



Transforming the Field  
Education Landscape

**ROLE OF SERVICE USERS  
IN SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION:  
SURVEY REPORT**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) is a partnership project that aims to prepare the next generation of social workers through research training and mentorship initiatives to improve the integration of research and practice in field education. In 2021-2022, the TFEL team conducted online focus group discussion sessions (FGDs) to explore the involvement of service users in social work field education in Canada. Seven FGDs were held online, with two to five participants in each group. The online FGDs were recorded and later transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Participants were selected after responding to recruitment posters, and messages were shared on social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) inviting service users to participate in the study. Sixty people expressed interest in participating, and twenty-two participants attended the FGD sessions. The findings from the FGD sessions revealed five main themes: 1) service users' lived experience informing practicum students, 2) practical suggestions for involving service users, 3) identified gaps in the skills and attributes of social workers 4) service users' experiences with professional social workers, and 5) considerations for involving service users in field education.

The project findings suggest that the involvement of service users in social work field education in Canada holds significant potential for transforming social work field education. This represents an opportunity to drive advancements and innovation in the field, particularly for service users, field education programs, and social work students. The integration of service users in field education can bring about positive changes that enhance the overall effectiveness and impact of social work practices and education through the development of respectful egalitarian relationships and the ability of experts of lived experience in nurturing the next generation of social workers. The study's implications and recommendations are provided based on findings from this study.

## INTRODUCTION

The benefits of service user involvement (SUI) in social work education are increasingly recognized. The term ‘service user’ refers to “the wide and diverse group of individuals who are involved in, or who use social work services” (Lucas & Thomas, 2021, p. 1). Cabiati and Panciroli (2019) refer to such individuals as “experts by experience” (p. 98). In this report, service users refer to individuals who are involved in, who use, or who have previously accessed social services. Service user involvement (SUI) in social work field education refers to the active engagement and participation in design and evaluation of the social work curriculum, academic assessment, and preparedness of social work students’ knowledge and practice skills. A study conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) found that SUI contributes to better students’ preparedness for social work practice by providing them with insider knowledge (Biskin et al., 2013). Further, studies have also found that SUI in field education not only enhances students’ learning experience but also empowers both students and service users (Laging & Heidenreich, 2019; O’Shea & McGinnis, 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). Similarly, Kam (2020) suggests that SUI in field education enhances social work students’ responsiveness to service users’ needs, fosters egalitarian relationships, and incorporates service users’ life experience and knowledge into social work field education (McGlade et al., 2020).

Despite the importance of SUI, there is limited research on how SUI is integrated into social work field education, particularly within the Canadian context. In 2021, members of the TFEL team completed an annotated bibliography comprised of only 32 articles on the role of service users in social work field education highlighting the scarcity of literature in this area. The existing body of research in this domain is largely from Europe, with a substantial portion specifically from the UK. This motivated the TFEL project team to further investigate how to involve service users in transforming social work field education in partnered research, training and mentorship.

This study aims to explore the involvement of service users in social work field education in Canada. The objectives include understanding the experiences of service users in field education and exploring the potential benefits and challenges associated with their involvement. To achieve these objectives, online focus group discussion sessions (FGDs) were conducted with service users across Canada.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform and guide social work education programs in Canada toward a more collaborative and inclusive approach by involving service users in field education. This involves engaging service users in field education through sharing personal experiences, participating in assessment and planning, providing feedback and evaluation, promoting advocacy and empowerment, and addressing ethical considerations. This study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on SUI in social work education and field education and provide valuable insights for field educators, practitioners, and policymakers, with relevance to the Canadian context.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature in social work education, albeit limited, increasingly acknowledges the potential for SUI in social work education. The literature review focuses on five central themes: 1) service users in social work education, 2) service users in research, 3) service users as educators, 4) service users contributing to the design and delivery of programs, and 5) the relationship between social workers and service users.

### Service Users in Social Work Education

In the UK, service users regularly participate in the design and evaluation of the social work curriculum (Laging & Heidenreich, 2019), as well as in academic assessment, including the creation of assessment tools, the evaluation of student group presentations, and the assessment of written reflective essays (Skoura-Kirk et al., 2013). There is a requirement that service users are involved in all qualifying and post-qualifying social work programs in the UK (Robinson & Webber, 2012). Similar mandates exist in other European states including Sweden, Norway, and Germany (Laging & Heidenreich, 2019). The value of SUI within education is rooted in the experiential knowledge brought by service users and in their interactions with students, who value service users' experiences (Duffy et al., 2021). Laging and Heidenreich (2019) noted that both students and service users felt a sense of empowerment throughout the process of engagement. Further, Kam (2020) suggests that SUI in fieldwork practicum training can be regarded as the best opportunity for students to “examine and develop their personal qualities” (p.791).

Several considerations regarding the inclusion of service users in social work field education were identified. Geregova and Frisaufova (2019) described students' inability to consider the effects of differences in class and privilege as a source of frustration for service users who adopt the role of experts in social work education. Biskin et al. (2012) highlight additional challenges such as student ambivalence when engaging with service users, and the lack of clarity from universities regarding the intentions of such programs. Wilson and Daly (2007) also noted the potential for service user participation to present as an exercise of tokenism within technocratic institutions.

### Service Users in Research

There are a number of benefits to involving service users in research. Biskin et al. (2013) indicate that SUI in social work research helps researchers to understand how to involve service users in the reconstruction of social work frameworks by incorporating their direct knowledge and experiences. In the UK (McGlade et al., 2020) and Sweden (Nykanen, 2019), researchers found that SUI also functions as an evidence-based-practice, in which researchers consider the knowledge and experience of service users as integral to practice design. The literature suggests that employing strategies that advance SUI within social work is of vital importance due to the intrinsic value of their knowledge and expertise (Loughran & McCann, 2015). An example of SUI is Participatory Action Research (PAR), a research

design that fully integrates service users into all aspects of the research process (Loughran & McCann, 2015). The characteristic of shared decision making throughout the research process is a key component of SUI (Loughran & McCann, 2015; McGlade et al., 2020).

### Service Users as Educators

Service users' roles in social work education are diverse. Service users have been involved in admissions, student assessment, curriculum planning, co-teaching, program development, and influencing student perspectives (Ramon et al., 2019). At Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK, service users contributed in the grading of students (Skoura-Kirk et al., 2013). Through integrative co-learning experience with service users, students' quality of learning, competencies, skills, and life experiences can be enhanced (O'Shea & McGinnis, 2019). This approach promotes and develops "meaningful relationships and shared responsibility" (Wilson, et al., 2019, p. 717). SUI in co-educative roles can challenge existing social work frameworks by developing co-initiatives that are more comprehensive and inclusive of service users' knowledge and experiences. Geregoya and Frisaufova (2019) proclaim that "it is not (just) teachers... but also the clients who could and should teach (students) about sources of imbalance, sources of support, and 'define' what the problem is in their life situation and to propose a solution" (p. 316). Much of the research suggests that SUI in social work programs is important in helping social workers develop an understanding of the nature of service users' experiences and how to reconstruct social work definitions to include the direct knowledge and experiences of service users (Biskin et al., 2013).

### Service Users Contributing to the Design and Delivery of Programs

There is a need to alter and improve services to better meet the needs of those being served. Geregoya and Frisaufova (2019) highlight a gap in understanding the individuals affected by social work practices and explores the source of practitioners' knowledge. Biskin et al. (2012) support such inquiry by discussing the importance of 'insider knowledge' that can be generated from service users' experiences. These ideas are further supported by literature stating that service users feel they have value in contributing to program design and implementation in partnership with social workers, as well as professional trainers (Wilson & Daly, 2007). This process can contribute to the development of an understanding of service users' perspectives (O'Shea & McGinnis, 2020).

### The Relationship Between Social Workers and Service Users

The quality of relationships between social workers and service users is identified as an integral component of the helping process. A study conducted in Hong Kong explored the perspectives of service users, revealing a relationship between social workers and service users similar to a friendship, rather than a traditional client/professional dynamic. This approach was identified as a means to reduce power imbalances within the relationship between service providers and service users (Kam, 2020). This

research situated social workers as different from other professionals in that professionalization should not be valued above the quality of relationships, and that the quality of relationships are largely informed by the personal attributes of social workers (Kam, 2020). Cabiati and Pancrioli (2019) reaffirm this concept, asserting that human help comes from relationships rather than the technical application of clinical practices.

## METHODOLOGY

This research project was an exploratory, qualitative research study that used virtual focus group discussions (FGDs) with service users in Canada. FGDs are a suitable method for having in-depth discussions with service users in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of field-related issues (Nyumba et al., 2018). A total of seven FGDs were conducted virtually in English using Zoom in March and April of 2022 with service users. The range of participants in the FGDs were between two and five. The study was guided by the following research question: “How do we involve service users in social work field education in Canada?”.

Recruitment for this study took place between March 11<sup>th</sup> and March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The study participant recruitment involved the distribution of recruitment messages and posters through email and postings to social media platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter) as well the TFEL website and monthly newsletter. The inclusion criteria required individuals to be service users who had accessed social services within the past year, aged 19 years or older, and Canadian residents. A total of 22 service users were recruited from across Canada.

This study was approved by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) at the University of Calgary. Each FGD session took approximately 60 minutes. A \$50 e-gift card was provided to each participant as an incentive for their participation in the study.

The FGD sessions with service users began with a brief PowerPoint presentation that included an introduction of research assistants, a land acknowledgement, a description of the purpose of the research, a list of discussion questions (see Appendix B), and a list of mental health resources. The mental health resources were also sent to participants by email and placed in the Zoom chat box for anyone to access in case the need arose in discussing the role of service users in social work field education.

A pilot focus group with two participants was held to test the research process online. The facilitators found that two participants were a very small size for a full discussion, and having more than two participants could provide more insight and knowledge. The second focus group brought together five participants. The facilitators found that the number of participants was too large for a thorough discussion of the questions. In subsequent focus groups, the number of participants ranged between two and four participants per session. During the fourth focus group session, two participants were absent, resulting in only one participant who agreed to share their perspectives online.

**Table 1***Focus Group Schedule*

Focus Group	Date	Number of Participants
1	March 23, 2022	2
2	March 28, 2022	5
3	March 31, 2022	2
4	April 1, 2022	1
5	April 8, 2022	4
6	April 12, 2022	4
7	April 13, 2022	4
<b>Total</b>		<b>22</b>

All seven focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom. The three student researchers anonymized, edited, and analyzed the transcripts. All the transcripts were coded using NVivo 12.0 software. Following an analysis of seven transcripts, a preliminary codebook was established, encompassing codes, subcodes, and their definitions. The codebook underwent modifications until it covered all themes in the transcripts without new codes emerging. Codes were then organized into themes, and definitions were drafted for each theme. Coded quotes representing each theme were compiled in the theme book. The analysis identified five themes, and comments were grouped together to guide further inductive analysis.

## FINDINGS

The findings from the FGD sessions were organized into five overarching themes, some of which had a number of sub-themes:

- 1) Service users' lived experience informing practicum students.
  - Shaping the practice skills of new students
  - Lived experiences to inform program design
  - The personal benefits for service users
- 2) Processes for involving service users.
  - Classroom involvement
  - Evaluation of practicum students
  - Providing feedback for field education
  - Peer-support
  - Advisory committees
- 3) Identified gaps in the skills and attributes of social workers.
- 4) Service users' experiences with professional social workers.
- 5) Considerations for involving service users in field education.
  - The vulnerability of service users
  - Issues based on previous experiences with practicum students
  - Importance of honoraria for service users

- Barriers for Involvement

The findings are presented below.

### Service Users' Lived Experience Informing Practicum Students

Many participants suggested that experts of lived experience could potentially provide valuable insights to inform new social work students. These insights include shaping the practice skills of new students, lived experiences to inform program design, and the personal benefits for service users, which are discussed as subthemes below.

#### *Shaping the Practice Skills of New Students*

Many participants in the FGD sessions shared the belief that involving practicum students to work alongside service users as experts of knowledge can help shape students' practice skills as they learn about the client's world. Participants placed importance on providing opportunities to introduce students to new ideas about practice or client circumstances. One participant shared their experience with a student as:

The community engagement manager, she's included some students in our orientation and just learning who we are, and what we're about, and I shared my lived experience with them, and it ended up being a really good experience because at the end [student] asked me, "so I hear you talk about the shame and the struggle you've had with dealing with some medical professionals, what can I do in my practice, in your opinion, would be best?" So, if there are people doing practicum hours of any kind or haven't fully got there yet, you get a chance to work with people and they can teach you more than you realize. (Focus group participant)

The concept of teamwork and being part of a co-journey was also a prominent feature in the FGDs. Participants highlighted that the two-way process allows for reflections from which practicum students can learn the root causes of certain issues that clients face:

I would love the opportunity to work with more students just because I think I am at a point where I've done a lot of self-reflection, so I can kind of describe some of the motivating factors, and I could maybe share them with the students so that they can get a clear understanding of the root causes and the motivations that cause people to go down a different path. (Focus group participant)

In addition, it was thought that service users' involvement could help improve students' communication skills with diverse populations. For example, one participant shared:

Something like communication skills, it is something that you can learn through interactions with different people, and you learn how to address every type of person. (Focus group participant)

Participants shared the lack of flexibility that the system offers for clients to change, and one participant offered:

I would want the students to know that things don't happen ideally. You don't find someone who is completely damaged, in need of services... That's the most important thing. That's what hurts the most is when you're working toward building a better life and one little mistake and you're being sent back to the bottom ... I think that's why success rates are low because nobody can do that. It's a tremendous feat, in itself, to change all those habits, to change that pattern of brain thinking. (Focus group participant)

SUI can help practicum students not only improve their practice skills but also learn the barriers clients face in the change process. Understanding these barriers can inform program design.

### *Lived Experiences to Inform Program Design*

Many participants in several FGD sessions discussed how the lived experiences of service users can help inform the design of social service programming and field education frameworks to mitigate the issues between service user needs and the processes that develop future social workers. Speaking to the ability of lived experience to inform the design of social service programming, one participant shared:

Actually, I've been doing some training through [agency] and the team leader noticed I was doing all these trainings and had heard a bit of my story and then she asked if I wanted to get more involved and be part of the advisory committee on how they come up with the content for the substance use portion of the training. So, I'm just actually getting more involved in that, so I think that is a great way as well. (Focus group participant)

Participants expressed that service users themselves have the best understanding of what social work education should look like to meet their needs and that lived experience should inform the transformation and implementation of field education. As one participant stated:

If the service user is brought into field education, the way field education is conducted might bring a change. Maybe the service user didn't want this, maybe this service user wanted more of this. If we take their perspective and put it into education and into how we conduct social work education... That would really meet the needs of service users. Then, when we reprogram the programs and projects, we include the community with us in all the sections from planning to evaluation and monitoring ... I think if we involve service users, at the end of the day it will

result in what the service user really needs at the end of the program or the services that they are accessing. (Focus group participant)

### *Personal Benefits for Service Users*

Several participants who worked with practicum students during their field placements suggested several areas in which the service users themselves could benefit from the practice. These benefits include the opportunity for service users to give back to the system, the potential for creating awareness and sharing lived experiences to foster personal pathways to healing, and the potential sense of pride because of SUI in field practicum. In the case of participants with experience as both a service user and a practicum student, SUI can provide opportunities to inspire and uplift social work students not only with their experiential insights but also with their social work knowledge and skills. Expanding upon the potential collaboration between service users and practicum students, the next theme presents processes aimed at effectively involving service users in field education.

### Processes for Involving Service Users

Participants discussed several processes on how to involve service users in social work education and field practicum. Opportunities to interact within classroom settings as a guest speaker and in role plays were discussed in several focus group sessions. Additional suggestions for involving service users included opportunities to participate in the evaluation of practicum students in field education courses and contributing feedback to field education programs. The details are provided in the following subthemes, including classroom involvement, evaluation of practicum students, providing feedback for field education, peer support, and advisory committees.

### *Classroom Involvement*

SUI in the classroom could include service users serving as guest speaker to share lived experiences and to assist students in understanding the tensions that may exist between service users and social workers. One participant offered this perspective:

I've been thinking about sharing my story because I know that a lot of people when they're in the situation, like with child services, they come to me because they know that I've been through it and everything ... I think sharing my story and maybe just letting them know this is how it has happened, and this is why we're so against you. (Focus group participant)

Role-playing was another practice that could be employed to involve service users in field education. Throughout these discussions, the concept of embodying a fictional character was something that some participants felt would be both enjoyable as a practice and beneficial to students as they began to draw

from past experiences. Incorporating actual lived experiences into service user/practitioner role-playing simulations provides an increased element of authenticity to the practice. One participant commented:

I kind of like the idea of role-play... I can get into the character of being a service user or being like a troubled person very easily. I think that would be an excellent experience for a social work student... I lived like that for so many years that I could easily provide some very real, hands-on experience for practicum students. (Focus group participant)

Other suggestions that were discussed within the focus groups for incorporating service users into the in-class environment involved simulations and workshops. Service users would be able to participate in the skill development of students through sharing different lenses as well as generally being involved in classes, as service users expressed interest in meeting and interacting with incoming cohorts of social work students.

### *Evaluation of Practicum Students*

Some participants discussed the potential for SUI in the student evaluation process as another way to be involved in field education. Participants reflected on the importance of being able to provide feedback not just on knowledge and application but also on the use of soft skills such as interpersonal relationships. An opportunity to be involved in the evaluation of social work practicum students could serve as an imperative for students to take on suggestions made by service users regarding the application of such soft skills. As one participant stated:

I don't know if at the end of the helping relationship or the service being provided for the service user, there will be feedback or a survey that could be given to the service user, and answer or fill it out to assess the knowledge, skills and attitudes being shown by the practicum students. I think that would be helpful for the students. Also, for the social work department or the university to gauge the specific need or the specific knowledge, attitude, and skills that this student should have at the end of the practicum. (Focus group participant)

Participants felt that their input could enhance their understanding of both their strengths and areas for improvement. Additionally, incorporating service users in this capacity could aid professors and field instructor supervisors in providing more meaningful support to students by monitoring their progress and offering ongoing feedback.

### *Providing Feedback for Field Education*

Some focus group discussions involved the benefits of services users offering feedback to the design of programming and social work practicums, as well as participating in the piloting of these programs. One participant reflected on prior experiences:



But had I brought the service user in place, maybe the program design would have changed. Similar to that in social work education, if the service user is brought into field education, the way the field education is conducted might bring a change. Maybe the service user didn't want this, maybe this service user wanted more of this. If we take their perspective and put it into the education and into how we conduct social work education... Are we just concentrating on basic skills or are we just concentrating on data? Or are we just concentrating on case notes? That would really bring what the service user needs. (Focus group participant)

This can serve as a means of addressing gaps that exist between service user needs and the practice skills of social workers.

### *Peer-Support*

Some focus groups also discussed the benefits of service users being included in peer support roles. One participant spoke to how this might help foster the helping relationship:

I think including peer support, honestly peer support is a new movement...just to make sure they're comfortable, like the service user. (Focus group participant)

This included the value of working with practicum students and being able to share lived experiences across the journey, as well as being able to help foster relationships with other service users in cases where folks may be hesitant to engage with students in practice settings.

### *Advisory Committees*

The use of formal or semi-formal advisory committees which incorporate service users were also discussed among participants as a means of service user inclusion. This approach was identified as being valuable not only for social work education to inform the students' development but also for the broader social service sector as well. One participant shared this lens:

I just think if you bring a bunch of service users together who have had various experiences and then you're asking them. [...] I just think that it enriches the whole thing because I can only speak for myself and there are lots of other people that have had different experiences. So, if you get all that experience, put it together and really use that towards how you set up your services. In this case, how do you set up education for social workers? I think it's valuable because it's more than just me. (Focus group participant)

To implement these proposed approaches for engaging service users in field education, participants also put forth specific social work skills, which are discussed in the next theme.

## Identified Gaps in the Skills and Attributes of Social Workers

FGD participants reflected on previous experiences with practicum students, as well as professional social workers, to come up with a set of skills that they considered most important for incoming cohorts of social workers to possess. Table 2 provides a summary of the 23 skills identified by service users.

**Table 2**

*Identified Skills and Attributes for Improvement*

Skill	Quote from Focus Group Sessions
1. Understand service users	“They should be understanding of every person. People have different opinions and everything. Sometimes you can find someone who is rude and everything but as a social worker, you have to understand your job and everything and not take things personally”.
2. Trauma-informed	“I think trauma informed is one of the biggest things because I have a lot of traumas in my past and I was in a really abusive relationship. So, just understanding that my trauma can be triggered and to be conscious of that is really good. Because and then like, I live in [apartment] with the [agency] now and my case manager, one of the best things about her is she understands when if I have an overreaction or something happens, she understands that it wasn't me coming from a place of me being me, it was me coming from a place of trauma and I was triggered and she allows the space for me to learn and grow”.
3. Empathy	“Yes, I would like to say that when dealing with a lot of people, or different people, it is good to be kind to everyone around you because I think everyone is going through a lot. So, it is good to be kind”.
4. Non-judgmental attitude	“I think for a student, it's very important to be non-judgmental, no matter what the history is or how the worker that you're working with feels about you. I think it's very important that they have their own opinion and they're not basing it off of my past”.
5. Persistence	“For me, I would want the students to know that things don't happen ideally. You don't find someone who is completely damaged, in need of services, who can just do exactly as they're instructed the first time, get it right, everything's perfect. That's the most important thing. That's what hurts the most is when you're working toward building a better life and one little mistake or doing that and you're being sent back to the bottom. That's why I think everything is... I think that's why success rates are low, because nobody can do that. It's a tremendous feat in itself to change all those habits, to change that pattern of brain thinking”.
6. Apply an anti-oppressive approach	“Because when I went to school, like, I was taught its anti-oppressive practice... So, just know acknowledging where you're at and knowing where you're privileged at and where you're not”.
7. Communication	“I would say that when they are able to communicate to the students using the best language for understanding”.

8. Active listening	“The skill that you need to have as a social worker to work with anybody, to be honest, is listening. Active listening, not just listening to what the person is saying, actively listening and then supportive listening at the same time.”
9. Systems perspective	“I [would] love for them to acknowledge the ecosystems that are holding me backwards, not to blame, like things are not moving forward”.
10. Community knowledge of resources	“I think it's important that they're very resourceful of services that are offered because maybe if I would have had that option the first time, then maybe I wouldn't have lost them a second time”.
11. Ability to conduct referrals & follow-up	“The second is being really skilled in sector knowledge and just knowing not only what's in the community, but if they make a referral, I want the referral to go through, and not just fall off dead and follow up. So, truly just having that accountability of like stepping into my life and owning it and then advocating for me”.
12. Developing connections	“...So, as much as you can, just meet with them as if you're meeting with your friend kind of on a human level”.
13. Solution-focused	“But also look at me from a deficit perspective as well, so I know that social workers are like cheering me on when things are going well, which is yeah true, but there are some deficits, and they are truly deficits and I need a lift in that area in order to get to a baseline of wellness. So, I would say so I'll just keep myself focused, so active listening, acknowledging what's going well, but also acknowledging what's not going well and really spending time problem solving and resources and supports in the deficit area and then they'll come along”.
14. Coordinating efforts & cooperation	“Coordination, I think. The ability to coordinate mobile communication among multiple parties of various social workers, the ability to connect with clients”.
15. Creative problem-solving	“One right off the hop is kind of understanding the situations outside of the box”.
16. Organized	“For the social worker, I think they should be organized. Maybe always following the ways in which they are going to collect information from their people so that people can be able to maybe trust them and give them their honest opinion. I think they should be organized in the way they are going to carry out their research to gather more information”.
17. Capable of conducting assessments	“The basic skill is just being able to do an assessment, social assessment, psychosocial assessment. That's kind of the basic thing that will give you the basic understanding of your client: what they need, what they're coming from, how you can help them further”.
18. Patience	“One should have patience because dealing with people can be different. It can take time or something. Things might not work your way as soon as you want them to work. So, it is good to exercise patience”.
19. Emotional intelligence	“I think also you should have emotional intelligence”.

20. Critical thinking	“In my opinion, I will say empathy, good communication skills, critical thinking”.
21. Cultural competence	“Cultural competence enhancing proper organisational performance”.
22. Engage in self-care	“And also, they should have self-care”.
23. Setting boundaries	“I would say boundary setting”.

Having highlighted the focus on enhancing skills for incoming cohort social workers, the subsequent theme delves into the valuable insights gained from service users’ interactions with professional social workers.

### Service Users’ Experiences with Professional Social Workers

Some participants in the FGDs discussed the importance of centering past experiences with social workers. Positive and negative accounts of helping relationships were about their interactions. Positive experiences were identified as being when the practitioner took the time to understand service users, were knowledgeable about the resources available to service users, and approached the helping relationship in an authentic manner. Common amongst these discussions was the impact of workers not being judgemental or arriving with preconceived notions about the service users with whom they were meeting for the first time. One participant mentioned,

And whenever I’ve had a positive experience, it's been because people have not made judgments, or I guess perceived judgments because maybe I’m perceiving it wrong too, right? (Focus group participant)

Conversely, negative experiences with professional social workers resulted from practitioners being perceived as being judgemental towards service users through practices such as questioning why they are seeking help when services users are perceived to be able to look after themselves. Furthermore, a lack of effort and knowledge around the resources available to service users were also perceived as a drawback. One participant reflected on losing her children due to a lack of knowledge of available resources:

However, the first time when I lost them, I didn't know about the shelters, and I didn't know there was support out there for me because it was very much dependent on my daughter's dad. Then I ended up letting him come by and then my kids were taken away, and... I was scared because if I didn't let him back, I wouldn't have been able to pay my rent, I wouldn't be able to feed my kids, I wouldn't be able to take care of them. So, then it's kind of... Whatever... But I didn't know about the shelters at that point. So, I think it's important that they're very resourceful of services that are offered because maybe if I would have had that option the first time, then maybe I wouldn't have lost them a second time. (Focus group participant)

The next theme sheds light on key considerations when involving service users in field education.

### Considerations for Involving Service Users in Field Education

Participants identified areas of consideration for involving service users in field education. The vulnerability of service users and the potential for experiences to be re-traumatizing was a dominant theme. Transference and countertransference, as well as the importance of matching personalities, were brought up based on previous experiences with practicum students. Other areas included the importance of the provision of honoraria, issues related to time constraints, and language and cultural barriers. These themes are presented below in detail.

#### *Vulnerability of Service Users*

Throughout many of the FGDs about incorporating service users into field placements and social work education on a broader level, a common area was the potential for service users to feel vulnerable when sharing stories, lived experiences, and engaging in role-play and simulation-type activities. Many participants voiced their concerns about how sharing their experiences with different students and in different environments may bring up past trauma. One participant offered this:

It's just hard for me to share my story with so many people because I feel like I just get to know somebody and then, all of a sudden, I'm meeting somebody else and then I'm having to re-explain it. Kind of like I'm re-traumatizing myself but it's like I'm bringing it up again and again, and I just don't think that... I don't like that... (Focus group participant)

Another area common among FGDs was the need to develop rapport and trust between service users and practicum students for service users to be able to open up. Participants shared their wish for students to be a part of their journey, rather than just intersecting with them sporadically. This was thought to not only help with rapport building but could also give service users the opportunity to convey the message they wish students to receive. One participant stated:

It would be nice to know if [students] are taking the time of whatever allows practicum students to be a part of that journey for more than just one time. I can understand how someone might feel, like it's just someone coming in to inspect or dissect you, and then they're gone, right? Like, they have no investment in you... It would feel way better to know that the person is kind of committing to a certain amount of time to get to know the full story or you not just pop in for a quick second and put you under the magnifying glass, then leave without revisiting the whole stuff... We can never get the fact or the entire scope of the situation in one 45-minute session. Sometimes you don't say things the right way the first time, and so that can be the first feeling. Like, "oh, I didn't say that right." That has more anxiety; you don't have a second chance to kind of elaborate and explain more to give them the bigger picture. (Focus group participant)

Other areas of concern that were discussed among participants included the importance of creating a safe space for service users if they participate in the field, as well as the importance of disclosing the roles of those involved and the fear that can be experienced when conducting classes across online platforms. One participant reflected on a class they joined via Zoom, saying, “it was scary at first, though, because it's on Zoom and all of their cameras were off.”

### *Issues Based on Previous Experiences with Practicum Students*

Other potential challenges that were discussed were based on previous experiences with practicum students. The themes within this space included phenomena such as transference and countertransference as service users share their experiences. One participant had this to say on the occurrence of transference and countertransference:

Sometimes some practicum students can start off super calm and then when you empty yourselves with them, they're like trying to use their best poker face trying to like be as professional as possible, but you can see that they're overwhelmed and they just kind of go in the hole with you, which is not effective, because you need them to remain neutral and they know it comes with practice and time... So, when I see them going in the hole with me, I reassure them it's really okay it's like this is nothing new, it happens, and I just want to work with you for a solution. So, kind of like poke them, nudge them towards that direction. (Focus group participant)

The above participant's experience speaks to the importance of matching practicum students and agency placements.

### *Importance of Honoraria for Service Users*

Honoraria or other incentives were discussed as a consideration for service users with regards to their participation in field education. Participants reflected on how providing honoraria or other incentives, such as cash and/or gift cards, as well as reimbursing transportation costs can contribute to decreasing service users' anxiety and allowed them to focus more on their participation. Reflecting on the gift card provided as an incentive for participating in the focus group session, one participant mentioned:

Well, like how you provided a [gift] card, that's amazing. That allows a person to stop focusing on basic necessities for a minute and enter into that place. [Receiving] almost a week's worth of groceries at Walmart, a person can be like, “oh, I don't have to worry about this first for this.” Like, it's when you feel that sense of relief that something you stress about constantly has been eased. Then that allows a person to get into that self-reflection, like we know the hierarchy of needs, right? So, we can't get into that self-reflection, self-actualization stage when you're

worried about your safety when you're worried about housing when you're worried about food when you're exhausted from constantly worrying about those things, you get into that brain fog. (Focus group participant)

### *Barriers for Involvement*

Time constraints was one of the areas of potential concern identified by the participants; for example, it was mentioned that circumstances where service users are in a hurry might impact the relationship and educational experience with students. General logistical concerns with regards to scheduling may impact service user inclusion in the field, for example, “coordination of time between [service user] and the social work students.” Language and cultural barriers were also brought up as areas of potential apprehension with regards to service user participation in the field. However, the involvement of service users can also assist practicum students in enhancing their cultural understanding of various ethnic groups.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study echo the literature as it supports the involvement of service users in social education, specifically in field education. Many participants had at least some interactions with practicum students and drew from these experiences in the FGD sessions. Additionally, some participants were also able to draw from their experiences as practicum students themselves. Participants who had not previously worked with a social work practicum student provided valuable insights by drawing from previous experiences with professional social workers. All participants emphasized the value that experts of lived experience could contribute to both field education and the broader social service sector, with dominant themes tending to focus on SUI in field education providing opportunities to enhance the interpersonal and relational skill sets of incoming cohorts of social workers.

The value that experts with lived experience bring to field education is explained by the notion of insider knowledge (Biskin et al., 2012). Programs using this concept in the UK emphasize inclusivity and strive to challenge traditional positivist epistemological frameworks that are often used in social work education. Focusing on field education, the opportunity to work with students provides avenues through which service users can share their lived experiences with the intention of helping to shape the practice skills and attitudes of students as they become practitioners. This is supported by the work of Kam (2020) who identified that the personal qualities and the working attitudes of social workers were viewed by service users as more valuable to the helping relationship than professionalization or credentialing. Prior research suggests that fieldwork provides the preeminent site for the development of personal qualities and positive attitudes (Cabiati & Pancioli, 2010; Kam 2020). This sentiment was echoed in the findings.

Some participants shared fewer positive experiences with social workers, noting instances where they perceived them as judgmental and hesitant to fully engage in the helping process with service users. The

concepts of teamwork, and social workers walking alongside service users were repeatedly emphasized, supporting the importance of relationality. Wilson et al. (2019) suggests that involving service users in the educational process fosters a sense of shared responsibility through nurturing and meaningful relationships.

The involvement of service users in social work field education also provides opportunities for service users to personally benefit. It can be as a pathway to healing and a means of giving back as well as an opportunity to cultivate a sense of pride through their contributions. This is echoed by Cabiati and Pancioli (2019) who found that the inclusion of experts by experience in education contributes to an increase in self-esteem. The authors found that this involvement creates through dialogue a chance for service user voices to be heard. This theme correlates with the idea of ‘nothing about us, without us’ (Agnew & Duffy, 2010). This was a common thread among participants who were under no misconception that their experience should be the driving force behind program design and implementation.

Addressing the gaps between service provision and service user needs was another concern that emerged in the findings. Service users believe that they know the best in terms of their needs, and the challenges they face in accessing social services. As such, they can better support students and educators in designing programs that address service user needs. This aligns with previous research that regard service users’ knowledge and experience as crucial in shaping social work practice (McGlade et al., 2020; Nykanen, 2019). Several European countries, including the UK, Sweden, Norway, and Germany have already embraced this approach by involving service users in their respective social work programs (Laging & Heidenreich, 2019; Robinson & Webber, 2012). Wilson and Daly (2007) highlight that traditional social service structures, particularly within institutional settings, reinforce power imbalances through the coercive mechanisms that are intrinsic to bio-medical models of Western social work. To begin to agitate these positivist relations, Wilson et al. (2020) suggest rather than adopting a pedagogical approach that teaches ‘what to do’ (p.88), we should be engaging with the notion of shared disciplinary reflexivity which forwards practices of unfinished or ambiguous social work thereby fostering collective “engagement with the ongoing nature of the unfinished project” of social work (p.88).

The concept of shared engagement was evident with participants emphasizing teamwork and a shared journey. Many service users expressed a willingness to be actively involved in field education working as a team with practicum students from the beginning to the end of their practicum period. Such a collaborative effort is believed to enhance various skills of social work students, including relationship-building, effective communication, active listening, empathy, understanding of diverse issues, and addressing cultural and language barriers. The development of these skills can help students to become effective and professional social workers in their future practice. In addition, the process of working together as a team can also provide both service users and social work students a sense of empowerment (Laging & Heidenreich, 2019). SUI can enhance students’ competencies, learning, and the development of strong and trusting relationships (O’Shea & McGinnis, 2019; Wilson et al., 2019).

The findings of this study highlight the importance and benefits of SUI in field education, however, understanding how and to what extent they can be involved in social work education programs, as well as how to navigate and overcome some of the challenges raised, is equally crucial. Robinson and



Webber (2003) reported that universities and social service organizations varied in the extent to which service users were included. Several ideas were suggested in this study, such as inviting service users to be guest speakers in classroom settings, participate in role-play simulations, join advisory committees, assist with curriculum development and program design, provide peer support and share their lived experiences and knowledge to help students and educators enhance their knowledge and skills. These findings align with previous research suggesting that service users can also be included in social work education through admissions, curriculum development, and evaluating students' progress (Branfield, 2009; Ramon et al., 2019). This work to date has influenced universities across the globe to consider service user inclusion in social work education. It has even become a mandatory practice within the UK and in other European countries (Levin, 2004). Furthermore, this involvement can be used to challenge existing social work frameworks. By serving as both teachers and client, service users can help students better understand sources of imbalance and support and define the problems they face in their life situations, proposing solutions (Geregova & Frisaufova, 2019).

The participants in this study also emphasized that service users should be included in the evaluation process of students, as their feedback can help students understand their strengths and areas for improvement. This process may also assist in reducing power imbalances in the service-user-social work relationship. In addition, involving service users in evaluating practicum students can assist faculty and field instructor supervisors in monitoring students' progress (Branfield, 2009; Ramon et al., 2019). This process, however, requires careful consideration in order to avoid tokenism and conflict of interest. Crisp et al. (2006) mentioned that achieving a full sharing of power in assessment decisions about social work students with service users is difficult to achieve in reality as many service users do not feel that it is their role to assess social work students (Fitzhenry, 2008). According to Skoura-Kirk et al. (2013), service users contributed toward the grading of students at Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK, but they were not assigned to formally allocate final marks or grades. Providing feedback by service users on students' practice has been criticized for being too lenient or too harsh, ambiguous, and inconsistent (Edwards, 2003; Shennan, 1998). There are barriers to including service users and that further research is needed on how to overcome the barriers.

In terms of service users participating in online classes, participants shared that students would turn off their cameras and interaction was minimal. As the participant described this as 'scary at first', the sense of relationality that has been prominent above in guiding equitable relationships, now has the potential to be mitigated as shifts to virtual platforms such as Zoom are becoming more established. As the literature suggests that the social work profession should be differentiated from other professions based on the need for relationality to guide human help and eliminate unequal power relations (Kam, 2020), the implication for social work educational institutions may be to create a mandate that cameras be turned on for students participating in such activities. The run-on effect of such a mandate could potentially help encourage students to put the welfare of service users ahead of the value they place on their own level of comfort for the duration of such an activity.

Another area requiring attention is the potential for vulnerability of service users which may lead to re-traumatization when sharing their experiences as guest speakers or participating in role-play simulations in the classroom. The fear that a situation where a rotating door of students coming in and

out of work environments with service users would force service users to have to continuously re-tell their story may lead to unwillingly reliving of past traumas. The implication may be to address the participation requirements, considering student attendance and the duration of students' engagement with service users. This could involve extending the engagement period over multiple semesters. For example, establishing a strong rapport and trust between service users and students may create a comfortable and open learning environment that may facilitate the healing of past traumas. Debriefing and providing care support may also be necessary to address any concerns about re-igniting past trauma.

Furthermore, additional aspects were discussed from diverse perspectives to be considered prior to integrating service users into field education. These include creating a safe space where service users can freely share their experiences, providing honoraria to recognize the expertise and time of service users, offering scheduling flexibility to accommodate the needs of service users, considering language and cultural barriers that might hinder accurate interpretation of voices from different ethnic backgrounds. It is important to carefully consider these multifaceted aspects for involving service users in field education.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

There were some limitations to this study on the involvement of service users in social work field education. With focus groups engaging 22 participants, the sample size was small, so the knowledge is transferable to the extent that people choose to use it. Another limitation was that the FGDs were conducted virtually, which could have limited the involvement of some participants or be perceived as a possible barrier to participation.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study suggest that the potential benefits which can be derived from SUI in field education may serve to improve the quality of relationships between service users and social workers. More research is needed to look specifically within the Canadian context on how institutions can work to incorporate SUI in a meaningful way, that mitigates experiences of tokenism. Furthermore, as the potential for service users to unwillingly relive past trauma as a result of retelling their story, additional research is required to discover pathways to alleviate the potential for such adverse effects.

## CONCLUSION

Service users value their involvement in social work field education. Several potential roles for service users were discussed, including classroom involvement and peer support. However, the most significant impact on helping relationships and the development of non-judgmental attitudes among future social workers was found to come from their contributions to the relational aspects of social work. Participants emphasized that service users are particularly well-suited to help foster these essential skills.

The involvement of experts by lived experience in field education was ubiquitously endorsed. However, the potential for service users to re-live past trauma through such involvement was addressed as a matter of consideration in the context of trauma-informed social work education and field education for all. This report highlights the need for social work programs in Canada to begin to implement the many benefits that lay intrinsic to the SUI in field education, as literature reflects the successes of their counterparts in other countries such as the UK and Sweden.

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## APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM



**Dr. Julie Drolet, Faculty of Social Work, (780) 492-1594, [jdrolet@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jdrolet@ucalgary.ca)**

**Title of Project:**

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

**Sponsor/Partner:**

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

This consent form, a copy of which has been sent to you by email, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

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

**Purpose of the Study**

The virtual focus group aims to explore ways to involve the experts by experience service users in social work field education. The Transforming the Field Education Landscape project will facilitate a focus group online.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

As a participant in the virtual focus group, you will be encouraged to share your thoughts on the current context of social work field education, your experiences as a service user about field education and explore ways to involve the voices of service users in field education.

The virtual focus group will be online and will be approximately 60 minutes. The focus group will be recorded on Zoom, and notes will be taken for analysis with all identifying information, such as your name removed. You will have the choice of utilizing your Zoom camera or turning this function off to protect your privacy and confidentiality. Given that this is a focus group with other members, confidentiality is not guaranteed. However, the importance of maintaining confidentiality within the group will be explained in-depth to all members. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained throughout the data analysis process.

Only members of the research team will have access to the audio recordings from the focus group session.

All information will be stored in locked cabinets and password-protected computers by the research team and the lead researcher at the University of Calgary. Copies of the results of the study, upon its completion, may be obtained by contacting the Project Director, Dr. Julie Drolet, by email at [jdrolet@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jdrolet@ucalgary.ca) or telephone number (780) 492-1594.

Research findings from the project will be used in the following ways: presentations at conferences and published works, policy reports, and developing action plans.

All questions concerning the procedures will be answered to ensure they are fully understood.

By consenting to participate,

I understand the information regarding this research project, including all procedures and the personal risks involved, and agree that my participation is voluntary.

I understand that my identity and any identifying information obtained will be kept confidential. Only the research team members will have access to the data collected.

I understand that it is difficult to withdraw individual responses in the focus group because the information will be collected in a group setting. I understand that participants cannot completely withdraw individual responses once the focus group is complete. I may decline to answer any and all questions without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

I understand that I may ask any questions or register any complaints I might have about the project with the lead researcher, Dr. Julie Drolet.

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Should you agree to participate, you will not be asked to provide any personal information outside of your experiences with social services. All participants shall remain anonymous in any reporting of the study findings (final report, presentations, etc.).

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

*I grant permission to be audio taped:* Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

*I wish to personally remain anonymous:* Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

*I wish to personally remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym:* Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

*The pseudonym I choose for myself is:* \_\_\_\_\_

*You may quote me and use my name:* Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

The focus group may involve discussing personal experiences. We acknowledge and understand that these experiences may be difficult to talk about, so we invite you to bring along a person who can support you if this would be helpful. Some service users may possibly experience some stress or fatigue or risk in the process of reflecting on their personal experiences. These risks and discomforts are associated with participating in the focus groups. It is also possible that some service users may experience some distress at the prospect of integrating their voices into field research. However, while sharing experience in a focus group may be sensitive for some service users and may go beyond what they normally experience, there are supports in place to assist services users. If a service user becomes upset or distressed through their participation in the study, the service user will be provided with a list of resources where they would possibly receive support from a local organization. Each service user will be provided with this list of resources before participating in the research study.

The study aims to benefit service users by providing opportunities to explore and remove barriers that may limit the inclusion of service users' voices in field education. Your decision to participate or not in the study will not affect your relationship with the TFEL project.

### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Members of the research team will have access to the information collected, including Dr. Julie Drolet, the co-investigators in the study and their student research assistants. All information provided will be treated confidentially, and anonymity will be maintained through the analysis of the findings.

Your participation is completely voluntary. No one except the researchers will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers from the focus group session. The research team will summarize information to share the study results in any presentations or publications. The Zoom recording will be kept in a password-protected computer by the lead researcher – Dr. Julie Drolet.

Summaries of the research findings, and a final report, will be made available to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

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### ***Signatures***

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

**If you prefer to provide oral consent, please contact the research team at [tfelproject@ucalgary.ca](mailto:tfelproject@ucalgary.ca) and we will arrange a time to meet with you before the focus group meeting.**

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this



research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact: Dr. Julie Drolet, Faculty of Social Work, at (780) 492-1594, or by email [jdrolet@ucalgary](mailto:jdrolet@ucalgary) If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at tel. (403) 220-7289 / (403) 220-8640; or by email [cfreb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cfreb@ucalgary.ca).

A copy of this consent form has been emailed to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

## APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Have you ever worked with a practicum (social work) student? If so, would you be willing to share some of your experiences?
- 2) We are interested in better understanding how service users can be integrated in practice and field education. What are the three most important skills that a social worker should have when they are working with you or other individuals and service groups?
- 3) How would you feel about working with a practicum student in the future? How come?
- 4) As the expert by experience, would you be interested in participating in social work field education? What do you feel would be the best way to include you in a student practicum (learning through experience)?
- 5) From your perspective, is it important for you as a service user to be involved in social work field education?