural areas to address the gender gaps so evident in education and in other social institutions” (p. 153). They reminded us that

local social workers, educators, and social development practitioners are required to address local realities of personal, social, and community challenges. We can use student practicum reports to gain much wider understanding about local problems and solutions. (p. 153)

On a similar note, Ali (chapter 11) described a model of field education in community development in Pakistan and highlighted the impact of social work students on local and broader social change. The discussion “provide[d] insights into the field education model that trains practicum students in need assessment, community mobilization, participatory action research, capacity building, monitoring, evaluation, and long-term sustainability of the project” (p. 210). Building strong community development practicums requires “collaboration between social work schools and social development agencies. In the future, even more collaboration is needed to address the multi dimension challenges related to social and environmental justice” (p. 221).

Suárez Rojas (chapter 16) invited readers to ponder how, despite the merits of field education, “fieldwork also can become a challenging and even traumatic experience for students, thus underscoring the need for a preventive and healing training process” (p. 348). In response to these concerns, he introduced the novel Multimodal Integration of Imagination and Trauma (MIIT) framework to aid in developing trauma-informed field education and social work practice.

## Integrating Indigenous and Anti-racist Knowledges, Methodologies, and Perspectives

Several authors envisioned achieving change through integrating Indigenous and anti-racist knowledges, methodologies, and perspectives into social work and field education curriculum. Chilanga (chapter 4) advocated for the Indigenization of social work education in Africa, in part by transitioning from a Western casework model to a developmental social work theory and practice education curriculum. In his chapter, Chilanga asserted that “the transforming from Eurocentric to Afrocentric social work pedagogies has the potential to influence Africa’s social work theory, policy, and practice” (p. 70). Further, he hypothesized that such change would lead social workers to address social problems more effectively, including poverty, homelessness, unemployment, lack of access to education, food insecurity, and disease. Notably, this chapter offered that “the theory and field education curriculum of developmental social work is designed to empower social workers to advocate for economic development and confront structural systems that perpetuate social problems” (p. 73).

Also advocating for social work educators to Indigenize the curriculum and social workers to engage in social change, Ayele and Kebede (chapter 10) provided a critical overview of social work education and field education in Ethiopia. In doing so, they “consider[ed] the gaps between theory and practice in Ethiopia and explore[d] how these could be addressed in order to bring about social change in systems to promote social justice in international social work” (p. 193). Given that “field education may also play a vital role in identifying and intervening in unjust and oppressive practices at the individual, group, and community level” (p. 196), the authors also recommended the integration of social justice into social work field education and social work practice in Ethiopia.

Drawing on research that explores the provision of services to undocumented victims of interpersonal violence (IPV), Balbuena (chapter 13) described how “culturally responsive practices and policies need to be implemented to remove structural and institutional barriers” (p. 252) and recommended that “social work service providers must become aware of their service delivery and cultural responsiveness to diverse groups of undocumented immigrants who are economically, socially, and politically marginalized” (p. 267).

In a similar vein, Mack (chapter 6) discussed using culturally responsive approaches to address racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare practices and reflected on her research-based field practicum with a child welfare agency. Her recommendations for field education included “... providing opportunities for increasing cultural awareness, engaging in skill-based interventions, seeking more profound cultural knowledge, participating in cultural encounters, cultivating cultural desire, and implementing action-oriented practices” (p. 128). Hence, “it is recommended that field education supervisors and students collaborate on ways to integrate opportunities for discussing, applying, and promoting culturally responsive practices within the field practicum setting” (p. 127). In chapter 15, De Vynck, Ciesielski, and Boynton

contend[ed] that understandings of cultural humility and competence should be extended to include a stance on spiritual humility and competence. These should include culturally and contextually appropriate ways of practicing, as spirituality is integral to cultural beliefs and worldviews, particularly for non-Western cultures. For many individuals, spirituality is connected to their culture. (p. 299)

Greenslade (chapter 5) addressed the lack of preparedness for anti-racist social work practice among social work students, the dearth of anti-racist theory and practical skills in the curriculum, and the essential role of critical conversations in anti-racist education. Contextualizing the urgency of her recommendations, she drew links between the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased presence, visibility, and violence of racism. In doing so, she reminded us that



anti-racist education does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, it is a consistent reflection of everyday encounters, rife with the subtlety of racism and Whiteness that have become so much a part of our existence that we no longer question them. (p. 106)

Greenslade recommended Critical Race Theory as a framework for engaging in conversations about race, racism, coloniality, anti-racism, and anti-coloniality. Importantly, she noted that

It is through the conversations and reflections in which we engage, with ourselves and with others, that we begin to question and comprehend years of coloniality, white supremacy, and racist systems and structures that have gone unquestioned for so long that we hardly notice them anymore. (p. 114)

On a similar note, Gooding (chapter 8) integrated Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) to discuss race as a component of “use of self.” She postulated that “if use of self is truly about relationship, then there must be an understanding that relationships do not live outside of societal constructions of race, and that social worker bodies become a part of use of self” (p. 158).

## Encouraging Students and Field Instructors to Step/Think Outside of Their Comfort Zone

Authors also addressed the necessity for social work field education to provide opportunities for students and field instructors to participate in uncomfortable conversations, address unspoken topics, and engage with under-served populations.

Recognizing the assumption that social workers and social work students are from dominant identity groups and that service users are not, Gooding (chapter 8) urged “field instructors and students to engage in meaningful conversations about the social construction of race, its dimensions, and the ways a racialized identity informs one’s ability to use self to build relationships with clients and to advance client goals” (p. 169).

Similarly, Greenslade (chapter 5) acknowledged the dearth of anti-racist theory and practical skills in the curriculum and counselled that

owing to the continued pervasiveness of racism, intentional and explicit anti-racist social work education is long overdue, and it is imperative that these conversations start happening in field education. Failure to do so is to severely disadvantage social work students as they graduate to practice in environments and institutions plagued by racism. (p. 114)

Kaushik (chapter 9) asserted that social work education has a responsibility to educate students about immigration, and therefore encouraged field education to enhance that learning through placements with immigrant serving agencies. Recognizing that “the challenges and issues that immigrants face are often beyond cultural or ethnicity-based discrimination or racism” (p. 187), it is essential that social work educators not limit discussions to diversity but rather focus on immigration policies and practices. She demonstrated that

Owing to the rapid influx of immigrants, the changing demographic realities in Canada demand that the social work academic programs offer appropriate knowledge and experience on the range of issues experienced by the immigrants, and not just limit the focus on diversity and cultural competence. (p. 187)

This call for increased education around immigration is echoed by Balbuena (chapter 13) in her recommendations regarding the provision of services to undocumented victims of interpersonal violence (IPV) in the US. In her chapter, she explains that “There is a need for social work field education programs to acknowledge the importance of immigration status as a component of diversity” (p. 269).

De Vynck, Ciesielski, and Boynton (chapter 15) explored the integration of spirituality and religion into the social work curriculum, particularly field education. Addressing the absence of spirituality in most social work curriculum, the authors noted that “Although historically social

work has roots in spirituality, explicit focus on this area was suppressed over time” (p. 296). They advocated for social work educators to include spirituality in their teaching and pointed out that “social workers entering the practice field will inevitably encounter children, adolescents, families, and/or communities dealing with adversity, and research has demonstrated spiritual strengths, crises, struggles, and distress are often intertwined with these experiences” (p. 295). Shiferaw, Asrate, and Eyasu (chapter 7) equally underscore the importance of spirituality in social work practice and research, noting that “a spiritual base provides them purpose, direction, focus, and a sense of fulfilling their destiny” (p. 150).

## Integrating Research into Social Work Field Education

The majority of the contributors noted that there is not enough research on field education available and highlighted the importance of researching various aspects of field education. Many of the authors suggested areas for further exploration and some addressed the importance of integrating research into social work field education. De Vynck, Ciesielski, and Boynton (chapter 15) “recognize[d] that there is a reciprocal nature of practice driving research and research driving practice” (p. 315). de Bie, Chaplin, and Vengris (chapter 3) noted that

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. (p. 64)

Zenebe and Kebede (chapter 10) “highlight[ed] the important role of field education in addressing visible gaps while also engaging in social work research, evaluation of programs or projects, and planning social work interventions at various levels” (p. 193).

In this collection, field education research and scholarship are valued and respected, and provide a stimulating field for investigation. It is important and necessary to promote social work field education as a site for research. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Asakura et al. (2018) found

that field education was under intense pressure to respond to a rapidly changing environment. Today, the pressures and challenges are compounded by the impacts of the global pandemic and many interrelated social, economic, and environmental factors. New practices and perspectives are needed to drive innovation and transform social work field education. The authors call for additional resources, collaboration, social justice, accessibility, equity, new placement models and field instruction approaches, and for pedagogy informed by anti-racist and Indigenous knowledges. Social work educators must accept responsibility to maintain a strong commitment to social justice education in field programs (Levine & Murray-Lichtman, 2018). While many social work educators agree that social justice is critical in social work education, there remain significant challenges to making social justice a priority in the field placement (Levine & Murray-Lichtman, 2018). Moreover, the need for advancing environmental justice was demonstrated by contributors who addressed environmental concerns, such as clean drinking water and environmental degradation.

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, a joint commitment to action of the three global organizations of social work professionals (IFSW), educators in social work (IASSW), and activists (ICSW) adopted the 2020–2030 framework “co-building inclusive social transformation.” This theme is echoed by the authors of this collection who share a concern about and share strategies to address the state of field education.

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