

# STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON CANADIAN SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION Virtual Dialogue Circles Report 2021



Transforming the Field  
Education Landscape

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>7</b>
CANADIAN FIELD EDUCATION IN CRISIS .....	7
STUDENT PERSPECTIVES .....	7
<b>TRANSFORMING THE FIELD EDUCATION LANDSCAPE (TFEL) PROJECT</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>METHODS</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>13</b>
THE VALUE OF FIELD EDUCATION .....	13
CHALLENGES WITH FIELD EDUCATION .....	14
ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE .....	18
SELF-ADVOCACY .....	19
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC .....	20
RETHINKING FIELD EDUCATION .....	21
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>APPENDIX A – INFORMATION ON THE STUDY FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS</b> .....	<b>34</b>
<b>APPENDIX B – VIRTUAL DIALOGUE CIRCLES QUESTIONS</b> .....	<b>35</b>

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Virtual Dialogue Circles is a project aimed at capturing student perspectives on social work field education in Canada by facilitating virtual dialogue circles with current social work students. Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) is a partnership project that aims to better prepare the next generation of social workers in Canada by creating training and mentoring opportunities for students, developing and mobilizing innovative and promising field education practices, and improving the integration of research and practice in field education.

Dialogue circles are a dialogic practice that curates a space wherein all participants are valued, respected, and given opportunity to contribute to the conversation. A series of eight dialogue circles were conducted online over the Zoom platform between July and November of 2020. Participants were current BSW or MSW social work students registered in a program accredited by the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE). Findings from this study indicate that social work students have valuable insight into field education and can contribute to addressing the current crisis in field education.

Thematic analysis of the data revealed the following themes and subthemes:

### **Value of Field Education**

- Valuable learning experience
- Supports for students
- Seminar and supervision
- Learning agreements

### **Challenges in Field Education**

- Difficulties with communication
- Difficulty meeting learning goals
- Desire for more support from field instructors
- Lack of macro, policy, and research placements
- Competitiveness of recruitment process
- Lack of financial compensation
- Experiencing stress and burnout
- Overburdened field coordinators

### **Anti-Oppressive Practice**

- Challenges in achieving anti-oppressive practice and decolonizing learning goals
- Desiring more incorporation of anti-oppressive practice into university context
- Students' experiences of oppression, marginalization, and discrimination
- Lack of consideration for Indigenous values, ways of knowing and being, and wise practices

### **Self-Advocacy**

- Self-advocacy and self-sufficiency as vital strategies
- Important skills as social workers

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic**

- Challenges during COVID-19
- New opportunities with COVID-19

## **Rethinking Field Education**

- More field instructors and field coordinators
- More mental health supports
- More financial supports
- More peer supports
- Changes to curriculum
- Additional training and educational opportunities
- More diversity in placements
- Rethinking what 'counts' as valuable experience
- More communication and collaboration
- More workplace and paid placements
- More flexibility in completing placements
- Incorporating lived experience into placements
- Systemic change in regulatory bodies and government

Based on the findings, the following five key recommendations were made:

1. Foster collaboration and communication among universities, students, agencies, and policymakers.
2. Hire more staff, including field education coordinators and field instructors.
3. Develop more financial supports for students.
4. Incorporate anti-oppressive and anti-racist values into field education.
5. Continue exploring flexible and non-traditional opportunities for field placements.

## INTRODUCTION

This report on Student Perspectives on Canadian Social Work Field Education presents the findings from a series of dialogue circles with social work students held between July and November of 2020. The findings highlight student experiences in field education, including the value, challenges, and opportunities associated with field education as encountered and perceived by the student participants.

The field education component of social work education is critical to both individual students and the field of social work. Field education is an essential component of social work education that allows students the opportunity to practice their skills and obtain tangible experience to benefit their development as social workers (Bogo, 2015; Gelman & Lloyd, 2008). Field education, or practicum, experiences ensure that new professionals entering the field are capable of practicing ethically and with an established level of competence (Bogo, 2015). It is important that students enrolled in social work programs across Canada have opportunities for positive, educational, and sufficiently challenging field education experiences.

However, social work students are facing significant challenges affecting their learning, as social work field education in Canada is in a state of crisis (Ayala et al., 2018a). There are increasing numbers of students entering social work programs, such that field directors, coordinators, and staff have a difficult time supporting them (Ayala et al., 2018a; Bogo, 2015). At the same time, the social and political context has de-emphasized social services, increasing the pressures on agencies that would typically provide practicums to social work students (Bogo, 2015). Thus, the field environment has become more pressured, competitive, and strained for all those involved. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created additional pressures for many students, social work educational programs, and field agencies.

Despite these challenges, new ideas for innovative approaches to field education, that can potentially be beneficial in the current context, are emerging. Many of these ideas come from social work educators and professionals involved in field education, such as field coordinators (Ayala et al., 2018a). However, the perspectives of social work students themselves frequently have been left out of the conversation. It is important to include student voices in such conversations in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the realities of social work field education in Canada and address the current crisis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Canadian Field Education in Crisis

Social work field education is a key component of social work education (Bogo, 2015; Gelman & Lloyd, 2008). It is recognized as the “signature pedagogy” by the Council of Social Work Education (2015, p. 12) and considered critical by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014). Field placements, the places where students complete their field education, are “the site where students learn to integrate and apply the values, knowledge, complex practices and skills” of social work and “[s]tudents are socialized to think and act like a social worker.” (Bogo, 2015, p. 318). As well, field education is a key force behind either reinforcing or dismissing social justice values for students (Bhuya et al., 2017). Field placements also may be referred to as practicums or internships.

Social work field education in Canada is in a state of crisis (Ayala et al., 2018a; McConnell, 2016). Canadian field education coordinators have brought forth their perspectives on this issue, and many of them find their work to be unsustainable due to expectations, complexity, time demands, and workloads (Ayala et al., 2018a; McConnell, 2016). There are difficulties with recruiting and retaining field instructors to ensure enough appropriate placements for students, and a lack of suitable placements has been noticed by students (Ayala et al., 2018a; Bogo, 2015; McConnell, 2016). In order to address the crisis, Ayala et al. (2018b) introduced the ‘Sustainability Model of Field Education’, a model that fosters collaboration, innovation, and seeks to enhance available resources and supports within the current neoliberal context.

Also, the lack of compensation for labour is a critical issue within field education, as the unpaid nature of field placements renders field education less accessible for some students (Hemy et al., 2016). This is an issue that some Canadian students have attempted to address. For example, social work students in Quebec went on strike against unpaid internships in November 2018 (Bryan-Baynes, 2018). Permitting more workplace practicums has been proposed as a solution to financial barriers and has been supported by research (Pelech et al., 2009).

While the current crisis in field education in Canada provides ongoing challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically shifted the landscape of social work field education for all those involved, including social work education programs, field agencies, policymakers, and students. In March 2020, CASWE-ACFTS (2020) introduced several temporary changes to field education requirements, including a reduction of required hours in placement, in response to the escalating severity of the pandemic. These adjustments also were necessary for institutions in other countries. For example, Australian social work educational regulatory bodies responded with similar modifications and allotted more flexibility for students completing non-traditional placements, such as workplace practicums (Morley & Clarke, 2020). Despite these institutions responding to student needs, there is no doubt that these changes have affected student experiences and, consequently, their perspectives on field education. It is important to note that the reduction in practicum hours and the changes in field education requirements still remain in place one year after the onset of the pandemic.

### Student Perspectives

When exploring social work field education, student perspectives are key to developing a rich understanding. The voices of social work students have been captured through survey data (Bhuya et

al., 2017; Brady et al., 2020; Flynn et al., 2014; Knight, 2017; Maidment, 2003; Pelech et al., 2009; Ralph et al., 2008), focus groups (Engstrom et al., 2009; Hemy et al., 2016; Parker, 2010; Rehn & Kalman, 2018; Srikanthan, 2019), and interviews (Ralph & Walker, 2008). As there are numerous aspects of social work student experiences, most researchers have identified a smaller aspect of field education to study rather than exploring field education holistically from student perspectives.

Different aspects of a student's social location, such as race (Razack, 2001; Srikanthan, 2019), citizenship (Wall et al., 2017), sexual orientation (Messinger, 2004), (dis)ability (Hearn et al., 2014; Kiesel et al., 2018), and language proficiencies (Engstrom et al., 2009) can affect their experiences in field education. Already occupying a subordinate role as a student within a practicum setting, racialized and international students also may experience racism and differential treatment detrimental to their learning (Razack, 2001; Wall et al., 2017).

Srikanthan (2019) conducted an institutional ethnography focusing on Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students and found that "a race-stratified labour market" has replicated itself within social work field education (p. 2183). In one study, Messinger (2004) described how individual, interpersonal, and institutional issues related to sexual orientation can arise for gay and lesbian social work students in field placements that need to be addressed with resources, mentorship, and other supports. Students with disabilities encounter unique challenges affecting their field education experiences, including confusion regarding accommodations and feeling isolated, that hinder their learning (Kiesel et al., 2018). Research has highlighted the need for educators, school administrators, and field coordinators to not make assumptions of any individual student's ability and to work collaboratively with students to support their success (Hearn et al., 2014). Bilingual students are at risk of having their language proficiencies exploited by practicum sites, as they may be expected to work harder with greater workloads to serve as interpreters and translators for staff, as well as teach themselves social work terms necessary for practice in that language (Engstrom et al., 2009). It is evident that social work students are at risk of and experience oppression, discrimination, marginalization, and exploitation while in field practicums. It is crucial to hear from students themselves to understand their experiences and prevent further harm.

Other research has focused on exploring specific challenges in social work field education, such as financial support (Ralph et al., 2008), the financial burden of doing unpaid work (Maidment, 2003), burnout among students (Hemy et al., 2016), motivating and recruiting field instructors (Ayala et al., 2018a; Ralph et al., 2008), and ensuring students get adequate field experiences with different skills, such as group work (Knight, 2017) and interprofessional collaboration (Kelly et al., 2020). In order to address these challenges, a variety of solutions have been explored and recommended. For instance, permitting more paid workplace practicums, demonstrated as a satisfactory experience for students, would alleviate the pressure on field coordinators to find viable placements, reduce the financial burden on students, and provide a rich learning experience (Pelech et al., 2009). Community-based field placements that respond to the needs of a community are a promising alternative to traditional field placements (Brady et al., 2020). For example, an MSW student, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and displaced field placements, created an action-learning project responding to a community need while also meeting the field education requirements for many students involved (Morris et al., 2020). These alternative practicums provide promising opportunities to create more field placements for students and incorporate more diverse experiences into field education.



Cultural and geographical contexts are salient factors to consider when studying social work field education. In mainland China, social work and social work education, including field education, have not been established for as long as other Western countries, like Canada. The profession's relative infancy creates unique challenges for students, including inadequate supervision due to supervisor inexperience (Chen et al., 2018). Similar challenges related to a developing field education were expressed by social work students in Papua New Guinea, who reported feeling unprepared for field placements (Flynn et al., 2014). Swedish social work education's development and delivery is a response to the need of their strong welfare state for competently educated and trained professionals to support the system (Rehn & Kalman, 2017). While distinct in their own right, examining the experience of students in a variety of cultural and geographical contexts allows for the opportunity to recognize similarities and differences, and to learn about how to manage the challenges in social work field education in Canada.

As previously mentioned, the voices of social work students have not been highlighted in discussions as prominently as the perspectives of others involved in Canadian field education, such as field education coordinators (Ayala et al., 2018a; Clark & Drolet, 2014) in Canada, specifically. In the literature, researchers focused on specific aspects of their experiences rather than Canadian field education as a whole. These issues of interest included experiences of racism and oppression (Razack, 2001; Srikanthan, 2019), integration of social justice (Bhuya et al., 2017), wellness and relational selfcare (Drolet & McLennan, 2016), the importance of feedback as an educational process (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019), workplace practicums (Pelech et al., 2009), and comparing experiential learning across disciplines (Ralph & Walker, 2008). This is a similar scope used by research in other countries. However, an understanding of social work student perspectives on the current crisis in field education is lacking.

Student voices also are not represented in the regulatory bodies that pertain to social work field education in Canada. The Field Education Committee of CASWE (n.d.), which consults on policy and curriculum related to field, typically does not include student representation. At the annual CASWE conference, members of the student committee and field committee participate in a meeting for consultative purposes. It is important to note that students are not directly involved in important processes, such as policy and curriculum changes to field education, affecting their development as social workers.

The literature suggests that student perspectives are salient in exploring field education. Their perspectives need to be utilized to inform program development, as suggested by Ralph et al. (2008), as well as policy changes at the institutional, organizational, and governmental levels. Field education is a vital component of students' development as social workers and their perspectives needs to be incorporated into how field education is implemented. Therefore, in this exploratory study, it was considered important to capture students' views on field education from a Canadian context.

## TRANSFORMING THE FIELD EDUCATION LANDSCAPE (TFEL) PROJECT<sup>1</sup>

The TFEL partnership brings together a diverse team of social work educators, researchers, and partners to address the crisis in field education that is evident in the literature by creating new training and mentorship opportunities in field education for students. The project aims to assess the current state of social work field education in Canada and create opportunities for student research in developing sustainable models of field education (Drolet & Harriman, 2020).

The goal of the TFEL 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 (Drolet, 2020, p. 3).

The project has five main objectives:

1. To 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. To strengthen the recognition of the importance of social work practice research by building knowledge and skills among students, postdoctoral fellows, and current and future practitioners;
3. To train and mentor students and postdoctoral fellows through new partnered research training initiatives that build the research capacity of current and future social work scholars, practitioners, and policymakers;
4. To support the development of sustainable models of field education through engaging students and postdoctoral fellows in research on promising practices in social work field education across Canada; and
5. To engage students and postdoctoral fellows in partnered knowledge mobilization and the multi-directional exchange of knowledge in Canada and internationally on promising practices for sustainable field education and practice research (TFEL, 2020).

The project is built on an inquiry-based learning and a transformational approach to create “opportunities for students and postdoctoral fellows to explore, identify, and develop promising practices for integrating research training in social work practice” (Drolet, 2020, p.7).

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<sup>1</sup> This is a general summary used for all TFEL reports.

## METHODS

The virtual dialogue circles comprised an inductive, exploratory, qualitative study approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. The purpose of this research is to showcase the perceptions of social work students regarding social work field education. The study focused on the following research question: What are social work students' perspectives of social work field education in Canada?

Eight dialogue circles were conducted for data collection (Atlas.ti - Qualitative Data Analysis, 2016; Pranis, 2014) using a virtual platform (Archibald et al., 2019; Daniels et al., 2019) in which participants were invited to respond to a series of nine questions focusing on the current state of field education, the strengths and challenges facing students, and ideas for the future of field education. The research team included five MSW student research assistants enrolled at the University of Calgary; TFEL Stream 2 members provided guidance and consultation.

Students registered in CASWE accredited undergraduate or graduate social work programs were invited to participate in an online focus group discussion in English or French. No other eligibility criteria were specified. Convenience sampling methods were used for recruitment. Information regarding the study was distributed to various Canadian social work student interest groups, such as student advisory committees, student associations, and the social media accounts for Canadian social work programs. Students interested in the study contacted the researchers directly and signed an informed consent prior to participating in a dialogue circle. Each participant received a \$20 gift card.

Twenty-eight participants took part in the study: four from British Columbia, three from Alberta, two from Manitoba, 14 from Ontario, four from Quebec, and one from Newfoundland and Labrador. Ten participants were enrolled in BSW programs and 18 were enrolled in MSW programs.

Seven dialogue circles were conducted in English and one in French. All dialogue circles were hosted on Zoom, with two to five participants in each circle. The circles were structured, and each participant was given time to respond to each question. At the start of each dialogue circle, it was reiterated that participation was entirely voluntary. Participants shared insights informed by past and/or current experiences in social work field education. In some circles, participants also contributed through text chat. The circles were approximately 90 minutes in length. Each virtual dialogue circle was recorded and then transcribed verbatim by the researchers for analysis. The French dialogue circle was transcribed in French and translated into English by a bilingual student research assistant for analysis.

## ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed by three<sup>2</sup> student researchers using the following steps based on Fonteyn et al. (2008):

- Each of the three research assistants independently read through and coded each transcript creating new codes as they proceeded.
- After analyzing three transcripts, a preliminary codebook was developed with codes, subcodes, and definitions. This codebook was modified until all themes in the transcripts were covered and no new codes emerged.
- Researchers met, compared their coding of the three transcripts, and came to a consensus about the final codes.
- A list of quotes that aligned with each code was created.
- The codebook was reviewed to clarify code definitions (e.g., description, inclusion/exclusion criteria) and revised to remove any redundancies.
- Codes were grouped into themes. Definitions were created for themes. Coded quotes that best represent each theme were compiled in the theme book.

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<sup>2</sup> The French transcript was coded and analyzed by two student researchers.

## FINDINGS

Several themes were identified through the analysis of the data. Overall, participants acknowledged the value of field placements as part of their social work education and highlighted their importance in their career development. They provided examples of the difficulties they faced in trying to obtain and complete the field requirements. Participants highlighted challenges in managing stress during their practicum. They also shared a variety of suggestions for improving social work field education as a whole. Given the timing of the study in 2020, many participants discussed how field education changed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the discussions, it was noted that incorporating social work values and anti-oppressive practices into their work and field education experience was a priority for participants. They recommended structural changes and ideas for new ways of approaching field education beneficial not just to students but to all stakeholders. One theme that emerged was that of self-advocacy for social work students, and the importance of taking initiative for one's own learning.

### The Value of Field Education

Participants identified the significant value of field education as a key component of social work education programs. While being cognizant of the challenges, they spoke of the importance of practical and applied experiences to supplement their coursework, which provided opportunities to practice the skills they were learning:

[H]aving the field placement opportunity is in fact a really great part of the program...I think without it, I would not get the kind of education that I need and that my future clients deserve me to have had so I'm really glad, even though there's troubles with the field placement sometimes in how it gets implemented I think it's a really important part of the BSW program.

Some participants identified field education as the most important part of their social work education, such as one participant stated: "I would say in my experience throughout all of my placements, and even the one that I'm doing now that's research-based, I have learned the most about being a social worker from my field placements."

The participants identified aspects of the process that were helpful and supportive to their learning, including the availability of university and agency staff, and having access to other supports. Participants specifically noted the important support that faculty field liaisons provided during their placements:

I also liked how we had [a] practicum liaison to kind of check in with us during our practicum placement. I liked how we had that connection with the school to check in on us and not just like leave us alone and [ fend ] for ourselves...

Another common theme was the importance of field seminars:

We also have through our whole placement structure at [name of institution], integration seminars to embed learning beyond...the placement which works out really well, I find, just to really hone in on what you're learning, like a theory to practice thing works out really well.

In addition to the seminar course, participants recognized the impact of positive supervision experiences. As one participant stated, regularly scheduled group supervision was an important part of their learning experiences: “[W]hat worked well within my placement was group supervision, we had like weekly group supervision...it was something that my supervisor did to give structure to us [while] completing the practicum.” Another participant shared a similar sentiment regarding individual supervision:

[V]ery regular supervision times with...one of the supervisors, which I really appreciated, because we were able to sit down and talk a lot about...potential things, or potential clients or...her clients that she was dealing with, and what experiences she’s had. So...that was really valuable to have, consistent time each week with the supervisor.

Participants elaborated on other support services, such as university counselling services:

I also have two kids and I work [during] placement and there was one course I was taking at one point in 3rd year you know it was really really really busy and...really really stressful. I had to...seek out people that were not as emotional and everywhere I just saw the help of liaison campus counseling. I just went with them when I was stressed about regards to balancing my life with...my coursework and practicum and that really helps.

Some participants included reflections on the helpfulness of the student learning agreements and their autonomy and flexibility in meeting their learning goals:

[W]e have a learning contract that we establish in placement and part of that also involves you being able to create some of your own educational goals...I really appreciate this part of placement a lot, but I think it provides a great document that both me and my mentor or instructor can reference if we’re ever confused about anything. It gives a lot of ideas for...different learning activities or things I can try out, it provides a lot of guidance in that way. And the opportunity to create my own personal goals helps me to feel a bit more in control of my education...

On a related note, some participants also discussed appreciating the ways in which field education is formally evaluated. As one participant shared: “...[I]t’s cool there aren’t really grades that are given [for practicum], I think it really helps to decrease the stress of the student’s performance who often wants to get good grades.”

Overall, participants articulated that field education is extremely important to them. They demonstrated their appreciation for the support provided by the institutions and field agencies. These supports included faculty field liaisons, field supervisors, university counselling services, and more. When accessible, being in communication with these supports helped participants manage any difficulties that they faced in practicum. Flexibility in how students complete their placement, the hours required, and how they met their learning goals was identified as helpful.

### **Challenges with Field Education**

While recognizing the importance of field education, participants also described field education as not working as well as it could, and the challenges experienced by students. This discussion included

comments about challenges related to universities and agencies. General structural issues underlined many of the themes that arose.

Two common challenges included difficulty with communication and not feeling fully supported by university staff. When asked about challenges, one participant shared: “It can definitely feel like there was lack of communication...[with] the coordinator and you always have to reach out to her to ask questions, otherwise there was basically no information for how you can navigate the system.” Another participant stated: “I find it quite frustrating so this case if and when we try to negotiate to find internships in the field it’s for sure that the coordinator will say that the internships are hard to find.”

Some participants were not able to meet their learning goals in practicum due to a variety of factors. One common experience among BSW and MSW participants was the difficulty getting the level of clinical experience they thought necessary to complete their program and be prepared to enter the workforce, as discussed by one participant: “A lot of students are often given admin work to do and not any tangible clinical tasks. This was my experience for the most part of my first field placement. It was just job shadowing.” Similarly, another participant stated:

...I had like little to [no] direct experience, which was what we were kind of told we need to get from the practicum experience, it should be very direct. Especially the first one... I had many really uncomfortable conversations with my supervisors, to have more of those experience[s]. But then I got faced with them saying that they’re protecting their clients, in not allowing me to see them, which I felt was...not in agreeance with their role and what I’m to be doing there.

Other participants discussed challenges with their field instructors, including field instructors not having the time to adequately support students: “[F]ield supervisors don't have time to sit down and explain things, go over processes. They just basically don't have time to invest in...the students.” Another participant noted the challenges associated with having a field instructor that does not have a social work background to inform their teaching:

[T]here’s not enough social work supervisors. In both of my placements...neither of my field supervisors have had a social work degree and I feel like I’m missing out on the skillset, and the learning opportunity from having that type of supervisor.

There were challenges associated with finding a placement, including a lack of availability of specialization-specific placements One participant noted the lack of policy and research placements available:

[T]here's absolutely zero field placements with respect to policy analysis, or policy making in my school. So... that’s something I feel that should be improved. And the same goes for research. There's a...very limited amount of research placements in our school.

Another participant discussed similar challenges with regards to placements related to their leadership specialization:

[M]y stream is in Leadership and Management...I don’t think there are enough opportunities, and especially in leadership and management roles, in non-direct work, to...contribute to real

changes in the system... I don't know if that is part of the school not understanding what the students' needs are, but I think, part of that as well is organizations aren't reaching out to schools to provide those opportunities.

Recognizing the limitations on the number of available placements, some participants expressed concerns with the competitive nature of the recruitment process. One described their discomfort in having to compete with their peers, and spoke the potential creation of a negative environment within their cohorts:

[T]here seems to be kind of a competitiveness between students vying for certain placements in certain parts of the city because some are deemed as more exciting, or...just seemed to be like...the hot spot, so there seems to be a lot of people you know going to interviews at one place, and it just I find it puts a real competitive edge to it. Personally for myself I found that difficult because I didn't want to necessarily be in like competition with my...student colleagues. We all kind of want to learn together and you know have positive experience.

A significant theme was the financial challenges associated with completing a field placement. Participants discussed the difficulties they had experienced in trying to juggle their field education, coursework, employment, and family responsibilities, as stated by one participant:

I just find it difficult sometimes that I can get stuck for an internship because they want me to take 3 days, 4 days, and then I have to work at the same time when there is someone who has more support, more financial support I don't know where I can get access to that internship there and then I have to change internships and do something that doesn't interest me as much because of the demands.

They also revealed high levels of stress and burnout within their cohorts. On a broader scale, participants also addressed inequities in accessing field education due to financial factors. Those with children, for instance, were not provided flexible options to support them in completing their placements with reduced financial stress. Some participants voiced their dissatisfaction with university rules about not being permitted to engage in workplace field placements:

When someone asks me how I've been managing in light of these challenges, the only thought that comes to my mind is burnout...that's what I've been doing...I guess that's what comes with going back to school when you have three children. I had children really young, and I went back to school as a single mom, and now here I am doing my Master's, and even when I was in my BSW when we weren't able to do placements within our paid place of employment, I was juggling two part-time jobs outside of my full-time placement and had my three children and I was just go go go go go, like 24 hours a day, 7 days a week...and I struggled with my mental health after my BSW, I really really struggled, it took me a while to come back from that.

The participants also noted dissatisfaction in students feeling 'taken advantage of' by their respective social work programs and field agencies. These sentiments were expressed through comments related to paying tuition and fees for field placement courses, the format of which differs significantly from regular university courses. According to one participant: "Why are we paying tuition when we don't see the benefits of that tuition either going towards the organization...we just don't see where that money goes."



Notably, participants expressed dissatisfaction with providing important services to agencies without any reimbursement. Their work often occurred in under-staffed and/or under-resourced agencies and was perceived as a reflection of the state of social work organizations on a larger scale:

I find as students, we enter into placements, and often agencies, I don't really want to use the word "take advantage of," but...we're an unpaid position that comes in, and there's research and work that they want to do, and programming, and service, that they don't necessarily have the bodies to do on their own accord.

Other participants discussed how the experiences of completing internships in different fields of study are vastly different than in social work in terms of paid and unpaid placements:

[W]e are still doing unpaid work at the graduate level. Many of us have varying levels of experience... the reality is that if we were business students or engineering students, we would be paid. We would have been being paid for placements since the undergraduate level. I just think it's just unacceptable.

One participant noted an association between traditional gender roles and paid practicums in different professional programs:

[W]hy do engineering and I.T. students have mandatory practicum for their degree and they're all paid for it, and why [are] nursing and social work [students] not getting paid for it at all. And we're actually paying...for my school triple the amount of a course for practicum that's not paid. And I think it comes down to the gender roles, and... the labor of gender roles.

In terms of structural challenges, many participants reported that they think that field coordinators are overwhelmed by their workloads. They described their perceptions of field coordinators as having unmanageable workloads and a lack of resources to dedicate the time needed to each student. They perceived field coordinators as generally being under high levels of stress and pressure, as observed by one participant:

[A] current challenge that I notice is field coordinators appear to be overworked. You know, they have like 30, 60, sometimes even more than 90 students that they have to organize field placements for. So, the magic of finding placement, one that you love, kind of gets forgotten. It then becomes a task for the field coordinator to assign you to whatever open spot they have left.

In summary, there are many challenges associated with field education identified by students. Many of these challenges may be related to structural issues that were not explicitly identified. For example, the financial challenge related to having to pay tuition for field classes is based on institutional regulations. Many agency-level concerns such as inadequate learning opportunities for students may be reflective of the state of social work as a profession rather than field education specifically.

## Anti-Oppressive Practice

As social work students, participants possessed an awareness of social work values and the principles of anti-oppressive practice. These values did not always align with what they saw in their field placements. Participants discussed the ways in which anti-oppressive practice is and is not demonstrated in field agencies. This theme also included comments about experiences of oppression/discrimination related to race, differences in ability, and socio-economic status. They provided suggestions on how anti-oppressive practice could be further incorporated into field education.

One participant noted that working on learning goals related to anti-oppressive practice and decolonization was largely unsupported in their placement: “[W]hen I do find some way to achieve like the decolonization work, I feel like I do it haphazardly, and it just becomes like a check mark in a box, and it's not done with good intentions.”

Some participants discussed how field education has a rigid expectation of what a social work student looks like and what their responsibilities are:

[Field education] doesn't account for students who have children, it doesn't account for students that are coming back later in life and it's just really...for me, it looks as though they designed it as if everybody is like 18 years old, still living at home, and can manage that financial burden.

Participants also shared their own experiences of oppression, marginalization, and discrimination, in addition to not feeling supported in talking about these experiences in their programs. As discussed by one participant: “Because even in the best internships I know people who have experienced, for example, micro-aggressions on a racial and sexual level, and it is quite difficult to denounce them...” Other participants spoke to experiences of racism:

I actually witnessed a white male doctor say a racist comment...to my field instructor, who was Asian, and this was during the COVID pandemic and he said something very insensitive to him which was...very disheartening and I remember that me and my field instructor didn't talk about it and it just make me critically think about how...for students of colour or...students who come from different intersectionalities, how it's so important to have these conversations, because...witnessing moments like this it is also very common in our social work field as well... I wish we had a moment between me and my field instructor to talk about this.

I think for people who are entering this field, especially...entering very white-centric spaces, I think it can feel dominating or you may not have the language to really deconstruct that...but I do truly believe that if we do face moments of discrimination, whether it be racial trauma or any other forms of discrimination, you do really carry that with you in the field and it can manifest in different ways....where you might not be able to be emotionally present in the workplace, or not feel safe with other coworkers.

Some participants spoke to ableism and experiences of students living with disabilities:

[A]s somebody who...identifies as somebody with multiple disabilities...I often have to think

about a placement as a workplace and... I can't leave the disability at the door... I think it's really important to know that not everybody has the opportunity to choose their placement based on where they wish they had the experiences...

Participants provided suggestions for changes within field education to support decolonization. As demonstrated by one participant, many spoke of the importance of incorporating social work values and wise practices into field education and ensuring that the field education experience be reflective of the decolonial and anti-oppressive viewpoints that are central to the profession of social work:

[T]hat's what I'd like to see moving forward...how can especially field education but also social work education as a whole, but within field education, what can we implement that's truly decolonizing the way the way that we're taught? And then deconstructing our own system that you know doesn't just oppress us as social workers but the people that we work with when we come out of that education.

*Wise practices* in this study were defined as flexible, locally relevant to diverse Indigenous groups, and respect all forms of knowledge including lived experience, traditional knowledge, and stories. Wise practices are typically relational in nature, involve respect for others, and working together. When asked about wise practices in field education, participants reported that they experienced a lack of consideration of Indigenous values and ways of knowing and being in their field education experiences. One participant indicated the need for change in healthcare: "I would be interested in learning about Indigenous-related therapeutic techniques, or services, just wellness practices, and unfortunately, as everyone knows with the hospital-based systems and therapy and counselling, it's very traditionally rooted, it's really rigid." Another participant noted the opportunity for students to learn in Indigenous communities:

[F]or wise practices, speaking specifically I guess and personally as somebody who's practiced in remote Indigenous communities, I just have to say that there's just endless opportunities for growth in wise practices in those communities. Whether it's research or clinical, not enough social workers spend time in Indigenous communities.

In summary, the participants expressed a need for more consideration of anti-oppressive and decolonial values and approaches both in social work as a profession and, specifically, in field education.

### **Self-Advocacy**

The majority of participants discussed how self-advocacy, autonomy, and self-sufficiency are effective and vital strategies in managing the challenges that they faced in field education. One participant noted the need to self-advocate as a student:

I feel like field [education] has great opportunities for students, but it can be limited if you don't advocate for yourself as a student, especially for the field that you want and the one that you feel that you deserve.

As one participant shared, an example of self-advocacy in action included voicing concerns and communicating learning goals: "[A] big piece is of course, self-advocacy, like, I've been very vocal

about what I want and what I need. I've you know, expressed that my practicum's very important to me, my practicum experience is very important to me."

Other examples of self-advocacy included taking action towards personal goals and reaching out for supports:

I think overall with the challenges that I said, I had to really take a lot of initiative on my own, to do things on my own, and take the opportunities that are there for me just because...as a student sometimes you are limited to what you can do in the agency, so... I have to take a lot of initiative and go out of my way to make the most out of my field education that can connect to like my learning experiences there.

I've also done the work on my own end to seek out MSW's who have the experience that I want...as limited as they might be in my province. And, and you know, I've gone forth and made those introductions myself, and like I haven't waited for the coordinator and my school to do that for me.

Participants also discussed how self-advocacy is both an important skill for social work students to develop and practice, and a skill that transfers to working with clients:

I think self-advocacy for myself. I also see it as a... as an opportunity to kind of like practice my advocacy skill for social practice. If I can't advocate for myself, how am I supposed to be expected to advocate for my clients?

## **The COVID-19 Pandemic**

Statements speaking directly to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was ongoing throughout the duration of the study, were a focus of the discussions. These reflections included challenges brought on by the pandemic and the ways in which it has altered the field education experience. For instance, one participant spoke to the challenges of disrupted placements: "I think one of the biggest challenges now is that I was faced with, you know unpredictability of COVID and whether or not I'd be doing direct practice, or remote work." Another participant discussed the lack of placements due to the pandemic:

I'm finding like one thing that really made an impact on field education is a lot of people didn't have a placement when the program started, or you know people's placements were falling through last minute and I hear from a lot of my peers that that's causing you know a lot of distress a lot of panic.

Other comments included navigating the challenging landscape created by the pandemic: "...wear[ing] masks and this diminishes the sense of connection with our clientele...and therefore I find that at the level of the relationship [is] not allowing ourselves to create...what we have learned in class, then it becomes an additional challenge."

Participants also spoke to the challenges with virtual field placements and not meeting personal learning goals:

I'm like really anxious to, for my second practicum...to give me some direct experience, but now with COVID, I'm once again, you know stuck with the situation, so I'm worried I might never see a client before I become a social worker.

I think right now obviously I'll just blanket statement and say COVID [is a challenge]...scheduling and virtual remote placements are a challenge. Agencies are not used to them, our schools are certainly not used to them, we're not used to them, nobody's really ready to take it on.

This theme also addressed how the pandemic created new opportunities for students and social workers involved with field education, such as being able to take part in virtual and remote work: As shared by one participant: "I actually think we're going to be a generation of social workers that come out of this knowing how to interact with, build relationships with and get that experience in the virtual world." Another participant shared:

I find that with the pandemic offering the possibility to do our internships in a tele-work way I find it quite interesting for some people that it can avoid traveling because they have had particular situations, I find that it offers great opportunities to improve our practice in a way to work as well.

One participant noted that the COVID-19 pandemic instigated change that may lead to long-term benefits being incorporated into field education: "[I]t's funny how there wasn't a whole lot of movement on the systemic level for that and the pandemic happened and all of a sudden we're seeing the drop-in hours, we're seeing a lot more...opportunities being opened up..."

These benefits included ways in which paid placements can be incorporated into field education, as one participant shared: "[W]hat I'm hoping to see is that maybe the challenge of unpaid placements is alleviated post-COVID, when we've kinda already opened this Pandora's box of allowing some students to do paid placements." Another participant stated:

They're allowing students to venture out to find their own placements, as well they are introducing a concept where students can stay in their current place of employment and have those hours counted towards their becoming accredited as a social worker.

These potential long-term benefits extended to not only students, but also to others involved in field education, including service users: "[M]y field education is trying to explore the possibility of providing service using technology and I have lots of very deep personal reflection on resources that we have in this society to support different service users in accessing...technology."

Overall, most participants acknowledged the significant impact of the COVID-19 on their field education experiences. Discussion centred around how these impacts most likely will affect how social work field education is conducted in the future.

### **Rethinking Field Education**

Participants discussed at length the ways in which field education can be improved through structural changes and innovation, as well as through incorporating student input and promising practices. Many of the suggestions highlighted opportunities for collaboration among students, staff, and other stakeholders involved in field education.

In discussing institutional changes, participants suggested hiring more field coordinators. One participant stated that this would lessen the workload of individual field coordinators and help to enhance support for students: “[T]hey could add a few more field coordinators so that they can divide the workload. And provide more customized service and follow-up services to [students.]”

In addressing the challenge of the lack of suitable field placements, participants suggested ways to encourage more social workers to become field instructors, as shared by one participant: “I think the supervisors need more incentives to take on students. We need to consider reducing their caseloads to allow them to have more time to invest in students.”

One participant suggested more engagement to encourage alumni to supervise students: “[W]ith respect to alumni engagement, I definitely think that that could help, and I do question why there's such a shortage of field placements.”

Many participants spoke to the need for mental health supports available to students throughout the field education process. One participant shared:

I think you know we talk a lot about self-care and mental health in our classrooms, but we don't encourage it enough. And I think there needs to be counselling supports for students while they're going through their education, kind of have not mandatory, but at least unlimited counselling support for those who need it.

In response to the challenges around completing unpaid field placements, participants identified the need to make structural changes to increase available financial supports, including through paid practicums, as stated by one participant: “I think we've kind of all agreed. Paid practicum placements, always. No less than that...” Another participant shared:

[P]ut in some financial incentives for everyone. Like no matter what their financial status is, and additional help for those who need additional financial support. You know doctors get paid when they do their student placements. Nurses and social workers don't, and we do a lot of great work, and it's really a topic that makes me like, irritated almost, but I wish there were more advocacy around that for the students.

Another recommendation was to incorporate more opportunities for peer support. One participant discussed developing their own peer support group to connect with other students completing remote research placements: “I started a remote research student practicum network for anybody who is doing a remote research placement so that we could get together and communicate just about the challenges that we're having...”

Other more informal opportunities also would be welcomed by students and would provide beneficial support:

...[P]eople in our program, we would always talk about the issues we were having and the challenges we were facing, to kind of be a support group for each other, because we recognized that no one outside of our group would understand really what we're, what we're going

through, and our frustrations, and just concerns that we have.

Participants also discussed various content changes to social work programs in order to better prepare students for their field placements and to enhance their learning:

When I went into my placement is that I didn't feel like I was really prepared honestly to take that initiative to get you know my placement going and even to set up meetings with the coordinator. I was feeling like there could have been some kind of like prep course or something...in the first the second year or something...[o]f course you do before it kind of helps you develop these skills to seek out a rewarding practicum field experience.

In addition to better preparation, participants suggested changes to what is taught in and alongside practicums to support their development as social workers. These changes included more research courses prior to completing placements:

In the undergrad program we only have really two courses that really focused on research like a research methods course and stats...[t]hese are courses that we have and that is sometimes courses that students take after their good placements. They don't actually have them coordinated in their timetable to take them before they don't actually have those skills going into their placement which I think is not necessarily a good thing. Actually, is not a good thing. I think those skills are really important part of practicum.

Other suggestions included more development of clinical skills amongst students:

I really wanted that learning like therapeutic modalities. I thought I would learn that, like practicing them anyway, like CBT, DBT, narrative therapy, or emotion focused, one or a few, in each practicum is what I thought I would be learning. So having that like expectation be put into like the actual practicum would be helpful.

I would like to see more clinical skills to be added. Although I'm in the clinical stream, I don't think there are enough clinical skills to be taught to us...I think that's something really critical. Like, although we said we have the permission and license to practice clinical intervention, but we do need those skills to get prepared. And for now, it seems like we just have to pay extra money out of my pocket to do a certificate...as part of continuing education pieces.

One participant discussed service learning as an opportunity to support students' learning:

... it's a bit of like, a field trip week or kind of like learning about a social problem with a lot of hands-on experience...you kind of had discussions about poverty and what you knew about poverty and over the week in your cohort you went and volunteered at a variety of organizations within that realm...

Another participant discussed offering training for students completing unpaid placements: "Training, in lieu of paid placement would be a good solution..."

Participants discussed at length the need for more placements and more diversity in the types of placements available. For example, increased inclusion of research activities and research-focused

placements described as important to them and a valuable learning experience: “I feel like it’s very separated in practicum settings, either you get direct experience, or you get indirect, and I feel like it should be more combined, in my personal opinion.” Another participant discussed:

Although now doing a placement that’s solely in research, I can totally see how I could incorporate research in my own job. I never thought it was something I could do or wanted to do. Now I see the relevance and how it could easily be incorporated into daily practice, therefore I can see how research could be filled into a research placement, but I would assume that probably rarely happens unless you’re doing a completely research-based placement.

In addition to research, more leadership, social justice, and policy field practicums could be included: “I don’t think there are enough opportunities, and especially in leadership and management roles, in non-direct work, to contribute to real changes in the system. And I would like to see that in the future.” Similarly, another participant noted:

I would like to see more macro level field placements... field education [has allowed] us to work at the micro or meso level but not a lot at the macro level. Like I said, not a lot of research based or policy analysis field placement.

Participants suggested that a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach to field education would broaden the scope of opportunities for placements. Suggestions included working with the fields of public health and nursing in interprofessional practice:

I feel like there's a lack of multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary work with respect to field placement, so sometimes I feel like... maybe we think that a placement is not really related to social work, and we don't think outside the box., but I would love to see a little bit more of...outside the box thinking, for example, social work could be related to public health, and we don't have any placements in that domain...

I'm taking an aging class where I have people from kinesiology, nursing and me and I think health study so that has been kind of helpful. They do emphasize that you know once you go into any field you're going to have to do like, across the discipline, so like learned how to communicate.

It was also suggested that exploring avenues outside of the traditional public health and non-profit sectors would increase the opportunities for field placements:

And I think part of the reason why that has happened is that we don’t have collaboration with the for-profit sector as much as I think we should, and we could, um, I think the for-profit sector can maybe you know help kind of guide and educate the next kind of um, the next generation of leaders within social work. And I think that is very important. So I would definitely like to see um just the schools or just the students engaging with non-traditional placement settings.

Also, it is important that what ‘counts’ as valuable field experiences for students is reconsidered within field education. Traditional, clinically focused placements with one student matched to one field instructor are increasingly difficult to find. Participants noted that field coordinators need to take care in vetting possible field placements to ensure they would provide good learning



opportunities for students:

And make sure that the agencies are actually able to teach us. In certain respects, it was great. In other respects...they didn't know what they were doing, it's sad to say. We have extensive contracts with them that outlines exactly what they should be able to teach us and then they agree that they can, and they know how. So to have those followed up and enforced would be amazing.

[O]rganizations and agencies that students are placed, I feel like there needs to be... like some conversation or some way for them to identify what this student's role truly is. Like if it's not admin work or whatnot, what will you be providing or educating or helping the student with to move forward with their learning, so that they're not stuck doing things that they don't want to do and are not related to their learning.

In order to expand on what types of work can be done in social work field education, it is important that both students and stakeholders broaden their perspective on what qualifies as valuable experience:

I think there's this assumption that social workers have to have direct practice in order to be good social workers. And that's not necessarily true, you can do a lot of great work without seeing anyone or having direct kind of counselling experience. Although it's good to have both, I think. I remember in my BSW everybody wanted direct practice, a lot of people didn't feel comfortable doing indirect practice. I think maybe the school or faculty members have to do some education around you know what is realistic, and what is realistic in terms of expectations with different types of placements.

Participants also had significant discussion around the process of finding a practicum, including the need for both more autonomy and more support in finding and securing field placements in general. One participant stated: "I think at the beginning of placement when you're meeting with the coordinator who matches the programs. I think there needs to be more time set aside for individual students to meet with them."

This discussion around autonomy and support in finding a field placement extended to paid and workplace practicums. Many participants highlighted that being able to complete workplace practicums would provide financial relief and allow them to contribute what they are learning to their agencies:

I think that's something schools should really try to find a strategy to work towards a change, so that they could include when students are able to identify employers who'd like to have them for a temporary full-time position that could act as a practicum.

We are studying and also working as well, so I think if they allow us to work in our own... if it's related to a social work practicum, then of course we can work in our own working place and [count] it as a practicum hours, which is convenient for the students.

Some participants offered ideas about ways of connecting with agencies and organizations in their community in order to learn more about placements opportunities given the challenges with field

coordination. Specifically, participants identified field practicum fairs and other similar gatherings as a way for students to connect with field agencies. One participant described one such initiative:

[T]hey have...like a practicum fair, it's very similar to a job fair. They invite all their agenc[ies] who are interested in taking a practicum student, and invite them to have a fair and then have every student participate. And then just you know, go around, talk to every agency you are interested in, and see which one match, you know resonate with your passion, and trying to, and then there is the opportunity for both, both sides, you know both ends of them to talk, and like find their you know, best match candidate...

In relation to acknowledging that it is a privileged position to be able to take on a full-time, unpaid placement and participants noted that there needs to be more flexibility to make field education accessible. Having more flexibility in terms of hours or working remotely in some cases would allow students to balance the demands of field placements with their other responsibilities:

I think more flexibility needs to happen. We're not in a time where people can go to school, and school only be their main focus. We have other outside concerns or cares that we have to take care of as well, and the practicum experience doesn't always necessarily coincide with the outside stuff we still have to do.

One participant related this consideration of flexibility to wise practices:

I also think...in talking about wise practice, it would be really interesting to see field education move to a place where...we are able to incorporate our lived experience and our traditional knowledge and stories into the way that we do our field placement...maybe that looks like a part-time placement for single moms so that they can complete it without completely depleting their financial means.

As well, ideas of how to improve relationships between universities and agencies, and better communication and collaboration among students, faculty, field instructors, and university staff were also prominent among participants. These ideas highlighted a relational approach to conducting social work field education: "Organizations aren't reaching out to schools to provide those opportunities. So, I think it's both ways. And I think there needs to be definitely more open communication, between the student's needs and what is available in the community." Another participant shared the following suggestion: "Have students input on placements. Let the field coordinator know what field supervisors are good, what placements are good, what options are available, and also which placements and supervisors that were bad."

Participants also spoke to the benefit of considering and incorporating the lived experiences of students into field education:

I think school should consider that, hey you know we all come from different backgrounds, some of us with many years of experience in the field. There are people in my program who are just here for the degree kind of, so I think we need to consider everybody's experience and meet the person where they are, and not meet them what the institution is...

Incorporating students' lived experience included language skills, as discussed by one participant:

I know in one of my placements I was lucky enough to be placed in like a domestic violence centre and then I spoke one of the languages and they couldn't find somebody who spoke that language so they used me I guess again as like an asset but through that experience, I was able to see more of what they can do and I also had to voice in how they can make changes to the agency to serve that population so I liked that experience as well.

While the majority of ideas related to changes that can be implemented within placements and social work programs, some participants directly spoke to making greater systemic change in social work regulatory bodies: "I feel that needs more work and more support both from our schools, from CASWE, and from the CASW as well as our provincial regulatory bodies." Another participant suggested involving government in such systemic change:

I think it would be a stretch, but there needs to be either federal legislation or some type of legislation that guarantees paid practicums that are in keeping with our experience, our skills, our abilities. I don't think anybody should be working for free, and agencies benefit from our professional knowledge and our experience during practicum, so that needs to be recognized and compensated fairly. When I say legislation, I know it's not a quick or a simple fix as that, but I think that CASWE and CASW and our provincial regulatory bodies need to put that pressure on the federal government in conjunction with other professional regulatory bodies for professions that require field education and practicum placements... I think there could be better partnerships between schools, governments, and agencies, to ensure fair pay during field education. So, for example, agencies that can't afford to pay, maybe government steps in with a supplement for the wage.

In summary, participants were able to articulate tangible changes and innovative ideas to improve field education, many of which build upon what already is working well within field education. As informed by their insider perspective, student participants were able to pinpoint specific strategies for alleviating the current challenges they are facing based on a relational approach that enlists the support of students, faculty, staff, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from the virtual dialogue circles on student perspectives in Canadian social work field education has centered the student experience in understanding the current field education landscape. Research exploring student perspectives on social work field education in Canada is emerging. This study has highlighted the expectations that social work students have of their field education experiences. However, it is important that future research continues to explore and contribute towards further understanding student perspectives, as well as incorporate the voices of other importance stakeholders involved in field education.

Five key recommendations emerged from the findings. First, the findings call for better collaboration between universities, students, field agencies, and policy makers to best serve the needs of all field education stakeholders. While we acknowledge the delivery of social work education within diverse contexts, we encourage stakeholder collaboration on local and national levels to account for both regional variation and larger coordination efforts. Second, we recommend hiring more staff/faculty to support students throughout their field education, including field education coordinators. Hiring more field educators will facilitate every student receiving the support they need to navigate field education. A sufficient number of qualified and experienced field instructors and increased capacity in field agencies will facilitate access to suitable placements for every student. Field instructors may be recruited through strategically engaging with alumni. Third, we recommend more financial support for students, which may include paid placements, workplace placements, scholarships, bursaries, grants, and income support from the government. Fourth, the findings call for enhancing the incorporation of anti-oppressive and anti-racist values into field education. This may include increasing opportunities for peer support, collaborating with agencies and organizations to confirm that they practice these values, and ensuring that racialized students have access to much needed supports. It also is important that social work programs provide opportunities for students to work with a diverse professional body comprised of individuals occupying a variety of intersectional identities. The fifth and final recommendation is to continue exploring flexible and non-traditional opportunities for field placements, including virtual, self-directed, and remote placements, particularly in the wake of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondary recommendations include:

- Communicate clear expectations regarding what students can expect of the practicum recruitment process and field placements themselves.
- Ensuring field placement opportunities are congruent with student learning goals by requiring agencies to disclose and adhere to expectations of work for practicum students.
- Enhancing access to or developing mental health supports directed to social work field practicum students, such as counselling services.
- Revise curriculum content to better prepare students for field education and augment their learning during placement.
- Introduce more outside training and educational opportunities to supplement student learning, including workshops and certifications.
- Recognize students as individuals. Incorporate student lived experiences into field education, by acknowledging past work experience and allowing for flexibility to meet the unique needs of adult learners with a wide variety of responsibilities.

- Incorporate more diverse placements including research, macro-level, or leadership placements and multidisciplinary and interprofessional placements.
- Reconsider how field placements are assigned to match student interests, building on their professional experience and strengths.
- Rethink what 'counts' as valuable experience for students, including redefining "clinical" experience.
- Advocate for greater systemic change through policy change and development within regulatory bodies and government.

## CONCLUSION

This report highlights the perspectives of students engaging in social work field education who participated in the series of virtual dialogue circles in 2020. Participants spoke of the benefits of field education, what is currently working well, challenges associated, and what can be done to rethink field education in the future. Reflections relating to anti-oppressive practice, self-advocacy, and the COVID-19 pandemic also were common within these discussions. Participants shared rich thick description through their reflections, highlighting their key insights into field education.

While each participant held a unique perspective, informed by their particular context within Canada, there were many similarities among their reflections. Many of the ideas and sentiments shared by participants were echoed in the literature. In particular, study findings are congruent with research exploring aspects of social work field education in Canada (Ayala et al., 2018a; Ayala et al., 2018b; Hemy et al., 2016; Maidment, 2003). There are opportunities for future research to expand on our findings and address the identified limitations in order to continue developing our shared understanding of student perspectives on field education.

This study was completed as part of the TFEL Project and is an important contribution to the knowledge generated on field education. By widely sharing our findings, we seek to encourage educators, administrators, and policymakers to incorporate student perspectives into their decision-making processes regarding field education. We hope to inspire students to continue sharing their valuable knowledge with these decision makers. Addressing the current crisis in field education and shifting to more sustainable models must be a collaborative process. As such, the voices of all stakeholders, including students, are essential to changing the field education landscape.

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## APPENDIX A – INFORMATION ON THE STUDY FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

You are invited to participate in an online dialogue circle being organized by the Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership.

This study has been approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (REB19-0901).

The purpose of the dialogue circle on field education is to discuss the current context of field education from the students' perspective. The dialogue circle will raise some discussion questions on what is working well, what are the current challenges, what are promising and wise practices, what is needed, and what students would like to see in the future.

Members of the Transforming the Field Education Landscape project will co-facilitate a dialogue circle taking place online in July and October 2020.

As a student participant in the dialogue circle, you will be asked to share your perspectives on social work field education. Notes will be taken, and the dialogue circle will be recorded on Zoom for analysis purposes. You will be asked to turn off your video function on Zoom to protect your privacy and confidentiality.

If you have questions about this dialogue circle, please email [tfelresearch@gmail.com](mailto:tfelresearch@gmail.com) or contact Dr. Julie Drolet, Professor, University of Calgary at (780) 492-1594 or email [jdrolet@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jdrolet@ucalgary.ca).

## APPENDIX B – VIRTUAL DIALOGUE CIRCLES QUESTIONS

Transforming the Field Education Landscape: Intersections of Research and Practice in Canadian Social Work Field Education

This study has been approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (REB19-0901).

The following questions will be posed to participants in the Dialogue Circle. We encourage you to reflect on these questions as much as you would like. We welcome any feedback about the questions or suggestions for concepts that should be added.

### **Section 1 – Students’ Experiences**

How would you describe the current status of social work field education?

What would you say is working well within field education?

What would you say are the current challenges within social work field education?

How have you managed any of the challenges that you have faced?

### **Section 2 – The Future of Social Work Field Education**

What additional resources, supports, or changes to field education do you think are needed to address the challenges that were discussed?

Can you identify any promising or wise practices that you would like to share?

What would you like to see in the future of social work education?

How do you see research as part of your field experience?

Is there anything else you would like to add as a final thought, comment?