

Student Reflections on Field Education During COVID-19: One Year Later

Jesse Henton, Tara Collins, Jayden Wickman, Lavender Xin Huang, and Mohammed Idris Alemi

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected social work education, particularly field education. This article reflects upon field education of student research assistants doing their practica during COVID-19, comparing those perspectives to those of students surveyed one year ago. The research assistants worked on a national online survey conducted in July 2020 by the Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership. The survey obtained responses from 367 BSW and MSW students. The article outlines five major student themes: social isolation, mental health, quality of learning, financial concerns, and a sense of fear and uncertainty. It juxtaposes these concerns with reflections by the TFEL student research assistants—each research assistant reflecting on one concern that resonated with them—to demonstrate their continued relevance to student practica one year later.

Keywords: social connection, pandemic, supervision, practicum, tuition costs

Introduction

Field education plays a pivotal role in student learning and their future success in social work practice. The Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) was created to understand social work field education changes (Drolet, 2020). By March 27, 2020, governments, universities, and businesses across Canada adjusted to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic under a national state of emergency (Canadian Nurses Association, 2020). The job of TFEL in the wake of these adjustments was to create a working group to study the impacts of the pandemic on field education. A national online survey was conducted between July 8–27 to capture student perspectives on how COVID-19 impacted field education and their practica experience. The survey obtained responses from 367 BSW and MSW students (TFEL, 2020).

In this article we ask if student field education experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic remain relevant one year later. The concerns were selected from the survey results based on thematic coding of open-ended responses for “Is there anything else you’d like to share?” and “Describe your experiences with practicum during COVID-19.” Each author selected one concern to reflect on based on both the number of respondents who shared the same concern as well as the author’s experiences as a research assistant and (in most cases) a practicum student resonating with a given concern. The five concerns from the survey, reflected on in this article, include: social isolation, mental health, quality of learning, tuition and financial concerns, and sense of fear and uncertainty. We offer our experiences during our practica as well as our work with TFEL to contrast and compare with the concerns raised by survey respondents. We educate social work students to serve humanity by advocating for marginalized voices, raising their concerns to a wider community and offering tentative recommendations for future practice.

Social Isolation: Narrative 1

I am a white cisgender male, introverted with moderate depression. This is my story about how I learned to make connections with others during the pandemic, not only to enhance my learning but to break out of the shell of loneliness I had been living in for months and to feel human again. I started working for TFEL in a somewhat unusual position, studying COVID-19 impacts on student practica without having experienced a practicum myself. It was my first time being a research assistant (RA) and the combination of inexperience with the subject and inexperience with the methods should have proven overwhelming. Yet, this was not the case because I was joined by several co-workers, many starting at the same time as me. They were, if not in the exact same level of confusion as me, still confused enough to be relatable.

Such a large team could have been unwieldy, and sometimes was, but it was also a chance to connect with other social work students—in my case, for the first time since I had started my program. While I am not very good at connecting with others, for some reason, it was easier for me in this online space than it usually was in person. We built rapport through our shared struggles navigating unfamiliar theories, collaborating on papers, and drafting surveys, as well as plenty of good-natured venting about the usual workplace pains: deadlines, supervisors, and each other. The friendships I formed on this team were a crucial lifeline to bringing me out of my isolation. What makes this most unusual is that I have never met any of my co-workers in person. TFEL had switched to a fully online model before I started working there, and social distancing guidelines in Alberta ensured that we never had the opportunity to meet “in real life.” However, the accessibility of the online format, helped along by weekly meetings through Microsoft Teams, ensured that we came to know each other very well. Before the pandemic, I had always made a distinction between friends I knew only online versus friends I had met in person. It is remarkable how quickly that distinction can become strained and artificial when it refers to people you talk to almost every day and have formed strong social bonds with.

My experience as an RA matches the experience I had when my practicum finally began in January 2021. I was assigned to do macro level work with a provincial riding association¹. My previous degree is in political science, so the work was familiar, if not initially a significant learning opportunity. I had extensive supervision in the form of debriefs to discuss situational issues and reflect on my biases and willingness to show vulnerability. The supervision was a highlight and a major difference from most of my classmates, who struggled to get one hour of supervision for every 15 hours of practicum. I estimated that I had double or triple the amount of supervision time that other students had. The direct practice work was limiting, however, mostly taking the form of calls to constituents in our riding. The goal of the calls was to conduct pandemic check-ins with constituents, engage with them, discover if they had any barriers to accessing resources (rarely) and serve as a bridge to send any feedback to the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Although I feel I made a valiant effort to connect theory to practice, it was the briefest of “Brief Therapy.”

¹ Editor’s note: An electoral district association.

However, like my experience in TFEL, one bright spot to the practicum was that it was shared with another social work student, who I will call “Melissa.” As with my work colleagues, Melissa and I together navigated unfamiliar terrain like learning how to write a newsletter in Mailchimp, writing reports on the Alberta budget, and doing mock phone calls with each other. While our shared space was unintended, and we often worked on separate, isolated projects, we nevertheless found ways to collaborate. Melissa had been a practicum student with the MLA’s office for three months when I arrived and was already working on a project to lower wait times at sexual assault centers in Edmonton but hadn’t made much progress. She had a lot of passion for the work but had not explored the funding structure of these sexual assault centers. She had also run into some obstacles, contacting employees who were not able to answer her questions. I used to work at a nonprofit and was able to help her navigate some of these challenges. Melissa, in turn, helped me with my own weak spots, specifically overcoming my pessimism for macro work. Coming into social work, I knew that the Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005) demands that social workers fight for social justice, but at this point in my life, I had a very cynical idea about the ability of individuals to achieve real social change, perhaps a negative outcome from a thorough political science education. Melissa, who had little knowledge about politics, encouraged me to see a familiar political landscape through fresh eyes, dreaming of politics that were consensual instead of adversarial, unbound by the traditional way of doing things: “Start over!! Figure it out! People are smart! We made these rules so we can change them!” (personal communication, March 8, 2021). I realized then, watching the snarling, combative, question and answer session between the opposition and the government, more often yielding sound bites than useful information, that she was right—there had to be a better way of doing things.

My supervisors were initially apprehensive when I suggested the idea of the party adopting a collaborative, solutions-based approach to working with the government caucus instead of constantly seeking advantage. They felt that I was indirectly criticizing a strategy they had had a hand in creating. This proved to be a good opportunity to work on my conflict resolution skills. By coming from a place of genuine curiosity about each other’s perspectives, we were able to come to a mutual understanding and realize we both had a shared interest in streamlining the legislative process. I also did some research and learned that some places, like Nunavut, do have a consensus-based legislative process (Tootoo, 2012). Perhaps it wasn’t as naïve an idea as it seemed. I realized then that Melissa was not merely alleviating the isolation I felt doing this type of policy-centered practicum, I was learning more with her there than I would have been on my own, and vice versa.

As I write this, my practicum is nearly at an end, and I will also be moving on from my job at the end of the semester. The learning in both settings has been valuable, but what I will miss the most are the people with whom I have shared these experiences. I know from the student survey that many students have felt the same isolation in the course of their studies, and unlike me, many have had to go it alone. I believe we need to put the “social” back into social work education.

Social Worker's Mental Health: Narrative 2

I am a white cis het single mother to an adolescent female. I also often feel like a zombie, staring at the screen, willing the words to appear. In this section, I reflect on how the pandemic has increased the strain on my mental health in all my various professional roles: as a PhD candidate, as a student living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and as an RA. Although I am not in practicum, I have had many practica before and can attest to the mental health challenges they pose to students, even when there is not a global pandemic looming down on us.

It is 3:00 pm on a Thursday, March 2021. I have just finished meeting with my supervisor over Zoom for an hour. Prior to the pandemic, we always met face-to-face to discuss my progress with my dissertation. Today, before we get into talking about my analysis chapter, she asks me how I am doing—how is my mental health? My supervisor understands. She knows on an intimate level that working on a PhD is stressful, let alone with other life stressors, including struggling with a medical condition and being a single parent to a child with behavioral challenges. My supervisor is also aware of my own mental health diagnosis that occasionally impacts my functioning. In 2015, I was diagnosed with PTSD as a result of an abusive relationship. Sometimes this complicates life for me. It can be hard not to get overwhelmed. On some days, I will get triggered by something, and it can take hours to focus my mind back on my work. One example of a trigger is yelling. I have noticed that sometimes people on Zoom calls will raise their voices, but I have never had someone yell into their mic before, thankfully. Conflict is another one of my triggers, and conflict, for me, can begin simply from not knowing how to interpret another's expression, tone, or reaction online.

As a PhD candidate, I have a different kind of relationship with my supervisor than with practicum supervisors during my BSW and MSW. Although there is still a hierarchy with her being my superior, she also acknowledges that one day we will be colleagues. Her acknowledgement signifies that I have power and status. As a person with PTSD, this means a lot because I have a major fear of being stigmatized. Until recently, I rarely disclosed my condition to anyone except close friends and, besides my supervisor, very few other social workers. I do not want to be judged or treated as lesser because of my condition. Before the realities of the pandemic mandated social distancing, my supervisor would occasionally invite me for lunch at her home to go over my progress. That is no longer so easy to achieve. My supervisor knows that I thrive on being able to have that face-to-face contact, because it is easier for me to read people. This shift to online learning has been strange for me. I stare at my screen a lot. I draw blanks because of the stress associated with trying to balance work, my dissertation, and some semblance of a personal life. I am not alone. COVID-19 has already been stressful for students, with 63 percent of post-secondary students “very or extremely concerned” about the effect of the pandemic on their grades and 26 percent of post-students having courses cancelled or delayed (Statistics Canada, 2020). My course work is done, but I still have a long road ahead of me as I try to complete my chapters for my dissertation.

I have been an RA for other projects before, but this was my first time being part of a team with several other students. Actually, I am on four different teams for TFEL, which is unusual; most

students are only in one or two, and each team is quite different. In one team, I may be developing training manuals, then I will switch to writing manuscripts and reports, then switch to building an online survey and conducting webinars, or on still another team, facilitating graduate student presentations. I keep myself very busy, something that co-workers have commented on, but that is my preferred element. Being busy keeps my brain focused on the here and now, rather than ruminating, which can lead my brain into rabbit holes of anxiety and overthinking. By contrast, on some teams, like the COVID-19 team, a degree of creativity is required. I have never considered myself to be creative and certainly find it challenging these days, especially writing a reflective narrative. What has kept me motivated has been the inspiration from other students. Even on stressful days with tight deadlines, we somehow work together, supporting one another with not only the project, but also emotionally. It does not matter what our level of education is or where we all come from, we know that on our team, we are there for one another. A social work student in a practicum setting, or indeed, even another TFEL team, may not have the sense of collegiality and togetherness that we do. The United Nations asserted that “we are all in this together” with COVID-19 (Guterres, 2020, para. 21). I wonder how many students feel that way in their practicum and how many students feel abandoned.

My supervisor checks in on me at least once a week. In a recent check-in, she noted that one of my chapters was too descriptive and needed to refocus on theory development. The irony that I was being too creative, and needed to be more analytical, does not escape me. The pandemic is having a strange effect on me. I can appreciate, on an intellectual level, that her honesty is required for me to grow as an academic; however, I find it harder to acknowledge the point when we are not face-to-face. I just cannot read her body language on Zoom the way I can in person. In lieu of in-person meetings, she has suggested that I practice self-care. I know that self-care is meant to improve resiliency and increase the brain’s ability to maintain mental well-being (Stuart, 2021). If you consider time spent with family self-care, I do that already, and I also have hobbies to fall back on. But even with self-care, online check-ins are just not the same as in-person meetings.

I stare at the screen. The minutes tick past me. My zombified brain lurches. My focus turns back again and again to that UN report. “We are all in this together” (Guterres, 2020, para. 21). Agreed, but the question is what do we, as practicum students and RAs, field instructors, and coordinators, do about it?

Student Quality of Learning: Narrative 3

I am a white cisgender female, and this reflection is about my struggle to gain quality learning, both in practicum and as an RA. I began working with TFEL in January 2020. At the time, there were only two RAs. We would go to work in person, where we could easily collaborate and have meetings with each other, the project director, and the project coordinators. During my first few months as an RA, I was working on different tasks such as literature reviews, researching knowledge mobilization, searching for applicable journals and podcasts, and exploring networking opportunities. In mid-March, when Alberta declared a state of emergency (Black, 2020), we transitioned to working from home, still working on the same projects and planning

for our in-person symposium the upcoming summer. I was convinced that the pandemic would not greatly affect us and that we would still be able to continue with our symposium without change. It was in May that I realized how wrong I was—my duties moved to an exclusively online format, and everything that I had previously done as an RA seemed like it belonged to another job. Another momentous change was that we now had over 30 new RAs working for the project, all with plans to study the impacts of COVID-19. I saw this as a unique research opportunity and quickly transitioned to the newly formed team to study the pandemic's impacts on field education.

Researching the impacts of COVID-19 on field education was strange for me, since I was not then participating in a practicum, but I knew it was something that could affect me in the future. I am a post-diploma student currently completing my fourth year of the BSW program. I have had the opportunity to experience two in-person practica before the onset of COVID-19, as well as additional work experience. Conversely, many of my classmates were new to social work and had never done a practicum. They were worried about how the pandemic would negatively affect their ability to learn direct practice skills. At this time, we RAs had received the news that the upcoming summer symposium would be online only, which for me was unexpected, but I had not yet realized how massive an impact the pandemic would have on student learning.

My classmates, who were university transfer students, had shared their concerns about going into a profession with zero practical experience and missing out on vital social work skills such as relationship building, communication, active listening, and interview skills. My post-diploma peers, who were a little more seasoned, were mainly concerned by the loss of unique learning opportunities that are not as available to diploma students, such as hospital social work or involvement in the criminal justice system. Not only were they worried about not receiving the same learning experiences, but they were also worried about future job prospects, and the feeling of being inadequate for the task. It is important in social work to build confidence in client interactions—something that, I feel, cannot be achieved the same way virtually. Employers may not see these virtual practica as equivalent to in-person experience, and this can create a barrier to obtaining the jobs that students are supposed to be prepared for after completing their education. That being said, the concerns of my peers were still abstract to me. My next practicum was not set to begin until the winter of 2021, more than a year away; surely, the pandemic would be sorted out by then.

It was not until fall 2020 that I began to feel nervous about my own practicum. At this time, I had an interview to do an in-person practicum at a hospital. I was very excited to be given this opportunity until I heard from my coordinator that it might not work out and we might have to think of a backup plan. During this time, I wondered if I could find my own in-person practicum or, if I must do a virtual one, what setup I would prefer to get the most out of it. I felt disappointed because I had high hopes for my upcoming practicum and felt that everything was falling apart. My post-graduation dream was to practice in healthcare, which requires exposure in the hospital and the opportunity to be a part of a multidisciplinary team. I did not think that I would be able to gain adequate knowledge, assessment and intervention skills, and most importantly, confidence, with a virtual practicum. The concerns of my classmates had finally hit home for me, and I imagined sitting at home all day, every day, for my entire practicum. I am a

very hands-on learner; I need to complete tasks on my own, in person, if I am to apply my skills in practice. For days, I waited anxiously, until I eventually learned that it had all been a miscommunication from the university, and I would, at last, do an in-person hospital practicum beginning in January of 2021.

I had an amazing experience at my last practicum and the reduced hours have, in turn, reduced my workload stress. I was able to meet and see various clients, to shadow different professionals, and to get the much-needed hands-on experience to really build up my social work practice skills. Yes, it has worked out well for me. But it did not work out so well for many of my colleagues, and I can truly empathize with how they felt. I feel that it was by chance that my practicum dream was fulfilled and theirs were not. It made me realize how little power I have as a student and how much our choices for practicum depend on field coordinators making decisions for us. Had my in-person practicum been canceled due to safety concerns and I knew that the hospital was otherwise willing to take me on, I would have signed any liability form to take responsibility for my own risk. I suspect many of my peers who had to settle for virtual practica would have made the same choice if it had been offered to them.

Tuition, Finance, and COVID-19: Narrative 4

COVID-19 has brought about challenges to social work education and student learning that were inconceivable in the past. Were social work education programs as prepared as they should have been for this disaster that destroyed the lives of so many? For students, this question has been haunting them since the news of the pandemic and subsequent quarantine was first announced (Elmer et al., 2020). As an MSW Clinical Specialization student a breath away from graduation, I ended up completing the last year of my degree virtually. The tensions and anxieties experienced by my cohort were not singular; rather, these concerns were also echoed by the student survey. As an immigrant person of color raised in Canada, I have been fortunate enough to complete my education here, but as a strong advocate for social justice and equality, the following reflection is a statement, a call to action, regarding the crisis faced by students during COVID-19. Universities have failed to provide for students, and they will continue to fail for as long as the pandemic lasts, for as long as they are unable to adapt.

For students who lost their jobs, could not afford rent or loan payments, or had to complete three to four months of unpaid practica, my heart goes out to you. As someone juggling a job in healthcare with his duties as an RA, I was given too few paid hours in both and have had challenges making rent and tuition payments; I feel for my fellow precariat. In this era of crisis, where students have been pushed beyond their capacities, universities seemed to have done little to support students economically. Institutions, including mine, did not reduce tuition or freeze tuition payments for even a single semester (Taylor, 2020). Furthermore, students like me were told that they were achieving the same quality of learning online as they were in person, prior to the pandemic; this dismissal invalidates our perspectives. As many students were nearing graduation during the pandemic, they lost their opportunities for quality placements, for quality learning, and yet were expected to pay full tuition prices and complete unpaid practica. I got by, but not every student is fortunate enough to have the monetary funding and resources to do this.

One common complaint among students was the fact that our tuition remained the same, but the opportunities and quality of our learning dropped, contrary to claims from our universities and faculties. Considering that not all students were eligible for financial incentives from the government, especially those who held part-time or full-time jobs to pay for school, many students have had to debate whether they could afford to continue their program. This is especially concerning considering many of my own classes were shifted online, and our classes became filled with student presentations rather than meaningful learning experiences. Instead of endorsing critical conversations, collaborative dialogue, and reflecting on how social workers can support others during COVID-19, our class education became mundane and rote. Whether this is unique to online learning, the preparedness of faculty to adapt to an online format, or the extensive mental health impact COVID-19 has had on everyone, it is not acceptable to me that students must pay the same tuition for a lower standard of education.

I have had to navigate my practicum opportunities while balancing my financial capacity, learning needs, and interest in social work practice. My hours for work were severely cut, but I did not meet the criteria for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit as I still retained my healthcare job, with very limited hours. I also had to focus on completing an online practicum that was meant to foster my learning and practice skills, but instead I was directed to complete a research practicum, as it was the only option available to me. Granted, I made the most of my practicum opportunity, and luckily, I was able to find work as an RA with TFEL. I was one of the more than 30 students given jobs, and it served as a source of income, as well as a good opportunity to enhance my learning and make connections with other social work students. However, I faced another challenge: balancing my learning objectives as a practicum student with my obligations as an employee. While I was grateful to enhance my research skills, my desire to complete a clinical practicum was forgotten. I had to split my time between working to make enough money to pay for my education and support myself while also balancing the requirements expected of me for my practicum. I feel that students are often overloaded with expectations and responsibilities well beyond their capacity. I had to constantly negotiate how my role as an RA would fulfill my clinical practicum requirements but also advocate for my own learning needs. To achieve a quality of learning that I was satisfied with, I found myself working additional hours within a short period of time to be able to fulfill both requirements.

In this time of crisis, I had hoped that academic institutions would have created additional avenues of support for students. The university has been my home for years, and the faculty has trained me to act like a social worker, to serve humanity and fight for social justice. As social workers, we should be cognizant and critical of the impacts COVID-19 has had on others. As a social worker, I must ask then, where is our effort to strive for social justice for students during COVID-19? As a member of an invisible population who has suffered during this time of crisis, I hope that members of our society in positions of power, whether in an academic institution or government organization, learn from these experiences, listen to our stories, and transform the current education landscape to better prepare the next generation of social workers and other professionals. I know that COVID-19 has paved my path forward to be an advocate, an agent of social change, and an individual who remains vigilant and conscious of the challenges, oppressions, and struggles we continue to experience.

Sense of Uncertainty and Fear: Narrative 5

I am a Chinese Canadian, cis het female. I am married, with three boys I have homeschooled since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am writing about the sense of uncertainty and fear that gripped my heart and paralyzed my thoughts. I feel that my fears have passed thanks, in part, to my experiences in TFEL and my practicum work, but the journey to reach that point of relative safety was difficult. This is the story of how I learned to stop asking the question “When will it be safe?”

First, some background: I emigrated from China 17 years ago. In China, I was a physician who grew up in Wuhan, a graduate from one of its top medical schools. My husband is a pharmacist, and after arriving in Canada, I chose to be a stay-at-home mom for more than 13 years before starting my clinical MSW. I was a foundation student when the pandemic began, doing a research practicum studying inquiry-based learning (IBL) with a former professor (Archer-Kuhn, 2020). When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, I had to end my practicum early, but my supervisor asked me to continue her research as an RA. I look back on this period cognizant that it was the moment before everything changed.

Even before my practicum was cut short, I had received troubling news of a strange disease flooding several hospitals in Wuhan. By the time it reached Canada, Wuhan had become almost a curse word. It is a strange sensation to realize that my beloved hometown, a city of 11 million people, a city most Canadians would not be able to point to on a map, is now infamous as the origin point for the COVID-19 global pandemic. My hometown had become an apocalyptic city. This news was accompanied by a spike in anti-Asian racism, specifically Sinophobia, throughout Canada—what has been called a “shadow pandemic” (Shore, 2020, para. 20). While the racism was and continues to be upsetting, my family had a more personal nightmare waiting for us. Back home in China, my sister-in-law caught COVID-19, and unknowingly passed it on to four members of her immediate family, three of whom went into critical condition. For the next three months, my husband and I were in a state of extreme anxiety. We could do nothing for them so far away, while they, in turn, pinned their hopes on us because of our medical backgrounds, as if we could come up with a solution that had stumped countless healthcare professionals. We also did our best, despite the long distance, to comfort my sister-in-law’s husband in China. He did not catch the disease, but he suffered from chronic panic attacks because his family remained in critical condition for months, and their teenage son was quarantined in a hotel, cut off from his family.

My family was not the only source of worry. As the numbers of infections and deaths skyrocketed in China, I continually received news that many of my former, much beloved professors from medical school had caught COVID-19, many who passed away suddenly, no thanks to the shortage of beds or life-saving ventilators (Yang et al., 2020). Wuhan would eventually gain acclaim for building a hospital inside of ten days to accommodate the infected, but in the early days of the pandemic, this was a dream. I felt like I was drowning in my worries, unknowingly lost to desperation, which, as I discovered in my recent course studies, was textbook compassion fatigue (Zhang et al., 2021) and moral injury (Wang et al., 2020).

Despite my physical and mental exhaustion, I still had to apply for my second clinical practicum. I started the application process in May 2020, mere months after my first aborted practicum. In some ways, the application was the worst part for me. In my first practicum, I saw how Chinese Canadians (and other English as a Second Language) social work students were repeatedly passed over in favor of white, English-speaking Canadians. Sinophobia did not begin with the pandemic; this casual racism was hardly unknown within our social work faculty. This time, however, there was also a major logistical nightmare to contend with: as I learned, there were only 15 clinical practice placements for more than 50 foundation MSW students from my cohort; in fact, I later discovered that the odds of getting a direct practice placement were even narrower because non-foundation MSWs were also competing for spots. I did not want to do another research practicum; I wanted to learn direct practice skills. Even without the pandemic as a factor, I knew that, as an immigrant, I had a much lower chance than others of getting a clinical placement—but I soon realized that this time, my chances were nearly zero. After being rejected by two promising agencies, and with the practicum application deadline drawing near, I had the idea of contacting a previous employer, the social agency in Calgary where I had gotten my parenting training certificate more than 10 years ago. Surprisingly, I got a face-to-face interview, unusual during the pandemic, which was successful; I would be doing clinical work, after all! Interestingly, the day I interviewed for this position was the same day I did my job interview with TFEL. I picked the COVID-19 team specifically for the chance to work on research directly related to the pandemic's impacts; once a source of fear, it had now become an opportunity to engage with others on this fascinating, deadly topic.

The major lesson I took from my experiences on the COVID-19 team was the sense of acceptance. Unlike previous social work settings, I did not experience racism here. I was the only Asian immigrant on the team, but no one made any distinctions or offered me lesser opportunities on the team based on perceived linguistic, racial, or ageist biases, the latter because I was significantly older than the rest of my team. From an educational perspective, I am also grateful that my research into IBL would later inspire me and my husband, initiated by some friends in the Chinese community, to create our own educational outreach organization which uses IBL theory to facilitate learning style transformation in adult group learning and communication group therapy, serving Mandarin speakers all over the world. Given the chance, the Chinese community can work to alleviate some of the anxieties the pandemic has created. We can train young people to be thought leaders and undo some of the mistakes that older generations have made in responding to the pandemic's challenges. From a sense of fear and uncertainty, we can move towards a sense of safety among our diverse communities.

Recommendations

In reflecting on these experiences, we offer recommendations for future remote field education. Each of the authors independently developed a recommendation connected to their specific concern. We then discussed each of them as a group, coming to a consensus that the recommendations, listed in order below, not only reflected our experiences but also were, in our opinion, the best option to ameliorate these concerns.

First, we believe it would make a major difference in combating isolation if multiple students were assigned to the same placement, being able to connect with each other, do similar work, and reflect on similar problems. True, there would be increased demand on the agency supervisor. However, if the type of work was shared between practicum students in their group and built around student collaboration for shared learning activities, it may also be beneficial to creating valuable learning opportunities in field education.

Second, the key to making students with existing mental health conditions (or those at risk of developing mental health challenges because of increased stress) feel more comfortable is to reduce the barriers they experience. To that end, it may be necessary to look outside the university environment and enlist the support of larger systems and non-governmental organizations to create new initiatives, incentives, and supports to help students complete their education.

Third, to augment student quality of learning, we believe students should be allowed to determine their own level of comfort with attending an in-person practicum. Of course, it would be necessary to have enough field supervisors willing to have a student at this time. This would have to involve informed consent from the student and ensure that all responsibility and liability is on the student.

Fourth, universities need to step up and create avenues for financial support and resources for students who have fallen through the cracks. At the very least, social work faculties should provide credits to students who lost quality opportunities for practicum learning if they found their experience unsatisfactory.

Fifth, field instructors need to be aware of potential biases and ensure that Asian social work students are not passed over from promising practicum opportunities. Social work faculties must be leaders in demonstrating their confidence in ethnic communities threatened by racism and white supremacy.

These recommendations have the potential to mitigate student concerns and worries and to be beneficial in fostering growth, confidence, and well-being of future social worker students.

Conclusion

In this article, we have reflected on the five major concerns shared by students in a national online survey conducted in July 2020. It was our hope that by reflecting on these concerns, we would highlight their continued relevance to social work students at this stage of the pandemic. We believe that quantitative research needs to be done to provide an updated lens of student field experiences. We emphasize that the concerns we have shared were not intended as a complaint to field instructors, social work education programs, or university administrators, but should instead be understood as a call to action. Should COVID-19 continue to be a dominant force in society, we strongly urge decision-makers to consider ways to increase supports for students during practicum.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to offer their heartfelt thanks to Jessica Ossais for her work coding the student concern themes from the national survey. They also wish to acknowledge the TFEL project for supporting this research. TFEL is supported in part by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors.

References

- Archer-Kuhn, B. (2020). Putting social justice in social work education with Inquiry-Based-Learning. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 40(5), 431–448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2020.1821864>
- Black, M. (2020, March 17). ‘The situation is very serious’: Alberta to declare a state of public health emergency over COVID-19. CTV News. <https://edmonton.ctvnews.ca/the-situation-is-very-serious-alberta-to-declare-a-state-of-public-health-emergency-over-covid-19-1.4856794>
- Canadian Association of Social Workers. (2005). *Code of ethics*. https://www.casw-acts.ca/files/documents/casw_code_of_ethics.pdf
- Canadian Nurses Association. (2020, April 17). *State of emergency declarations*. <https://cna-aiic.ca/en/coronavirus-disease/state-of-emergency-declarations>
- Drolet, J. (2020). A new partnership: Transforming the field education landscape: Intersections of research and practice in Canadian social work field education. *Field Educator*, 10(1), 1–18. <https://fieldeducator.simmons.edu/article/transforming-the-field-education-landscape/>
- Elmer, T., Mepham, K., & Stadtfeld, C. (2020). Students under lockdown: Comparisons of students’ social networks and mental health before and during COVID-19 crisis in Switzerland. *PLOS ONE*, 17(5), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236337>
- Guterres, A. (2020, April 23). *We are all in this together: Human rights and COVID-19 response and recovery*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and>
- Shore, R. (2020, June 22). *Anti-Chinese racism is Canada’s ‘shadow pandemic,’ say researchers*. Vancouver Sun. <https://vancouversun.com/news/anti-chinese-racism-is-canadas-shadow-pandemic-say-researchers>
- Statistics Canada. (2020). *How are post-secondary students in Canada impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?* [Infographic]. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2020032-eng.htm>

Stuart, H. (2021). 'Professional inefficacy is the exact opposite of the passionate social worker': Discursive analysis of neoliberalism within the writing on self-care in social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 32(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2020.1790715>

Taylor, A. (2020, August 6). *Drop tuition fees: University students face a precarious future amid COVID-19*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/drop-tuition-fees-university-students-face-a-precarious-future-amid-covid-19-129285>

Tootoo, H. (2012). Nunavut: An example of consensus government in the Canadian Arctic. *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 35(4), 2–5. http://www.revparl.ca/35/4/35n4_12e_Tootoo.pdf

Transforming the Field Education Landscape Project. (2020). *TFEL COVID-19 Infographic* [Infographic]. Tfelproject.com. <https://tfelproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/tfel-covid-19-infographic-sept-15-2020-1.pdf>

Wang, Z., Koenig, H. G., Tong, Y., Wen, J., Sui, M., Liu, M., & Liu, G. (2020). Psychometric properties of the moral injury symptom scale among Chinese health professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMC Psychiatry*, 20, 556. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02954-w>

Yang, X., Yu, Y., Xu, J., Shu, H., Xia, J., Liu, H., Wu, Y., Zhang, L., Yu, Z., Fang, M., Yu, T., Wang, Y., Pan, S., Zou, X., Yuan, S., & Shang, Y. (2020). Clinical course and outcomes of critically ill patients with SARS-CoV-2 pneumonia in Wuhan, China: A single-centered, retrospective, observational study. *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, 8(5), 475–481. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(20\)30079-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(20)30079-5)

Zhang, L., Ren, Z., Jiang, G., Hazer-Rau, D., Zhao, C., Shi, C., Lai, L., & Yan, Y. (2021). Self-oriented empathy and compassion fatigue: The serial mediation of dispositional mindfulness and counselor's self-efficacy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 613908. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.613908>

About the Authors: Jesse Henton, MSW is Research Assistant, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (jesse.henton@ucalgary.ca); Tara Collins, PhD is Post-Doctoral Scholar, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada (tara.collins2@ucalgary.ca); Jayden Wickman, BSW, RSW is Social Worker, Ambulatory Clinics, Stollery Children's Hospital, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (jayden.wickman@ahs.ca); Lavender Xin Huang, BSW is Research Assistant, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (tripleewang@gmail.com); Mohammed Idris Alemi, MSW is Research Assistant, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada (omida09@hotmail.com).