

# Field Education for Clinical Social Work Practice: Best Practices and Contemporary Challenges

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**Abstract** Field education is arguably the most significant component of the social work curriculum in preparing competent, effective, and ethical clinical social workers. Students and alumni characterize it as such, and national accrediting bodies, both in the United States and internationally, recognize its crucial impact on the quality of social work services delivered to the public. In addition, there is likely more scholarship and research conducted on field education than on any other component of the curriculum. And yet, field educators anecdotally describe a crisis in their ability to implement the best pedagogical practices for students. This paper will discuss the developing evidence-base highlighting best practices for field education, the changing context of field education, and analyze current challenges and potential responses.

**Keywords** Field education · Social work field instruction · Student supervision · Clinical social work practice

## Introduction

The ability of social work education to graduate ethical, competent, innovative, effective clinical social workers is highly dependent on the quality of their field experience.

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This fact makes field education of great significance since the effectiveness of social work practitioners is crucial to develop and provide the best social and health policies, programs, and practices—and hence make a difference in the lives of citizens. Students and alumni characterize their experiences in the field as most significant in preparing them for their future practice roles. These observations pertain to learning to practice at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. For clinical social work practitioners, the field experience is seen as providing the foundation for clinical practice with the expectation that continuing learning through clinical supervision, advanced study, and reflective practice is mandatory to achieve higher levels of competence. The field experience in clinical practice however is crucial as it provides the underpinning for subsequent growth.

From the earliest inception of social work educational programs, practitioners and educators recognized that preparing effective practitioners required not only learning about the knowledge base for practice but also having opportunities to learn to integrate theory and apply it in their practice (Raskin et al. 2008; Wayne et al. 2015). National accrediting bodies, both in the United States and internationally, recognize the importance of the field experience. The Council on Social Work Education designated field education as the signature pedagogy in 2008 affirming its importance and pivotal role in preparing the next generation of social workers (CSWE 2008). As well, the field practicum serves a gatekeeping function through assessing students' competence and readiness to graduate (Sowbel 2012).

Over many decades a growing body of scholarship and research on field education has emerged, mainly focused on learning for direct or clinical practice. Arguably it appears that field education has received more systematic attention

than any other component of the curriculum. And yet, field directors anecdotally and in regional and national meetings describe a crisis in their ability to implement the best pedagogical practices for students. This paper will discuss the developing evidence-base highlighting best practices for field education for clinical practice, the changing context of field education, and analyze current challenges and potential responses.

### Field Education as Signature Pedagogy of Social Work

In 2008, in recognition of the importance of field education for social work practice the Council on Social Work Education designated this component of programs as the signature pedagogy of social work education.

Signature pedagogy represents the central form of instruction and learning in which a profession socializes its students to perform the role of practitioner. Professionals have pedagogical norms with which they connect and integrate theory and practice. In social work, the signature pedagogy is field education. The intent of field education is to connect the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting. It is a basic precept of social work education that the two interrelated components of curriculum—classroom and field—are of equal importance within the curriculum, and each contributes to the development of the requisite competencies of professional practice. Field education is systematically designed, supervised, coordinated, and evaluated based on criteria by which students demonstrate the achievement of program competencies (CSWE 2008, p. 8).

This designation stimulated thoughtful scholarly analysis of necessary field components and also identified challenges in achieving the aspirations expressed (Larrison and Korr 2013; Lyter 2012; Wayne et al. 2010). In comparison to other professions' signature pedagogies, field is the site where students learn to integrate and apply the values, knowledge, complex practices, and skills of our profession. Students are socialized to think and act like a social worker. In many professions these various components are taught in distinct parts of the educational program, or some professional education programs focus primarily on only one aspect (Pierce 2015). For example, law schools generally focus on knowledge, critical thinking, and interpretation of the law leaving learning the practice of law to post-graduation arrangements. In contrast social work field education attends to all components of knowledge, values, skills, critical thinking and use of self.

Moreover, it is primarily in the field where students learn to integrate and apply not only what they have learned in classroom courses but also the specialized practices of the particular setting.

It is challenging to provide effective field education given the complex nature of clinical practice. Content in classroom clinical courses can be structured, segmented and studied in an orderly fashion; general concepts can be illustrated with specific examples. In contrast, in field, content is stimulated by the unique clinical situations presented in the agency. Field instructors therefore need to balance a focus on the practice delivered in their setting and draw links to the core competencies for clinical practice, for the profession, and as defined by the school. In addition, as captured in the above discussion of signature pedagogy, field instructors in clinical practice need to draw attention not only to interventions with the client, but also relate those interventions to students' understanding of theory and evidence, and of professional use of self.

### The Knowledge Base of Social Work Field Education: Towards an Evidence-Base

Over the past century a rich body of knowledge about field education has emerged that explores the dynamics of teaching and learning. The literature includes wise insights gleaned from practice wisdom, although increasingly pedagogical principles are grounded in a range of concepts from educational theory and cognitive neuroscience, and are supported by empirical research. While this literature has largely developed in relation to teaching clinical practice it can be used in teaching all levels of intervention. Field directors who are responsible for providing quality field experiences for students and training field instructors for their role can use recent texts which integrate this growing body of knowledge and present principles and guidelines for teaching (Bogo 2010; Hendricks et al. 2013; Hunter et al. 2015).

Field education in clinical social work has been influenced by key concepts in clinical practice. Initially, as the profession was developing its knowledge base, psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory informed and influenced professional practice and field education (also referred to in the literature as student supervision). Modelled on the client–practitioner relationship as the context and catalyst for support and change processes, the primacy of the student–instructor relationship was established as the major vehicle for teaching and learning. The field instructor and student develop a relationship that embodies many aspects of the clinical relationship and provides a role model, some parallel processes, and experiential learning. Issues of transference and countertransference

were conceptualized as professional use of self, which has remained a foundational concept in clinical practice and in field education (Brandell 2004; Larrison and Korr 2013). Clinical theory, especially concepts from contemporary social work and psychodynamic approaches, continues to inform reflection on practice and analysis of client-in-context and client–worker interactional dynamics.

Over the years we have learned a great deal about the elements that are necessary for a quality field experience. A review of publications in the leading social work education journals reveals numerous papers—as noted above, it is probable that *no other component* of the curriculum has been the subject of so much research, scholarly articles, and discussion of administrative issues. Many contributions are the result of only one project in one school and as such limit the professions’ ability to generalize and articulate universal pedagogical principles. There are also a number of researchers who have developed a focused in-depth program of scholarship in various important aspects of field education. See for example the work of Fortune and colleagues on processes and learning activities in field (Fortune and Abramson 1993; Fortune and Kaye 2002; Fortune et al. 2001, 2007; Lee and Fortune 2013a, b), of Bennett and Deal on attachment concepts and the supervisory working alliance (Bennett et al. 2008, 2012), and of Bogo and Regehr on evaluation of student learning in field (Bogo et al. 2002, 2004, 2007; Regehr et al. 2007, 2011). These investigators and their teams are building an empirical base for field education. While there is still much to be done in education research on field, we can say with some degree of confidence that, in conjunction with abundant conceptual writings and practice wisdom, we are moving towards a robust *pedagogy for field education*.

A number of crucial factors emerge as promoting student learning. First is the presence of strong, positive learning *environments* in organizations and teams that welcome students and view teaching and learning as mutually beneficial. There is scant research in social work on the effect on organizations of providing education for students. Earlier work suggested that organizations that value professional development of their staff are also invested in student learning (Globerman and Bogo 2003). Senior leadership perceives that quality clinical practice requires practitioners’ continuous learning and growth. In turn, this commitment to education is also experienced by practitioners who volunteer as field instructors. Such organizations and their staff take pride in their work and recognize they are able to teach unique knowledge and skills, and contribute to professional identity and renewal. While recognizing that students provide extra needed resources, their contribution also includes sharing new knowledge learned in their academic courses (Zendell et al. 2007), stimulating critical thinking as a result of students’

questioning current practices, and bringing a sense of vitality and new energy (Globerman and Bogo 2003; Hunter and Poe 2015).

A second factor is, similar to clinical social work practice, the presence of *collaborative relationships* with field educators—relationships that provide strong support and have high expectations for students’ being *actively* involved in their own learning (Ellison 1994; Fortune and Abramson 1993; Fortune et al. 2001; Homonoff 2008; Knight 2001; Lefevre 2005; Miehls et al. 2013). Studies investigating students’ anxiety as they begin field practicum reveals a range of concerns such as their lack of knowledge and competence which may contribute to clients’ lacking confidence in students’ ability to be helpful, feeling emotionally overwhelmed, and confronting difference and diversity in client populations (Gelman and Lloyd 2008; Gelman 2004; Rompf et al. 1993; Sun 1999). Bennett, Deal and colleagues have proposed that the supervisory working alliance in clinical social work field education can be characterized as an attachment relationship whereby a supportive supervisor provides a secure base that addresses these issues of lack of confidence and enables students “to attempt untried and challenging clinical interventions. When the supervisee becomes stressed due to the novelty of the activity, the supervisor serves the safe haven function of organizing thoughts and containing affect that emerges in the clinical relationship. Together, secure base and safe haven attachment functions in supervision lead to the development of a supervisee’s professional sense of self...” (Bennet et al. 2012, p. 200). Such relationships promote learning and importantly provide a model and encounter where a complicated clinical concept is experienced by the student and can be transferred into practice with clients.

A third factor involves opportunities to *observe and debrief* with experienced practitioners including, but not only limited to, the primary field instructor. Social learning theory notes that individuals learn by observing others (Bandura 1977). Expert social workers in the agency can serve as exemplary role models. Solely observing however is not sufficient to achieve the goals of competent practice. For systematic learning to occur some review is important to illuminate how and in what way the practitioner has used knowledge frameworks, their own practice experience, and their subjective reactions to interactions and information in a session. Such review can assist students to gain insight into the concept of use of self and see the intricate and nuanced links between theory and practice.

A fourth factor is *multiple opportunities to actually practice* with clients. Learning through experience has been a cornerstone of practicum education supported by the concepts of experiential (Kolb 1984) and adult learning theory (Knowles et al. 2005). Insights from contemporary

neuroscience research demonstrates that it is through action—such as the practice of social work—that new neuronal connections are made and strengthened, that new knowledge begins to make sense as learners make *personal meaning out of professional notions* and see how new concepts can actually guide and be used in their work. As in learning any new activity it is *independent practice*, repetition of tasks and of a variety of tasks that are needed. Malcolm Gladwell has popularized the work of psychologist Ericsson et al. (1993) noting that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to assimilate what needs to be known to gain mastery.

A fifth factor recognizes that these student practice experiences form the basis for our field instruction. A wide range of methods are used to access student–client interactions, including direct observation, review of audio or video recordings, written records and verbal reports (Bogo 2010; Hendricks et al. 2013; Saltzburg et al. 2010). Direct observation is especially important given the substantial research that demonstrates that self-report and self-assessment of practice is often distorted (Baxter and Norman 2011; Davis et al. 2006; Eva and Regehr 2005). In recent studies of social work students' performance we found significant inaccuracies in some students' immediate verbal or written recall of 15 minute simulated interviews they had just completed when compared with their actual performance (Bogo et al. 2014). Since the essence of field instruction is related to the actual practice there needs to be numerous opportunities to sample students' work. Field instructors must *gain access to what students actually 'do'* in practice. However, limited resources of time impact and constrain this crucial dimension.

Instruction based on students' practice generally consists of *mutual reflective dialogues*, provision of feedback and coaching, and future planning. The focus of reflection is framed by key concepts informing clinical social work and is congruent with the competencies in EPAS. Drawing the links between theory and practice has always been challenging as experienced practitioners report their work is based on an integration of numerous concepts as well as their own style developed through working with many clients. Training programs for instructors aim to include methods for helping social workers articulate the basis of their practice so that they can both assist the student to do so, and they can discuss with students the ways in which their intervention models and principles guide the processes they engage in with clients and the guidance they provide for students' practice (Bogo 2010).

As the profession has moved to integrate evidence-informed practice many challenges exist for field education. An innovative project links a special classroom course with selected practicum in agencies that were funded to implement core evidence-based practices in mental health. A

faculty-based educator reinforces integration of learning from courses through involvement with the field instructor (Stanhope et al. 2011). The authors discuss necessary conditions more generally for incorporation of evidence-based practice in field education noting the importance of training for field instructors and collaboration and acceptance by the field agency.

Mirabito (2012) provides an insightful analysis of contemporary trends in clinical practice in organizations. She recommends that students need clinical knowledge and skills that are integrated with “case management, group work, advocacy, evidence-based practice and cultural competence to work with diverse, vulnerable populations. These critically important clinical skills need to be combined with political skills for analyzing and negotiating difficult organizational environments and engaging in “systems work” as well as skills in interdisciplinary teamwork, collaboration and leadership” (p. 249). Field instructors may find this inventory useful in their selection of practice assignments and the focus and content of their instruction. With an expanded repertoire of competencies to be taught however, will there be less time and emphasis on students' achieving in-depth clinical practice ability?

Finally useful educational practices emerge from social learning theory and implementation science. These approaches emphasize the importance of providing *feedback, coaching, and rehearsal* of complex practice interventions so that feedback can be received and absorbed throughout the term (Bearman et al. 2013; Fixsen et al. 2009). It appears that students accept feedback more readily when the instructor has observed their practice, the instructor is seen as knowledgeable and hence credible, and there is a relationship between student and field instructor that includes trust and support (Bogo et al. 2007; Eva et al. 2012; Miehl et al. 2013). Therefore, field instructors need to observe numerous samples of students' actual practice—the over-reliance on written and verbal report as a way of teaching and learning is not consistent with evidence-based teaching practices. As well, field instructors have the primary responsibility for *assessing* competence as performance in the field is one of the most authentic indicators of practice competence. How can field instructors assess students' clinical practice in a valid manner if they have not actually observed it?

While each of the factors for quality field education discussed thus far cannot be present in every field instructor–student supervision session, to describe field as the signature pedagogy of social work, these components need to be *routine and pervasive*, offered with some consistency over the time the student is in the field (Shulman 2005; Wayne et al. 2010). It is likely that, as a field, we cannot say with confidence that these components for developing competent social workers are indeed systematically

incorporated in all students' learning experiences in field education. In the following section of this paper challenges and potential responses to achieve excellence in the practicum are examined.

### Challenges to Quality Field Education

Since the inception of professional education about 100 years ago, a *voluntary agency-based* model has been used to prepare social workers. This model developed in an era where educators could rely on social work agencies, their leadership and their social workers to voluntarily participate with schools of social work and to provide resources to prepare the next generation of clinicians. Definitive national data is not available to accurately describe the current state of field education. However, a looming crisis has been described over many years in the literature, on social work educators' listserves, in regional consortium meetings and at national conferences.

As early as 1980 Michael Frumkin, then the President of CSWE, cautioned that with changing times affecting resource availability, schools of social work could not expect agencies to continue to offer field learning simply because of their *professional commitment*. He recommended the conceptualization of new school–agency relationships (Frumkin 1980). Few took him up on that advice. In the mid-nineties the literature began to document changes to availability of high quality practicum due to managed care arrangements that did not cover student supervision (Donner 1996; Raskin and Blome 1998) and financial cutbacks to agencies from all levels of government that led to higher caseloads. In addition, greater complexity of client problems was noted. In hospitals strong central social work departments were being replaced with program management models so that offering student supervision needed to be negotiated by individual social workers with their interprofessional teams (Globerman and Bogo 2002). Together these conditions led to less availability of social workers to take on the additional responsibility of student teaching (Bocage et al. 1995).

In 2002, 33 field directors met to consider the challenges and potential innovative responses (Wayne et al. 2006). In addition to the above concerns regarding availability of field instructors they noted that increased number of social work programs and higher enrollments of students led to greater competition between schools for quality placements. Also noted was that agencies were not able to release instructors for the crucial training needed for effective transition to the field instructor role (Hendricks et al. 2013). Furthermore changes in the university, such as increased expectations for faculty members' to conduct research and disseminate their scholarship, led to minimal

or no engagement of full time faculty members with the field program in many schools (Peebles-Wilkins and Shank 2003; Wheeler and Gibbons 1992). As more field directors are appointed as administrators, rather than as faculty members, numerous analyses point out the impact on the value of the field practicum in the academic setting (Rhodes et al. 1999) and field directors' limited ability to impact curriculum (Wayne et al. 2006; Wertheimer and Sodhi 2014). Indeed, in 2014 the Council on Social Work Education recognized the concerns and convened a Field Summit to develop innovative and creative strategies to address the quality of field education.

### The Need for Structural Change

Given the presence of an evolving evidence-base and the analysis of challenges to providing quality field education for clinical social work practice, it appears that a central issue relates to the very structure of field education. Excellence in field education must become a priority for the profession and for all social work educators—not only field directors.

Organizational theorists and researchers highlight that *motivation* for groups and organizations to collaborate arises from the *joint recognition of a shared problem facing their field* (Guo and Muhittin 2005; Sowa 2009). It is obvious that society, governments, and agencies need an effective workforce of human service professionals to meet their mandate and objectives. Schools of social work perceive work settings as the ideal site for professional preparation, preferable to classroom and simulation experiences. However, none of these sectors can develop the future workforce *alone* (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Clearly then it is in the interests of both schools and organizations to recognize the mutual benefit of joint effort and resources to develop a shared response; we need each other.

Creative and successful innovations have already been instituted. For example, the Gero-Ed and Hartford sponsored Practicum Partnership Project developed innovative field models including rotations and successfully increased the competence and prevalence of social workers working with a growing elderly population (Zendell et al. 2007). Similarly Title IV-E grants have been used creatively to increase competence and retention of graduates in public child welfare (Clark et al. 2013). A recent international study examined employer's involvement in social work education in ten countries in Europe, North America, and Australia (Shardlow et al. 2012). Only in UK countries were there formal partnership arrangements to plan social work education (Northern Ireland) and employers' were involved in program monitoring and, with stakeholders, in

design, delivery, and evaluation of programs (Scotland). In England there was an emphasis on the importance of strong robust arrangements for collaboration with employers. It is important to note that in these countries national government councils provide funds for schools to offer a daily placement fee to agencies.

If the profession, schools, and organizations recognize the need to collaborate to provide well-prepared social workers then a commitment needs to be made in organization mission statements; an obvious example of this approach is found in medicine and health professions with the university-affiliated teaching hospital (Globerman and Bogo 2002). And schools must make the development and testing of innovative field models a priority.

Organizations need to consider how to best marshal resources for developing and maintaining field instructors and promoting students' field learning. And similarly schools need to consider how they can access new resources and re-deploy current resources for innovation in field. Too often the response to new program ideas is "there are not enough resources" rather than "how can we use resources differently?"

The limited literature on university–community partnerships notes that frequently the benefits of such partnerships accrue to the university rather than to the community (Zendell et al. 2007). If we aim for synergistic collaborations what are value-added benefits for organizations beyond generating the workforce? We already share some resources such as access to libraries and video collections. Could schools be more active in other substantive activities such as providing lectures and consultation on emerging clinical practice topics and models, conducting more joint research that addresses agencies' clinical practice questions, and consulting on how to generate quality assurance and evaluation data which funders increasingly expect of agencies? In the earlier discussion of evidence-based practice Stanhope et al. (2011) noted the importance of agency commitment and implementation so that students are supported in transferring new knowledge to their practice with clients. Faculty members who are committed to implementing evidence-based clinical approaches can provide invaluable training for existing staff and work with agency leaders to accommodate agency conditions to produce better outcomes for clients (Mirabito 2012).

Drawing again from organization literature (Guo and Muhittin 2005; Sowa 2009), commitment for partnerships must be made between individuals at the most senior levels of both organizations as they have the authority to bring about change. If we use the example of the university-affiliated teaching hospital, formal agreements exist and are carried out under the leadership of the CEO of the hospital and a Vice-President or Vice-Provost of health science professions at the university. Are we using the power and

influence of those in these senior positions to secure quality practicum for social work students? With the emphasis on inter-professional practice and education now is an opportune time for social work programs to advocate for inclusion in university-teaching hospital educational activities.

Can this approach apply to agencies where clinical social work is provided? Although there is no national data, it is likely that negotiating and maintaining field settings and field instructors is largely carried out by the field director. They build strong relationships with staff in agencies that keeps the field program going. Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work however are likely in the most influential position to join with agency leadership. Have we involved them sufficiently?

Field Directors are supported by strong peer networks in local and regional consortiums. The community of those concerned with education for clinical practice needs however to be expanded to include a wide range of champions, allies, and advocates for clinical field education. There is an important role for faculty colleagues and social work practitioners, deans and directors of schools, professional associations, accrediting and licensing bodies, and service organizations at local, regional, and national levels, as well as government program administrators.

Field education makes a huge difference in the quality of social programs and well-being in society. This is an important link which we must articulate in a compelling way. The quality of students' field experience greatly affects our ability to educate ethical, competent, innovative, effective clinical social workers. In turn, the effectiveness of clinical social workers greatly affects the quality of social and health policies, programs, and practices—all of which make a difference in the lives of citizens. This link between social work education and field education, effective clinical social workers and social programs, and well-being in society must be advanced.

In *EPAS 2008* (and again in draft 2015) it appears the authors recognized the challenges and crisis in field education and gave prominence to it through its designation as the signature pedagogy—perhaps their aim was to raise the profile in a way that would motivate the entire community of social work educators and organization leaders to engage meaningfully with this component of social work education. It is time to realize the aspirations and goals expressed in this vision and bring it to a reality.

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