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Integrating Practice Research into Social Work Field Education in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Given the increasing value placed on research among social work practitioners, and that field education is primarily responsible for the integration of social work values, knowledge, and practice, it is essential that research skills be incorporated into BSW and MSW field practica. In 2020, a team of faculty co-investigators and students explored the integration of research activities into Canadian BSW and MSW field practica through the review of online field education materials of all accredited programs. We make the argument that not only is it essential for professional social workers to receive training in practice research, but also that there is much room for us to integrate such research into field education. We begin with a review of the literature regarding social work student attitudes toward research, widely known to be hesitant and even hostile, before discussing the limited international literature (English and French) on the experience of integrating research into field education. After describing our methods, we then present our findings in terms of BSW and MSW programs at Canada's anglophone and francophone universities. We conclude with a discussion of the implications in terms of ways to increase the role of research in field practica.

KEYWORDS

Field education; applied research; student attitudes; social work; Canada

Recognition of the importance of understanding and engaging in research has increased among social workers, particularly those who actively practise from an evidence-informed stance. Practicing social workers may engage in research, for example, to evaluate practice, programs, or policy; conduct community needs assessments; or identify best practices reported in academic literature. The *CASW-ACTS*[1] *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (CASW-ACFTS, 2005) outline the responsibilities of social workers engaged in research, including the necessity to "observe the conventions of ethical scholarly inquiry when engaged in study and research" (6.1.2) and to "educate themselves, their students, and their colleagues about responsible research practices" (6.1.1).

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Practicing social workers have much to share with BSW and MSW students regarding applied research, even if they do not always conceptualize their practice as being research related.

As we discuss below, it currently is the norm that social work research courses incorporate field experiences into the curriculum – for example, by asking students to reflect on how what they are learning might apply to the setting or population of their field placement. However, it is less clear to what extent research is formally included in field education experiences. Given the increasing value placed on research by the CASW-ACTS and among social work practitioners, and given that field education is primarily responsible for the integration of social work values, knowledge, and skills, it is essential that research be incorporated into BSW and MSW field practica. Such integration can be achieved in a variety of ways. A range of research activities can be included in clinical or community field practica, or students can engage in research-focused field placements.

Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) is a partnership project that 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.[2] In 2020, a team of TFEL co-investigators and students explored the integration of research activities and projects into BSW and MSW field practica in Canada through the review of all official field education materials on the websites of CASWE-ACFTS[3] accredited programs. Two students, Noble from Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN)'s BSW program, and Finlay-Roy from McGill University's MSW program, were intimately involved in each stage of this research.

In this article, we share the results of this enquiry, making the argument that not only is it essential for professional social workers to receive training in practice research, but also that there is room for us to integrate such research into field education. We begin with a review of the literature regarding social work student attitudes toward research, widely known to be hesitant and even hostile, before discussing the limited international literature (English and French) on the experience of integrating research into field education. After describing our methods, we then present our findings regarding the websites of all CASWE-ACFTS accredited BSW and MSW programs in Canada's anglophone and francophone universities. We conclude with a discussion of the implications, including recommendations for increasing the role of research in field practica as well as suggestions for future research.

Review of the literature

Student attitudes toward research

What social work students believe and how they feel about research fundamentally impact their experience as learners and their development as active researchers. Student studies show that they are dominated by ambivalence, anxiety, discomfort, and disinterest (Adam et al., 2004; Cameron & Este, 2008; Chakradhar, 2018; Chilvers et al., 2012; Holbrook & Chen, 2017; MacIntyre & Paul, 2013; Neden et al., 2018; Vallet, 2019; Zuchowski et al., 2020). According to Adam et al, "Research is the curricular content area that evokes the greatest amount of anxiety and the least sense of confidence among social work students" (Adam et al., 2004, p. 2). Given the range of negative feelings and attitudes experienced by students, it is no surprise that "making the step from education and practice into research is the key challenge for many students" (Phillips et al., 2012, p. 788).

The uneasy relationship between social work students and their engagement in research is fueled by a professional climate in which the importance of research and evidence-informed practice is emphasized, yet most social workers feel uncomfortable and inadequately prepared to understand or engage in research (Cameron & Este, 2008; Chakradhar, 2018; Chaudet, 2011; Chilvers et al., 2012; Holbrook & Chen, 2017; Maidment et al., 2011; Neden et al., 2018). Student aversion to engaging in research carries into the profession where practitioners often lack the skill and motivation to incorporate research in their practice (Adam et al., 2004; Cameron & Este, 2008; Chilvers et al., 2012; MacIntyre & Paul, 2013; Maidment et al., 2011; Zuchowski et al., 2020). Negative attitudes about research, coupled with the difficulty of comprehending the connection between research and practice (Cameron & Este, 2008; Neden et al., 2018), frequently result in students and practitioners who are less likely to integrate research into practice.

Practicing social workers, as mentors and field instructors, are reluctant to engage with students to integrate research projects into field education learning opportunities (Chilvers et al., 2012; Maidment et al., 2011; Zuchowski et al., 2020), and often feel unprepared to engage in applied research, even when urged to do so by their professional associations, schools and regulators (Chaudet, 2011). When social workers are uncomfortable integrating research into their practice, the pool of potential mentors and educators able to engage student learners becomes limited, perpetuating the disconnection between research and practice.

It is this disconnection between research and practice that necessitates the exploration of alternative methods of engaging students in research, and in providing tools and resources to alleviate the professional discomfort currently experienced by practitioners in this arena.

Integrating research into field practica

There is a fair degree of unanimity in the literature that research is essential to skilled social work practice. Cameron and Este summarize it well:

> Research is an essential component in social work as a means of furthering our understanding of the context in which we work, and as a means of fostering the development of the professional body of knowledge for social work and the provision of optimal care/service to our clients. (Cameron & Este, 2008, p. 404)

As such, many scholars concur that it is important to provide students with a wide range of opportunities to engage in practice research, including through integrating research into field practica and other forms of experiential learning (Baralonga, 2018; Cameron & Este, 2008; Chakradhar, 2018; Chilvers et al., 2012; Fraga-Levivier & Tourrilhes, 2012; Hewson et al., 2010; Holbrook & Chen, 2017; Maidment et al., 2011; Rubin et al., 2010; Svoboda et al., 2013; Tourrilhes, 2018; Vallet, 2019; Walsh et al., 2019; Whipple et al., 2015; Wulf-Andersen et al., 2013; Zuchowski et al., 2020). As MacIntyre and Paul tell us, "the hands-on experience of researching practice issues 'brings research alive' for students" (MacIntyre & Paul, 2013, p. 694).

Effective engagement in research and research activities in field practica requires "the engagement of host agencies, field educators, students, and academic staff in a collaborative process focused on developing research knowledge and skills" (Chilvers et al., 2012, p. 36). A review of the literature assessing how best to support such integration of research into field education suggests that student success is facilitated by:

- adequate preparation (e.g., tutorials for students and field instructors);
- availability of community-based or university-based research projects;
- goodness of fit between the practicum and the research project (e.g., clear research questions, achievable tasks, realistic timelines);
- material (e.g., computers, software, research tools) and professional (peer, field instructor, academic) support for students;
- collaborative knowledge production; and
- regular supervision and evaluation (Cameron & Este, 2008; Chilvers et al., 2012; Flanagan & Wilson, 2018; Hewson et al., 2010; Maidment et al., 2011; Neden et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2019; Whipple et al., 2015; Wulf-Andersen et al., 2013; Zuchowski et al., 2020).

The integration of research into field education can be achieved in a variety of ways, including blending research activities into traditional direct practice or community-based field practica or providing research-focused placements. Hewson et al. (2010) and Walsh et al. (2019) describe research-based field practica, wherein the primary objectives are to provide opportunities to:

- develop a range of research knowledge and skills;
- integrate cognitive, affective, relational, and experiential learning;
- challenge negative stereotypes about research;
- generate passion and excitement for practice research;
- integrate research theory and methods with social work practice;
- experience community-based research; and
- prepare students to integrate research into their future practice as social workers.

Walsh et al. (2019) and Hewson et al. (2010) also note that, in addition to fulfilling the above-noted objectives, students who participated in such research-focused placements reported improvement in:

- writing;
- interviewing;
- data collection and analysis;
- project management;
- preparing and delivering presentations;
- building stronger resumes;
- improving their access to graduate education; and
- developing marketable skills for future careers.

Whether integrating research into field practica or engaging in research-focused placements, students are presented opportunities to develop confidence and competence in research skills, and draw links between research and practice (Baralonga, 2018; Chilvers et al., 2012; Fraga-Levivier & Tourrilhes, 2012; Holbrook & Chen, 2017; Maidment et al., 2011; Neden et al., 2018; Vallet, 2019; Walsh et al., 2019; Zuchowski et al., 2020).

> Application of research concepts to the field practicum setting can strengthen students' comprehension of course content as well as deepen their understanding of the field agency context. Ultimately, these approaches have the potential to enhance the connection between research and practice. (Holbrook & Chen, 2017, p. 72)

In bridging the gap between practice and research:

> students identified a wide range of learning emerging from the integration of research activity into clinical practice. This included learning how evidence can be influential as a conduit for introducing change to an organisation and how organisational culture can limit that potential. (Neden et al., 2018, p. 10)

Integrating research into field practica (and other forms of experiential learning) positively improves students' relationships with research and encourages future engagement in research (Chakradhar, 2018; Chilvers et al., 2012; Hewson et al., 2010; Holbrook & Chen, 2017; Maidment et al., 2011; Neden

et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2019; Whipple et al., 2015; Zuchowski et al., 2020). In their examination of an initiative to teach social work research through student-community partnerships, Chakradhar reports that "the shift from fear and bewilderment to relief and excitement in the learning and skill-building accomplished by the students, as well as a sense of empowerment in being able to empower agencies, was evident" (Chakradhar, 2018, p. 438). In fact, students whose field practica include research activities report positive learning experiences and deepened engagement through experiential learning (Baralonga, 2018; Fraga-Levivier & Tourrilhes, 2012; Hewson et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2019). Further, students who engage in research activities in their practica are more likely to be engaged in research as social workers upon graduation (Chilvers et al., 2012; Svoboda et al., 2013) and to apply critical thinking skills in their practice (Tourrilhes, 2018).

It is important to note that, while most applications of research into field practica focus on the transfer of traditional research components and activities into the field setting, there are initiatives that seek to bring research and practice together in more integrative ways. One such effort, titled *Research As Daily Practice* (St.George et al., 2015; Wulff & St. George, 2014), seeks to present practice itself as a research process. Therefore, doing practice becomes conceptualized as doing research. The steps involved in doing research coincide with the steps of doing practice. This places social workers and other practitioners at the center of studying their own work within their practice skill sets. This alternative to learning discrete research skills fundamentally alters social workers' approach to research and provides another way of integrating research into field education.

Methodology

The goals of this TFEL sub-project included: 1) identifying current models of integrating research and research activities into BSW and MSW field practica in CASWE-ACFTS accredited programs; 2) identifying relevant issues and best practices, as described in the literature; and 3) presenting recommendations for better integrating practice research into social work field education. The project addressed one primary research question: *Do Canadian social work programs provide opportunities for BSW and MSW students to engage in research projects and/or research activities during field practica?*

Prior to undertaking the scan, we gathered a list of CASWE-ACFTS accredited social work education programs and categorized the programs by region and language. We reviewed the CASWE-ACFTS Standards for Accreditation (2014) in order to understand the expectations of field education and the integration of research into undergraduate and graduate social work education in Canada. These procedures received ethical approval from three universities: MUN, McGill and the University of Calgary.

Table 1. CASWE-ACFTS accredited social work programs.

	Anglophone	Francophone	Total
BSW programs	30	11	41
MSW programs	23	10	33
Universities	32	11	43

The next stage of the investigation, undertaken between May and August 2020, involved a scan of the websites of all CASWE-ACFTS accredited programs (Table 1), seeking information addressing the integration of research activities and projects into BSW and MSW field practica. Most Canadian schools of social work refer their students to their websites for the most up-to-date information on field education policies and regulations, so websites are a good reflection of schools' intentions to include research in field practica and the information is readily available to both students and field instructors. Data were gathered from the websites of all 30 BSW and 23 MSW programs at the 32 anglophone universities with CASWE-ACFTS accredited programs. Data also were gathered from the websites of all 11 BSW and 10 MSW programs at the 11 francophone universities with CASWE-ACFTS accredited programs, eight of which are located in the province of Quebec. (We distinguish the anglophone and francophone universities due to their differing historical and cultural frameworks, which sometimes lead to different approaches to teaching and learning.)

Websites offered information on BSW and MSW curricula, as well as field policies, guidelines, and descriptions of field practica. This information was analyzed and coded according to our research spreadsheet (detailed in the summary tables in the results section) in order to document whether research was included in learning objectives for both the overall BSW or MSW program, and, for field practica. The anglophone data and coding was reviewed by four authors, while the francophone data and coding was reviewed by the two bilingual authors. We then reviewed the spreadsheets and summary tables together, and addressed the challenges encountered in coding. This process resulted in clarification of the questions asked of the data and the processes for analysis.

Findings: opportunities for BSW and MSW students

Field education requirements in CASWE-ACFTS accredited social work programs

Field education is considered a central component of social work education; indeed, the integration of knowledge, values and skills in the context of field education is a critical and distinctive aspect of social work education. The purpose of field education is to connect the theoretical/conceptual

contributions of the academic setting with the practice setting, enabling the student to acquire practice skills that reflect the learning objectives for students identified in the Standards (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014, p. 14). In programs that offer an MSW to students who have completed a BSW, MSW students are required to complete at least 450 hours of field education – or a thesis or memoire in addition to or in place of a field practicum. In programs that offer an MSW to students who have **not** completed a BSW (but have completed a different degree), MSW students in their foundation year (which in effect covers material from the BSW) must complete a 450 hour practicum – in addition to the regular expectation of an MSW program – at least 450 hours of field education – or a thesis or memoire in addition to or in place of a field practicum.

Research within BSW field education

Research learning objectives are absent from more than half of online Canadian BSW programs, despite the fact that the CASWE-ACFTS (2014) list *Engage in Research* (3.1; #6) as a Core Learning Objective for BSW students.[4] Of the 30 anglophone BSW programs reviewed, only 12 (40%) included research skills in their online *BSW program objectives*. This is consistent with the 11 francophone BSW programs reviewed, where only five (45%) included research skills in their online BSW program objectives.

On a more positive note, 26 (87%) anglophone BSW programs and 11 (100%) francophone BSW programs list a *mandatory research course*.[5] Ten (33%) anglophone programs and five (45%) francophone programs indicate that they offer a research course before the first practicum; 22 (73%) anglophone programs and seven (64%) francophone programs state it comes before or concurrent with the second practicum.[6]

Where *expected outcomes for field education* were available online (21/30 anglophone programs), research or research skills were listed in 14 (67%). In contrast, 10 of 11 francophone programs listed expected outcomes for field education, yet only one (10%) of those 10 francophone programs named research skills. Where field education learning objectives were available online (11/30 anglophone programs), research skills were listed in 10 (91%). While all 11 francophone programs named learning objectives for field education, only six (55%) referred to research skills.

Answers to these questions are summarized below for both anglophone (Table 2) and francophone (Table 3) BSW programs.

Table 2. Anglophone BSW program summary.

	Yes	No	Un-known	N/A
Are research skills included in the BSW program objectives?	12 (40%)	18 (60%)	0	0
Is there one practicum?	1 (3%)	29 (97%)	0	0
Are there two practica?	27 (90%)	3 (10%)	0	0
Is a social work research course mandatory?	26 (87%)	3 (10%)	1 (3%)	0
Is a social work research course completed prior to the first field practicum?	10 (33%)	19 (63%)	1 (3%)	0
Is a social work research course completed prior to the second field practicum?	22 (76%)	6 (21%)	1 (3%)	1
Is a Field Manual online?	19 (63%)	11 (37%)	0	0
If a field manual is not online, are details regarding field covered in the student manual or on the website?	3 (27%)	8 (73%)	0	19
Are details regarding field practica online?	22 (73%)	8 (27%)	0	0
If expected outcomes for field are online, are research skills included as expected outcomes?	14 (67%)	7 (33%)	0	9
Are learning objectives for field online?	11 (37%)	19 (63%)	0	0
Do learning objectives include research/research skills?	10 (91%)	1 (9%)	0	19

Table 3. Francophone BSW program summary.

	Yes	No	Un-known	N/A
Are research skills included in the BSW program objectives?	6 (55%)	5 (45%)	0	0
Is there one practicum?	0	11 (100%)	0	0
Are there two practica?	8 (73%)	3 (27%)	0	0
Is a social work research course mandatory?	11 (100%)	0	0	0
Is a social work research course completed prior to the first field practicum?	5 (45%)	2 (18%)	4 (36%)	0
Is a social work research course completed prior to the second field practicum?	7 (64%)	0	4 (36%)	0
Is a Field Manual online?	8 (73%)	3 (27%)	0	0
If a field manual is not online, are details regarding field covered in the student manual or on the website?	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	0	8
Are details regarding field practica online?	10 (91%)	1 (9%)		
If expected outcomes for field are online, are research skills included as expected outcomes?	1 (9%)	9 (82%)	1 (9%)	0
Are learning objectives for field online?	11 (100%)	0	0	0
Do learning objectives include research/research skills?	6 (55%)	5 (45%)	0	0

Research within MSW field education

Congruent with the CASWE-ACFTS (2014) Core Learning Objective for MSW students, *Engage in Research* (3.1; #6), all 23 anglophone and all 10 francophone CASWE-ACFTS accredited MSW programs included a *mandatory research course*. Sixteen (70%) anglophone programs offered an optional *thesis (independent, original research project, often with empirical data collection)*, while two (20%) francophone programs required a mandatory thesis and eight (80%) offered an optional thesis. In 11 (48%) anglophone

programs, *non-thesis* students were required to complete a research internship (involvement as an assistant in a project led by others) or independent study project (more circumscribed than a thesis, often literature-based). In contrast, in all eight (100%) francophone programs where a thesis is optional, non-thesis students were required to complete a research internship, research project, or an applied field project (contextualizing their field project within the relevant literature). Four (25%) of the anglophone programs offering a thesis required thesis students to complete a field practicum, whereas only one (10%) of the francophone programs required thesis students to do so.

Where *learning objectives* for field education were available online (10/23 anglophone programs), research or research skills were listed in nine (90%). In contrast, of the francophone programs that listed learning objectives for field education (7/10), three (43%) included research or research skills.

Answers to these questions are summarized below for both anglophone (Table 4) and francophone (Table 5) MSW programs.

Comparison of francophone and anglophone BSW and MSW programs

The scans of CASWE-ACFTS accredited BSW and MSW programs revealed both similarities and differences in how francophone and anglophone social work education programs present opportunities for students to engage in research and research activities, particularly within the realm of field education.

Less than half of anglophone and francophone BSW programs included research skills in their descriptions of program objectives. Yet 87% of anglophone BSW programs, and 100% of francophone BSW and MSW programs (and anglophone MSW programs) require completion of a social work research course.

Table 4. Anglophone MSW programs.

	Yes	No	Unknown	N/A
Does the program include a thesis (mandatory or optional)?	16 (70%)	7 (30%)	0	0
If the program offers a thesis, is it mandatory?	0	16 (100%)	0	7
Are thesis students required to complete a field practicum?	4 (25%)	12 (75%)	0	7
Are non-thesis students required to complete a research internship/project?	11 (48%)	12 (52%)	0	0
Is there an optional research internship/project for non-thesis students?	2 (9%)	21 (91%)	0	0
Are non-thesis students required to complete a practicum, if they complete a research internship/project?	23 (100%)	0	0	0
Is a social work research course mandatory?	23 (100%)	0	0	0
Is a social work research course completed prior to the field practicum?	9 (75%)	3 (25%)	11	0
Is a field manual online?	12 (52%)	11 (48%)	0	0
If a field manual is not online, are details regarding field covered in the student manual or website?	8 (73%)	3 (27%)	0	12
Are details regarding field practica online?	20 (87%)	3 (13%)	0	0
Are learning objectives for field online?	10 (43%)	13 (57%)	0	0
If learning objectives for field are online, do they include research/research skills?	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	0	13

Table 5. Francophone MSW programs.

	Yes	No	Un-known	N/A
Does the program include a thesis (mandatory or optional)?	10 (100%)	0	0	0
If the program offers a thesis, is it mandatory?	2 (20%)	8 (80%)	0	0
Are thesis students required to complete a field practicum?	1 (10%)	9 (90%)	0	0
Are non-thesis students required to complete a research internship/project?	2 (25%)	6 (75%)	0	2
Are non-thesis students required to complete a field project?	6 (100%)	0	0	4
Is there an optional research internship/project for non-thesis students?	0	8 (100%)	0	2
Are non-thesis students required to complete a practicum, if they complete a research internship/project?	0	0	0	10
Is a social work research course mandatory?	10 (100%)	0	0	0
Is a social work research course completed prior to the field practicum?	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	2
Is a field manual online?	2 (29%)	5 (71%)	0	3
If a field manual is not online, are details regarding field covered in the student manual or website?	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	0	5
Are details regarding field practica online?	6 (86%)	1 (14%)	0	3
Are learning objectives for field online?	7 (100%)	0	0	3
If learning objectives for field are online, do they include research/research skills?	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	0	3

At the MSW level, 70% of anglophone programs offer an optional thesis, while all of the francophone programs include a mandatory (20%) or optional (80%) thesis. In 48% of anglophone programs, non-thesis students were required to complete a research internship or project. In contrast, in all (100%) of the francophone programs offering an optional thesis, non-thesis students were required to complete a research internship or a field research project.

Where field practica learning objectives were listed online, 91% of anglophone BSW and 90% of anglophone MSW programs listed research or research skills, in contrast to 55% of francophone BSW programs and 43% of francophone MSW programs. It would seem that francophone schools more often emphasize the development of social work research skills through required theses or independent study projects (mémoires), which may be parallel to their field practica, rather than through specific field placement requirements.

Research activities and skills as learning objectives

A review of field education manuals, learning contracts, and evaluation forms, available on the websites of anglophone CASWE-ACFTS accredited social work programs, produced a variety of examples of BSW and MSW learning objectives; research activities and skills; BSW and MSW research-focused field practica; and MSW research internships.[7]

Field educators, practicum instructors, and students can incorporate these research-based learning activities into BSW and MSW field education learning contracts. They also may draw inspiration from the learning contracts of BSW and MSW research-focused field practica and other research internships. These tools can be implemented to enhance opportunities for students in field practica to develop and enhance research values, knowledge, and skills, taking care to comply with both university and agency-based ethical requirements for research involving human subjects.

Discussion and recommendations

Possessing the knowledge and ability to understand and practice research is a fundamental expectation for professional social workers. Yet it can be challenging, through course work alone, to develop applied research skills and to nurture a meaningful relationship between research and practice. "Advocates of experiential learning posit that hands-on activities are the most effective way of helping students not only master content and skills but also navigate the socialization process" (Svoboda et al., 2013, p. 663). As such, it is essential that classroom learning be paired with experiential learning, wherein students can develop, enhance, and integrate research skills into their practice (Cameron & Este, 2008; Chakradhar, 2018; Chilvers et al., 2012; Holbrook & Chen, 2017; Maidment et al., 2011; Rubin et al., 2010; Svoboda et al., 2013; Whipple et al., 2015; Wulf-Andersen et al., 2013).

Given that field education is the cornerstone of social work education, wherein social work values, knowledge, and skills are integrated through applied learning, practice, and supervision/mentoring, BSW and MSW field practica provide an important opportunity for the integration of research activities and/or projects – particularly since many placements typically include unrecognized research activities, such as practice evaluation, needs assessments, or identification of resources. As extolled by Zuchowski et al. (in a systematic review of research placements for students in a variety of professional degrees), "research placements could become an integral and valued part of the field education experience for all students" (Zuchowski et al., 2020, p. 60).

Recognizing that both social work students and practitioners (including field instructors) may be reluctant to engage in research activities (Cameron & Este, 2008; Chakradhar, 2018; Chilvers et al., 2012; Holbrook & Chen, 2017; Maidment et al., 2011; Neden et al., 2018; Zuchowski et al., 2020), it is important that field educators be encouraged and supported in integrating research and learning However, doing so necessitates the exploration and use of clear and consistent language around practice research, paired with a shared understanding of what constitutes research (including research projects,

activities, and skills), and how research can be integrated into practice opportunities in social work education (e.g., field education, research internships, experiential learning opportunities).

Visibility of research activities on program websites

Prospective and current post-secondary students draw much of their information from university and program-specific websites. Thus, what is or is not visible on websites influences the programs to which prospective students apply for undergraduate and graduate social work education. Website content also impacts the choices that current students make about their programs of study, including the focus of and learning activities throughout their BSW and MSW field practica.

How social work programs communicate information about practice research in field education to students, including via websites and field manuals, significantly impacts students' feelings about, attitudes toward, perceptions of, and willingness to engage in research, as well. If research activities are not visible as learning opportunities in posted field education materials, students may not be aware of or encouraged to include research projects or activities among their field practica learning opportunities. Hence, clear and consistent communication regarding the value of practice research and the availability of research-based learning opportunities during field practica can facilitate student learning through engagement in research projects and activities. And, of course, reinforcement of this information through classes, workshops, and direct discussions is always helpful.

Differences in francophone and anglophone programs

There appears to be a greater focus on research among field practica in anglophone than in francophone programs, as evidenced by the research skills listed online as field practica learning objectives, and as expected outcomes in field evaluation forms. At the MSW level, however, there appears to a greater focus on the mandatory incorporation of practice research in francophone programs than anglophone programs. This difference is most visible in the percentage of francophone programs offering both required and optional theses, and those requiring mandatory research internships, research schemes, or field research projects for non-thesis students. Given that in most francophone MSW programs, thesis students are not required to complete field practica, and that all MSW students are required to complete either theses or research internships/projects, francophone programs may not see the need to explicitly integrate research activities into MSW field education (although, of course, applied practice research is likely occuring within these settings). These francophone MSW findings are consistent with those of Rubin et al. (2010), who, in a scan of

American social work programs, found that BSW students are more likely than MSW students to complete research as part of their field practica.

Differences between BSW and MSW programs

In contrast to the findings of Rubin et al. (2010), this project found that, particularly in anglophone programs, there are more opportunities to engage in research activities and projects at the MSW level than at a BSW level. However, none of those opportunities are as visible as they could be in either BSW or MSW field education materials.

As Rubin and colleagues state, "Clearly there is an expectation that students bring some knowledge from their undergraduate study that they can build on through their graduate study" (Rubin et al., 2010, p. 52). As such, if BSW students are not exposed to or engaged in applied practice research, they are not likely to possess the foundational expertise to engage in research as graduate students or as practicing social workers. This lack of foundational knowledge and skills also will likely inhibit them in their role as field instructors from engaging with and mentoring students in practice research in a field practicum.

Students require access to research activities that correspond to their particular stage of learning within their social work education program. Whether integrating research into field practica or designing research-focused placements, the learning objectives and activities need to be "tailored to meet individual needs, building from the skill level possessed by each student – challenging those who already have certain skills and working to develop skills for those students with limited experience" (Hewson et al., 2010, p. 10). Whipple and colleagues add, "Effective teachers need to get to know how to engage students actively in activities appropriate to the learning outcomes." (Whipple et al., 2015, p. 407) As outlined in the CASWE-ACFTS Standards for Accreditation (2014), BSW students are expected to possess a foundational understanding of research, whereas MSW students are expected to possess more advanced knowledge and skills. Bearing this in mind, it is important to develop, enhance, support, and make visible opportunities to engage in research activities and projects in both BSW and MSW field practica, in francophone and in anglophone programs.

Recommendations for integrating research and research activities into field practica

Based on the scan of CASWE-ACFTS accredited anglophone and francophone BSW and MSW websites, and the review of relevant literature, it appears that there is plenty of room to further incorporate conscious engagement in practice-oriented research in Canadian BSW and MSW field education. As such, we recommend that programs:

- work with field instructors to better identify actual and potential opportunities to develop applied research skills within field settings;
- integrate research activities and projects into BSW and MSW field practica;
- incorporate research activities and skills into learning objectives in field manuals, learning contracts, and evaluation forms;
- design research activities and projects, in partnership with field agencies, at a level consistent with student learning, to develop and enhance research values, knowledge, and skills among students who will also benefit field agencies;
- present clear and consistent language to describe practice research;
- integrate a shared understanding of what constitutes research (including research projects, project components, and activities);
- clearly and consistently communicate (via program websites, field education manuals and forms, field seminars, classroom courses) to students the value of practice research, and the availability of applied research learning opportunities in BSW and MSW field practica;
- encourage, support, and mentor field instructors to help them integrate practice research and learning into field practica in a manner that will nurture the development and application of research expertise; and
- develop, implement, and support a range of opportunities for students to integrate research into their practice (e.g., incorporate research into direct practice and community field practica, research-focused field settings, internships, research projects, and community engagement).

Challenges, limitations, and opportunities

It is essential to recognize that the data collected through this project reflects the information available on the websites of the CASWE-ACFTS accredited francophone and anglophone BSW and MSW programs at a particular moment in time (May through August 2020). Not all university websites provide comprehensive or complete information about their social work programs or about field education. Further, the data do not provide a complete picture of the student experience of field education or of how research is integrated into field practica. The data, however, do provide a "snapshot in time" via program websites of the visibility and invisibility of the integration of practice research in field education. Websites are a primary source of information for both students and field instructors about program requirements and, as such, they generally do provide a good measure of expectations for field education, if not the actual outcomes.

In conducting the literature review, we found that only a limited number of articles specifically addressed the integration of research into fieldwork. Related articles addressed student attitudes toward research, increasing student engagement in research, and the use of various forms of experiential

learning to enhance student engagement in research. Engaging in research during field practica, when addressed, was generally positioned as an exception, with the emphasis usually on direct practice in field education.

In reviewing field education materials on the websites of CASWE-ACFTS accredited programs, we used the term "research" to describe a variety of activities, some of which may not typically be defined as research per se. For example, some field education materials used the term "research," where "review" would have provided a more apt description (e.g., students are expected to "research potential field placements" or "identify, research, and, where possible, visit agencies/organizations relevant to the client population"). Other times, research components, skills, or activities, including literature reviews, assessments, and focus groups, were not identified as "research." Thus, "research" and "research activities" were defined for the context of this project, and used as inclusion/exclusion criteria. As such, it is possible that errors occurred in determining which data were included and excluded.

The francophone and anglophone programs were examined separately, primarily because the student and co-investigator at MUN were not bilingual. Moreover, the data from the websites were not analyzed by region, program size or focus, or any other criteria. Future research could explore how program differences impact the integration of practice research into field education. In addition, given the commitments toward decolonization made by CASWE-ACFTS, Canadian universities, and their social work programs, it is timely to explore specifically how Indigenous-focused programs integrate practice research into field education, and how this focus can be delivered in a culturally relevant and decolonized manner.

Exploring the perspectives and experiences of students, field instructors, and field educators through primary data collection also would likely broaden and deepen our understanding of the integration of practice research in field education. Therefore, a comparative analysis across social work programs internationally would yield a more fulsome understanding of how practice research is integrated into field education beyond the Canadian context. What we present here is the beginning of such an enquiry.

Notes

1. Canadian Association of Social Workers – Association canadiennes des travailleurs sociaux: https://www.casw-acts.ca/en
2. The TFEL partnership (2019–2024) is supported through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's (SSHRC) Partnership Grant, with additional contributions from project partners.
3. Canadian Association for Social Work Education – Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social: https://caswe-acfts.ca/

4. Wherein:

   I. social work students acquire knowledge and skills to critique, apply, or participate in social work research;

   II. social work students at both levels of university education are prepared to apply social work knowledge, as well as knowledge from other disciplines, to advance professional practice, policy development, research, and service provision;

   III. MSW students acquire knowledge and skills in conducting social work research and competence in evaluating professional practices (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014, p. 11).
5. The 13% of anglophone BSW programs without a mandatory research course may respond to CASWE accreditation standards by including research skills transversally across courses.
6. The numbers for second practicum include those offered before the first practicum.
7. A more substantive review of learning objectives and activities will be published in a future paper.

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