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Transforming Field Education During COVID-19

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Transition from In-Person to Online: A Virtual Partnership Project

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all spheres of life – social, economic, educational, political, cultural, spiritual, and environmental. Internationally, adjustments have had to be made in service provision in adherence to public health guidelines, and post-secondary institutions have developed strategies to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on student learners (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). In order to ensure safety for students, staff, and faculty, and in response to local public health guidelines on physical distancing, Canadian post-secondary institutions rapidly shifted to virtual platforms and operations for teaching, student learning, and research (Bazinet et al., 2020; Wall, 2020). This transition affected all aspects of social work education programs, including student field placements and related field education activities (Canadian Association of Social Work Education [CASWE], 2020).

Field education in Canada was in crisis prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic as a result of multiple intersecting factors (Ayala et al., 2017; Drolet, 2020; McConnell, 2016). Field education directors and coordinators struggle to manage field education while experiencing financial cutbacks, restructuring, and limited agency capacity to accept students, all of which leads to fewer opportunities for student field placements (Ayala et al., 2017; McConnell, 2016). Additionally, the increase in the number of social work education programs and student enrollments, which resulted in increased competition for social work placements for students, has contributed to the crisis in Canadian field education (Ayala et al., 2017; Drolet, 2020; McConnell, 2016). COVID-19 created further challenges for field education and student learning with the cancellation of practica, which are an essential component of social work education as they provide students with direct practice experience (Ayala et al., 2017; Bogo, 2015; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). In some cases, this has caused social work field education programs to transition to online virtual field placements and learning (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020).

Prior to the global pandemic, an innovative community of practice and research initiative was established to bring together a wide range of social work education collaborators and practice partners to assist in addressing the challenges in field education (Ayala et al., 2017; Garthwait, 2015). In Canada, the Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership was established in 2019 with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Hosted at the University of Calgary, the TFEL partnership brings together local, provincial, national, and international partners to explore the current state of social work field education while supporting the development and implementation of new sustainable models of field education; facilitate the integration of research into practice in the context of field education; increase the recognition of the importance of social work research in field education; and create new training and mentorship opportunities for students to inform the next generation of so-

cial workers (Drolet, 2020). Due to the requirements of social distancing measures, the TFEL partnership pivoted to offer new remote field education and practicum learning opportunities for students beginning in April 2020, shortly after the pandemic began impacting Canada and Canadian social work field education. This shift is described in the following sections of this article.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the innovative practices and contributions of the TFEL partnership to social work field education in the context of COVID-19. Like other organizations, the TFEL partnership had to consider how to adapt its model of practice to function in the new environment created by COVID-19. In doing so, it was important to consider the following: How do we address the impacts of COVID-19 on social work field education? How can the TEFL partnership continue to meet its mission to address the current state of crisis in social work field education? How can the TFEL partnership be a model for innovation and creative thinking for other social work partnerships?

Transforming the Field Education Landscape Partnership Project

The work of the TFEL partnership has been amplified in response to the current pandemic. With the transition to virtual platforms and remote practices, TFEL has engaged and adapted to the current climate by utilizing online resources and platforms to continue knowledge exchange and mobilization within the partnership and beyond. Although COVID-19 and safety practices (e.g., social distancing) have created challenges for all post-secondary educators and researchers, it has also facilitated new and innovative ways for the partnership to collaborate and, in doing so, contribute to the transformation of social work field education.

To support communication and collaboration within the partnership, the TFEL project conducts monthly working group meetings of the three teams and hosts various workshops via Zoom. The TFEL project uses Microsoft Teams to help establish a virtual community for student research assistants and practicum students registered with the University of Calgary to collaborate on various project activities. Student research assistants were encouraged to meet weekly in their online groups, and received supervision and mentorship from fellow peers and TFEL co-investigators in regular meetings. As part of this work, student research assistants contributed to conducting survey research on the state of social work education, survey research on the impact of COVID-19 on field education from students' perspectives, interviews on promising and wise practices, dialogue circles on student learning in field education, and document reviews of field learning agreements. Students were also involved in the development of training modules and mentorship opportunities to enhance their practice research skills, such as the development of virtual practicum resources, a digital story guidebook, and near-peer mentorship, as described below. Students were involved

in virtual knowledge mobilization activities that introduced creative ways to involve students and professionals in TFEL activities through webinars and online workshops. To promote the work and research conducted by collaborators and students, the TFEL project showcased this new knowledge through virtual exhibitions including the Virtual Field Summit, the Digital Storytelling Premiere, the Field Image Showcase, and the Virtual Practicum Exhibition. Descriptions of each event are provided below.

The TFEL Field Summit was originally organized as a major in-person event to coincide with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) international conference in Calgary, Alberta. TFEL planned to host a one-day event with workshops to provide context on the current state of social work field education and discuss current research practices related to field. With social distancing practices, and the cancellation of the IFSW conference in Calgary (which also moved to a virtual platform), the TFEL partnership transitioned the Field Summit onto a virtual platform. In order to accommodate the new virtual platform, a four-day Virtual Field Summit event was organized and broadcasted internationally, using social media. Sessions were broadcast live and recorded using Zoom. One of the benefits of hosting the Field Summit virtually is that it allowed for more participants to attend the events. Rather than having to limit the number of participants for an in-person event (e.g., 80–90 participants), the Summit was able to accommodate over 600 participants across the different sessions.

The Virtual Field Summit began with a welcome and territorial acknowledgement by Dr. Julie Drolet, project director, and Dr. Ellen Perrault, dean of the faculty of social work at the University of Calgary. To introduce the TFEL partnership and to share some preliminary research findings on the state of social work field education in Canada, a plenary session was presented by Dr. Drolet and student research assistants working on the national study. The national study was designed to collect information from field education directors and coordinators regarding social work field education programs, resources, and structures across Canada.

The plenary session was followed by a panel presentation with Dr. Grant Charles, University of British Columbia; Holly Bradley, Vancouver Island University; Clement Dlamini, University of Eswatini; and Dr. Lena Dominelli, International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). Each panelist responded to four critical questions facing social work field education and the impact of COVID-19 on field education. The plenary session was followed by five breakout discussions highlighting different aspects of field education: 1) E-Supervision, 2) Evaluation, 3) Green Social Work, 4) Indigenous and Anticolonial Practice, and 5) Social Work in Health. The Summit also included workshops highlighting innovative ways that research can be integrated into social work practice: 1) Research As Daily Practice, presented by Drs. Sally St. George, Dan Wulff, and Lauren Birks, University of Calgary; 2) Articulating Transformation in Field Education and Research through Digital Storytelling, presented by Dr. Christine

A. Walsh and social work students Natalie St. Denis and Alison L. Grittner, University of Calgary; 3) Models for Integrating Research and Practice in Social Work Education, presented by Dr. Sheri M. McConnell, Memorial University, and social work students Melissa Noble, Heather Shenton, Mohammad Idris Alemi and alumna Amanda Duke; 4) Wise Practices from the Indigisphere to the Land: Indigenous Intersectional Violence and Trauma-Informed Field Education in Shifting Spaces of Learning, presented by Dr. Natalie Clark, Thompson Rivers University; and 5) Digital Storytelling Premiere. The Digital Storytelling Premiere showcased digital stories created by students who had attended a three-session workshop, allowing students to reflect on their experiences using digital media to tell their stories and help make sense of their social work journeys. The creation of digital stories promotes confidence building, while creating a powerful, transformative product to share with others.

The Field Image Showcase highlighted student photo images and narratives that were submitted in response to a call for students to share their learning in social work practicum, field seminars, and course work. The Showcase invited students to share their experiences regarding their social work journey while maneuvering the current pandemic and in previous practicum experiences. Students presented their insights and experiences with online learning during COVID-19 at the Virtual Practicum Exhibition.

Reflecting on a Virtual Partnership

We wish to share a reflection provided by Dr. Natalie Clark, co-investigator in the TFEL partnership:

As a co-investigator, with an over-15-year commitment to decolonizing and Indigenous social work field education practices and policies (Clark et al., 2012) I was honored to lead a breakout session on Wise Practices in Indigenous Field Education, and a workshop on Indigenous Field Education for the TFEL conference. An Indigenous and anticolonial perspective on field education would center Indigenous worldviews together with a strong commitment to activism and Indigenous sovereignty (that is mindful of the different meanings and experiences of sovereignty for different Indigenous peoples).

I was unsure of how the switch to the online format would impact the importance of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the online format, in particular ensuring the voices and experiences of Indigenous students, field education coordinators, and community partners were centered. The breakout session and workshop were both very well attended with over 100 participants sharing their experiences and challenges in implementing Indigenous and anticolonial field education. In the breakout session, participants were asked: "In what ways can Indigenous and anticolonial field practica and research opportunities be-

come more available to students?” and participants were asked to “provide examples from your own experience of wise or promising practices with respect to Indigenous field and research.” Examples from Indigenous students and faculty highlighted the systemic and ongoing colonial challenges in field education, including lack of funding, and time to create and maintain respectful community relationships, experiences of racism and tokenism, and the everyday challenges of this work. Respectful relationships require time and presence in the community, yet field education coordinators face Eurocentric structural barriers such as increased practicum caseloads that deter relational development. Participants requested that one of the outcomes of the Summit be the creation of an Indigenous social work sharing space to center policies, practices, and approaches to support Indigenous field education. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive and has revealed the importance of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, even in the “Indigisphere,” the online and virtual format of the conference, but also of field education during the pandemic. (Dr. Natalie Clark, PhD, RSW, Thompson Rivers University)

Student Reflection on Virtual Practice

Emmanuel Chilanga, an international student from Malawi who recently completed his PhD and is pursuing his MSW at McGill University, shares his perspective on virtual practice in the TFEL partnership:

The TFEL project has been helpful to me in several domains. First, the virtual meetings substituted my disrupted in-person social networks caused by COVID-19. TFEL virtual meetings provided a safe platform for me as a visible minority student, where I was able to socialize with many social work scholars from across Canada. I was freely engaged in discussions and felt a sense of belonging to TFEL community. I felt that my engagement in the program uplifted my social and mental wellbeing at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as I felt that there were people who cared for me.

Second, my involvement in the TFEL project has increased my social work skillsets. The project allowed me to take and pass the CASWE-ACFTS Online Field Instructor Course and to understand perennial and COVID-related social work field education challenges in Canada. Through my involvement in qualitative data analysis, I am able to have a picture of the best social work practices that can be employed to address the problems. These include training of more field instructors to reduce instructor/intern ratios, and the promotion of tailored research-based internships.

Finally, the TFEL project houses social work professors from different universities in Canada. In this way, not only the professors at McGill University, but from all the provinces are mentoring me. Therefore, I have developed social

work scholastic network that could be impossible if I was not a member of the project. (Emmanuel Chilanga, MSW Student)

Mentorship Activities

The TFEL project is creating and implementing new educational and mentorship opportunities for social work students (Drolet, 2020). One of the initiatives for students this year is the Near-Peer Mentorship Program, where third-year BSW students are mentored by fourth-year BSW students, and fourth-year BSW students are mentored by MSW students. The goal of the program is to prepare students for their practica and to nurture skills that will be of use as future field instructors in social work field education. The Near-Peer Mentorship Program also will assist in building relationships between students by using online platforms during the pandemic. As students are faced with social distancing due to COVID-19, the Near-Peer Mentorship Program is a new avenue to help build networks for students to share their experiences, wisdom, and concerns about field education and virtual practice. TFEL will increase educational opportunities by hosting online webinars, workshops, and seminars, like the Virtual Field Summit, for students and social work practitioners across Canada.

Another opportunity to enhance practice research skills and knowledge relating to field education is the Field Research Scholars Program for graduate students and post-doctoral and new scholars to foster the growth and talent of social work researchers in field education. Monthly seminars will bring together social work field education scholars to discuss their current research, share information, and exchange field research interests.

Reflections on a Virtual Workspace

The pandemic has created opportunities for post-secondary institutions and social service organizations to reconceptualize how they work, offer services, and engage in student learning. TFEL quickly adapted to the current situation created by the pandemic by designing ways to engage with social work students, faculty, field instructors, and practitioners in advancing knowledge exchange and mobilization. The partnership has taken this opportunity to increase collaboration between colleagues and members on the various project activities, events, and opportunities. The virtual platforms have provided creative avenues for student supervision, which TFEL incorporated as a foundation of student learning and development. Student research assistants had opportunities to engage in peer support, through collaboration and feedback in their working groups and during larger-stream working group meetings, where feedback is provided by TFEL co-investigators and collaborators. The following reflection was provided by Dr. Marion Bogo, co-investigator in the TFEL partnership:

While missing the stimulating face-to-face interaction that takes place at our usual conferences, virtual formats allowed the participation of colleagues from around the globe. This international representation is often not possible due to the costs of travel. Ironically, the pandemic provided a new opportunity for expanded participation. Given the significant geographical distances in Canada which separate co-investigators, even without the pandemic, meetings would have to be held online. Our ability to work together smoothly and effectively helped many of us migrate to teaching online. (Professor Marion Bogo, OC, LL.D., MSW, RSW, University of Toronto)

Conclusion

The COVID-19 global pandemic has placed the spotlight on social work field education, calling for innovative ways to engage practicum students in virtual learning environments. While COVID-19 has created additional challenges for field coordinators, staff, faculty, students, and field instructors with the disruption in field placement availability and the shift to virtual practice, field education has adapted and continues to evolve to meet the demands of this changing climate while adhering to new remote learning guidelines (CASWE, 2020). The TFEL partnership demonstrates how innovation is critical to social work field education and the importance of being creative, reflexive, and adaptive in order to continue to transform field education, resources, and learning.

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