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Integrating Practice Research into Social Work Field Education

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Abstract

Social work field education is considered a key element of social work education. While many field education placements traditionally have focused on teaching practice-based skills and integrating theory into practice, it is also critical to incorporate research into social work practice and field education. This article discusses how practice research can be integrated into social work field education by drawing upon a training module designed for this purpose by the Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership. Implications and recommendations for practice research and field educators are provided.

Keywords: field education; practice research; social work; practicum/internship

Field education, also referred to as the signature pedagogy of social work (Council on Social Work Education, 2015), commonly accompanies coursework to enable students to connect classroom theory with practice in professional “on-the-ground” experiences (Bogo & Sewell, 2019). While field placements, practica, and internships are utilized in various disciplines, they play a critical role in social work by preparing students to provide effective services in various settings (Bogo, 2010). Within the social work field education domain, traditional student placements have tended to adopt one-on-one tutoring, role modelling, and mentoring of students by field instructors (Ayala et al., 2018; Bogo, 2010). While this model has been and is currently one of the most prominent models of social work field education, many authors have commented on how the traditional model of social work field education is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain (Ayala & Drolet, 2014; Ayala et al., 2018; Bellinger, 2010; Drolet, 2020).

Considering these observations, Ayala and colleagues (2018) interviewed Canadian field coordinators about addressing existing challenges within social work field education. They compiled several promising and wise practices that potentially could be used to move the state of social work field education from crisis to sustainability. These practices included designing and implementing alternative placement models and enhancing training of field instructors and faculty liaisons. In considering these promising practices suggested by Ayala and colleagues, the Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership initiated the development of a field instructor training module for the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE). The training module focuses on creating strategies to assist field instructors in integrating practice research into social work field education. In combination with attempting to give field instructors the tools and knowledge needed to incorporate practice research within their workplace context, the module also seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice, and to demonstrate how these can be understood

as parallel processes. Drawing from a literature review and consultations with TFEL members, the module has been developed further into an online course for students, social work educators and researchers, and other social work professionals. The online course is designed to share knowledge and understanding of practice research in order to strengthen the role of practice research in social work field education.

Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) Partnership

To date, there has been a disconnect between research and social work practice (Drolet & Harriman, 2020). Traditional formal research approaches are often viewed as being inapplicable to social work practice and inaccessible to social work students and practitioners (Driessens et al., 2011; Fook et al., 2011; Shannon, 2013). There is a need to rethink traditional approaches to teaching research in order to provide practical, hands-on learning opportunities that engage students (Benson & Blackman, 2003; Freymond et al., 2014; Trevisan, 2002). The Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership aims to better prepare the next generation of social workers in Canada by creating training and mentoring opportunities for students, developing and mobilizing innovative and promising field education practices, and improving the integration of research and practice in field education (Drolet, 2020). This article is based on the findings of a literature review conducted on practice research and social work field education. The findings of the review informed the development of a practice research training module that was designed to better integrate practice research in social work field education. By creating multiple online training modules on practice research for diverse audiences including field instructors, students, social work educators, and researchers, the TFEL partnership aims to build capacity for bridging the gap between research and practice in field education. We hope that this article will invoke a sense of curiosity on practice research and provide information on how practice research can be integrated into social work field education.

Bringing Practice Research and Social Work Field Education Together

In recent years, many social work scholars have described how the profession requires incorporating a greater understanding of research into social work practice (Teater, 2017). Despite good intentions and the pursuit of the “social good,” social work can often lack accurate measurements of effective practice (Cabassa, 2016). Considering these shortcomings, social work must develop more intervention research that emerges from practice in order to maintain competency and proficiency (Fortune et al., 2010). Researchers and practitioners alike are witnessing the need, if the profession is to move forward, for social work research no longer to remain in the profession’s background, but to be incorporated into practice and emerge in an inseparable and interdependent manner (Webber & Carr, 2015, pp. 3–21). Often, research and practice are viewed

as distinct and separate elements of the profession. Yet it is becoming increasingly evident that research and practice are both more effective when they function as collaborative processes.

In response to the need to incorporate research more effectively into social work practice, some educational institutions, workplaces, and practitioners have utilized a collaborative research process termed “practice research” to bridge the gap between research and practice. As new social work practitioners are educated and prepared for professional practice, it is of utmost importance that they are prepared to carry out their duties to the best of their abilities, generate new knowledge, and enhance practice strategies. By utilizing practice research in social work field education, social work students and practitioners will be better prepared to harness curiosity and research collaboratively to improve practice. We believe the profession of social work, through integrating practice research, will advance research-informed practice and practice-informed research.

For many social work practitioners and students, the thought of research can elicit feelings of anxiety, dread, and confusion (Wahler, 2019). However, when research is viewed as a regular part of daily practice, feelings of comfort and excitement about new opportunities can emerge. When closely examined, research and practice strategies can be considered parallel processes. Within both traditional practice and research settings, questions are raised, answers are pursued, and knowledge is discovered and developed. These parallel processes of research and practice have been expanded upon in detail through the development of the “Research As Daily Practice” philosophy created by Sally St. George, Dan Wulff, and Karl Tomm (St. George et al., 2015).

“Research As Daily Practice”

For many years, social work clinicians and educators Dan Wulff and Sally St. George have been advocating the notion of “Research As Daily Practice” (St. George, et al., 2015). Their work has identified how research and clinical practice overlap and share similar steps, procedures, and strategies. The core of their philosophy is the belief that “practitioners are researchers because they use inquiring processes to make quality decisions in their daily practice (gathering data, organizing the data to better explain phenomena, constructing a plan of action, implementing the plan, observing the effects, gathering more data)” (St. George et al., 2015, p. 5). When social work practitioners perceive themselves as active investigators and knowledge developers in practice, research becomes the tool to improve practice and push the profession forward. We believe that adopting a research-informed approach to practice, such as viewing research as a part of daily practice, is crucial for effective practice and practice research utilization within social work field education.

Defining Practice Research

The term “practice research” is used across disciplines to explain the negotiated process between practice (service providers and service users) and research (researchers and educators) working collaboratively to understand and address challenges, develop new knowledge on a subject matter, and address existing gaps between research and practice (Fisher et al., 2016). At the core of practice research is a focus on learning, sharing, and seeking to understand individual, group, and organizational environments (Joubert & Webber, 2020). While the methods through which practice research can be carried out vary, effective practice research involves pursuing curiosity about practice through collaborative means (Austin & Isokuortti, 2016). These elements of curiosity and collaboration are essential to both practice research and field education. Curiosity can be a catalyst to seeking and developing promising strategies to meet practice needs. When multiple parties with different perspectives can harness their curiosity, a critical examination of practice can often occur, which can lead to the “development of new ideas in the light of experience” (Austin & Isokuortti, 2016, p. 11).

While curiosity is a cornerstone of effective practice research, it is through collaboration that practice research becomes increasingly valuable. Practice research is often conducted through collaborative partnerships by a range of stakeholders to enhance understanding of practice issues and enrich practice strategies (Fouché, 2016). At a fundamental level, practice research is the process through which ideas, problems, or concepts found in practice are expounded upon through a research undertaking. When utilizing practice research, collaborators can pursue knowledge through informal or formal research designs, with the central premise being that the research generates knowledge to improve practice.

Practice Research Operationalized

In seeking to implement practice research in a social work setting, it is important to note that there is not one overarching methodology or formula that will work in every context. Instead, effective practice research methods tend to emerge organically through researchers’ and practitioners’ strategic collaborations based on their practice context and research questions. Effective methods are typically based on a research question that emerges from a practice issue. These methods must be conducted in a mutually beneficial process for all the collaborators involved in the practice research setting.

For those seeking more direction in designing a practice research study, Miller (2019) outlines a process in which the practitioners and researchers (“enablers”) work

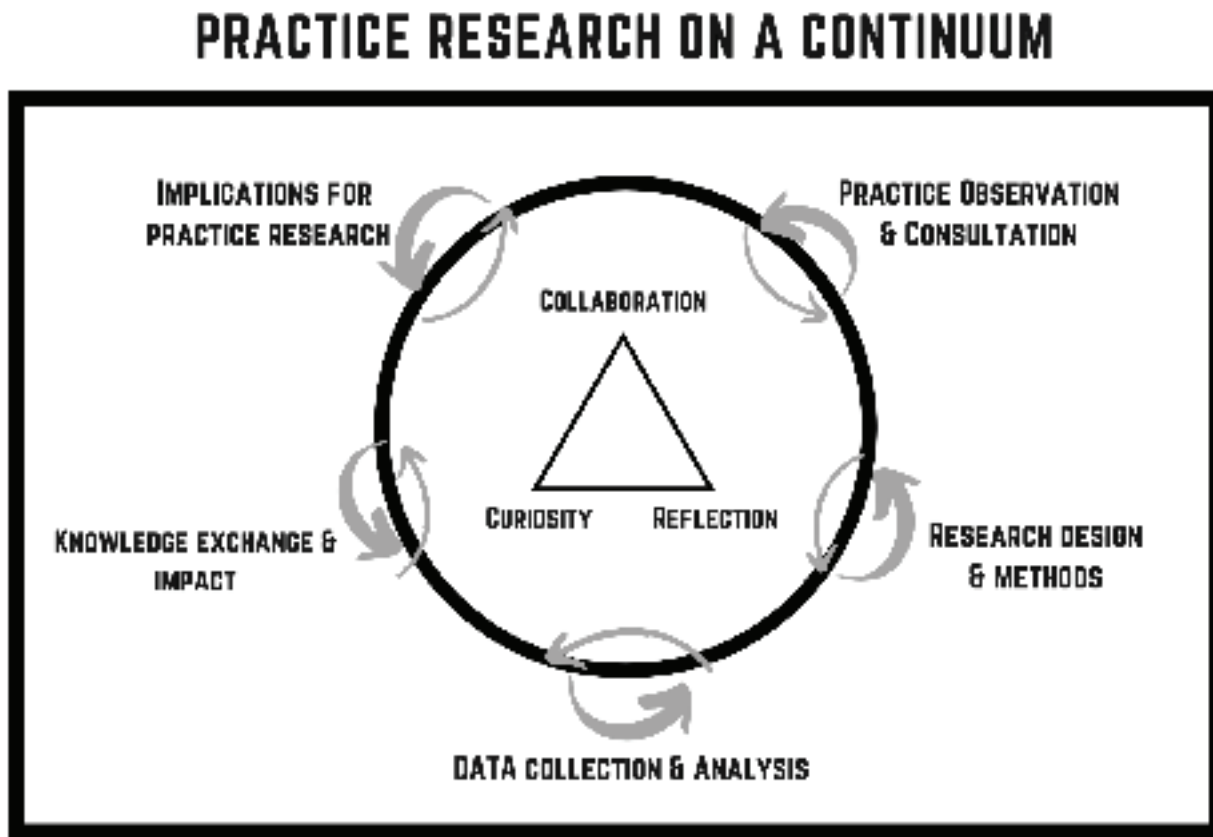
together to compile an effective agency report that follows a rigid methodological approach. In their approach, the enabler and the practitioners work collaboratively to identify an issue to investigate, discuss the issue, and narrow down a specific research question that meets the needs of the practice agency. The practitioner is supported in the data collection process by the enabler. The enabler usually will take the lead in data analysis, with direction from the practitioners, to ensure that the data accurately addresses the research question. The results typically culminate in some change to practice in the agency (Miller, 2019, pp. 682–683).

One of Miller's (2019) strengths in this example is that the author presents the researcher as an enabler and enhancer of practice. While suggesting roles within the research process such as "enabler" and "enhancer" can be beneficial in highlighting where students may be able to utilize practice research within field education, these labels must be used judiciously, so as not to separate the elements of practice and research. Such a separation may create an insider/outsider argument, such as questioning who the *real* researcher might be. It is important to remember that practice research includes the notion that research can be conducted through inquiry at all levels of practice through a methodological research process. Miller's example shows the importance of viewing the research and practice partnership as a method to increase practice competencies and to discover critical areas for further research. While this approach may be beneficial for some to follow, others may prefer a less formal process that invites cocreating a practice research framework based upon the practice setting and the investigators available.

Practice Research on a Continuum

To assist practitioners and students in implementing practice research in field education, we have outlined the multiple continual stages and central themes that we believe the practice research process can contain. This process is illustrated below in Figure 1.

Figure 1



While we believe that these themes and stages can help organize and implement practice research within the field education context, we also accept that it is valuable to see practice research as on a continuum. Viewing practice research on a continuum allows for the notion that research is continually growing, evolving, and changing over time. This means that practice researchers can be in multiple stages at any given time, and that the research process can be continually renegotiated and improved to better meet the research and practice objectives. As we have identified multiple themes that students and field instructors may find to represent their current process, we also propose that curiosity, reflection, and collaboration are three central themes that must be present for effective practice research to be conducted. We have confidence that students and field instructors can create their own practice research projects collaboratively through utilizing this framework of practice research on a continuum. This framework may be beneficial for simplifying the practice research process, which can allow for both students and field instructors to identify important research questions and the proper strategies needed for investigation. We also recognize the importance of integrating practice research activities in field learning agreement contracts, integration seminars, assignments, and readings.

Recommendations and Implications for Integrating Practice Research into Social Work Field Education

The curiosity that drives inquiry and investigation forms the foundation of integrating research in field education (St. George et al., 2015). For practice research to be integrated successfully into social work field education, the research must be relevant and based on local practice topics that are meaningful, important, and appropriate for investigation. When considering integrating practice research into field education, it must be ensured that the research meets the needs of the agency, practitioners, and service users. This calls for attention with respect to caseloads, organizational patterns, and practice outcomes. These patterns can become more evident through discussions at staff meetings and case conferences, highlighting agency needs for further investigation. At this point in the process, field educators and students can commit to collaborate in the investigation of emerging curiosities and challenges. Any practice research agenda must include agency workers and respect practitioners' time, and can either be planned out ahead of time or be a spontaneous response to an emerging need. These steps can help incorporate the utilization of practice research within social work field education.

Curiosity is but one quality motivating practice research. Walsh et al. (2019) also found that attitudes towards research, comfort level, the time involved, and interpersonal/relational factors also influence how enthusiastically students approach research. Thus, practice research is more than a cognitive exercise. Practical considerations need to be factored into any agency-based research: length of the practicum, time availability with the supervisor, and available practical resources. For this reason, it is helpful to think of practice research on a continuum so that all students can benefit from integrating research and theory into their practice.

The impetus for practice research initiatives can start in the curriculum and teaching of the social work research course. Rather than being a distant, esoteric topic, social work research courses can be designed "closer to home" where they have greater personal significance to students. Research also can be taught to create "habits of the mind" that have relevance in everyday life. Students can become disciplined to discern valid and reliable information critically, rather than accepting any opinion that catches their attention. Research does not have to be a practice that is overly formal and hard to reach. We need to bring research to the student instead of bringing the student to research. Similarly, research conducted within field education placements provides an opportunity to bring research closer to the field for agencies and field instructors.

A Continuing Need for Collaboration

In keeping with this project, field education can be transformed through joint training

initiatives (Drolet & Harriman, 2020), such as between social work programs, faculty liaisons, field instructors, social work educators, students, service users, and agencies. To achieve this transformation, we need to enhance students' knowledge and skills and build research capacity through partnered research endeavors (Drolet & Harriman, 2020, p. 4). One of the ways that this has been considered within our current context is through the creation of a practice research training module for the field instructor training hosted by the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE). This specific module introduces field instructors to practice research, demonstrates how practice research may be used in field education, and invites field instructors to consider utilizing practice research alongside their students within their practice context. In combination with this field instructor training module, we also created an open-access practice research course that can be accessed by students, educators, field instructors, and other social work professionals interested in learning more about practice research and how it can be used within field education. In building capacity for practice research, there is value in encouraging social work educational programs and field agencies to develop more sustainable field education models and promote multidirectional exchanges of knowledge on innovations and promising practices. As it is with practice research, collaboration is a key element in the incorporation of practice research into social work field education.

Points of Consideration for Social Work Field Education Programs

As field education programs and placements consider integrating practice research into their contexts, there are several considerations that require examination. These considerations include:

1. incorporating into research courses at least one project involving practice research that echoes a field situation;
2. offering field instructors in-service training and workshops on using practice research in their agencies;
3. clearly demonstrating how research and practice activities are parallel processes;
4. developing strategies to help students and field instructors to become more comfortable and competent in developing and undertaking practice research in field education placements;
5. designing learning contract agreements that incorporate, at a minimum, at least one research/practice initiative;
6. facilitating the integration of research and theory into practice; and
7. evaluating how practice research is adopted in the field, what challenges emerge, and how to maximize the use of practice research in field education.

Gaps and Areas of Future Research

While we have been able to identify multiple ways to integrate practice research into social work field education, we also acknowledge that the incorporation of practice research into field education is in the early stages. As we move forward with this initiative, we need to examine the various configurations of field education across Canada and internationally to identify promising practices for incorporating practice research into field education. To accomplish this, we must become aware of the challenges impacting students, field instructors, and agencies, and consider them in our approaches. As research moves forward, there is a need to expand on the suggestions in this article and demonstrate how practice research can be utilized in different types of social work field education placements and contexts.

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