



Building Capacity: Preparing Practicum Instructors To Develop Students' Antiracist Practices

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**Author's Note: Throughout this article, we have intentionally used the language "practicum education" instead of "field education." This change comes from our awareness of the harmful history of unpaid, oppressive "field work" in the United States. This terminological change is also part of the present article's ongoing efforts to advance explicitly antiracist approaches to practicum education within social work. We would like to thank our colleagues J.P. Przewoznik, Karon Johnson, Michele Patak-Pietrafesa, and Ronni Zuckerman for their contributions in designing, structuring, and facilitating the book discussion group and JEDI PLC.*

Antiracist and antioppressive practice must be at the heart of any social work curriculum that seeks to produce professionals who can dismantle oppressive systems and work with clients and communities to advance social justice (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). Yet numerous scholars have documented the ways in which social work education has failed to center antiracist principles and practices, instead perpetuating white supremacist ideals and in turn harming students, colleagues, and the very communities we seek to serve (Abrams & Detlaff, 2020; Brady et al., 2019; King-Jordan & Gil, 2021; Leotti et al., 2023; Murray-Lichtman & Elkassem, 2021). As social work educators, we must make intentional efforts to identify and revise biased educational practices into practices that better express the social justice mission of our profession. Situated at the intersection of academia and real-world practice settings, practicum education is uniquely positioned to translate classroom knowledge about

the mechanisms of oppression and structural racism into a concrete, antiracist practice skill set. This article describes a model developed by one university's social work program to build social work practicum instructors' knowledge and skills in providing Masters of Social Work (MSW) students with opportunities for antiracist and antioppressive supervision and practice opportunities in their practicum, and explores the challenges encountered while implementing the model.

Current Issues in Antiracist Practicum Education

Social work practicum instructors play a pivotal role in students' professional development into practitioners, as they support students as they transform classroom knowledge into tangible practice strategies in practicum settings (Ketner et al., 2017). Practicum instructors expose students to learning opportunities with diverse clients and communities, encourage and model critical self-reflection and humility, and provide personalized feedback and evaluation to students on their demonstrated competence. Through their attitudes, words, and actions, practicum instructors demonstrate for students what social work practice looks like in the real world. In order to support students' development into antiracist practitioners, practicum instructors must incorporate antiracist approaches into their work and offer opportunities for students to develop applied practice strategies that center antiracist tenets (Copeland & Ross, 2021). Without opportunities for a strong practicum experience in antiracist practice, social work programs risk leaving students with a conceptual, but not actionable, understanding of antiracism in real-world settings.

Considered the signature pedagogy of social work education, the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) 2022 Educational, Policy, and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) states that the "field setting...fosters an environment where antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion are valued" (CSWE, 2022). Given the importance CSWE places on practicum education, and especially on students' opportunities to apply antiracist practices in practicum settings, it is essential that practicum instructors have the knowledge and skills to thoughtfully prepare students to address issues related to race and racism in their practicum (McDermott et al., 2021).

Developing an antiracist skill set requires students to understand the mechanisms of oppression and how they are at play in specific circumstances, and to actively consider dynamics of power and privilege in their assessment of the individuals, families, and communities they are working with. Additionally, antiracist practice in practicum placements requires that students advocate for and support changes in policy and practice that identify these inequities, and support tangible steps towards social justice. Importantly, social work students need the opportunity to unpack and process situations through an antiracist lens, which requires their practicum instructors to be open and willing to have critical conversations around naming oppression and

identifying and enacting needed changes. Recent studies of the relationship between students and their practicum instructors found that when practicum instructors attended to issues of racial equity, students had a more positive practicum education experience, and that students and practicum staff successfully addressed racial equity at the macro level (McDermott et al., 2018; Mehrotra & Gooding, 2022). Clearly, the social work practicum experience and study data both support leveraging practicum settings and instructors to promote antiracist principles and practices among future social workers.

To further support student development of an antiracist social work skill set, our program also utilizes the practicum seminar course as a space to encourage students to explore tensions that may exist between advancing core social justice values stated in the *NASW Code of Ethics* and the policies and practices of the agencies in which they are placed (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). In seminar, students are presented with questions such as “In your practicum, when do you feel like you are engaged in work that is advancing racial and social justice?” and “In your practicum, when do you feel like the work you are engaged in is perpetuating white supremacy and oppression?” Students are asked to identify specific examples of their work in their agency setting for this discussion. By encouraging students to sit with this dissonance between our expressed professional value of antiracism and real-time examples of how social work practice may be perpetuating systemic harm, students can consider what concrete changes in practice are needed, and how they may advocate for these changes within their respective settings. To encourage deeper discussion within the placement setting, seminar faculty leaders also support students in identifying how to bring these insights to discussions with their practicum instructors and other agency leadership.

Promoting practicum instructors' centering of antiracist practices requires supporting both the individual instructor and the agency in which they are practicing. Especially given the substantial evidence of social work's role in perpetuating structural racism and white supremacist practices (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Del-Villar, 2021; Ladhani & Sitter, 2020; Longres & Seltzer, 1994; Varghese, 2016), practicum instructors must be provided with professional development opportunities that foreground this history and ways of updating traditional practices in accordance with social work's antiracist principles. Building practicum instructors' capacity to support students' development of antiracist practices also requires social work faculty to invite practicum instructors into classrooms to engage in critical conversations that move beyond cultural competency and simplistic notions of diversity to critical theories and antioppressive practices that confront and expose issues of white supremacy (Albritton et al., 2021; McDermott, et al., 2021). In this way, faculty, practicum instructors, and students can engage in more robust conversations about ways they can work together to dismantle longstanding oppressive structures within the profession. To support this learning at a larger agency level and amplify impact, professional development opportunities

centering antiracist and antioppressive practices can be provided not only to practicum instructors, but to the wider practicum agency staff and community as well.

Several challenges can impede the ability of social work practicum education programs to provide students with opportunities to employ antiracist practices and receive mentorship and supervision that centers antiracist ideals. Students may be placed in practicum agencies that offer few opportunities to practice work that is explicitly antiracist due to a misalignment of agency values, the limited positional power of students to direct their learning, or a lack of motivation from students, supervisors, and agency leadership to center antiracist practice (Cane & Tendam, 2022; Ford et al., 2022). Instead of engaging in work that critically examines structural racism and its impact on individuals and communities, students may find themselves assimilating into existing power structures within their agencies that replicate harm on the very communities they seek to support (McDermott et al., 2018).

Practicum instructors may feel poorly equipped to advance student learning due to their own lack of knowledge on important topics related to antiracist theory (e.g., critical race theory [CRT]) and antioppressive practices (e.g., confronting their own racism; considering dynamics of power and privilege in individual and community assessments; advocating for organization and systemic change). This knowledge gap may be due to advances in university social work curricula, creating situations where current students are learning theories and practices to which their practicum instructors were not exposed in their social work training. Additionally, given that practicum instructors are volunteers who typically manage multiple employment responsibilities as well as student supervision, they may have limited time for additional learning, and their employing agencies may not support their advancement of antiracist knowledge and practice skills (Levine & Murray-Lichtman, 2018). Because of this lack of exposure to antiracist knowledge and skills, practicum instructors may not feel sufficiently trained to explore issues of power, privilege, and identity with students in supervision sessions, and choose instead to avoid these important topics, leaving students without opportunities for critical self-reflection (Mckenzie-Mavinga, 2020). Further, without antiracist training, practicum instructors may perpetuate racism through their words and actions, and fail to adequately support students who are experiencing race-related harm in their practicum settings (Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021).

Historically, practicum education programs have not been held accountable for assessing the capacity of practicum instructors, agencies, and students to demonstrate competence in antiracist practice, thereby perpetuating white supremacist practices within the social work field, e.g., mis-diagnosis of mental health issues due to clinician's racial bias, or perpetuation of racial disparity and disproportionality within the public child welfare system (Beasley et al., 2022; Lynch, 2022). This lack of critical

self-examination within practicum education programs, coupled with the variance in practicum instructor capacity, can lead to misalignment between students' antiracist learning in the classroom and the abilities of practicum instructors and community agencies to teach students to employ antiracist practices in real-world settings.

Building Practicum Instructor Capacity Through a Book Discussion Group

Our MSW program serves approximately 250 students in practicum every year, working with 200 practicum sites, 300 practicum instructors and task supervisors, and 10 practicum faculty who serve in teaching, administrative, and advising roles in the MSW program. We provide an orientation to all new practicum instructors and task supervisors, and we also host a half-day annual appreciation event in late spring for all who have supervised students the previous year (both new and continuing supervisors) aimed at providing continuing education and networking opportunities for our practicum partners. The annual appreciation day is an optional event and is typically attended by 50% of the practicum instructors and task supervisors who work with students each year.

To increase practicum instructor knowledge of and ability to employ antiracist approaches in their practice and student supervision, our practicum education program employed an innovative training and book discussion model. This model began with a training for all practicum instructors at our annual appreciation event that provided information on changes within the MSW curriculum, highlighting the intentional centering of antiracist tenets within the generalist-year curriculum. Beyond providing a broad curricular overview, the training included an introduction to CRT, other critical theories, and antioppressive practices. Participants were provided with information on the history and basic tenets of CRT, and examples of how we integrated this content into the MSW curriculum. Additionally, participants were given opportunities to participate in small group discussions of how to apply key tenets of antiracism to their individual social work practice settings and their ongoing supervision of students. In these small groups, participants were able to connect with their colleagues and were prompted to share how they bring up issues of power and privilege in their supervision sessions with students, and how they explore with students the ways in which their organizational policies and practices may contribute to ongoing systemic oppressions. Practicum instructors received several resources for additional learning, including articles, videos, and free online trainings on CRT and antiracist social work practice.

To further encourage practicum instructors' self-reflection and understanding of core antiracist concepts, this training also served as the launch for a practicum instructor book discussion group focused on Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020). Wilkerson's text was selected as the community reading for

the incoming MSW student cohort, and faculty collaborated to intentionally integrate content from the book in multiple courses in the generalist-year curriculum. In the months before the fall semester, we coordinated a monthly student-focused book discussion group and a virtual monthly book discussion among practicum instructors that targeted their unique roles as student supervisors and mentors. This practicum instructor-focused book discussion group created space for participants to process core concepts of the book (e.g., Wilkerson's "Eight Pillars of Caste"), reflect on their own identity and positionality, and consider how content from the book may influence their ongoing work as social workers.

To encourage cultural humility and lessen the impact of any power dynamics, practicum instructors and facilitators were encouraged to enter this reflection and discussion primarily as learners with diverse individual life experiences. Additionally, probing questions such as "How might you bring concepts from this book into your work with MSW students?" were used to encourage practicum instructors to consider how they could apply concepts from the book to center discussions about race, power, and privilege in student supervision, and provide opportunities for students to apply an antiracist lens to their practice (see the Appendix for a detailed outline of book discussion group question prompts). The book discussion group was cofacilitated in small groups by practicum faculty and other teaching faculty, and monthly groups were offered during lunch and in the evening. A virtual book discussion kickoff event was held to introduce discussion facilitators, discuss shared community commitments, and provide resources with information about the text and structure of the book discussion.

Book Discussion Group Considerations and Lessons Learned

We continue to offer an annual practicum appreciation event focused on continuing education opportunities for our practicum instructors, and we are intentional about including content to build their knowledge and skills around antiracist social work practice. And while the *Caste* book discussion group was our first attempt at including the practicum instructors in our community reading, it had mixed results. Initially, practicum instructors were enthusiastic about participating in the book discussion. Books were distributed to practicum instructors at the annual practicum instructor appreciation day event. The kick-off book discussion was well attended, but over subsequent sessions participation continuously declined. A few weeks after the last book group, the facilitators met to debrief and reflect on lessons learned, as it is essential for social work educators to regularly reflect on how and why we are putting an antiracist pedagogy into action (Kishimoto, 2018). Offering the *Caste* book group discussion to practicum instructors was a strategy to bring antiracist pedagogy into the practicum setting to improve the student experience and understanding of antiracism practice in social work. As social work educators, we reflected on factors related to

practicum instructor attendance and the length and scope of the chosen book, and revised our strategy for engagement accordingly.

After reflection, facilitators concluded that the decreasing attendance rate reflected the lagging effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on practicum instructors' capacity to incorporate one more activity or virtual meeting into their lives. When the book discussion kick-off event occurred in September 2021, social workers in most practice settings around the globe were experiencing acute stress reactions and moral injury (Johnson et al., 2021; Walton et al., 2020), both personally and professionally. The effects of these issues on participant attendance may have been compounded by the fact that the book discussion group was launched four months after the book was initially introduced at the appreciation day event. This implementation timing may have failed to capitalize on the excitement practicum instructors felt at the appreciation day event, when many registered for the book group. Still, we cannot ignore that the high registration numbers for the book group reflect practicum instructors' interest in joining social work educators to perform critical self-reflection work.

The facilitators also speculate that the length and scope of the book may have deterred some participants from continuing to participate. Written by the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in journalism, *Caste* is a 496-page nonfiction book that explores what Wilkerson's website (2020) calls "the structure of an unspoken system of human ranking...[that] reveals how our lives are still restricted by what divided us centuries ago." The content is heavy and powerful. Practicum instructors may not have had the time and/or mental or emotional energy to read the book, and therefore may have felt uncomfortable joining the discussion group, even though facilitators encouraged practicum instructors to join regardless of whether they read the book chapters for each discussion date. In fact, the facilitator's discussion guide (see Appendix) specifically includes a review of key elements or terms from the assigned chapters and opportunities for dialogue to pursue even if participants have not completed the readings. However, it is understandable that some practicum instructors may have preferred not to show up in a professional space feeling unprepared. Notwithstanding these barriers to attendance and engagement, the book discussion group enhanced practicum instructors' knowledge of antiracist social work practice and opened up new discussions between practicum instructors and students on topics related to race, power, privilege, and positionality.

Further, in light of feedback and self-reflection, facilitators have modified this model by introducing practicum instructors at the 2022 appreciation day event to the Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Professional Learning Community (JEDI PLC). JEDI PLC was developed by the practicum education faculty team for social work faculty and practicum instructors to discuss topics related to race and other dimensions of diversity, and to provide practicum instructors with a peer support network for

discussing case scenarios involving students. A JEDI PLC meeting is structured to improve participants' tolerance of discomfort when discussing topics related to racism, discrimination, oppression, and privilege. Members are encouraged to critically self-reflect through tiered dialogue activities that move from discussion in dyads, to small groups, to large groups (Onken et al., 2021), while discussion leaders seek to diffuse power differentials that may risk shutting down productive dialogue. This opportunity to engage with colleagues through structured discussion prompts in both large and small group dialogue allows participants to reflect on their own identities and lived experience, while also connecting with others engaged in this same process. Through this format, we found that participants were willing to be vulnerable and increase their capacity for authentic discussions about race and racism.

The learning objectives for the JEDI PLC are:

1. Name and explain at least three terms related to Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion.
2. Understand the different levels at which racism operates within systems and our roles in those systems.
3. Recognize opportunities within the instructor–student relationship for mutual reflection related to antiracist practice.
4. Create brave spaces in supervision for giving and receiving feedback related to field experiences.
5. Identify at least three actions that one can take to advance antiracism in our workplace, personal lives, and communities.

Beginning with the first meeting, two weeks after the 2022 appreciation day event, JEDI PLC meets virtually on the first Thursday of each month with no cost for participation. The group is designed for practicum instructors and practicum faculty to meet in a small group (no more than 15–20 participants) for dialogue. JEDI PLC meetings are held on a day that students are typically at their practicum setting, so the practicum education office sent students a letter asking students to give their practicum instructors space to attend the JEDI PLC meetings in private. Students were also made aware of what the JEDI PLC meetings were about, so they would know that this opportunity for practicum instructors to be in community with each other is an important step towards making the students' experiences in practicum more supportive. Initially, meetings were one hour long, but at the request of multiple participants, meetings were extended to 90 minutes as they continued through the academic year (the additional half hour was optional, and a contact hour was offered for the first hour only).

Lessons learned from the implementation of the book discussion group have contributed to the success of JEDI PLC (e.g., any reading materials such as articles or terms and definitions were limited to a few pages in length, and emphasized dialogue

when possible to encourage participant engagement). After piloting this professional learning community during summer 2022, its good attendance and evaluations encourage us to continue holding meetings throughout the 2022-23 academic year. Currently, JEDI PLC is being evaluated and improved, with plans to restart at the beginning of the 2023-24 academic year.

Conclusion

The Caste book discussion group and subsequent JEDI PLC meetings offered practicum instructors new opportunities for professional learning and growth. As social work professionals, participation in these groups encourages practicum instructors and social work faculty to engage in critical self-reflection to understand how antiracist social work pedagogy translates into antiracist practice. As student supervisors and mentors, practicum instructors benefit from acquiring the skills to bring antiracist principles to their work with students. These instructors create and gain opportunities to hold ongoing conversations about identity, power, and privilege, as well as opportunities to apply these concepts with the clients and communities served by the practicum agency. This learning process is mutually beneficial to practicum instructors, students, faculty, and the social work profession as a whole: Practicum instructors increase their knowledge and skills, students receive quality mentorship and opportunities for practice with a stronger antiracist focus, and practicum education programs continue to support our current and future social work workforce in advancing the core social justice mission of our profession.

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Appendix

Caste Book Discussion Guide

A Companion Document to the UNC School of Social Work
Caste Book Discussion Group for Practicum Instructors and Task Supervisors*

*This guide was originally developed by J.P. Przewoznik and modified by the UNC-CH Practicum Education Program.

This guide supports the discussion series for practicum instructors and task supervisors of the book *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson. The fall discussion series consists of three 60-minute virtual discussions open to all current field practicum instructors and task supervisors with the UNC School of Social Work. Each of the three discussions will follow agendas included in this guide in an effort to support everyone in making an informed decision about self-selecting into these conversations. Should you be unable to attend any of these discussions, please feel free to use this guide for your own processing of and self-reflection on this important text.

About the Discussion Series

These discussions will invite folks into dialogue that may feel challenging, upsetting, and/or triggering. You are encouraged to take care of yourself in whatever way feels right for you. The discussions will combine large and small group discussions, independent writing, and storytelling. While full participation will engender the richest discussion, no participant is required to engage in any conversations they feel unwilling or unable to engage in. Having said that, we encourage you to explore your growth edges and approach any feeling that might come up for you with curiosity.

We offer a few group agreements to guide us in our conversations:

- Use “I” statements
- Take space, make space
- Acknowledge intention while naming impact
- Commit to confidentiality—what is said here stays here, but what’s learned here leaves here
- Use folks’ correct names and pronouns
- We are all on a learning journey – have grace for ourselves and each other
- Avoid “in group” and coded language by explaining and unpacking acronyms

Discussion #1: Prologue, Part I, Part II

Opening:

- Setting the stage and contextualizing our learning
- Drop your name, pronouns, your geographic home, and a one-word impression of the book in the chat.

Discussion:

- Define Casteism
- Discuss the differences between Casteism and Racism
- Storytelling in small group:
 - Each person in a small group has 3 minutes to share their relationship to the concept of Caste as it relates to their own racial identity development. This activity includes no cross-talk and is intended to hold 3 minutes' worth of undisturbed space for each person.
- Large group discussion:
 - In what ways does Casteism feel like a more helpful descriptor to elucidate the harms we see enacted around us?

Closing:

- How are you feeling? What are you taking with you? What will you seek to learn more about? How has your internalization of today's conversation been informed by your own lived experience?

Discussion #2: Part III (The Eight Pillars of Caste), Part IV, Part V**Opening:**

- Setting the stage and contextualizing our learning
- Drop your name, pronouns, your geographic home, and a one-word impression of the book in the chat
- Revisit shared definitions

Discussion:

- Small and large group discussion:
 - Wilkerson suggests that intentional centuries-old processes of dehumanization have enabled the justification of acts of great cruelty. What is your understanding of the dehumanization process and share examples of how you witness this process playing out around you?

Closing:

- How are you feeling? What are you taking with you? What will you seek to learn more about? How has your internalization of today's conversation been informed by your own lived experience? How might you bring some of the themes of this book into your work with MSW students?

Discussion #3: Part VI, Part VII, Epilogue

Opening:

- Setting the stage and contextualizing our learning
- Drop your name, pronouns, your geographic home, and a one-word impression of the book in the chat
- Revisit shared definitions

Discussion:

- Small group discussions and large group share out:
 - How has the pandemic and recent public attention to the violence enacted by our criminal legal system shifted your understanding of the American caste system? What can you now see that was previously invisible to you?
- 10-minute independent free write and share out:
 - In what ways did learning about the lens and language of caste impact the way you feel about U.S. society and about the role social workers could and should play in the dismantling of harmful systems?

Closing

- How are you feeling? What are you taking with you? What will you seek to learn more about? How has your internalization of today's conversation been informed by your own lived experience? How might you bring some of the themes of this book into your work with MSW students?