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# A New Partnership: Transforming the Field Education Landscape Intersections of Research and Practice in Canadian Social Work Field Education

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## **Introduction**

Practicum, also known as field education, is the signature pedagogy for a wide range of professional education programs, especially social work (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2007; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). Social work is a profession concerned with helping individuals, families, groups, and communities to enhance their individual and collective well-being (Canadian Association of Social Workers, n.d.). With approximately 50,000 social workers in Canada, the profession plays a critical role in the delivery of social services in the labor market (Stephenson, Rondeau, Michaud, & Fiddler, 2001). The social work profession and the accrediting and regulatory bodies for social work education recognize the critical importance of practicum in preparing the future social service workforce (Bogo, 2015). Field placements provide real-world practice experience in which knowledge, skills, and values that students learn in the classroom are applied within practice settings under the supervision of a qualified professional (Ralph et al., 2007). Many schools of social work offer a traditional agency-based model of field education in which unpaid, voluntary, one-on-one “tutoring” is provided by professional social workers, or field instructors (Bogo, 2006). Field instructors serve as mentors, teachers, and role models for practicum students by demonstrating the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and ethics required to be a practicing professional through supervised application of practice in the field (Ayala et al., 2018; Barretti, 2007; Bogo, 2006).

Field education is in crisis (Ayala et al., 2018; McConnell, Sammon, & Pike, 2013). There is an urgent need for social work education programs to re-vision how field education is conceptualized, structured, and delivered (Ayala et al., 2018; Bellinger, 2010; Charles, Alexander, & Oliver, 2014; Clark et al., 2012; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Karger, 2012; Lager & Robbins, 2004; Lyter, 2012; Preston, George, & Silver, 2014), and ultimately how the profession prepares the next generation of social workers. While field education is a required component in all undergraduate and graduate social work education programs across North America (Barretti, 2007; Wayne et al., 2010), social work education programs have been experiencing significant multi-layered challenges with delivering practicum experiences to social work students (Ayala et al., 2018) and with integrating research and practice in field education (Hewson, Walsh, & Bradshaw, 2010; Teater, 2017). Field education coordinators have faced increasing challenges associated with unprecedented growth in social work education programs and rising student demand for placements (Ayala et al., 2018; Lyter, 2012; Noble & Irwin, 2009; Poulin, Silver, & Kauffman, 2006; Regehr, 2013).

Field instructor recruitment and retention has emerged as a top concern over the past decade (Ayala et al., 2018; Lyter, 2012; Noble & Irwin, 2009; Poulin et al., 2006; Regehr, 2013) and increased annual turnover rates of practicum sites are growing, creating a vicious cycle whereby field programs are continuously undertaking efforts to procure new practicum opportunities (Lager & Robbins, 2004). This situation has culminated in field education coordinators from across Canada releasing a joint statement calling for educational institutions and the profession to find new ways of addressing this growing and significant problem (Ayala et al., 2018; McConnell et al., 2013). The crisis is at a tipping point and needs to be addressed before it negatively impacts the learning needs of students and ultimately the ability of the profession to deliver quality services to our communities (Ayala et al., 2018; McConnell et al., 2013).

In response to calls from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), social workers need to be “properly educated and trained about the history and impacts of residential schools” (TRC, 2015, p. 1). New practices, insights, and approaches to teaching and learning are urgently needed in order for social work education to thrive in evolving and increasingly demanding social contexts, educational landscapes, and labor markets (Ayala et al., 2018; Barretti, 2007; Karger, 2012; Regehr, 2013; Stoesz, Karger, & Carrillo, 2010). In particular, there is a need for more sustainable practicum models to be developed and implemented (Ayala et al., 2018). Further, there is a continual concern over the disconnect between research and social work practice and the extent to which research evidence is not fully used to inform social work practice (Preston et al., 2014). Numerous studies call for the

integration of research in social work practice, specifically in field education (Hewson et al., 2010; Stoesz et al., 2010; Teater, 2017). The field is both a critical resource to, and a benefactor of, the academy, yet in both instances, the lack of integration across facets of social work (practice and research) impedes the advancement of the profession, which vicariously renders service users at greater vulnerability due to this unresolved disciplinary struggle.

### **Goal and Objectives**

The goal of this project is to integrate research and practice in the preparation of the next generation of social workers by developing partnered research training initiatives, both within academia and across the public and not-for-profit sectors, that enhance student research practice knowledge and applied skill development. The objectives are to:

- 1) transform social work field education by bridging the gap between research and practice through joint training initiatives, projects, and other forms of multi-stakeholder engagement and integration;
- 2) strengthen the recognition of the importance of social work practice research by enhancing knowledge and skills among students, postdoctoral fellows, and current and future practitioners;
- 3) train and mentor students and postdoctoral fellows through new partnered research training initiatives that build the research capacity of the current and future generation of social work scholars, practitioners, and policymakers;
- 4) support the development of sustainable models of field education through engaging students and postdoctoral fellows in research on promising practices in field education across the country; and
- 5) engage students and postdoctoral fellows in partnered knowledge mobilization and the multi-directional exchange of knowledge on promising practices in Canada and internationally for sustainable field education and practice research.

The team is comprised of 13 co-investigators, 51 collaborators, and 39 partners from Canadian and foreign post-secondary institutions; provincial, national, and international social work associations; government departments; and private, public, and not-for-profit organizations. The co-investigators include: Uzo Anucha (York University), Marion Bogo (University of Toronto), Natalie Clark (Thompson Rivers

University), Grant Charles (The University of British Columbia), Jill Hanley (McGill University), Sheri McConnell (Memorial University), Eileen McKee (University of Toronto), David Nicholas (University of Calgary), Michelle Reid (Nicola Valley Institute of Technology), Sally St. George (University of Calgary), Tamara Sussman (McGill University), Christine Walsh (University of Calgary), and Dan Wulff (University of Calgary). Social work field education brings together students, postdoctoral fellows, field education coordinators and directors, social work practitioners, researchers, deans and directors of schools of social work, members of professional associations, policymakers, field instructors, and service providers.

### **Context and Literature Review**

The Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) Standards for Accreditation (2014) require students to complete a minimum of 450 hours (MSW graduate students) and 700 hours (BSW undergraduate students) in the field; the same standards also require student research competence. Contributing to the crisis in field education are significant concerns about the teaching of research to social work students (Kvarfordt, Carter, Park, & Yun, 2014; Preston et al., 2014). Some literature notes that because of their experiences as students, social work practitioners express disinterest in engaging in research due to a self-perception that they lack the skills, including the capacities to read, understand, and incorporate research into their practice (McDermott & Bawden, 2017). Traditional formal research approaches are often viewed as being inapplicable to social work practice and inaccessible to social work students and practitioners (Driessens, Saurama, & Fargion, 2011; Fook, Johannessen, & Psoinos, 2011; Shannon, 2013).

In the field of social work, there is a long-held assumption that knowledge is developed by researchers and then applied by practitioners rather than being a collaborative endeavor (St. George, Wulff, & Tomm, 2015). This is of significant concern to the profession, as social work practitioners are increasingly expected to have the skills and knowledge to be able to both analyze research evidence, incorporate research findings into their work, and carry out research in their own practice (St. George et al., 2015). Clearly, traditional coursework alone is not sufficient to stimulate student interest and acumen in conducting research or to develop a sense of confidence in applying research in practice (Freymond et al., 2014; McDermott & Bawden, 2017; Walsh, Rutherford, & Sears, 2010). There is a need to rethink traditional approaches to teaching research in order to provide some form of practical “hands-on” learning opportunities that engage students (Benson & Blackman, 2003; Freymond et al., 2014; Trevisan, 2002).

A number of studies discuss the advantages of providing learning opportunities, in which students work toward addressing a real-life research problem, that include collecting and reporting on data and that increase students' confidence in conducting research and build students' research interests, knowledge, and skills (Hewson et al., 2010; Preston et al., 2014; Stoesz et al., 2010; Teater, 2017). However, little research discusses how field education and research could be integrated to provide opportunities for students to enhance their research capacity as they prepare to enter practice environments that will demand their engagement in evidence-based practices (Stoesz et al., 2010). Social work education can play an important role as a catalyst in bringing about change and promoting the development of research-minded practice (McCrystal & Wilson, 2009; Orme & Powell, 2008). Field education can foster the interconnections and exploration of research and practice by providing creative training and educational opportunities in the classroom and beyond (St. George et al., 2015). This project will provide the opportunity through a large scale educational and practice collaboration to explore new ways of bringing together field education and research efforts to solve the current challenges being experienced in both areas.

Allied disciplines, such as human services, counseling, psychology, education, medicine, nursing, and health sciences, provide practice placements with various expectations. For example, clinical placements focus on practitioner-oriented qualifications and competencies, while service-learning and co-op placements provide "added value" elements to an academic course (Kolomer, Quinn, & Steele, 2010; Mink & Twill, 2012). Despite recognition of the importance of clinical placements in allied disciplines, there is a global shortage of practice placements for students due to staff shortages, training costs, budget cuts, and increasing competition for placements with the expansion in the number of programs and increased class sizes, which result in professional programs facing similar challenges in finding enough suitable placements for students (Brown et al., 2011; Taylor, Angel, Nyanga, & Dickson, 2017). Medical and allied health professions address the challenge, in part, by adopting peer teaching models such as "Near Peer Teaching" in clinical placements (Blanchard, 2015; Irvine, Williams, & McKenna, 2018). Near Peer Teaching is an instructional method wherein students temporarily assume the role of coach or instructor in medical teaching teams. Students completing clinical placements identify with their senior peers who fulfill precepting roles such as direct instruction, modeling, coaching, and facilitating for junior students (de Menezes & Premnath, 2016; Walter & MacDonald, 2015). Canadian nursing programs expose students to a variety of clinical learning opportunities under the supervision of clinical instructors employed by the academic institution in group placements (Wiens, Babenko-Mould, & Iwasiw, 2014). Clinical

practice and simulation labs support teaching and skill development for professional practice in a self-regulated learning environment (Craig, McInroy, Bogo, & Thompson, 2017; Liaw, Palham, Chan, Wong, & Lim, 2015; Manning, Skiff, Santiago, & Irish, 2016). Despite the challenges in securing quality placements in allied disciplines, the literature demonstrates that students are eager to enhance their employability through professional experience gained through workplace and clinical placements, internships, apprenticeships, and co-ops that enhance their learning in practical and academic domains (Nevison, Drewery, Pretti, & Cormier, 2017; Silva et al., 2016).

### Theoretical Framework

There are several theories that inform the training and mentoring approaches in this project. These include: (a) inquiry-based learning, (b) transformational learning and research, and (c) Valsiner's (2000) work on cultural and human development. Based on a constructivist paradigm, *inquiry-based learning* refers to a range of instructional practices that promote learning through student-driven and student-centered questions (Justice et al., 2007). Inquiry-based learning results in deep understanding and high levels of integration through active engagement with content (Justice et al., 2007; Lundahl, 2008; Walsh, Casselman, Hickey, Lee, & Pliszka, 2015). Mezirow's theory of *transformational learning* (1998, 2000) suggests that in order to challenge one's own attitudes and beliefs, it is necessary to critically reflect upon one's own assumptions and those of other people. The project will draw from inquiry-based learning and transformational approaches that are consistent with the social work profession's mission, vision, and values, which are characterized by a change orientation, egalitarian relationships, accountability to service users, and holistic engagement (Dominelli, 2005). A transformative research approach allows for an action agenda to promote change in social work field education.

Valsiner's work on *cultural and human development* (2000) provides a framework for understanding how the creation of professional identity depends on interactions with the surrounding world (Charles, Bainbridge, & Gilbert, 2010). When applied to training and education, professional identity develops through an intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community interplay within local environments. In social work field education, students are immersed in both academic and practice settings, and these environments influence their professional development (Charles et al., 2010). The concept of *Research As Daily Practice* will be used to understand this integration of research and practice, through which practitioners reflexively consider how to improve their practice (St. George et al., 2015; Wulff & St. George, 2014). The guiding theoretical framework for the project is informed by the above elements.

## **Project Methods**

The talent partnership is built on an inquiry-based learning and transformational approach that creates new opportunities for students and postdoctoral fellows to explore, identify, and develop promising practices for integrating research training in social work practice (Benson & Blackman, 2003; Healey, 2005; St. George et al., 2015; Trevisan, 2002). The training and mentoring activities are organized into three streams of complementary activities (described below), each of which will create opportunities for students and postdoctoral fellows to integrate research into practice. Each of the three streams will employ a range of methods, including interviews, focus groups, digital storytelling, and case study research.

### **Stream 1 - Digital Storytelling**

Students and postdoctoral fellows will be trained and mentored to conduct digital storytelling interviews (Lewis, 2011) with each other to document and to share their training, mentoring, and research experiences. Innovative and promising practices in training and mentoring will be identified, and resources will be created to support the sharing of stories, perspectives, and experiences in virtual formats. Students and postdoctoral fellows will participate in semi-structured interviews to give meaning to their personal experiences and to inform the development of virtual resources that will build capacity in social work education. The guiding research question is: In what ways does the storytelling process enhance student learning about research training and mentorship?

Appreciative feedback will be used to enhance students' ability to refine elements of their stories and their delivery styles (Tyler & Mullen, 2011). Digital storytelling as a method will be used to promote deep reflection, to make sense of experience, to encourage cooperative activity, to build confidence, and to create a powerful product that can have a transformative effect on the maker and viewer alike (Alterio, 2002; Boase, 2013).

### **Stream 2 - National Study**

A national study will be undertaken by students and postdoctoral fellows, with training and mentorship from faculty and partners, to identify, document, and exchange innovative and promising practices in social work field education across Canada. The results will inform the development of sustainable models for field

education (Neden, Townsend, & Zuchowski, 2018). Research topics include: (1) Field instructor recruitment and retention; (2) Indigenous and anti-colonial field education; (3) Interprofessional practice; (4) International field education; (5) Official language in minority contexts; (6) Service user placements; (7) Research-based practica; (8) Field supervision models; and (9) Use of technology/simulation.

Interviews with 100 key informants will provide direct practice understanding, knowledge, and information. A national survey will be undertaken on the state of field education in Canada with schools of social work. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews will examine perspectives and experiences of field coordinators, field instructors, and social work practitioners with respect to their roles in supporting social work field education. A purposive sampling approach will be used to recruit 100 participants to include sample diversity based on student level, region, and diversity in social determinants to learn about their field education experience. Following the interviews, the researchers will capture intragroup dynamics as expressed by collective voices, and engage in member checking (Creswell, 2014) (to determine the accuracy of the findings) using focus group discussion sessions. Focus groups will take place from the end of Year 3 and in Year 4, when interviews are complete. They will be organized as community events and workshops in collaboration with partners and social work associations' annual conferences, which will help with recruitment and extend invitations.

### **Stream 3 – Applied Practice Research**

To facilitate the integration of research and practice in field education, students and postdoctoral fellows will be trained and mentored in *Research As Daily Practice*, an approach to research in which practitioners are recognized and valued as researchers because they use inquiry processes to make quality decisions in their daily practice (e.g., gathering data, organizing data to better explain phenomena, constructing and implementing a plan of action, observing the effects, and gathering more data) (Austin, Dal Santo, & Lee, 2012; Fook et al., 2011). In incorporating *Research As Daily Practice* in an agency context, practitioners collectively examine problems, dilemmas, and questions that they are facing in their work with clients in systematic ways. They first identify questions of interest and then evaluate the best methods to address those questions. They select and utilize research methodologies that most closely align with their contextual ways of operating as an agency. For example, they may tailor a discourse analysis process or use a narrative inquiry, grounded theory, or critical ethnography because that methodology aligns with the question of inquiry and the way they practice normally. The key issue is that the practices that the practitioners are



using to help their clients constitute systematic ways of developing an understanding of a client/family/community and can also be seen as a research process. Training on social work practice as a research approach will be delivered and resources will be developed for practicum students and field instructors.

## **Training and Mentoring**

The partnership brings together our expertise to provide a variety of educational, training, and mentorship opportunities to the current and future generations of social work scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. Undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, and practicum students and postdoctoral fellows will be involved in all aspects of the project. As the project develops, we expect to involve more students and postdoctoral fellows as training resources become available online for collaborators to use in their field education programs. There are approximately 14,500 social work students in Canada, and we expect to reach approximately 25 percent or 3,625 students over the five years of the project.

The training and mentoring plan recognizes the need for trainees to develop theoretical, research, professional, and career-readiness skills for social work practice, and to support the transition of students to practice settings in academia, public, and not-for-profit sectors. Through supervision and mentoring from team members and “hands on” training and participation in research, students and postdoctoral fellows will learn how to carry out a research project, become “research-minded,” and integrate *Research As Daily Practice* (Shannon, 2013). Students and postdoctoral fellows will create portfolios addressing their research, education, training, employment, and social development goals, and their learning will be documented in the partnership. Strategies to advance field practicum access will be developed through the research process.

A mentor relationship will support the achievement of these goals by drawing on the expertise of the team. Students will meet weekly with their academic supervisor and/or field instructor for mentoring and training and to discuss issues and concerns as the partnership progresses. In addition, students and postdoctoral fellows will meet with one or more of the co-investigators to share ideas and knowledge and to discuss the activities in which they are involved. Students and postdoctoral fellows will participate in all phases and will develop skills in practice research, research ethics, data collection and analysis, transcribing, coding and qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis, report writing, and knowledge exchange. In collaboration with the team, students and postdoctoral fellows will contribute to knowledge exchange by summarizing

findings, drafting journal articles and conference papers, presenting findings to diverse audiences, and creating online resources to be used for advancing research, education, and practice.

Each year, a preconference workshop at the annual CASWE conference will be held for students and postdoctoral fellows to discuss current priority issues. At the local level, practicum students will be mentored to integrate research into practice through field education and to work with community organizations on these projects. Online resources will be developed to foster student and postdoctoral training, including training modules, webinars, podcasts, and videos, which will be posted on our website: [www.tfelproject.com](http://www.tfelproject.com), and shared through our social media pages, including Facebook and Twitter: @tfelproject.

The partnership aims to create training and mentoring environments where students and postdoctoral fellows can thrive and ask critical questions about the nature of social work and field education. Mentoring relationships will be created and supported in the shared recognition that research experience in field education is critical. A diverse mix of opportunities will be developed by the partnership: (i) Webinars, workshops, panel discussions, and brown bag lunches will be recorded to be shared as resources on the website; (ii) Practice research training modules and resources will be developed and hosted online for use by students and field instructors across the country; (iii) Innovative and promising practices for research training (e.g., research-based practica) will be documented; (iv) National study in field education will provide opportunities for students and postdoctoral researchers to develop research and professional skills; (v) A Field Education Summit will be organized on July 14, 2020, to convene students and practice research stakeholders to develop new or enhance existing practice research field placements and learning opportunities; (vi) Research training program for students and field instructors will equip students and stakeholders with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to promote and assess competence related to practice research; and (vii) Research fellows program will connect students with social work leaders and trainee peers in Canada and internationally, based on supervisory focus and research interests.

The partnered research training initiatives bring together institutions from the academic, public, private, and not-for-profit sectors to support the creation of innovative approaches that enrich the research training experience for students and postdoctoral fellows while facilitating their transition to academic and non-academic workplace settings. Students and postdoctoral fellows will acquire and develop important research and professional skills that complement their social work education

to improve their employment readiness. The project will facilitate networking opportunities with potential employers and create sustainable joint research training initiatives.

### **Potential Influence and Impacts of the Project**

Training and learning opportunities will build academic competencies and professional skills for students, postdoctoral fellows, and the current and future generations of social work academics, practitioners, and policymakers. Students and postdoctoral fellows will learn the art and science of integrating research and practice. The potential influence and impacts of the project will facilitate partnered research training initiatives in support of practice research and the collaborative development of a multi-level strategy aimed at moving beyond the current state of crisis toward sustainable models of social work field education. Effective academic skills of value for both academic and non-academic careers will be fostered through collaborative research teams; practice research; and writing and publishing reports, papers, articles, and chapters directed to diverse audiences.

### **Conclusion**

This partnership will contribute to the development of talent through partnered research training initiatives that integrate research in social work field education. The partnership is expected to directly benefit every accredited social work education program in Canada ( $N=43$ ), and our partners, with new training resources. Trainees will gain significant benefits such as new perspectives, knowledge, and skills in applied practice research, applied theory, knowledge exchange, ethics, project management, evaluation, leadership, and enhanced career prospects as a result of the partnership's research and training initiatives. Because social workers work with vulnerable populations, such as children in need of protection and adults living in poverty, among many others, it is critically important to create new knowledge for better practice in complex situations. The integration of research in field education will improve social work practice, which will contribute to micro, mezzo, and macro system improvements in social services for all.

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