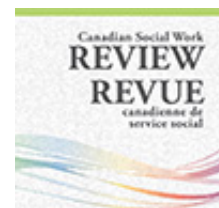


## Canadian Social Work Review Revue canadienne de service social



# TRANSFORMING FIELD EDUCATION: VOICES OF FIELD EDUCATORS IN CANADA

Julie L. Drolet, Liz Tettman, Tejika Chand, Hanna Hameline, Vibha Kaushik, Kamal Khatiwada, Shannon Klassen, Emmanuel Chilanga, Sheri M. McConnell, Eileen McKee, David Nicholas and Christine A. Walsh

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### Article abstract

Social work field educators are facing new challenges and opportunities that require innovative approaches to transform social work field education. Field education is critical to student learning, and in turn, social work practice. In Canada, field education is in crisis, due in part to growing social work student enrolments, government cutbacks to post-secondary education, limited resources, and organizational restructuring, all of which contribute to a reduced number of field placements in agency settings. The objective of this study is to respond to this situation by engaging field educators to better understand what is needed to transform field education in Canada. Researchers asked three to five questions in 31 focus groups discussion sessions with field educators nationally. The responses were coded using thematic analysis. This article presents three themes that are critical to the transformation of field education: innovative practices for field education, impacts of COVID-19, and decolonization of field education. The implications and recommendations call on the collaboration of field education stakeholders across Canada to expand understanding about the critical role of field education in organizations and the profession, and in turn, nurture new field learning opportunities.

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# TRANSFORMING FIELD EDUCATION: VOICES OF FIELD EDUCATORS IN CANADA

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**Abstract:** Social work field educators are facing new challenges and opportunities that require innovative approaches to transform social

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work field education. Field education is critical to student learning, and in turn, social work practice. In Canada, field education is in crisis, due in part to growing social work student enrolments, government cutbacks to post-secondary education, limited resources, and organizational restructuring, all of which contribute to a reduced number of field placements in agency settings. The objective of this study is to respond to this situation by engaging field educators to better understand what is needed to transform field education in Canada. Researchers asked three to five questions in 31 focus groups discussion sessions with field educators nationally. The responses were coded using thematic analysis. This article presents three themes that are critical to the transformation of field education: innovative practices for field education, impacts of COVID-19, and decolonization of field education. The implications and recommendations call on the collaboration of field education stakeholders across Canada to expand understanding about the critical role of field education in organizations and the profession, and in turn, nurture new field learning opportunities.

**Keywords:** field education, innovation, COVID-19, student preparedness, decolonization

**Abstré :** Le personnel responsable de la formation pratique en travail social est confronté à de nouveaux défis et à de nouvelles possibilités qui nécessitent des approches innovantes pour transformer la formation pratique en travail social. La formation pratique est essentielle à l'apprentissage des étudiant(e)s et, par conséquent, à la pratique du travail social. Au Canada, la formation pratique est en crise, en partie à cause de l'augmentation du nombre d'étudiant(e)s en travail social, des coupures budgétaires dans l'enseignement post-secondaire, des ressources limitées et de la restructuration organisationnelle, tous des facteurs qui contribuent à réduire le nombre de stages dans les services sociaux. L'objectif de cette étude est de répondre à cette situation en engageant le personnel responsable de la formation pratique afin de mieux comprendre ce qui est nécessaire pour transformer la formation pratique au Canada. Les chercheur(e)s ont posé trois à cinq questions dans le cadre de 31 groupes de discussion avec des professionnel(le)s responsables de la formation pratique en travail social au niveau national. Les réponses ont été codées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique. Cet article présente trois thèmes essentiels à la transformation de la formation pratique : les pratiques innovantes pour la formation pratique, les impacts de la COVID-19 et la décolonisation de la formation pratique. Les implications et les recommandations appellent à la collaboration des acteurs(rices) de la formation pratique à travers le Canada afin de mieux comprendre le rôle essentiel de la formation pratique dans les

organisations et la profession et, en retour, de favoriser de nouvelles possibilités d'apprentissage sur le terrain.

**Mots-clés :** formation pratique, innovation, COVID-19, niveau de préparation des étudiant(e)s, décolonisation

IN CANADA, SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION is in a state of crisis (Ayala et al., 2018b; Bogo, 2015). Many social work programs are experiencing significant challenges due to a lack of resources, difficulties in staff retention, increased student enrollments, and financial cutbacks that have impacted educational institutions and social work agencies (Ayala et al., 2018a; Macdonald, 2013; McConnell, 2016). These challenges are a cause for concern, as field education is a crucial aspect of social work education and enables students to gain valuable experience through direct practice (Ayala et al., 2018a). In the domain of field education research, there are few studies of Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices (Clark & Drolet, 2014). Extant literature supports Indigenous intersectionality in field education, to create a culturally rich and safe environment for social work students (Clark & Drolet, 2014).

This article reports on a research project designed to better understand how to transform social work field education in light of the current challenges experienced in Canadian social work education programs. The perspectives of field educators — including field education coordinators and directors, field staff, field instructors, and faculty and field liaisons — are considered given their roles and responsibilities in the field. This study was guided by the following research question: What is needed to transform social work field education in Canada? The research was conducted by members of the Transforming the Field Education (TFEL) partnership. 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 promising and wise field education practices, and improving the integration of research and practice in field education (Walsh et al., 2022).

Field educators across Canada participated in focus group discussions, providing valuable information to inform the development of more innovative, effective, and sustainable models of social work field education. While participants provided numerous ways to transform field education, the findings in this article present three themes related to transforming field education: innovative practices for field education, impacts of COVID-19, and decolonization of field education. The implications and recommendations of the study call on the collaboration of field education stakeholders to expand understanding of the critical role of field education in the profession, and in turn, nurture new field learning opportunities.

## Literature review

A great deal has been written in recent years about the challenges faced by social work field education programs and field agencies that provide placements for students (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; Drolet et al., in press). One of the factors contributing to this need is an increasing resource scarcity faced by agencies and institutions while simultaneously trying to manage the growth in placement requests due to the higher numbers of students enrolled in social work education programmes (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Hardy et al., 2021). There also has been a reduced interest in supervising students by professionals in the field due to added workplace stress and demands (Hardy et al., 2021; McConnell, 2016). Decreased agency funding, often leading to reduced budgets, has left field instructors struggling with inadequate time, space, and staffing (Strang, 2021). Field instruction is viewed by some practitioners as a burden that leads to increased workloads and additional responsibility, without benefits such as added time or financial incentives (Cleak & Smith, 2012). All of this has led to difficulty in finding enough field instructors to accommodate the steadily increasing number of enrolled students who require placements.

Although many field instructors still choose to volunteer despite these challenges, others have felt that they are not properly supported throughout the field instruction experience (Hill et al., 2019). For example, Hill et al. (2019) found that field instructors believe that, in order to be effectively involved, they need a reduction in workload, their input to be taken seriously, less paperwork, more university support, and additional training opportunities and learning resources. Alongside the provision of incentives for field instructors, Hardy et al. (2021) suggest intentionally building collaborative, reciprocal relationships between agencies and institutions to both ensure field instructor retention and meet the needs of all stakeholders.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted social work field education by forcing institutions, field instructors, and students to adapt to new ways of fulfilling education requirements (Davis & Mirick, 2021). Innovative responses to the pandemic also provided opportunities for creative and alternative ways of conducting field placements, allowing for novel directions in field education to be pursued and tested. The pandemic allowed for and often required additional flexibility from both students and field instructors. Because it was often deemed unsafe to work in a face-to-face manner, many practica shifted online. This online shift allowed students with additional responsibilities to have a more flexible schedule that accommodated their needs more holistically (Melero et al., 2021). Consequently, students engaged in online group work, project-focused placements, macro-level placements, group-based supervision models, and other options (Morley & Clarke, 2020; Strang, 2021). In

terms of group-based supervision models, Cleak and Smith (2012) found a high degree of satisfaction for both field instructors and students when supervision is shared between multiple mentors.

Social work field education has been increasingly focused in recent years on the need for decolonization (Chilvers, 2022; Clark et al., 2010). In a qualitative study aimed at understanding decolonization in field education, Clark et al. (2010) found that having more representation and awareness integrated into the foundation of social work education positively influenced the decolonization process. This representation and awareness could be achieved by incorporating spirituality and ceremony into academic programs, inviting Elders to be involved in all aspects of field education, integrating anti-oppressive educational practices, providing relational supports for students, and implementing mandatory use of wellness plans (Clark et al., 2010). Despite having guidance as to what may work, the process of decolonizing social work field education is not without its challenges. For example, Chilvers (2022) found that the three largest barriers to decolonization were lack of support from agency management, workload pressures and competing demands, and feelings of marginalization and isolation within agencies.

Despite these advances, there is still a need for innovative, effective, and sustainable models of field education to meet current and future challenges. This study sought to solicit the ideas of field educators about what is needed to transform social work field education toward sustainable models in which all stakeholders can thrive in light of diverse challenges.

### **Conceptual framework**

The study utilizes three theoretical concepts to inform the transformational approaches employed: (a) inquiry-based learning, (b) transformational learning and research, and (c) Research As Daily Practice. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, inquiry-based learning encompasses a range of instructional practices that facilitate learning through student-driven and student-centred questions (Justice et al., 2007). This approach promotes deep understanding and high levels of integration through active engagement with content (Justice et al., 2007; Lundahl, 2008; Walsh et al., 2015). Mezirow's theory of transformational learning (1998, 2000) posits that in order to challenge one's own attitudes and beliefs, it is necessary to critically reflect on one's assumptions and those of others. The data is analyzed using the lens of inquiry-based learning and transformational approaches that align with the social work profession's mission, vision, and values, which are characterized by a change orientation, egalitarian relationships, accountability to service users, and wholistic engagement (Dominelli, 2005). Additionally, the concept of Research As Daily Practice is adopted to comprehend the integration of research and practice, in

which practitioners reflectively consider how to enhance their practice (St. George et al., 2015; Wulff & St. George, 2014). A transformative research approach allows for an action agenda to promote change in social work field education, serving as the foundation for this study.

## Methodology

### *Study design*

This was a qualitative research study using focus group discussions made up of field educators (including field education coordinators and directors, field staff, field instructors, and faculty and field liaisons). Focus groups were the most appropriate method to engage in extensive conversation with field educators to gain an in-depth understanding of field issues (Nyumba et al., 2018). The study was guided by the following research question: What is needed to transform social work field education in Canada? Based upon the research objective, a list of 24 questions was prepared as guidance for the focus group discussions, which were approved in advance by the research ethics board at [Name of institution]. Each focus group discussion included 3–5 discussion questions with a small group made up of individuals with a high level of expertise in field education.

### *Study context*

Social workers are regulated at a provincial or territorial level in Canada, with approximately 52,828 currently registered nationally (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2022). There are 44 accredited social work programs across Canada, and it is a requirement of students within these programs to complete a designated number of field placement hours, which vary dependent on education level (e.g., bachelor's or master's; CASWE, n.d.). Social work field educators can be found in a variety of roles, including field education coordinators and directors, field staff, field instructors, and faculty and field liaisons. The number of field educators in Canada is unknown.

### *Sample*

Purposive sampling was used to select participants that were most likely to provide appropriate and useful information on social work field education (Kelly, 2010). The inclusion criteria involved individuals with experience in social work field education from post-secondary institutions and various organizational contexts in Canada. A total of 99 field educators were recruited from British Columbia (BC,  $n = 17$ ), Alberta (AB,  $n = 32$ ), Manitoba (MB,  $n = 1$ ), Ontario (ON,  $n = 39$ ), Quebec (QC,  $n = 8$ ), and Atlantic Canada (AT,  $n = 2$ ) to participate in the focus groups.



*Data collection*

Participant recruitment materials were developed and shared in the TFEL monthly newsletter and on the TFEL project website, and were featured on social media accounts including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter (which was rebranded as X in July 2023). The invitation to participate was shared via emails to TFEL network members. Individuals and organizations were invited to share the study information with their networks. Prior to each scheduled focus group, participants were emailed a list of 3–5 proposed discussion prompts, to prime reflection on their experiences. The discussion prompts were: 1) Please discuss what is needed to better support field educators and transform field education; 2) Please discuss what changed significantly in field education as a result of COVID-19 and any changes you would like to maintain post-pandemic; 3) Please discuss what decolonizing field education means to you and ways to achieve it; 4) Please discuss the current incentives offered for field instructors, students and field educators, and what incentives would be preferred; and, 5) Please discuss what you believe to be the optimal types of field supervision.

From September 2021 through April 2022, 31 focus groups were conducted online. Each focus group lasted between 60–130 minutes and was facilitated by a minimum of two trained TFEL research assistants. During the focus group, participants were provided 3–5 discussion prompts, depending on the time limitations and depth of discussion. Focus groups were offered in English or French, and conducted online with a small group of 3–5 participants. Krueger and Casey (2014) recommend that focus groups have a small number of participants to allow each participant ample opportunity to share their views and experiences. Each focus group brought together diverse participant roles, which varied based on availability.

*Data analysis*

The 31 focus groups were audio recorded on Zoom and transcribed. The transcribed data were coded using NVivo 12 software for data analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted by five student researchers who also facilitated the focus groups, and weekly meetings were held to discuss emerging themes with the team. Three themes are presented in this article, including key quotes that were shared during the focus groups.

**Findings**

Focus group participants shared comments that can be clustered into three themes: innovative practices for field education, impacts of COVID-19, and decolonization of field education. This section outlines key sub-themes within each theme with illustrative quotations.



*Innovative practices for field education*

Innovation has been recognized as a key element to transform social work field education to deal with emerging challenges (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Zuchowski et al., 2019). The theme *Innovative practices for field education* includes suggestions on how to transform field education. These responses address challenges participants faced within their roles as field educators as well as suggestions on how to respond to individual and systemic challenges. The study identified three sub-themes within the theme *Innovative practices for field education*: support for field instructors, non-traditional placement options, and pedagogical shifts in field education.

*Support for field instructors.* This sub-theme addresses the need to provide incentives for field instructors in social work field education. Participants discussed the challenges and responsibilities involved in providing field instruction to students. Field educators indicated that they would like more incentives from universities and agencies. They also stated that the level of support they have received was highly dependent on their agency's views on field instruction and the availability of a field liaison. Ideas for increasing supports and incentives for field instructors include an instructor peer support and mentorship program, university-led education and resources, reduced workload to allow for field instruction, monetary compensation, professional development credits, and recognition from universities through the granting of titles (e.g., 'adjunct lecturer').

*There are two social workers at my agency or [in] my building, so most people aren't social workers, so I was saying just having groups to talk about what's the best, what works, what doesn't — that would be helpful. (Focus Group Participant, BC)*

Participants indicated that, despite limited available time, providing field supervision was an expectation of their agency. Other challenges in fulfilling this role include a lack of peer support within their agency. It was indicated that it would be helpful if a field instructor peer support program was provided, especially for those in agencies with low numbers of social workers. Participants also discussed who is responsible for facilitating the provision of incentives, including universities, agencies, and professional regulating bodies.

*Non-traditional placement options.* This sub-theme includes the need for alternative placements, as opposed to traditional forms of practicum (e.g., clinical placements). Participants spoke of expanding opportunities for macro-level and self-directed placements to increase accessibility to students. Examples of these settings include public policy settings and research opportunities.

*[W]e have really interesting work happening in community agencies, where we do not have social workers employed, and so, if we had the financial support within*

*the university to hire external field instructors, we could have students supervised in a community agency ... they're kind of interesting ideas that we could work with if we had the capacity to put something like that in place. (Focus Group Participant, BC)*

Participants agreed that field placement options in the current field education landscape are limited in their diversity and felt that a larger representation of society could be included if more non-traditional field placements were implemented. They highlighted the many potential field placement options in less traditional social work agencies and settings (e.g., community agencies, libraries, animal shelters) that, with increased funding and planning, could become valuable practicum sites. Participants shared that non-traditional practica could influence the reputation of social work competencies in organizations in which few social workers are employed.

*Pedagogical shifts in field education.* Although cited as the signature pedagogy and a critical and distinctive aspect of social work education (CSWE, 2008), field education's limited access to resources such as time and funding were highlighted as a barrier for field educators' ability to implement preferred or innovative models of field education. Various field education program and curriculum suggestions, including yearlong placements and references to literature written by non-Western writers, were also discussed by the focus group participants. Another suggestion included shifting the status of field education within academia to be more recognized in social work education. Doing so may enhance its desirability to field instructors and funding opportunities. As stated:

*[I]s the recognition of field education as signature pedagogy to go beyond lip service? Because some schools have this neoliberal managerialist orientation in treating field education. [Some perceived that] what we do is just simply an administrative process of matching students to placements. Rather, it is also valuing the educational piece and the learning that we provide to our students. (Focus Group Participant, ON)*

Recognizing the potential for deep learning that field coordinators and directors offer students, rather than focusing simply on their administrative roles, was an important finding in this study. Focus group participants highlighted the interconnectedness and community that lie within the field education network, which is integral to delivering wholistic learning experiences. Participants suggested elevating the status of field education with the provision of entry-level training for field educators. This training would provide the opportunity to regulate the expectations and responsibilities of field educators as well as provide a sense of community and support among peers commencing their role.

*Impact of COVID-19*

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting public health restrictions created opportunities for change and transformation in field education by providing increased flexibility for students and field educators while reducing required hours for practicum and, often, reducing educators' capacity for hosting field placements. Participants opined that such changes are likely to continue post-pandemic, and they identified benefits and shared challenges associated with COVID-19 in delivering field education.

*Flexibility.* Participants shared how the pandemic brought with it flexibility within placements and impacted other responsibilities (e.g., classes). When asked to discuss what changes they would like to maintain post-pandemic, participants acknowledged the 'silver linings' of the pandemic on transforming field education to integrate more flexible and accessible practices:

*I think some of these changes will be sustained and I think there are agencies that are finding that virtual delivery is increasing accessibility to services for some people. I think when we think about field [education], we also need to think about what elements of self-directed practical activities should be maintained and what kind of function and role they play in terms of meeting certain competencies that students need after they graduate. (Focus Group Participant, AB)*

Participants referred to flexibility in how students and field educators adapted to the changes posed by COVID-19. They reported that COVID-19 and resulting public health restrictions transformed the field education landscape by providing more opportunities for students to engage in new placement options, including self-directed practica. Respondents addressed how the COVID-19 response brought novel ways of completing practica that created efficiencies for field educators and were more cost-effective than traditional placements. COVID-19 also shifted how social work education and field education are delivered, with more flexibility coming into the practice of social work as a result of working remotely.

*Reduced capacity for placements.* As a result of the pandemic, the number of field placements available decreased. Participants reported that field agencies reduced their capacity for traditional student placements due to the increased workloads of field instructors and limited agency resources.

*I think for us, the biggest impact was how much it took out of staff to just get through it all. So, we stopped taking students, but really because we just did not have the bandwidth to support a student — we were having enough trouble supporting our own staff and keeping things afloat. (Focus Group Participant, QC)*

Field instructors spoke at length about reduced staffing, heightened stress, and increased workload during the pandemic, leading to a decreased

capacity to support students. Field educators reported that the reduced capacity for student placements has added a significant level of challenges in preparing students for professional social work practice and that these challenges will have to be addressed post-pandemic to compensate.

*Reduced hours for practicum.* This sub-theme encompasses comments provided about the efforts made by individual programs, alongside the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014), to safeguard the health and wellbeing of students and field educators by reducing the total number of practicum hours needed for students to successfully complete their social work education.

*One of the things that I would love for us to keep is the CASWE guideline that we can reduce hours, and if you're impacted by COVID, [we] can have a reduction of hours[. ...] Pre-COVID and post-COVID, we still have students who are impacted by significant things, right? Like we've had students who receive a cancer diagnosis during practicum; we have students who have significant family issues during COVID, or their field instructors have, and so, you know, the idea that maybe someone can have a reduction in hours because something particularly significant is happening in their lives isn't so out of the realm [of possibility.] And I would love for us to be able to [maintain] these compassionate guidelines. (Focus Group Participant, AB)*

Most participants agreed that CASWE's (2014) compassionate guidelines should be sustained post-pandemic to support student wellness. In contrast, other field instructors — particularly those who worked in healthcare settings — shared their concern that reducing practicum hours may not adequately prepare students to work in the field.

### *Decolonization of field education*

During the facilitation of focus groups, student researchers employed Cull et al.'s (2018) definition of decolonization by offering it to participants to support their understanding of the term. The definition is as follows:

*Decolonization is the process of deconstructing the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches. Decolonization involves dismantling structures that perpetuate the status quo and addressing unbalanced power dynamics. Decolonization also involves valuing and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge and approaches and weeding out settler biases or assumptions that have impacted Indigenous ways of being. (p. 7)*

Participants were then asked to comment on what decolonizing field education means to them and ways to achieve it. This prompt led to critical dialogue on how decolonizing field education is a key component in transforming the field education landscape. These discussions culminated in the final theme, *decolonization of field*

*education*, which includes three sub-themes: meaningful inclusion of Indigenous social work, decolonization as a multidimensional process, and critical dialogue.

*Meaningful inclusion of Indigenous social work.* Participants shared the importance of the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous social work into all aspects of field education. Meaningful inclusion of Indigenous social work refers to the intentional addition of Indigenous perspectives and ideologies into all aspects of the field education process. Examples of meaningful inclusion that were shared include institutions hiring Indigenous professors, agencies working alongside Indigenous community members such as Elders, and incorporating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's calls to action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2012), among other recommendations.

*Another piece that I know my colleague and I are looking to do [is] a little project in decolonizing field education. We thought about how we bring in Indigenous mentors. So looking at recruiting and relationship-building with more Indigenous social workers in the community that can be field instructors or mentors to our students. (Focus Group Participant, BC)*

Concerningly, participants shared that Indigenous social work has been applied to social work settings without the meaningful inclusions of Indigenous perspectives, such as from Indigenous social workers or Elders, or without reviewing the TRC calls to action. Respondents also reported that, due to a lack of Indigenous social workers in field education, the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous social work is a critical contribution in transforming field education.

*Decolonization as a multidimensional process.* Decolonization is a dynamic process that involves multiple parts. Participants shared ideas on how to transform social work education in a way that acknowledges the multidimensional process, including the admission process, curriculum, and diversification within agencies, which require revisioning in an effort to engage in dismantling existing colonialist social work education systems.

*Especially when you spend most of your career in a medical model, which is a really heavy topic, and I just don't even know where to start to peel back the layers. I work for an organization that tries to focus on diversity and tries to do some decolonizing, but probably has a long way to go. (Focus Group Participant, BC)*

This participant refers to the medical model as an example of a colonialist system that requires decolonizing. Participants shared a variety of experiences from within their institutions and agencies that involve decolonizing field education; however, they also stated that they often do not know where to start. Participants stated that agency support and critical dialogue are integral parts to addressing colonialist social work

practices and acknowledged that, while they are moving in the right direction, there is still much work to be done.

*Critical dialogue.* Participants discussed the importance of critical dialogue, which refers to engaging in meaningful conversations about decolonization, which is required as a catalyst for transforming field education. This theme is closely tied to the sub-theme of meaningful inclusion of Indigenous social work, as participants noted that Indigenous community members and teachings should be included in these critical dialogues.

*I think that we can take lots of workshops and we can take lots of seminars, but until we actually put into practice what we need to do differently, none of that will really matter. So, it's having those conversations, and it's calling out situations and people, I think, that are not intending to cause harm, but are causing harm, without even realizing it. (Focus Group Participant, AB)*

This participant described the importance of using critical dialogue as a step on the path to decolonizing field education — instead of simply attending workshops and seminars — and as a tool for holding colleagues or peers accountable for the harm they may be causing. Critical dialogue among field educators was identified as a crucial step in stimulating action toward the multidimensional process of decolonizing field education. Participants expressed that, although critical dialogue can be difficult to engage in due to discomfort and a lack of agency support, it is necessary.

## Discussion

The study aimed to identify what is needed to transform field education based on the insights and perspectives of field educators — that is, field education coordinators and directors, field staff, field instructors, and faculty and field liaisons — from post-secondary institutions and organizational contexts across Canada. The study was designed in response to the challenges faced by field educators to discuss what is needed to deliver quality field placement experiences for students. Field educators shared innovative ideas to assist in addressing the current challenges in the field education landscape. The findings reveal a number of possible actions to transform field education, including incentives for field instructors, non-traditional placement options, supports for field instructors, and training to implement preferred models of field education.

The rise of neoliberal organizational structures, which focus on productive and cost-efficient operations, has contributed to reduced agency capacity to host practicum students and reduced numbers of field instructors in field education (Hill et al., 2019; MacDonald et al., 2020). To ensure satisfaction and retention, participants recommended increasing incentives and supports for field instructors. One desired support was for

universities to provide training opportunities for field instructors. Due to the accessibility and cost effectiveness of virtual platforms, Ayala et al. (2014) suggest that universities provide field instructors online training opportunities. The development of an online field instructors' course by Canadian field educators is reflective of the type of collaboration that is needed on shared resources (McConnell, 2016).

Participants emphasized that agency support is a valuable resource to facilitate field instructor retention. Consistent with the literature, and noted by participants, field instructors need a reduced workload while supervising students. In a study conducted by Hill et al. (2019), agency-based field instructors reported 'reduced workload' as the most significant factor that would increase their likelihood of supervising a student. Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration and partnership among stakeholders to effectively develop transformative models of field education, despite limited access to resources.

The study's results conveyed that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in increased flexibility, reduced hours for practica, and reduced capacity for placements, which Ferguson et al. (2022) refer to as the re-making of social work practice during COVID-19. As changes to field education were made almost immediately at the start of the pandemic (Davis & Mirick, 2021), the data highlighted how field educators and students were directly impacted by the pandemic. Consistent with the literature (Davis & Mirick, 2021; Dempsey et al., 2022; Zuchowski, 2021), field instructors reported that the students they were supervising reported feeling disconnected and isolated during their practica. Field instructors agreed that a virtual relationship placed a strain on their field instruction and on the practicum experiences of students. On the other hand, the challenges encountered in response to the pandemic supported a level of untapped creativity — one which field educators expressed wanting to maintain post-pandemic. For example, prior to the onset of the pandemic, there were few online group research projects (Morley & Clarke, 2020). In contrast, participants expressed concern about the impact of the reduction in required practicum hours on students' professional social work development. According to Petra et al. (2020), there is no empirical research addressing the number of hours necessary to learn the required skills to be a competent social worker.

Finally, the impact of COVID-19 was consistently mentioned throughout multiple focus groups, as participants described pandemic-induced changes that facilitated an ease of communication, accessibility, and sustainability and cost-effectiveness of practicums, and facilitated innovations related to self-directed practicums. In addition, participants noted that flexibility within field education permitted students to meet additional responsibilities during their practica (Melero et al., 2021) — for example, schoolwork, part-time jobs, family obligations, and caregiving. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a multitude of challenges



for social work students and field education stakeholders. Although field instructors and field coordinators explained how the reduced capacity for placements impacted the students' field experience, pandemic-induced challenges also invited field education stakeholders to transform, adapt, be creative, and flexible in their approach to field education (Drolet et al., 2020).

*Decolonizing field education* is presented as a key theme in addressing the demand for transformation in field education. Findings from the focus groups reveal that dismantling colonial practices is a process that involves the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous social work, the recognition that decolonization is a multidimensional process, and critical dialogue. There is agreement in the literature that involving Indigenous community members such as Elders (Clark et al., 2010) as well as reviewing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada calls to action (TRC, 2012) are both catalysts for the transformation necessary to decolonize field education in Canada. Participants agreed with reported findings in the literature that emphasize the importance of agency support for the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous stakeholders and hiring of Indigenous social workers (Chilvers, 2022). These changes play a role in the multidimensional process of decolonizing field education.

### *Limitations*

Focus groups were facilitated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses may not capture the experiences of field educators prior to the pandemic and may be less applicable to transforming field education post-pandemic, due to the situational changes in operations (e.g., remote learning).

While the sample population for the study included people who hold a variety of roles associated with field education, it is noteworthy that students did not participate in these focus groups. To learn about students' experiences in field education, visit the TFEL resources on our website: [tfelproject.com/resources-tfel](https://tfelproject.com/resources-tfel). Further research is needed to incorporate student perspectives in identifying how to transform field education in Canada.

### *Recommendations*

Discussions with field education coordinators and directors, field staff, field instructors, and faculty and field liaisons provided insight into how to transform social work field education in Canada. The study provided an understanding of what is currently meeting the needs of field educators and students, as well as challenges and recommended solutions. The following recommendations address how to transform field education:

1. Build awareness through accessible online platforms and networking events that create opportunity to share and discuss

the current state of social work field education in Canada. Engage field education stakeholders by having critical discussions about what is currently meeting the needs of field educators and students, and how current practices and policies can be enhanced.

2. Develop innovative resources and incentives to support field instructors, including networking events and workshops, financial support, and opportunities for peer support so that field instructors can share resources as well as create and sustain professional development communities. Create accessible modules that include resources such as recordings and helpful links that walk field educators through a nationally regulated training that includes information about how to navigate common experiences.
3. Acknowledge that decolonization is essential in all aspects of social work education, including field education. This process includes critical dialogue, diversity, and reflexivity. It is crucial that the curriculum be decolonized and that field education processes be diversified by hiring Indigenous social workers and academics who can support the integration of Indigenous and non-Western ways of knowing, being, and doing into field education processes and practices.
4. Continue to integrate the helpful changes to field education that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, including adopting flexible and accessible approaches to field education post-pandemic. These helpful changes include flexible scheduling for field educators and students, the ability to work remotely, and increased numbers of macro-practice opportunities in practica.

To implement these recommendations, ongoing collaboration and partnerships are essential to proactively engage field education stakeholders to expand understandings about the critical role of field education in organizations and the profession, and in turn, to nurture new field learning opportunities for social work students. Participants described the recognition of the important role of field education in students' learning as being a major indicator of field education sustainability. To convey the importance of field education, students must have a positive practicum experience and also need early interventions to consider becoming a field educator themselves. While aspects of these recommendations involve changes to individual, agency, and social work education programs, leadership and initiative within accreditation bodies is integral to the sustainability of these changes. Schools of social work, in partnership with agencies, must advocate for additional resources to respond to the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on social work field education. Future directions for research include exploring the

perspective of students as key stakeholders in the field education process. Their expertise may contribute to innovative, effective, and sustainable change for the future of social work field education.

## Conclusion

The TFEL aims to inform the development of innovative and sustainable models of field education through a diverse array of research activities that create new student training and mentorship activities which, in turn, contribute to transforming social work field education. This study highlights the experiences, perspectives, and recommendations of 99 social work field educators in Canada who participated in online focus groups. The key themes emerging from the focus groups include innovative practices for field education, the impacts of COVID-19, and the necessity of decolonizing field education. Participants shared the need for increased resources, collaboration, flexibility, diversity, and recognition for field educators.

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