



RESTRUCTURING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION IN 21ST CENTURY CANADA

From Crisis Management to Sustainability

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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Keywords: Practicum, field education, crisis, sustainability, mixed-methods research

Abstré : La formation en service social au Canada est en crise. Depuis plus de deux décennies, l'éducation sur le terrain se heurte à des défis et des obstacles croissants dans les contextes néolibéraux de l'enseignement supérieur et du secteur de la santé et des services sociaux. Ces difficultés ont été amplifiées par une croissance sans précédent des programmes de formation en travail social et des inscriptions d'étudiants, ce qui a fait croître la demande de stages pratiques à un rythme difficilement envisageable. Bien que certaines stratégies de restructuration de l'éducation en service social aient été élaborées, peu de travail a été fait jusqu'à présent pour recenser, évaluer et partager officiellement l'information sur ces stratégies dans les programmes canadiens de formation en travail social. Cet article explore l'état actuel de la situation de crise à partir d'une perspective axée sur les solutions et décrit trois stratégies interreliées pour aborder les problèmes critiques des modèles, pratiques et des processus qui sont actuellement utilisés. Les stratégies sont présentées comme un modèle de durabilité pour l'éducation sur le terrain. Les résultats d'une étude de deux ans qui visait à déterminer d'autres mécanismes de prestation de la formation en service social et à promouvoir le partage de l'information entre les programmes de formation en service social sont examinés. Une recommandation clé est de restructurer le domaine et de s'éloigner d'une approche de gestion de crise en mettant en œuvre des stratégies visant à améliorer la pérennité de l'éducation sur le terrain.

Mots-clés : Stages, éducation sur le terrain, crise, durabilité, recherche à méthodes mixtes

SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION in Canada is in a state of crisis (Ayala et al., 2018; McConnell, Sammon, & Pike, 2013). For over two decades field education has faced increasing challenges and barriers within neoliberal contexts in higher education and the health and social services sector (Morley & Dunstan, 2013) coupled with unprecedented growth in social work education programs nationally (Regehr, 2013). Although some strategies for restructuring field education have been developed, to date little work has been done to formally identify, evaluate, and share information about these strategies across social work education programs.

In this article we present the results of a two-year study that sought to identify alternative delivery mechanisms for field education and promote sharing of information about innovative practices across Canadian social work education programs. Mixed quantitative and qualitative research methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), including an online survey, focus groups, and individual interviews were conducted with field education coordinators and directors from across Canada, resulting in the identification of three inter-related strategies for remediating current challenges by improving the sustainability of field education. These strategies are presented below as the *Sustainability Model for Field Education*.

Background

Field education, also known as practicum, internship, or field work (Bogo, 2006; Poulin, Silver, & Kauffman, 2006), is the “signature pedagogy” of social work education (Lyter, 2012; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). Research suggests that students find their practicum experiences to be the most important element in their preparation for competent practice (Bogo, 2015). Field education enables social work students to gain applied knowledge and skills through experiential learning (Lager & Robbins, 2004; Poulin et al., 2006). It also allows faculty and field instructors to evaluate student suitability and readiness for professional practice (McConnell et al., 2013). Field education is a required component in all undergraduate and graduate social work education programs across North America (Bogo, 2006).

Practicum students learn from experienced social workers, called field instructors, in diverse community and governmental practice settings (Bogo, 2006; Homonoff, 2008). Field instructors provide students with opportunities to develop skills beyond those obtained in a classroom-learning environment (McConnell et al., 2013). As field instructors take on the role of educating students within professional practice settings, field instructors themselves benefit from gaining skills and experience in teaching and mentoring. They are also able to “give back” to their profession by educating the next generation of social

workers about applied techniques and practice approaches (Bogo, 2006; Homonoff, 2008).

Field education coordinators and directors (we use the term *field coordinators* hereafter to encompass all those responsible for coordinating and managing field education) work “at the interface” between social work education programs and the health and social services sector (Asakura, Todd, Eagle, & Morris, 2018, p. 152). They play a critical role in the administration and pedagogy of field education through acting as “placement arrangers, consultants or liaisons to field agencies, and as public relations directors and trouble-shooters” while also fulfilling numerous other coordination and supportive functions (Robertson, 2013, p. 99). They are often also responsible for assessing the suitability of students for social work practice thereby assuming a role as ‘gatekeepers’ for the profession (Robertson, 2013). According to Robertson (2013), field coordinator positions are “often perceived as one of the most taxing jobs in social work education” (p. 99). These positions are becoming increasingly complex and stressful in the present context of encroaching neoliberalization within both academic institutions and the health and social services sector, holding significant implications for field education (Asakura et al., 2018; Ayala et al, 2018; Brown, 2016).

Neoliberal Context

Within a neoliberal socioeconomic and political climate that is characterized by an ideology of individualism, productivity, budgetary restraint, and other austerity measures, social workers who serve as field instructors are contending with staff cuts and overwhelming workloads as they are forced to operate in a regressive environment with decreased supports and resources (Ayala et al., 2018; Ayala & Drolet, 2014; McConnell et al., 2013; Reisch, 2013; Wayne, Raskin, & Bogo, 2006; Weinberg & Taylor, 2014). Simultaneously, over the past two decades, unprecedented growth in social work education program enrolments has created substantial challenges for field education, namely the increased numbers of students requiring practicum placements (Ayala et al., 2018; CASWE-ACFTS, 2016; Lager & Robbins, 2004; Reisch, 2013; Regehr, 2013; Wayne et al., 2006).

Growth in Canadian Social Work Education Programs and Increased Enrolment. To quantify the growth in social work education programs in Canada, in 2008-2009 there were 37 accredited social work education programs offering part or full-time BSW and/or MSW studies, while in 2017-2018 the number had increased by 14 % to 42 programs (CASWE-ACFTS, 2018a). During the same period of time the number of student enrolments in these programs increased by 39 % . As of 2017-18, there were 14,690 BSW and MSW students enrolled across accredited social work education programs in Canada (CASWE-ACFTS, 2018a). Each of

these students requires at least one practicum placement and securing these placements is largely the role of field coordinators (Ayala et al., 2018).

Given the ever-increasing expectations placed on field coordinators to secure greater numbers of quality practicum placements, field education in Canada has been deemed to be in a “state of crisis” (Ayala et al., 2018; McConnell et al., 2013). At the same time, as a result of neoliberalization of health and social services, social workers in community and government agencies that are asked to serve as field instructors are less available to provide supervision to social work students now than in the past (Ayala et al., 2018; McKee, Muskat, & Perlman, 2015; McConnell et al., 2013; Regehr, 2013) and when they do, they may not receive any workload relief in recognition of the time and effort it takes to provide quality field instruction (Domakin, 2015; Wayne et al., 2006). In turn, the quality of the field instruction and the quantity of practicum learning opportunities provided to students are diminishing (Ayala et al., 2018; Domakin, 2015).

Models of Field Education

Traditionally, social work field education consisted mainly of one-to-one tutoring and mentoring of students by field instructors (Birkenmaier, Curley, & Rowan, 2012; Bogo, 2006; George, Silver, & Preston, 2013; Poulin et al., 2006). Essentially, field instructors serve as role models for their practicum students by demonstrating the knowledge, technical skills, attitudes and values that are intended to be adopted and internalized by the student through direct observation and active instruction (Barretti, 2007). While this traditional field instructor-student dyad model is still the most prominent form of social work field education today, within the context of budget cutbacks and increased workloads, barriers to the continuation of this traditional practicum format are being identified with increasing frequency and urgency (Ayala et al., 2018; Bellinger, 2010; Bogo, 2006 & 2015; Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Gursanky & Le Sueur, 2012; Lager & Robbins, 2004; McConnell et al., 2013; Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Noble & Irwin, 2009; Poulin et al., 2006; Preston, George, & Silver, 2014; Regehr, 2013; Reisch, 2013; Todd & Schwartz, 2009; Weinberg & Taylor, 2014; Wiebe, 2010). Field coordinators have articulated that securing quality traditional field education opportunities has become increasingly challenging (Birkenmaier et al., 2012; Lager & Robbins, 2004; Poulin et al., 2006).

As the traditional models of field education become a less tenable way to accommodate student practica within social work education programs in the 21st-century (Gursanky & Le Sueur, 2012; Lager & Robbins, 2004; Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Noble & Irwin, 2009; Preston et al., 2014), a number of programs have begun to rethink and reconfigure their

practicum models, developing innovative strategies to address existing challenges (Ayala, 2018; Crisp & Hosken, 2016; McKee et al., 2015; Regehr, 2013; Wiebe, 2010). However, to date, little work has been done to formally and systemically identify, evaluate, and share information about these innovative strategies, processes, and practices across Canadian social work education programs in a comprehensive manner.

One of the guiding premises of the present study is that sharing innovative strategies and changes to models of field education will help social work education programs to learn from one another as new solutions to the practicum crisis are developed, tested, and evaluated. A goal of this research project was to promote shared understandings and enhanced collaboration among social work education programs in addressing challenges. Over a decade ago, Lager and Robbins (2004) called on social work educators to embrace such challenges as an opportunity to engage in a process of re-visioning practicum. The crisis presents an opportunity to take up Lager and Robbins' (2004) call and to realign social work education to meet contemporary contextual realities and demands (Gursanky & Le Sueur, 2012; Preston et al., 2014; Wiebe, 2010). The specific objectives and research methods are presented below.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to: investigate how Canadian field coordinators address existing challenges in field education, explore alternative mechanisms for delivery of field education from the perspective of Canadian field coordinators, and disseminate innovative and promising practices that support field education.

The first phase involved articulating the challenges resulting in the state of crisis in field education in Canada, with the next phase being the generation of strategies and innovations to address the challenges. The articulation of the challenges has been published elsewhere (Ayala et al., 2018). To summarize, we found that:

Social work education programs in Canada face four key challenges in regard to field education that can be further divided into two sections: (a) the social work practice field and (b) social work field education administration. The two key challenges associated with the social work practice field are: (a) social work practice contexts and realities and (b) practicum shortages and saturation. The two key challenges associated with social work field education administration are: (a) practicum procurement and field instructor recruitment and retention; and (b) expectations and workloads of field education coordinators. (Ayala et al., 2018, p. 285)

Methods

The research design involved a sequential mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) consisting of three elements: an online survey; focus groups; and individual interviews. Participation in each element of the study was independent of the rest; therefore, a participant may have chosen to take part in one or more elements. Field coordinators from nine Canadian provinces participated in one or more elements. Research ethics approval was obtained prior to data collection. The study was conducted in both official languages, French and English. Quotes provided in French have been translated to English for the purposes of this article.

Online Survey

The survey was the first step in the sequential data collection process. It included questions about demographics, challenges, strategies, and promising practices for the coordination and administration of social work field education. The survey facilitated gathering information regarding the state of social work field education in Canada directly from field coordinators.

Survey development. The development of the survey was informed by a literature review. The literature review process followed the key principles identified by Timmins and McCabe (2005), including using both “standard” (inductive) and “network” (deductive) search methods. A pair of graduate-level research assistants reviewed scholarly works on social work field education published since 2000 (the most recent 15-year period), in Canadian and international contexts, including existing studies and commentaries (Timmins & McCabe, 2005). Key themes and findings, including analyses and discussions of innovations, models, challenges, and opportunities in social work field education in general and in specific areas of practice specialization (e.g., medical social work), were identified through analyzing the full text of relevant resources including books, book chapters, research papers, review articles, and opinion pieces.

The survey included 28 closed- and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions comprised a variety of question types including dichotomous yes/no, multiple choice, multi-answer, and ranking (ordinal) questions. The survey questions were drafted and finalized in English and then translated into French so that the survey could be accessible to both Anglophone and Francophone respondents. It was anticipated that the survey would take between 20 and 40 minutes to complete depending on the depth of responses provided to the open-ended questions. A pilot test of the survey was conducted with a small group of participants ($n = 5$). Pilot testing is an advisable strategy for pre-testing a new survey because it helps to mitigate potential problems with the survey prior to its general release (Stopher, 2012).

Survey administration. The survey was hosted on the SurveyMonkey© platform. An invitation to participate in the survey and a follow-up reminder message, including links to the survey webpage, were distributed by email to the listserv of members of the Field Education Committee (FEC) of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), in French and English in the winter of 2015. By participating, respondents provided their informed consent. Participants ($n = 34$) representing different regions of Canada responded to the survey. The overall response rate was 39 % . Approximately two-thirds (68 %) of the responses were received in English and the other one-third (32%) in French (Ayala et al., 2018).

Focus Groups

Further data collection occurred through focus groups designed to probe the survey findings and target specific content areas for further data collection (Ayala et al., 2018). Four focus groups with Canadian field coordinators were held in Ottawa, Ontario in the spring of 2015, in conjunction with a CASWE conference and the annual national FEC meeting (CASWE-ACFTS, 2016). Members of the FEC were invited to participate in the focus groups through a notice of invitation distributed to the FEC listserv by email. Those FEC members interested in participating were asked to send a reply email to a member of the research team expressing interest in participating. FEC members who expressed interest were then emailed the focus group questions so they could review them in advance if they wished. The focus groups lasted for 2.5 hours and were held in both English ($n = 3$) and French ($n = 1$). They were well attended ($n = 26$), with representation from 18 universities across Canada. Participants originated from the provinces of British Columbia ($n = 2$), Alberta ($n = 1$), Manitoba ($n = 3$), Ontario ($n = 15$), Quebec ($n = 4$), and the Maritimes ($n = 1$). In total, 21 participants attended the English focus groups and five attended the French focus group. Each participant signed a consent form before data collection began. All participants were provided with food and refreshments. The focus group dialogues were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Detailed notes were also taken by trained note-takers.

Data analysis followed a three-stage coding process conducted by a pair of trained bilingual graduate-level research assistants (Charmaz, 2014). Initial line-by-line coding of each transcript using Nvivo software was completed in order to generate emergent categories. Then, during a process of focused coding using a constant comparative approach, significant and frequent codes were re-coded and re-conceptualized to “condense and sharpen” the initial coding (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Next, theoretical coding brought the analysis to a higher level of abstraction

(Charmaz, 2014), before a final cross comparison and integration between survey and focus group results were completed.

Individual Interviews

Based on the analysis of the focus group data, further probing questions were identified and an eight-question individual interview guide was developed. One-hour long individual semi-structured interviews were completed with six Canadian field coordinators who were purposefully selected. The selected participants were identified as key informants by the research team (i.e., field coordinators who were known to have implemented innovative practices through their involvement with FEC). Four of the participants had also participated in the focus groups during which they shared information that the team decided to probe further. The remaining two individual interview participants did not participate in the focus groups but were known among members of our research team to be engaging in innovative practices in field education through information shared at FEC meetings. All six of the field coordinators were invited to participate through a letter of invitation and all provided informed consent to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2016. Participants included five Anglophones and one Francophone. They were from the provinces of British Columbia ($n = 2$), Ontario ($n = 2$) and the Maritimes ($n = 2$). A thematic analysis of the transcribed audio recordings was completed by two members of the research team following the interviews. The analytic process involved line-by-line manual coding of the transcripts, followed by a generation of broader themes based on synthesis and abstraction of coding patterns.

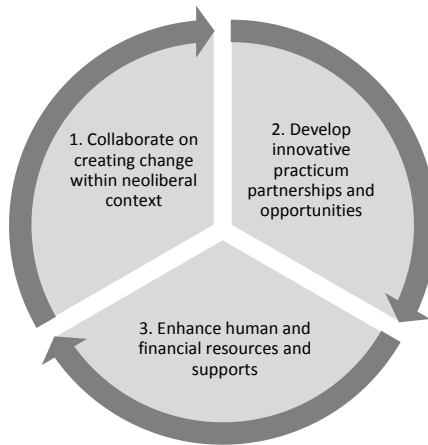
The final stages of analysis involved comparing and integrating the individual interview and focus group codes, finalizing the themes, and visualization.

Findings

The literature review, online survey, focus groups, and individual interviews provided a wealth of triangulated data and insights regarding the challenges facing Canadian social work field education, as well as strategies and promising practices for addressing those challenges. The challenges have been presented and discussed elsewhere (Ayala et al., 2018), therefore the findings presented here will focus on strategies to remediate problems and improve social work field education across Canada. Through our multi-level analysis of the datasets, three key inter-related strategies for remediating challenges and improving field education were identified: collaborating to create change within the neoliberal context; developing innovative alternative practicum models and partnerships; and enhancing field education resources and supports. Together these strategies form the *Sustainability Model of Field Education*

illustrated in Figure 1. This model is solution-focused and presents promising practices and innovations in field education designed to be responsive to the 21st century practice landscape (Gursanky & Le Sueur, 2012). Under the Model, field education is recognized as the cornerstone of social work pedagogy and professionalization. Each of the strategies that comprise the Model is discussed in detail below.

Figure 1 — *Sustainability Model of Field Education*



Collaborate to Create Change within the Neoliberal Context

Overall, 81 % of survey respondents agreed with the statement that field education is reaching a saturation point in Canada in regard to capacity of organizations to accommodate practicum placement requests, and 78 % indicated they are challenged to place a greater number of students than the number of practicum placements they know to be available (Ayala et al., 2018). Several participants emphasized the correlation between increasing enrolments in social work education programs and the simultaneous limited capacities to accept practicum students within health and social service organizations. Participants reported they are aware that organizations have limited capacities to take on additional practicum students as programs increase enrolments, leading to concerns about the ripple effect that growth in admissions is having on the quality of practicum student supervision. As one focus group participant explained: “Increasing admissions in terms of institutional targets are not matching really the realities [in the community].”

The findings suggest numerous social work education programs in Canada have already begun the process of rethinking their practicum models to better fit with current realities, namely the neoliberal context

in which they are operating (Ayala et al., 2018). Table 1 summarizes specific strategies identified by participants that can be employed to enhance collaboration and create change in field education within the existing neoliberal context at national, provincial, regional, and local levels.

Table 1 — *Strategies for Collaborating to Create Change within the Neoliberal Context*

National and provincial levels	Local and regional levels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with other social work education programs to offer joint trainings, supports and other benefits to field instructors • Collaborate among field coordinators at the national level regarding placement availability • Strengthen the work of the FEC in order to provide a venue for building relationships, addressing challenges and advocating for funding • Exchange information on workload management, expectations and supports with other field coordinators • Increase the number of provincial-level meetings of field coordinators (in person or by videoconference) • Work with provincial regulatory bodies to promote a positive image of the social work profession within communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase leadership from Deans and Directors in generating specific solutions to the crisis in field education through collaboration, advocacy, and funding for staffing and development of alternate placement models • Increase the number of regional-level meetings of field coordinators • Engage in collaborative placement procurement with other social work education programs, regionally and nationally • Recruit and build relationships with distant field instructors through electronic communications (email, Skype, etc.)

A field instructor's decision to offer supervision to a practicum student typically requires broader organizational support from their employer (Homonoff, 2008; Regehr, 2013). Participants reported that organizations are currently less likely to provide their employees with support for providing field instruction to students than they have been in the past. Field coordinators perceive contextual problems related to the neoliberal philosophy that underpins the current funding and operating structure of the health and social welfare system in Canada are a major issue being experienced by health and social service organizations and their staff. This translates into a lack of resources in terms of staffing, finances, time, and physical space, all of which impact capacity to offer practicum opportunities (Ayala et al., 2018).

Our analysis suggests that participants generally believe the development of new sustainable field education models and partnerships will require responsiveness to current contextual realities at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Ayala et al., 2018). Participants suggested that efforts to enhance collaboration and information sharing at local, regional, provincial, and national levels should be made through strengthening involvement in, and support for, formal forums such as

the FEC, as well as less formal or smaller scale initiatives such as offering joint field instructor training among two or more universities that are located in close geographical proximity and developing closer working relationships with provincial social work regulatory bodies.

The FEC was identified as a particularly important source for information sharing and collaboration. Participants asserted that building stronger relationships with one another through involvement on the FEC has been effective in helping to facilitate cooperation with student placements and other project-based initiatives, such as offering joint field instructor training, amongst some members. As one participant explained:

I think working collaboratively [through the FEC] is around having a common voice...This wording of crisis in field education [presented by the FEC to the Board of Directors of CASWE] comes from that common voice...And so, I think there's a lot of power when we come together as field educators across the country.

Currently, the FEC facilitates relationship building among field coordinators at the national level; however, participants identified that these efforts could be enhanced through meeting regularly at the regional and/or provincial levels between the bi-annual FEC meetings. For example, one participant shared that in her area there are provincial-level meetings regarding child welfare placements. From her perspective these meetings "saved the day for those placements" and such meetings "could and should" be held at the provincial level for field placement planning more generally.

Develop Innovative Alternative Practicum Models and Partnerships

The neoliberal context has spurred creativity and innovation among field coordinators in order to ensure each social work student is provided with a practicum opportunity. As one focus group participant explained, "if there's no placements, we're going to build them." Table 2 summarizes specific strategies offered by participants for innovative alternative practicum models, as well as partnerships with students, alumni, faculty, organizations, field instructors, and other social work field education programs that can be implemented within a more sustainable model of field education. While some of the strategies have been implemented and studied for many years, they are included in Table 2 because participants named them as specific approaches that they envisioned would support necessary change in the present context of crisis in field education in Canada.

Table 2 — *Strategies for Developing Innovative Alternative Practicum Models and Partnerships*

Alternative models and innovations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and implement alternative placement models and innovations, including developing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Non-traditional placements o Distance and international placements o New community partnerships and agreements for placements • Utilize placement matching and tracking software • Offer students tools to use to prepare for placement and track their learning during placement, such as a learning agreement • Offer field-based coursework concurrently with practicum • Offer a weekly integrative seminar concurrently with practicum
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With students and alumni: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Recruit current students and alumni to become field instructors o Recruit field instructors from among participants in continuing education courses o Listen to student concerns and be responsive to their needs o Take students to social work conferences and encourage them to engage in networking o Identify and respond to students who need extra support o Sensitize students to the crisis in field education in order to help manage their expectations by providing realistic information about the practice environment • With faculty members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Enhance faculty involvement in field education o Involve field coordinators in curriculum (re)design and advocate for alignment of curriculum with current practice realities • With organizations and partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Hold community consultations on the development of placements o Permit students to network with partners • With existing field instructors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Attend to relationship building through the provision of pre-placement planning, training, and support; increase frequency of contact with faculty liaisons; streamline the student evaluation process, and express appreciation post-placement. o Offer appropriate and desirable incentives and/or remuneration such as university library cards, restaurant gift certificates, cash, gym memberships, continuing education courses, certificates of acknowledgement, appreciation events, adjunct faculty appointments, competency credits for registration, and other incentives/gifts • With other social work education programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Partner with other social work education programs to offer joint training, supports, incentives, recognition and other benefits to field instructors

In addition, many social work education programs have begun to develop alternate placement models and processes. The following lists provide a summary of current and suggested innovations based on participants' recommendations, covering four key themes: placement locations, placement models and alternatives, supervision innovations, and pedagogy.

Placement locations: Rural, Indigenous, international, and other specialized placements (e.g., health care; social justice; research; cross-sectoral; with private practitioners; with organizations that do not typically employ social workers, e.g., radio stations).

Placement models and alternatives: Advanced standing or credit for prior learning as an alternative to completing a practicum; paid practica; practica in students' places of employment; and potential partnerships with other university faculties and offices (e.g. equity and diversity offices located on campus).

Supervision innovations: Placements with 'untrained' social workers coupled with supplementary seminars and/or additional external supervision; faculty-based group supervision; mentorship teams; and hiring social workers to supervise students.

Pedagogy: Having the same person in the role of faculty liaison and practicum course/seminar instructors to promote continuity; and enhancing critical reflection and service-user involvement in classes and integrative seminars in order to build bridges between classroom and community.

According to the survey responses, the most common alternative practicum models among participants are co-supervision (two or more social workers sharing the supervision of one student) (85 % of respondents have used this model), task supervision (having a non-social worker function as an on-site supervisor with off-site supervision provided by a social worker) (70 % of respondents have used this model), research-based practica (practicum student engages with a faculty member on research project(s) as their practicum) (52 % of respondents have used this model), and workplace practica (a practicum at the student's place of employment) (52 % of respondents have used this model). Other alternatives include group supervision (multiple students receiving supervision from one field instructor) (48 % of respondents have used this model), rotation model (students learn from a number of field instructors within one organization sequentially) (48 % of respondents have used this model) and in-house practica (students complete practica with a program or service provided by the social work education program or university, such as a community clinic operated by the university) (19 % of respondents have used this model).

Interestingly, participants discussed that the demand for students to complete research placements is largely coming from community-based organizations. While numerous participants noted that students tend to

find research practica less desirable than direct practice opportunities, others nevertheless view research placements as a promising resource, especially when they can meet a specific organizational or community need. As one focus group participant stated:

We're setting up a committee that will look at setting up multi-year research projects that we can guarantee a block [of practicum placements]. So, we can say we will send you ten fourth years [students], every year for this five-year project. And then, hopefully develop the next [project]. And it can be anything from food sustainability to support to homelessness. So, what we're doing is surveying all of our agencies around how can we work together - who would share supervision? And can we create placements in kind of non-traditional fields? So, trying to look at, outside of an agency, what can we [the social work education program] do?

In regards to partnerships, according to the participants, many social work education programs across Canada have successfully engaged in community consultations and networking at the local and regional levels, resulting in the development of affiliation agreements, contracts, and other forms of community-university partnerships for practicum. To illustrate, one focus group participant commented on the importance of considering the needs and perceptions of the wider community when engaging in planning at the faculty level:

You know, in terms of caring for the mentors [field instructors], we can't just keep asking and asking; burdening and burdening. It [field education] has to serve them in some way. And so, I think that that would be a key motivation to an innovation strategy.

Enhance Field Education Resources and Supports

Field coordinators report increased investments of time and human and financial resources are needed in order to support the implementation of new models and innovations in field education, and to better reflect the central role of the practicum in social work education. Field coordinators generally have high workloads and are required to be involved with many levels of communication and accountability (Lyter, 2012; Macdonald, 2013; Robertson, 2013). One interview participant explained she feels continuous pressure to "manage all of the expectations of the people that we [field coordinators] respond to." While another described her experience in her role as being a "constant struggle." Table 3 summarizes several strategies outlined by participants for enhancing field education resources that would support a more sustainable model of field education.

Table 3—*Strategies for Enhancing Field Education Resources and Supports*

Human Resources	Financial and Other Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hire additional field coordinators • Change the duties of field coordinators (make roles more manageable) • Increase administrative support for field education • Enhance faculty involvement in field education • Invest in development of current social work students' capacities to serve as field instructors in the future • Offer more training to field instructors and faculty liaisons • Hire additional faculty liaisons to share workload • Provide students with greater in-placement support, especially those who have complex learning needs or other unique circumstances • Create field instructor mentorship programs • Provide field instructors with ongoing training and supports regarding supervision of students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase funding for field education • Develop a funding scheme to compensate and/or incentivize field instructors • Offer field instructors appropriate and desirable incentives • Implement the use of placement matching and tracking computer software • Voluntarily restructure programs, including reducing the size of programs that have grown unsustainably

In addition to the resources and supports listed above in Table 3, enhanced communication with all relevant stakeholders in field education, undertaken with a spirit of inclusion and collaboration, will pave the way toward the effective implementation of new strategies. One interview participant expressed her opinion that everyone involved in social work education, including students, staff, faculty members, and university leaders, have a role to play to “get the word out...that it’s kind of the role of the university to be seen as a community partner and to care about our community.”

Discussion

Field education is “currently under intense pressure to respond to a rapidly changing environment” (Asakura et al., 2018, p. 151). These changes have been brought about by the encroaching neoliberalization of social work practice contexts that have served to “reduce field instructor and agency capacities to accommodate social work practice students” leading to practicum shortages and saturation across Canada (Ayala et al., 2018, p. 285). Neoliberalism has also had negative impacts on social work as a profession including: “the devaluing of social work skills and knowledge,” “reduction of practitioner autonomy and discretion,” and the “loss of a meaningful social work identity that is linked with emancipatory social change” (Morely & Dunstan, 2013, p. 142). The effects of neoliberalization have exacerbated tensions in social work field education to the point that large scale transformations of the traditional

field education model are widely viewed as imperative (Ayala et al., 2018; Crisp & Hosken, 2016; George et al., 2013; Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Preston et al., 2014).

Creating the required changes in field education will demand innovative solutions that will inevitably unsettle status quo practices and perspectives (George et al., 2013; Preston et al., 2014; Regehr, 2013; Wayne et al., 2006). In short, if field education is to be held up as the “central component” of social work education (CASWE-ACFTS, 2018b) then it needs to also be recognized that without sustainable and responsive models of field education at the core of its curriculum, social work education, and in turn the social work profession as we know them, are being compromised and ultimately risk ceasing to exist (Morley & Dunstan, 2013).

If field coordinators continue to be required to work from a model of crisis management, or as Wayne et al. (2006) put it, to “continue as if the [practicum] shortage does not exist” (p. 163), divisions between social work education and social work practice will deepen and marginalization of field education within social work education will intensify, leading to erosion in the quality of practicum placements. This presents a slippery slope for social work as reducing the quality of practicum placements results in the graduation of less competent social workers and the “deprofessionalization” of social work (Morley & Dunstan, 2013).

Calls for enhanced collaboration among students, alumni, social workers, organizations, faculty members, Deans and Directors, and field coordinators reflect findings from an earlier study with Canadian field coordinators (Robertson, 2013). The present study adds the specification that for field coordinators there is perceived value in communicating about placement planning and availability through participation on the FEC of CASWE. Advocating for increased funding for FEC members to actively participate in the FEC was cited by participants as a useful strategy for enhancing capacity for collaboration among field coordinators.

Participants were united in the assertion that field coordinators should not be dealing with the current problems in isolation and that it is imperative for the Deans and Directors of social work education programs to offer leadership in generating solutions to the crisis in field education. Active solution-focused involvement by Deans and Directors in addressing the issue of scarcity, and competition for placements through collaboration, advocacy, and providing funding and other resources to pursue alternative placement models were highlighted as specific strategies.

Finally, creating organizational change within social work education programs, specifically by placing a higher priority on field education and making a conscious effort to develop what one participant referred to as a “culture of field education” amongst faculty, staff, and students is recommended.

Develop innovative practicum partnerships and opportunities

Participants reported dedicating a considerable amount of their work time and energy toward designing and implementing innovative practicum strategies. Social work education programs in Canada and elsewhere have successfully developed a variety of alternate placement models and processes (Anderson et al., 2012; Birkenmaier et al., 2012; Danis, Woody, & Black, 2013; Mishna, Levine, Bogo, & Van Wert, 2013; Panwar et al., 2014; Pelech, Barlow, Badry, & Elliot, 2009; Todd & Schwartz, 2009; Wiebe, 2010). A list of current strategies and suggested innovations discussed by participants is presented above in Table 2. Echoing calls for more supports and resources captured in an earlier study of Canadian field coordinators (Robertson, 2013), participants voiced the need for more resources to enable them to enhance partnerships and engagement with social workers and organizations as a critical strategy for practicum procurement and field instructor recruitment and retention (Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Wiebe, 2010).

To move the necessary change forward the CASWE's accreditation standards (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014) related to field education should be updated to reflect the current contextual realities and challenges. Changes to the standards related to field education that support enhancing sustainability, such as revising the requirements for field supervision, field education coordination, and field placement settings should be considered in consultation with the FEC.

While additional research is required in order to better understand the implications of the findings presented here, and to evaluate the implementation of resultant change strategies longitudinally, the findings have resulted in the development of recommendations to address the crisis in social work field education and move toward sustainability. The Sustainability Model presented above in Figure 1 can be tailored to the specific contextual needs and realities of social work education programs while informing collaborative and strategic action at the regional, provincial, and national levels. Addressing the crisis in field education in Canada (Ayala et al., 2018) will require implementation of such a multi-level strategy with sustainability at the centre of its agenda.

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