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Research Article

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Abstract

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Keywords: Racialized students, field education, Institutional Ethnography, racism, social work education

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Introduction

This study explores field education coordination from the standpoint of five racialized social work students in one urban locale in Southern Ontario, Canada. Using Dorothy E. Smith's Institutional Ethnography (IE), I draw from textual analyses and interviews with five racialized students and two coordinators to examine the social relations embedded in field education coordination. By examining how field education coordination is organized at the local site and beyond, translocally,[1] I uncover the ways in which racialized students were disadvantaged in obtaining a social work placement.

The impetus for Institutional Ethnographic inquiry arises from a disjuncture in experience (Smith & Griffith, 2022). Within this framework, texts, including the literature, function to regulate and circulate authoritative ways of knowing (Smith, 1990)—that is, "official" knowledge which, while produced and sanctioned by authorities, may be dissonant with peoples' actual knowledge and experiences (Bisaillon & Rankin, 2013). Accordingly, I depart from the traditional research genre, which situates a topic for investigation within a review of literature. Rather, following Smith's (2022) guidance, I begin this study by developing my own experience: the problematic for inquiry.

The Problematic for Inquiry: Entry into Social Work Field Education Coordination

"Your placement for January 2016 has been confirmed," reads a late December email that I received from my School of Social Work's (hereafter School) field education department (FED). As I relaxed into the knowledge that I secured a placement, the mandatory, practice-based component of Master of Social Work (MSW) degree programs (Canadian Association for Social Work Education [CASWE], 2014), I found myself pondering at the work it took to get to this moment—this beginning. What did the hours of attending workshops, reviewing manuals, researching organizations, filling out application forms, and writing emails, résumés, and cover letters accomplish? What became of the time I spent attending meetings with the FED, making phone calls, interviewing, and, perhaps what was most exacting, waiting?

My work to "confirm" a placement also seemed to be shaped by who I was as a brown-skinned woman and how I was seen by various institutional functionaries. For example, the FED

[1] The term translocal, also interchangeable with extralocal, refers to how people's everyday lives and activities are coordinated by powerful outside social forces and across multiple local settings (Smith, 1987).

and placement settings (hereafter Setting) repeatedly prodded me to list the "marginalized groups" with whom I "self-identified," the languages I spoke, and the ways I contributed to "diversity." Did everybody have to do this work before placement officially started? More to the point, why is this work not discussed when we talk about the "placement experience," "equity," or "student workload"?

In the background were murmurs of widespread placement shortages, a trend that the Toronto-based social work professor, Marion Bogo (2015), declared as a "crisis" (p. 321) in field education. At Settings, neoliberal restructuring shaped a demand for social work placements that far exceeded availability. With ever-increasing student enrollment and expanding social work programs in the academy, neoliberalism was transforming Schools from places of learning into corporate enterprises (Regher, 2013). Concurrently, within a decaying welfare state, Settings—increasingly characterized by job insecurity, workload intensification, and staff shortages—had diminished capacity for providing field education (Preston et al., 2014).

Against this backdrop, I learned that other students also engaged in invisible work to obtain a placement, a task that CASWE (2014), the Canadian accrediting body of social work education, mandates as a responsibility of Schools. Racialized students additionally worked through puzzling subtexts where we were matched to undesirable placement settings. For example, I learned how a socially stratified labour market organized racial hierarchies into field education coordination at one School in Southern Ontario, enabling the FED to match racialized students to placements in ways that were inherently raced (MacDonald et al., 2020; Srikanthan 2019; 2020). In Hamilton, an urban locale that is also in Southern Ontario, de Bie et al. (2020) found that a widespread fear of losing scarce placements silenced students' experiences of racism and marginalization in field education. Taking the standpoint point of FEDs, de Bie et al. (2022) reflect on Schools' challenges in supporting racialized students and others from equity-deserving groups amidst the field education crisis. Overall, the stakes of field education are heightened for racialized students, who were more likely than their white counterparts to fail placements and face discrimination at Settings (Fairtlough et al., 2014; Okuda, 2023; Razack, 2002).

Although racialized students spent significant energy navigating racism in field education, authoritative ways of knowing circulated by Schools, Settings, and the literature frequently subsumed students' work. For instance, Bogo (2015) makes no mention of racism in describing current field education challenges. Similarly, Ayala et al. (2018)'s seminal study of the field education crisis in Canada emphasizes FEDs' intensifying workloads and plummeting morale. Obfuscating students' experiential realities and knowledge, the authors take the FEDs' standpoint to cast the work in accommodating students from equity-deserving communities—including

racialized students—as a "workload constraint" (Ayala et al., 2018, p. 288). Student voice appeared to be absent in authoritative ways of knowing the field education crisis.

By all official textual accounts, my School successfully 'placed' all students. Yet, as demonstrated by the confirmation email, field education coordination rendered students' work in this process passive, if not, invisible. Herein lies, in Smith's words (1987), the "disjuncture" (p. 49) in which there is a split between the experiences of subordinated groups and the dominant institutional perspective to which such groups must adapt: while it is Schools' responsibility to place students through a fair process, students' experiential realities suggested that this process was one of struggle that demanded their efforts. Racism was always present yet also invisible in this work—a paradox to social work's mandate for social justice. It is with this disjuncture that I turned to Institutional Ethnography (IE) to investigate the social organization of field education coordination.

Method of Inquiry: Institutional Ethnography

IE begins by examining the contradictions between peoples' experiences and institutional perspectives, where inquiry maps out work coordination. A sociology for the people, IE is interested in how some work is institutionally acknowledged while other work is made invisible by and subsumed under the institution. In IE, work is generously defined as "anything or everything people do that is intended, involves time and effort, and is done in a particular time and place and under definite local conditions" (Smith, 2006, p. 10). After exploring a local site, IE examines work completed higher up on the institutional ladder; in doing so, the goal is to understand how social relations coordinate work across different sites.

As a racialized social work student with experiential knowledge of obtaining a placement, I considered that field education coordination requires work that is embedded in systemic, institutional, and discursive forces—what Smith (1987) calls the *ruling relations*:

> They are those forms that we know as bureaucracy, administration, management, professional organization, and the media. They include also the complex of discourses, scientific, technical, and cultural, that intersect, interpenetrate, and coordinate the multiple sites of ruling. (p. 6)

Social relations are translocal—they are embedded in the coordination of work by people across multiple sites and impose objectified forms of knowledge onto everyday life. As social relations come to govern people's lives, they become relations that rule (Smith, 2006).

Informed by Marxism, IE directs attention to dialectical materialism: that is, how material realities coordinate and produce discourse (Smith, 1987). IE departs from Michel Foucault's theory of discourse as one that is confined to the realm of language practices:

> Brilliant as it is, it accredits the stasis of the text... [Foucault] discards actual subjects, whether as "author" or as reader, and the materiality of the text as in print, on screen, or in some other mode in which enters local setting … But here the materiality of the text, its replicability, and hence iterability, is key to addressing discourse as actual social relations between reading, speaking, hearing subjects—actual people, you and me. (Smith, 1987, p. 134)

Rather, the focus of IE is on how people actively participate in, produce, and reproduce institutional discourse through their actual doings. IE is concerned with how institutional, social, and discursive forces—the ruling relations—socially organize people's material everyday and every night, lives. The ruling relations are expansive, historically specific, and implement social control under capitalism (Devault, 2006).

Finally, IE considers that under capitalism, work is activated and mediated by texts that, due to their fixed and replicable properties, act as mechanisms for social control, regulating peoples' lives by standardizing and objectifying knowledge (Smith, 1990). IE is distinguished by its concern for texts' replicability and their role in activating, coordinating, and regulating work across space and time as they "enter into" and sequence "people's doings as they/we participate in the objectifying relations of ruling" (Smith & Turner, 2014, p. 5). Reading, completing, and reproducing texts are all ways in which they activate work.

Methods

This research was completed in a locale in an urban Southern Ontario, a racially diverse and densely populated province that is home to half of all newcomers in Canada (Government of Ontario, 2023). The study locale is home to three schools of social work and hosts multiple human service programs. Taking an IE approach, my research design focused upon the disjuncture between racialized students' experiences of and the institution's aspirations for field education coordination (Smith, 1987). Hence, my design involved two levels of data collection to explore local and translocal sites. I first engaged in participant observation by immersing myself into the local setting of one School for five months. I attended public meetings held by the School's FED and gathered texts, including Schools' website*s*, placement manuals, and self-studies, as well as the extant literature (existing published research on field education, which I regarded as a source of data as opposed to authoritative knowledge). I recruited participants by circulating fliers through

Schools' email listservs in the study locale. I completed pre-screening interviews with potential participants and used purposive sampling to select participants for their ability to provide detailed work accounts of obtaining a placement. While I strived to recruit students from all Schools in the locale, the respondents were all enrolled in one School—the participant observation site. The interviews with racialized students were semi-structured and mapped out the work of obtaining a placement. Through these activities, I generated a descriptive account of obtaining a placement at the local setting. To understand how translocal relations shaped students' work, I collected data at a second level. Here, I familiarized myself with the professional spaces associated with field education coordination by interviewing two institutional functionaries: a former School FED coordinator and a hospital-based education coordinator. I also maintained field notes in a research log. With participants' informed consent, I audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews. Unfortunately, the recording of my conversation with the former FED coordinator was unusable due to a faulty recording. I relied upon my log to glean knowledge from this interview.

All participants provided informed and written consent. To ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to and removed identifying information of participants, Schools, and Settings. I obtained research ethics approval from York University's Office of Research Ethics. As the focus of investigation was on institutional processes, I had hoped that IE's blame-free and non-confrontational character would facilitate my access to institutional functionaries (Campbell & Gregor, 2008). I attempted to recruit coordinators through purposive sampling; however, I was unable to recruit participants who, at the time of research, worked in FEDs. I collected a publicly available job posting for a FED manager and also consulted the extant literature on FEDs' work, both of which provided informative, albeit objectified, work accounts.

Data Analysis

I took up Smith's (2006) generous definition of work as "anything or everything people do that is intended, involves time and effort, and is done in a particular time and place and under definite local conditions" (p. 10) to examine participants' knowledge and efforts in field education coordination. I sought to understand how social relations shaped how and why participants worked. Following McCoy (2006), I subjected the data to the following questions for analysis:

1. What forms of work were alluded to and what skills and knowledge were used?
2. What achievements, challenges, and puzzles did participants experience?
3. How did texts activate and mediate work?
4. What brought about participants' work? What purposes did this work serve?

I iteratively and reflexively traced participants' work accounts through texts, with my attention focused on the contradictions encountered by participants. Through writing, I pieced together the co-ordering of work for students and coordinators as well as mediating texts to explicate the social organization of field education coordination.

Findings

Field education coordination required work from the racialized student participants as well as institutional functionaries situated beyond their experiences. Students worked skillfully to obtain a choice placement. Similarly, coordinators worked proficiently to place all students. The findings examine how social relations organized field education coordination for the participants.

Participants

The students were enrolled in a Master of Social Work (MSW) program. Four had previously completed a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree and one was enrolled in the foundational year of a two-year MSW degree. The student participants were Iman, Jordan, Eric, Naila, and Ayah (pseudonyms). Iman identified as a Muslim, South Asian woman; Jordan as a Black woman; Eric as an Asian man; Naila as a Nigerian-Black woman; and Ayah as a Queer, Muslim, South Asian woman. The institutional coordinators were Naomi, a former FED coordinator, and Eva, a hospital coordinator.

Students' Work

The official account of field education coordination, according to CASWE's (2014) *Standards for Accreditation* (SFA), [2] places responsibility on Schools through FEDs. Yet, from student participants, I learned that the process of obtaining a placement was governed by rules that transferred work to students. The following analyses examine the social organization of students' field education coordination work.

A Tightly Regulated Commodity Situated on Institutional Relationships

Students explained that they were key workers in field education coordination. However, before starting their jobs, students must first learn the rules of field education coordination. The students described how the FED communicated these rules through orientation texts, which included

[2] In 2021, CASWE updated its SFA with the Education Policies and Accreditation Standards for Canadian Social Work Education.

meetings, placement manuals, and videos that the students had eagerly attended, read, and watched in the idyllic summer months. Iman described attending a mandatory *Applying for Placement Orientation* meeting with the FED as "where [Iman] got [her] first introduction into how this placement process is going to work… The [FED] just giving [students] some direction about choosing placements." Through orientation texts, students were hooked into coordination work, months before school even began.

From orientation texts, students reported learning that FEDs tightly regulated field education coordination. While students may provide their placement choices, as put by Naila, students, alone, "can't go forward" because "[the FED was] the one to do" so. Iman explained that students "weren't supposed to ask agencies for placements." This cardinal rule was made blunt in the participants' placement manual.

> Given the complexity of securing placements for many students, the School has a structured placement process… students are not permitted to call, send their resume, or coordinate an interview with an agency **without prior permission from the [FED]** [emphasis original].

Elsewhere in the locale, another School's *Field Education Website* similarly stated that "students are NOT [emphasis original] to initiate independent requests of any social worker or organization." The *Placement Manual* for the third School in the locale also cautioned that "students **must** [emphasis original] consult with their [FED] Coordinator to receive permission to reach out to agencies" and that "**a student's interactions must not interfere with the processes and procedures of the [FED]**" [emphasis original]. These findings indicate that placements were a finite commodity whose coordination was regulated by Schools vis-à-vis FEDs. In this locale, FEDs discouraged, if not outright barred, students from intervening in placement coordination.

Although students shared that their FED rigidly oversaw field education coordination, they were still required to provide their FED with four placement choices. Ayah recalled that the FED advised students to "do [their] research [and] choose [placements]!" Through orientation texts, the FED asked students to research placements by searching through both their School's placement database as well as in 411, a database that provides the public with information on Ontario's social services. Students put in considerable effort to research and select their four choices. However, while students learned about a wide range of services through database search, they found that not all Settings were available to them as a placement.

When Iman "looked on 411 [to] see what [placements] was [were] available," she noticed that "some of those [placements] weren't on [her School's] database." Iman therefore worked to email the FED to discern the availability of specific placements of interest as part of her research:

> I started asking our [FED] myself before I put those choices down because I didn't want to waste one of my choices. I started asking in email, "is this agency available?" … [The FED] would say things like, "most likely not."

Eventually, the FED limited Iman's work in sending them emails, advising Iman that "[the FED] couldn't work on it [determining whether a placement is available] until [Iman] put it [a possible placement] down as a choice." Echoing Ayala et al.'s (2018) concerns of FEDs' "workload" (p. 288), this finding suggested that Iman's work of writing and sending emails activated work for the FED in determining placement availability, which the FED sought to restrict by requiring Iman to use up one of her four precious choices.

Students also described how placement availability addressed larger institutional relationships between Schools and Settings. Ayah, for example, explained that database research alone was futile for identifying available placements:

> You don't know what placement opportunities are available just looking on 411… You just know what the organization is. You don't know what placement opportunities they have, if they even accept placement students, [or] does [the Setting] have a relationship with [my School]?

Ayah questioned what choice students even had:

> I just picked a few places [from 411] … [The FED was] like, "we don't really have placements there" … [students] choose where we want to go, but we don't really know what is already available—what [the FED] already decided is where our students are going to go.

Ayah's analysis was furthered by Jordan, who explained that a placement's "availability" depended upon whether students' School had a "placement relationship" with a Setting. Ayah "came up with [four placement choices by] determining whether [her School] already had a relationship with these [Settings]… a placement relationship."

Eric was also knowledgeable on the importance of pre-existing relationships between Schools and Settings for obtaining a choice placement. Eric noticed that the orientation texts included a list of Settings that previously took students from Eric's School. With his knowledge on the relationships between Schools and Settings, Eric used this list to determine whether his FED had pre-existing relationships with his choice placements. In this way, Eric used the list and his knowledge on the importance of pre-existing relationships between Schools and Settings to select four choices for placement that would most likely be available:

> I look on the list of agencies that [my School] had a contract with before. Because [my School] actually listed the agencies that took a student before… I first went through every single agency [on the list] and then, the first thing I look at if there's hospital opportunities—of course!

Eric alluded to his knowledge of texts called "contracts" between his School and Settings, which signified a pre-existing relationship whereby Settings had previously taken students from Eric's School—the importance of the contracts as mediating texts would be later clarified to me by a coordinator.

For now, student participants reported that field education coordination involved extensive rules, which activated work for students. While the rules barred students from intervening in the process, they were still encouraged to provide choices to the FED, which necessitated students' work in researching placements. Through this work, students reported learning that relationships between their School and Settings were significant for actual placement availability. The students worked diligently to best select "available" choices based on their knowledge on whether their School had a placement relationship with a given Setting. Although this work was presumably done by all students regardless of race, the next section of this article reveals that, with choices not working out, racial tensions simmered and eventually, boiled over into confrontations with the FED, intensifying racialized students' workload.

Simmering Racial Tensions and the Overriding Mandate

Schools' websites and placement manuals also describe the process of obtaining a placement as collaborative, fair, and student-centred. Freedom from discrimination in field education coordination was enshrined in these texts as well as within higher-order, governing texts. For instance, section 3.2.17 of CASWE's (2014) *SFA* states:

> The field placement/setting accepts students without discrimination as defined by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and provincial human rights legislation; the field placement/setting is free of discriminatory practices both in personnel practices and in the delivery of services (p. 4).

In speaking with students, I learned that when their choices did not "work out," they were subsequently called into email or face-to-face meetings with the FED to discuss options. These meetings were contentious, with racial divisions surfacing in field education coordination, adding to students' workload. As these meetings unfolded, the FED's overriding mandate of placing all students became evident, rendering students' experiences of discrimination subordinate.

Jordan had no issue when she was first invited for an interview by a religious charity, her last placement choice. She believed it was a "good sign that organizations [were] contacting students." However, as her email exchange with the FED unraveled, Jordan reported learning that, if the charity offered her a placement, she was obliged to accept because the FED would not "work on" Jordan's top-ranked choices. Jordan protested these rules to the FED:

> You're [the FED] backing me into this corner. You're not giving me a choice because you've already told me that. If I go to the interview, and I get offered the placement, I have to take it. This means that my three other choices, which haven't even contacted me yet, have no opportunity.

The FED impressed upon Jordan that "there was no guarantee that [she] was going to get another placement." By requiring students to accept the first placement offer, the FED worked efficiently place all students. However, from her standpoint, this work confined Jordan, who desired a macro placement, to Settings misaligned with her interests. Jordan explained that "[she did not] want to commit to [the charity] because it's direct practice and [she had] specifically and explicitly said, [shed did not] want direct practice!" The FED's rule of accepting the first placement offer offered Jordan limited choice for placement. Jordan felt as though she "was ordered in a particular channel… [and] area of practice." The frustration that Jordan, a Black woman, expressed in being "channelled" by the FED towards care Settings reminded me of Canada's segregated labour market, in which racialized women are most likely to be employed in the lowest-paying care occupations (Block & Galabuzi, 2018).

Naila's account unveiled how the FED's rule for students to accept the first placement offer could confine racialized students to raced Settings. When Naila received email correspondence that her first choice of a hospital placement, a Setting in which social workers are typically white women (Srikanthan, 2019; 2020), was unavailable, Naila thought she "wouldn't mind going to other hospitals." Despite her expressed interest in a hospital placement, Naila, who identifies as Nigerian, learned that the FED was working to match her to a Caribbean agency. Overlooking this ethno-mismatch, Naila expressed that she was open to interviewing at the Setting; however, like Jordan, Naila learned that if she received a placement offer from the Caribbean agency, she would be obliged to accept:

> [What] if I try [the Caribbean agency] and I don't like that? The FED said, "but, if you said yes, and already got a call for an interview, it would be hard for you to turn it to down." If I got accepted… they offer me a placement, then that means, I have to do it there… Other opportunities would be closed to me.

Naila first rationalized that the FED suggested the agency because "none of [her] choices were working." However, when I asked about why the FED would not pursue other hospital options, Naila put the FED's work into perspective:

> Because I am Black, [the FED] thought I would fit in a Black setting. Like, working with Black minority and racialized youth. [The FED] first suggested the Caribbean agency… never suggested a hospital… Another one [the FED] suggested was [a shelter for refugees]. Based on the fact I'm Black, [the FED] thought, maybe I'll fit into that setting.

Naila explained that the FED did not propose other hospitals aligned with her choices, suggesting, instead, raced Settings unrelated to her interests. It became clear that the FED's responsibility was to place all students. With this mandate, the FED—whose staff were all registered social workers—could use racial assumptions to ethno-mismatch a Nigerian student to a Caribbean agency. Jordan and Naila's respective interests for placement—what they wanted to learn—were of little value in field education coordination. Further, their work of navigating racism in field education coordination was insignificant to the FED's mandate of placing all students.

Iman's account of her face-to-face meeting with the FED further illustrated how certain students were channeled into raced Settings through ideas of incompetence. Thinking she was being helpful, Iman suggested another agency to the FED that was similar to her "unavailable" choices. The FED met this suggestion by "pull[ing] up… the information sheet that [the FED] had [for the placement] for [Iman] to read" and proceeding to question Iman's qualifications for the proposed placement:

> [The FED] pulled up my résumé to look at what experience I have in counselling. And I kept telling [the FED], "I do have counselling experience because I worked in violence against women services for a few years" [They said] "Where do you have counselling experience?" But my résumé fully says… "women's advocate-counsellor" and "crisis intervention counsellor …" … It's right there! It says it, right there!

Iman detailed her humiliation in this meeting, where the FED was "talking [Iman] down and judging… [her] capacities and abilities… as incompetent." The FED made it clear to Iman that her experiences and qualifications were of little value for the task at hand: in their view, what Iman knew mattered little to field education coordination. Rather, from Iman's standpoint, the FED furthered the idea of incompetence by suggesting that she complete her placement at the Crisis Centre. Iman asked, "[The Crisis Centre has] volunteers… They don't usually have workers…

This wasn't an MSW level placement. Why [was I] being placed [at the Crisis Centre]?" Initially, I did not understand Iman's incredulity over the Crisis Centre. It was not until I spoke with Eric that I learned how ideas of incompetence had informed this suggestion.

Despite a disappointing lack of response from his choices, Eric was optimistic that his face-to-face meeting with the FED would be an "exciting opportunity for [him] to have a new placement." The FED provided Eric with "alternative options," including the Crisis Centre that the FED had suggested to Iman. Eric contacted the Crisis Centre to ask if the "field instructor possesses MSW… [Eric] spoke to the manager there. And they said, 'no, sorry… we are more volunteer-operated agency… We don't really have social workers doing specifically training for students.'" Eric's account appeared to confirm Iman's suspicion that the Crisis Centre was ill-equipped to supervise "MSW-level" students. Eric also similarly researched the FED's other suggestions. He concluded that "[the] supervisors [at the FED's suggested alternative Settings]… don't even have the education credential. They, themselves, are probably just a social service worker, or, have a BA, BSW. But, they're supervising the MSW students."

Although Eric and Iman chose "MSW-level placements" that would further their goals, through their meetings with the FED, they learned that their aspirations were subordinate as the FED was working to place all students. This allowed for the FED to use ideas of incompetence to match students like Iman and Eric to devalued Settings staffed by volunteers. Eric reported that the FED made this plain to him by stating that "if [he] won't make up [his] mind in the beginning of January, [the FED would] have to place [him] somewhere," including at Settings where supervisors lacked an MSW, a requirement of field instructors specified by CASWE (2014).

Returning to Iman's account illustrates how ideas of incompetence, as conveyed by the FED's suggestion of non-"MSW-level" placements, were linked to race:

> I am South Asian. I am Brown in colour. And, obviously, I wear a headscarf. I felt [the FED] was putting me into places based on my religious or my cultural or racial background too. It felt like [the FED] was driving me to places… based on the way I look.

By pulling up Iman's résumé in the meeting, the FED activated the labour market, linking Iman's work experiences and skills to Iman's limited opportunities for placement. Not only were Iman's experiences devalued, but she was being prepared for the lower stratum of placement with supervisors lacking credentials, which, as in the case of Jordan and Naila, was also linked to a racially stratified labour market. From Iman's standpoint, the FED's consideration of Iman for the Crisis Centre, a Setting that students considered an unskilled setting that lacked MSW-trained social workers, was linked to who Iman was as a Muslim, South Asian woman.

These meetings, which involved navigating racial subtexts, required significant labour on the part of the students with whom I spoke. The FED's overriding mandate to place all students allowed the FED to efficiently prioritize the students with whom I spoke for settings that did not match their placement desires but would put them in raced contexts. From the students' standpoint, field education coordination perpetuated racialized hierarchies; however, due to the overriding mandate, this work did not violate any of the non-discrimination statutes in governing texts. What students wanted to learn in placement mattered little; rather, their accounts suggested that the larger segregated labour market socially organized how the FED channelled students to Settings.

Coordinators' Work

By speaking with institutional coordinators and examining the texts with which they worked, I sought to understand how students' work was translocally coordinated. A reprise to students' work, the analyses that follow provide insights as to how institutional relationships socially organized field education coordination to systematically disadvantage racialized students in the locale.

Coordinators' Work Makes Relationships Work

Eva's main responsibility was to coordinate placements for students from another health profession in a hospital in the study locale but, as a trained social worker, she was knowledgeable of the parallels between her job and that of social work field education coordination. In speaking with Eva, I learned that work at different institutions was co-ordered. Eva explained that her role was dependent on Schools' FEDs:

> I negotiate with [FEDs]. The academic institution will determine which is the best student to come… [FEDs] will know their students best. And I trust that. They are invested in the long-term relationship between us and them. They will not send me a student that's inappropriate. I have faith in that. They know what skills their students have, where, I don't have that information.

For Eva, students' experiential perspectives were secondary to FEDs' objectified knowledge of students. Eva trusted that FEDs competently worked to only send appropriately skilled students because Schools wanted to sustain placement relationships. Interestingly, by official accounts, placements are "learning opportunities" (CASWE, 2014, p. 4) and should not demand competence. Eva's demand for "skilled" students reflects a learning from the extant literature, which is that Schools use market constructions to frame placements to Settings as channels for employment, resource exchange, and service outcomes (Starbuck & Egan, 2000). A publicly available FED job

posting for a School in the locale had described how Eva's demand for skilled students is substantiated by coordination work's dual purposes for Settings and students:

> It is vital that the incumbent understands and addresses the practice concerns that arise within the professional community when undertaking the teaching and supervision of students in the field and balance those with the learning goals of the students and the educational requirements of the [S]chool.

Naomi, a former FED coordinator, narrated her advocacy to obtain choice placements for students. However, the accounts of the student participants, Eva, and the wording in the FED job posting suggested that, today, FEDs' advocacy was limited. Instead, as the job posting went on to say that FEDs' work that sustained relationships between Schools and Settings was of utmost importance:

> The [School] relies on the professional social work community to provide students with this opportunity to complete this degree requirement… Developing and fostering strong ties is not only important to the [School] but to securing and keeping placement sites.

Relationship work appeared to be essential for FEDs because it ensured a steady placement supply to Schools, enabling them to continually meet accreditation standards. As per Eva as well as Starbuck and Egan (2000), relationship work also provided Settings with skilled student labour. The FED job posting that I had previously collected spoke of skills in diplomacy ("ability to maintain professional relationships," "ability to be tactful and diplomatic in dealing with difficult issues," and "experience with developing/negotiating community practicum placements"), administration ("excellent organizational and administrative skills," "initiative and analytical skills [including reviewing legal documents]"), and networking ("good negotiation, presentation and networking skills"), but Naomi's work in advocacy was absent.

Affiliation Agreements: Fairness Works

Although advocacy was invisible, fairness appeared to be significant for field education coordination. Eva spoke about how texts called affiliation agreements, which were referenced earlier by Eric as "contracts" between Schools and Settings, kept the process fair. Eva explained that affiliation agreements mediated coordinators' work at her Setting to prioritize work in finding placements for students from one of the three Schools in the locale. Eva described that her setting had "a big level [affiliation] agreement with one of the Schools and the responsibility, first and foremost, is to find those placements for that School. Everything else [finding social work placements for students from other Schools] is a bonus."

Although I could not access this affiliation agreement, I learned from existing studies that these texts emerged as accreditation bodies for social work education made field education requirements explicit. According to Gelman (1999), being unable to rely on voluntary appeals for placements, Schools formalized placement relationships with Settings through affiliation agreements, which are legal contracts that outline each parties' roles and responsibilities in delivering field education. George and colleagues (2013) elaborate that Schools developed legal contracts and policies to manage field education coordination. In this way, affiliation agreements codify coordinators' previously described relationship work into legal texts.

Research on affiliation agreements notes the rise of legalism within these texts as it concerns liability (Gelman, 1990; Gelman et al., 1996). This legal character appeared to inform how Eva used affiliation agreements to assure "fairness":

> One of the reasons for that [affiliation agreements] is because we don't want any accusations of bias. Everything is done anonymously… They [Schools] won't say one female student who has this name because then accusations of bias could come in later… It can't be that whoever calls gets a placement. That's not fair!

Eva's experiential knowledge, however, suggested that fairness was an abstract idea that masked how Schools in the locale were raced:

> Well, the partnership? So, one of the Schools [in the locale] is a partner. So, this sounds bad, but, if you look at the [social work] students at the Schools, they look different [in terms of race]. Like, you can tell… I see the way it plays out in who gets to be here [white students], and who doesn't [racialized students] … For the location that we are in [a racially diverse community], I am shocked at the numbers [of white students versus racialized students]. They [the partner School's students] are not reflective of the communities we serve.

Eva's observation of the partner School's white majority students was also noted by Eric, who secured a placement in an ethno-racial program at Eva's Setting:

> I think there's one Asian girl and one, maybe two, Brown. That's it! Everyone else is white! And if you think, [the locale] is very… racially diverse. And then you have, in the hospital, about 80 to 90 per cent of the students are white, who are more likely to get a job there compared to outside people [who did not complete placement at the hospital].

Briefly returning to students' work, Eric's account explicates how the affiliation agreement mediates the co-ordering of work for field education coordination. In the following passage, Eric describes how he deploys a personal relationship with his cousin (a physician at Eva's Setting) to obtain a coveted hospital placement:

> My cousin asked, 'okay, what's your first option?' I said, 'the ethno racial program'… If I speak the language, I will have the advantage competing with others for the same social work position…They [the hospitals] have to prioritize students from the other [partner] school [with the affiliation agreement]. But, in my case, I speak the language. They [students from the partner school] don't.

Eric was painfully aware that the affiliation agreement rendered the racism of the hospital Setting partnering with a School known to have white students as a majority invisible. Eric therefore strategized to pursue the hospital's ethno-racial program as a "first option" as all other hospital options were unavailable to him. Through language and placement choices, Eric speaks to how the students at the partner school were racialized as white.

Eric further recalled how the site coordinator spoke to the institutional relations that shaped field education coordination work:

> The hospital has an agreement for priority placements from the other school. It's always a challenge for students from other institutions wanting clinical training here. That having been said, you are looking for a niche placement.

Eric used race—as constituted through language—as a strategy to get what the institution racially-codes through scientific language as a "niche placement." By making race invisible, the institution de-raced placement coordination work through the affiliation agreement. At the same time, the institution constructed Eric, a racialized social work student, as intrinsic to the hospital's ethno-racial program, which, as a racialized setting, existed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy in hospital placements. Placement sites that are known to be predominantly white, such as hospitals, are positioned as top-ranked, both in the labour market as well as in placement coordination. Owing to the affiliation agreement, the formal rules of field education coordination did not work for the racialized student participants in this study in obtaining such top-ranked placements. While Eric breaks the rules to obtain a choice placement, he still gets ruled as his work occurs within institutional relations that sees him confined to a setting in the hospital that is marked by race.

Overall, the affiliation agreement was a barrier, preventing the racialized student participants, who were all in enrolled in a non-partner School, to obtain a placement at Eva's Setting. This was linked to race because, as per the student participants' placement manual, their School "differed [from other Schools in the locale] because of the student body." Reflecting the

locale, "many of the students enrolled in [this] School of Social Work were immigrants or children of immigrants." In contrast, reviewers of an external study for Eva's partner School noted that:

> The MSW program especially welcomes applications from visible minority groups, Aboriginal persons, and persons with disabilities… [but] the desired diversification and similarity to the population of the [locale] was not evident among the MSW students with whom we [the reviewers] met, who were predominantly young white females.

These findings suggested that Schools were raced in the study locale. Fairness, as it was articulated through 'neutral' affiliation agreements, allowed Eva's Setting and partner School to evade "accusations of bias." Through a legalistic discourse of fairness, the affiliation agreement concealed the inequities behind Eva's Setting partnering with one School that had white students as a majority.

Such inequities were not isolated to Eva's Setting. Rather, the self-study of Eva's partner School referenced its numerous affiliation agreements with Settings, representing the majority of placements across the locale. The partner School's self-study explained the importance of affiliation agreements for controlling the local placement supply:

> [The School] negotiates affiliation agreements with approximately 25 MSW practicum settings in [the locale], representing approximately half of the practicum placements. [The School] is advised of these agreements on an annual basis… This is a significant advantage for [the School], as the agreements state: "The Hospital undertakes that any teaching of students from other educational institutions will not compromise its ongoing teaching commitment to the University."

The affiliation agreements appeared to create this School's monopoly over placements in the locale, with the other two Schools only being able to access leftovers. Given that Schools were, themselves, raced, the affiliation agreements created structural barriers for racialized students, who were more likely to enroll in Schools without such agreements to accessing placements.

Coordinators' work suggested that institutional relationships were prioritized over advocacy work. This resulted in complex bureaucracy through affiliation agreements, which appeared to create a placement monopoly for one School that was raced as white. At the same time, these texts masked the social relations of race produced among students, Settings, and Schools, presenting field education coordination as fair.

Discussion and Implications

While it is Schools' responsibility to place students fairly and collaboratively, the student participants' experiential realities suggested that this process was one of struggle. Race was always present, yet also, invisible in this work—a paradox to social work as a social justice profession. The animosity and antagonism between the FED and student participants were inevitable as racial hierarchies among students, Settings, and Schools were discursively and materially reproduced through field education coordination. Although it appeared that placement-related disputes were of a personal and individual nature, the study's analyses suggest that racism was structured into field education coordination. Individual coordinators may not have racist intentions; however, as ideas from employment—choice, relationships, matching, competence, and fairness—penetrated field education coordination, it came to take the ugly face of a racially-segregated labour market in social work education, rendering students as choice-less, skill-less, experience-less, and worth-less.

As a result of the field education crisis, the study locale's placement supply was a tightly regulated commodity, with Schools and Settings evolving bureaucracy, including resource exchange practices, policies, database systems, and legal affiliation agreements, to mediate field education coordination. These managerialist strategies evoke neoliberal constructions of the free market, productivity, efficiency, standardization, and accountability. Together, these responses reflect managerial tactics that demonstrate value for dollar and sharply defined obligations as opposed to students' learning. With this focus, social justice and student experience were obfuscated in field education coordination.

Field education coordination was ruled by the overriding mandate of efficiently placing all students, rendering social injustice, including the discriminatory matching of racialized students to placements and exclusionary affiliation agreements between Settings and a white-dominated School, subordinate. This all added to the student participants' workload in obtaining a placement. In these ways, field education coordination represented configurations of social relations of race, gender, and class with labour. These findings are notable given that discrimination is not tolerated by social work. Yet, as demonstrated by this study, race-based sorting practices are sanctioned within field education coordination. Resonating with learnings from my previous investigations (Srikanthan, 2019; 2020) as well as that of de Bie et al. (2020) and Okuda (2023), this study demonstrates that the crisis is creating unique barriers for racialized students within specific locales. Intersectional approaches that are responsive to both the local context of field education, social work, and racism must be used to examine and confront the crisis' uneven impacts.

This study contributes knowledge on how managerialist responses to the field education crisis, including limiting students' choices for placements, race-based matching practices, and textually mediated placement monopolies, marginalize racialized social work students. This study also provides new insights on the managerialist properties of affiliation agreements and the work these texts activate. While affiliation agreements are used across disciplines, the study's findings suggest that these texts are ill-suited for social work as a social justice profession (Srikanthan, 2020; 2021; 2023) and must be further interrogated. As a profession with an explicit mandate for social justice, Schools must abandon the use of affiliation agreements to generate placement monopolies. Accrediting bodies, such as CASWE, must intervene by forbidding Schools' use of such antagonistic placement procurement tactics, which, in mirroring the free market, aggressively foster individualism and competition at the expense of students' collective wellbeing. Given the inextricable links between social work field education and the labour market, it would be in the interests of Settings, particularly in diverse locales such as that of the study, to relinquish the use of affiliation agreements. Rather, student-centred processes that favour equitable placement distribution will support those who follow Iman, Jordan, Eric, Naila, and Ayah as well as the communities served by Settings.

Readers must note the study's limitations. As an IE study, the analytical intent was not to produce generalized accounts—rather, I intended to learn about how the ruling relations organized field education coordination. That said, this study is limited by a small sample—the findings are not representative of all students and coordinators. Future research should draw from a larger sample and include participants from multiple Schools and Settings. Finally, from an IE standpoint, this study would be enriched by FED participants. Future research should explore how these functionaries' work is socially organized.

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