

Article

# **Canadian Social Work Field Education During a Global Pandemic: A Comparison of Student and Field Instructor Perspectives**

by

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### **Keywords:**

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected all aspects of social work education, including field education. The Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership conducted two national online surveys to determine the impacts of the pandemic on social work field education. The first survey explored the perspectives of students and received responses from 367 Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students. The second survey was designed to gather the perspectives of field instructors, with 73 field instructors completing the survey. The article examines the impacts of the pandemic on social work practice, field supervision, practicum flexibility and accommodations in placement, the shift to remote learning, perceptions of future career prospects and the effects on wellness and mental health. This article contributes to an increased understanding of the strengths and challenges facing social work field education, and informs field planning and responses in a pandemic. The findings will be of interest to social work field education programmes, field education coordinators and directors, field instructors, field agencies and undergraduate and graduate social work students. Recommendations for social work field education are offered.

*Keywords:* field education, social work, COVID-19, students, field instructors, mixed methods

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## **Introduction**

By March 27th, 2020, all Canadian provinces and territories had declared a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Canadian Nurses Association, 2020). This resulted in mandatory lockdowns, social distancing and isolation protocols, new public health and safety measures, and transitions to working at home (Department of Justice, 2021). The pandemic created significant socio-economic challenges for many people, particularly for marginalized populations, with declines noted in mental health, economic stability and overall quality of life (Arora, 2020). Added burdens have been placed upon the social work profession to assist those in need, with increased mental health and poverty challenges (United Nations, 2020). The pandemic's public health measures also affected how social work students could be prepared for professional practice in course learning and field education (Drolet et al., 2020).

Prior to COVID-19, Canadian field education was in crisis, with decreased funding and a lack of resources dedicated to field education (Ayala et al., 2018). These concerns were amplified during the pandemic with an increased stress placed on both students and field instructors, with little additional funding to further support them (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020). The growing demands for social workers generated by the pandemic, combined with the changed landscape of practice, presented a critical challenge for field education programmes in post-secondary institutions. The Transforming Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership launched a research study to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 on social work students and field instructors in Canada.

Online surveys were designed to capture students' and field instructors' perspectives on how the pandemic impacted their field placement experiences. The goal of the research was to understand how the pandemic affected Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students and field instructors (also known as field educators or field supervisors) who supervise students during practicum. Two separate online surveys were designed to capture the perceptions of the impacts in each group. This article compares student and field instructor perspectives on the impacts of the pandemic on social work practice, field supervision, practicum flexibility and accommodations in placement, the shift to remote learning, perceptions

of future career prospects and the effects on wellness and mental health. We provide a comparative analysis of the survey responses that focus on the concerns, benefits and recommendations for field education and future practicum planning during a global pandemic.

## **Literature Review**

### *Field Education*

Field education provides students with an opportunity to learn practical skills, integrate course material and master competency for future social work practice (Bogo & Sewell, 2019; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Katz et al., 2014). Field education is a required component for the successful completion of BSW and MSW degrees in Canada. Prior to the pandemic, there were significant challenges in the delivery of appropriate field education experiences. Shortages of field instructors and field placements, increasing challenges in field instructor retainment and a lack of resources and funding, as well as high workloads of field education coordinators and directors, have contributed to a state of crisis in field education (Ayala et al., 2017, 2018; Bogo et al., 2017; McConnell, 2016; TFEL, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the existing challenges facing field education.

### *COVID-19 and Field Education*

In response to the challenges brought on by the pandemic, the CASWE-ACFTS (2020) announced that, as of March 20, 2020, students who completed 75% of the required placement hours to a satisfactory level would be evaluated as having met the field placement requirements. CASWE-ACFTS also approved the use of online and virtual placements as an alternative to in-person ones. On January 27, 2021, as Canadian universities were planning for their 2021/2022 school year, CASWE-ACFTS (2020) declared that the reduction of hours may continue at the discretion of schools until April 2022. This served a number of purposes. First, it offered the field a host of new graduates ready to assist at the front lines. Second, it alleviated some of the pressures felt by schools and field sites to find placement solutions for students enrolled in programmes across the country (CASWE-ACFTS, 2020). The impact of this and other decisions on students' and field instructors' teaching and learning experiences have not yet been explored.

Challenges for both students and field instructors became apparent from the onset of the pandemic. While social work students may generally experience anxiety and emotional difficulties in field education, the pandemic created a sudden disruption to field education (Baird, 2016). This resulted in increased stress for students, resulting in mixed emotions, including confusion, disbelief, panic, disagreement, anger, sadness, anxiety and fear (Elmer et al., 2020). The Council on Social Work Education (2020) surveyed 3,564 students in the United States on their perception of the impact of COVID-19 in their education, of which, 65% of students articulated that COVID-19 had impacted their financial security, and 81% reported impacts on their mental health. A study based out of the United States shared that students reported feeling burdened by caregiving responsibilities and expressed concerns about limited resources, including a private space to conduct sessions and technology to help facilitate communication with clients (Dempsey et al., 2021). Students also reported feeling uncomfortable continuing their placements at home without face-to-face field instruction, which many field agencies could not provide during the height of the initial crisis (Dempsey et al., 2021).

In response to the changes brought on by the pandemic, field education was forced to adapt by creating practice innovations related to the use of technology to support students (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Drolet et al., 2020). As part of this response, the TFEL partnership created virtual field placements, training resources, research projects and activities, professional development webinars, mentorship initiatives and virtual events (Drolet, 2020). TFEL student research assistants were involved in the aforementioned surveys to better understand what students and field instructors were experiencing during the pandemic.

## **Methodology**

### *Recruitment*

Participation in the surveys was encouraged through multiple recruitment avenues. Recruitment posters were designed for each survey and posted on TFEL's Facebook and Twitter pages. Links to the student survey were emailed to social work faculty, field coordinators and directors, researchers and student groups in all 43 CASWE-ACFTS accredited schools of social work across Canada. Links to the field instructor survey were sent to TFEL members and partners, including CASWE-ACFTS, for

distribution among social work field instructors working in diverse urban, rural and Indigenous lands across Canada. The eligibility criteria for the student survey included BSW and MSW students from CASWE-ACFTS accredited social work programmes who completed a practicum between January and December 2020. The eligibility criteria for the field instructor survey included field instructors who hosted social work practicum students from a CASWE-ACFTS accredited social work programme during the COVID-19 pandemic, up to and including the distribution date of the survey.

### *Data Collection*

Both surveys were administered online using SurveyMonkey©. The student survey was available for a period of three weeks from July 8th to 29th, 2020, while the field instructor survey was open for 16-days from November 18th to December 3rd, 2020. Both surveys were designed in English and translated into French by a TFEL bilingual research assistant. The French survey responses were translated into English for data analysis.

Both surveys were comprised of a mix of open-ended short answer questions, Likert scales, ranking questions, multiple-choice questions and multi-response questions. The surveys took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The student survey consisted of 27 questions and included: demographics, COVID-19 impacts on practicum field placements, student needs and concerns, institutional responses to COVID-19, practicum supervision, student mental health, student learning and technology and online learning. The field instructor survey included 28 questions, including: demographics, agency overview, changes to client services and interactions, changes to practica due to COVID-19, perceived challenges to supervising practica, perspectives on supervising students during COVID-19, support during practicum supervision, impacts on student learning, technology and online learning and mental health during COVID-19. In both surveys, open-ended questions were included to gain a better understanding of what changes could be made to aid students and field instructors involved in field education. The surveys yielded a total of 367 responses from BSW and MSW students, with 73 completing surveys from field instructors across Canada. It is important to note that not all respondents

answered every question on the survey; therefore, the total number of responses per question varied.

In this article, we compare the students' and field instructor's responses in terms of the identified concerns, perceived challenges, unexpected benefits and recommendations for social work field education programmes.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Research ethics approval was obtained from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board prior to data collection. Participation in both surveys was anonymous and voluntary. Demographic questions were designed to avoid any identifying respondents. Respondents provided their informed consent prior to beginning the survey, and had the option to stop answering the survey questions at any point during the survey. There were no obvious foreseeable risks or consequences for either group in responding to the survey questions. To mitigate any potential discomfort, a web link was provided for respondents to access COVID-19 information and resources.

### *Data analysis*

Once the surveys were closed, the responses were exported from SurveyMonkey© into Microsoft Excel for data analysis. Likert scales, multiple-choice, multi-response and ranking questions provided quantitative data for both surveys. Likert scale questions included a 7-point scale ('strongly disagree,' 'disagree,' 'somewhat disagree,' 'somewhat agree,' 'agree,' and 'strongly agree' and 'not applicable'). For this analysis, these scales have been condensed into three categories with 'strongly agree,' 'agree,' and 'somewhat agree,' categorized into 'agree'; 'strongly disagree,' 'disagree' and 'somewhat disagree,' categorized as 'disagree' and 'not applicable' as the third category. The questions used to calculate the field instructors' concerns were based on a 5-point scale ('not at all concerned,' 'somewhat concerned,' 'very concerned' and 'extremely concerned' and 'not applicable'). For this paper, 'somewhat concerned,' 'very concerned' and 'extremely concerned' were categorized as 'yes', while 'not at all concerned' responses were categorized as 'no' and 'not applicable' remained as an individual category. The choice 'not applicable' was included in all Likert scale and ranking questions; however, the possibility of having a

'neutral' response was deliberately excluded. This was done in order to gather a clearer understanding of respondents' level of agreement and concern. The 'not applicable' response could represent that the question did not apply to them, or that they were genuinely not worried or concerned. This survey design approach reduces the 'forced choice' provided by the removal of a neutral response (Leung, 2011, p. 413). To ensure the scale's validity, the 'not applicable' responses were calculated separately, rather than at the midpoint on their respective scales (Chyung, 2017).

While the initial qualitative analysis for the field instructor survey included both a content analysis and thematic analysis based on the differing questions provided, only responses analysed using thematic analysis are presented for their comparative qualities. In the student survey, both open-ended questions were analysed using a thematic analysis. The same researcher completed the initial thematic analysis for both surveys, meeting with a second researcher to verify the analysis (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Themes and sub-themes were identified for each question using a colour-coding method. The themes identified included: perceived challenges, perceived benefits, neutral responses and recommendations. Sub-themes were developed to enhance and further narrow the themes. This colour-coding method provided a clearer visual representation of data and helped with the organization of responses into categories that best highlighted the respondents' experiences.

A notes section discussing any notable concerns with the data or any significant findings was also included in the analysis files. The qualitative responses' subjectivity can cause bias when analysing data, as interpreting a respondent's experience can be misguided by the researcher's own perceptions (Clarke & Braun, 2017). To help mitigate the chances of bias and errors in interpretation, a second researcher reviewed the colour-themed data to verify the analysis.

### **Field Instructor and Student Experiences in Field Education: Survey Results**

The survey results are presented starting with the demographics of the survey respondents, and followed by theme: the impacts of the pandemic on social work practice, field supervision, practicum flexibility and accommodations in placement, the shift to remote learning, perceptions of future career prospects and the effects on wellness and mental health.

*Field Instructor and Student Demographics*

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Comparison between Students and Field Instructors*

Demographics	Population	
	Students	Field Instructors
<b>Age</b>	<b>n=272</b>	<b>n=63</b>
20-29	119 (43.8%)	3 (4.8%)
30-39	75 (27.7%)	18 (28.6%)
40-49	22 (8.1%)	18 (28.6%)
50-59	9 (3.3%)	5 (7.9%)
60+	-	2 (3.2%)
I prefer not to answer	47 (17.3%)	17 (27.0%)
<b>Gender</b>	<b>n=272</b>	<b>n=63</b>
Female	237 (87.1%)	54 (85.7%)
Gender fluid, non-binary, and/or Two-Spirit	10 (3.7%)	-
Male	19 (7.0%)	8 (12.7%)
Prefer not to answer	6 (2.2%)	1 (1.6%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>n=272</b>	<b>n=73</b>
Black/African	10 (3.6%*)	1 (1.4%)
Asian (East, South and West)	15 (5.5%)	4 (5.5%)
Indigenous: First Nation, Métis, or Inuk (Inuit)	7 (2.6%)	5 (6.8%)
Latinx	7 (2.6%)	2 (2.7%)
Middle Eastern/North African	1 (0.4%)	1 (1.4%)
Pacific Islander	1 (0.4%)	-
White/Caucasian	185 (68.0%)	49 (67.1%)
Mixed Ethnicity	26 (9.6%)	6 (8.2%)
Other	9 (3.3%)	4 (5.5%)
I prefer not to answer	11 (4.0%)	1 (1.4%)

\*Rounded value

**Note:** This table outlines the demographic information obtained for students and field instructors in both surveys.

*Impacts of the Pandemic on Social Work Field Practice*

The pandemic and the accompanying public health responses created significant changes in the delivery of field education in the social work sector. Most students

indicated that the changes included a reduction in the required practica hours (57.1%), placements ending early (48.4%), practicum moving online (34.3%), fewer learning goals and expectations (32.4%) and field placements changing entirely (24.7%). Field instructor responses were similar regarding practicum supervision, indicating as the most common changes: a complete online transition (46.4%), a reduction in required hours (44.9%), a partial online transition (42.0%) and a practicum terminating early (15.9%).

Regarding the effects of these impacts on practica, narratives from the qualitative responses underscore students' concerns with their practicum, noting diminished practicum learning and experiences compared to before the pandemic as a result of the lack of face-to-face practice. For instance, one student explained: 'I feel that I have not been benefiting the organization. I have been working nearly as much as I would have in person. It does not feel like a "real" practicum but more like a formality.' Field instructors recognized similar challenges. One field instructor stated: 'The [one-on-one] connection with students; in addition, the lack of in-person activities makes the students' learning opportunities less available.'

Some students' field placements changed entirely as a result of the pandemic. A significant number (63.1%) were not able to complete a practicum in their intended area of practice. One student expressed: 'I am wanting to do it in a hospital/health care setting and the idea that it may not happen due to COVID-19 is really stressful and disheartening.' Many students shared that the abrupt ending to their practicum and lack of closure with clients and staff had a negative impact on their learning and practicum experience. This experience was shared by a student:

It was an abrupt end to practicum, and I did not have the opportunity to say goodbye to clients or staff. I was unable to participate in some activities that had been planned for the last month of my practicum that I believe would have been a very valuable learning experience.

A field instructor identified similar concerns with the practicum changes, noting: 'It has been a real struggle to provide students with shadowing opportunities...this has made their learning curve much steeper, as they were unable to observe/accompany [sic] prior to having to carry out interventions.'

The changes were perceived as difficult in a variety of settings, with many similar concerns expressed by field instructors and students; however, unforeseen positive outcomes due to these changes were recognized. Students reported improvements in virtual skills (46.3%), self-motivation and self-directed study skills (43.3%), research skills (25.7%), social work disaster skills (21.1%) and local community understanding (18.1%). The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way social work programmes and field agencies deliver student practica. One student noted the changes from traditional practicum settings, stating:

The reconceptualization of what learning looks like has been explored with practicum during COVID-19. Traditional concepts of what social work skills look like has been challenged by external factors such as the pandemic and internal factors such as thoughtful leaders who are quick to respond.

Overall, field instructor respondents agreed that it was satisfying to teach during these challenging times and still connect with students remotely. One field instructor noted: 'It is highly rewarding and enriches my own practice as a Clinical Social Worker. Students keep me on top of best practice and latest research findings.' Field instructors also learned new skills, both by learning from students and from having acquired new technological abilities to connect with clients and students. A field instructor supervising a student for the first time expressed: 'It was my first time being a supervisor, and I welcomed the roles with its challenges and learning.' Student and field instructor perceptions on practicum supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic are reflected in Table 2:

## Field Supervision

**Table 2***Student and Field Instructor Perceptions on Practicum Supervision During COVID-19*

Student Perceptions				Field Instructor Perceptions			
Statements	Likert Ranking Scale (n=294)			Statements	Likert Ranking Scale (n=65)		
	Disagree	Agree	N/A		Disagree	Agree	N/A
I am satisfied with the level of supervision I am receiving during practicum	60 (20.4%)	175 (59.5%)	59 (20.1%)	I am satisfied with the level of supervision that I am providing to student(s)	6 (9.2%)	59 (90.8%)	-
I am receiving more supervision than needed	172 (58.5%)	49 (16.7%)	73 (24.8%)	I believe that I can effectively keep track of the practicum hours completed by my student(s)	5 (7.7%)	60 (92.3%)	-
I am receiving less supervision than needed	133 (45.2%)	86 (29.3%)	75 (25.5%)	I believe that I can accurately evaluate the student(s) through online supervision	10 (15.4%)	50 (76.9%)	5 (7.7%)
Supervision holds me accountable to complete my practicum requirements	34 (11.6%)	205 (69.7%)	55 (18.7%)	I believe that having virtual supervision is beneficial	9 (13.8%)	51 (78.5%)	5 (7.7%)
If I have questions or concerns, my supervisor(s) are readily available and helpful*	30 (10.2%)	218 (74.4%)	45 (15.4%)	I adapt my supervisory role to meet the needs of the student(s)	-	65 (100.0%)	-
I am unable to meet my practicum requirements due to COVID-19 challenges	150 (51.0%)	58 (19.7%)	86 (29.3%)				

\*The number of responses for these questions were n=293.

**Note:** This table represents the level of agreement students and field instructors provided to different statements regarding practica and supervision during COVID-19.

Field instructors and students described different perceptions of field practicum supervision. Most field instructors (90.8%) felt satisfied with the level of supervision they were providing to their students, as opposed to 59.5% of students who felt satisfied with the level of supervision they received during their practica. In at least one case the move to online ended the practicum, as one student expressed: 'My practicum supervisor didn't feel there was anything to teach me remotely, so the placement ended.' This discrepancy reappears in student and field instructor perceptions of field instructor availability. Although 100% of field instructors agreed that they adapted their supervisory role to meet the needs of students, 29.3% of students believed that they received less supervision than what they needed. These findings suggest inconsistency and potential miscommunication on the availability of supervision between field instructors and students. Moreover, this may also indicate that during the pandemic students wanted additional supervision beyond the usual practices.

The qualitative responses in the survey demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of field supervision, and identified transparent communication and clarifying expectations as important aspects to reduce communication barriers. For example, one field instructor noted that it was important in their practice 'to be transparent and open with the student about their expectations of the placement,' with one student noting similar sentiments from their field instructor: 'My practicum supervisor has told me that I will be able to complete a practicum, but it may not be what I originally envisioned.' Another field instructor suggested:

[A] designated time for regular weekly meetings is something I would strongly recommend... as well as building in time in those sessions for 'teambuilding'-type discussions... without being able to interact on a daily basis, having these meetings has been a much welcome addition to ongoing work and a way to combat isolation. Regular email and text correspondence with students has also helped when discussing ongoing matters, and being direct and purposeful in having a best practice guide for online service delivery that is also modelled in supervisor/student interactions.

Despite the contrasting perspectives on field supervision, responses suggested that many students were satisfied with the supervision they received. Over half of the students (59.5%) expressed agreement with having satisfactory supervision, with one student recalling: 'I appreciated the flexibility from both my practicum placement

supervisors.’ One student further illustrated this point by identifying: ‘My placement was accessible, and I had a good supervisor. I still learned a lot during this practicum... my supervisor and other colleagues were still available and very helpful whenever I had questions or needed support.’

### *Practicum Flexibility and Accommodations in Placement*

Many students reported a greater placement flexibility, including a reduction in the number of practicum hours required to successfully complete their placement. Notably, 62.1% of students agreed, while 22.8% disagreed with the statement: ‘I have more flexible hours while completing my practicum during COVID-19.’ From the field instructor perspective, 44.9% also noted the reduction in required practica hours. Interestingly, the open-ended responses reflected that this accommodation was met with positive and negative reactions by both students and field instructors. For instance, one student shared: ‘I still learned a lot during this practicum. I was glad that we did not have to do so many hours. Reducing the hours helped me complete my practicum faster.’ A positive response was expressed by a field instructor who recommended to other field instructors, ‘Be flexible as to meeting the Learning Plan. Changes may have to be made based on client's own challenges with virtual care and coping during COVID.’ Although there were perceptions that flexibility and accommodations were beneficial, there were some contradictory viewpoints expressed by both students and field instructors. One student identified: ‘Doing a practicum during COVID-19 had refrained me from gaining almost a month of extra learning. As well, the abrupt stop left me feeling unfinished in my placement with my clients and my coworkers.’ Similarly, this sentiment was shared by a field instructor:

Shorter placements are not better during COVID. In fact, longer placements, even if this means reducing days, is better. By the time a student is onboarded and ready to work with actual clients, their time is almost up. It is not good practice to introduce a student who is leaving soon to a client, especially virtually.

Flexibility and accommodations were discussed in the context of post-secondary institutional responses, with students expressing that their institution’s response to the impacts of COVID-19 was prompt and effective. Flexible hours while completing practicum and sufficient resources and information to work safely during COVID-19 were noted by student respondents. One student shared: ‘I have surprisingly been able to have a very rich practicum with the opportunities that arose for me along with the University accommodation [for] the remote learning plan.’ On the other hand, a

field instructor perceived students' experience quite differently: 'I witnessed a disconnect with my students and field instructors from the academic institution. Regarding paperwork, expectations, deadlines, my students communicated to me that they did not feel supported by their respected institution.' There were students who agreed with this sentiment, as stated by a student: 'There needs to be more accountability from faculty...Many of my peers have no idea what is going on with their placements and haven't been given any direction.'

Student and field instructor perceptions on technology and academic support are outlined in Table 3:

*Shift to Remote Learning*

**Table 3**  
*Student and Field Instructor Perceptions on Technology and Academic Support*

Student Perceptions				Field Instructor Perceptions			
Statements	Likert Ranking Scale (n=294)			Statements	Likert Ranking Scale (n=65)		
	Disagree	Agree	N/A		Disagree	Agree	N/A
I have access to technology (programmes and equipment) required to complete my practicum	27 (9.3%)	235 (80.8%)	29 (10.0%)	I was provided with online tools to supervise the student's practicum effectively.	14 (21.5%)	49 (75.4%)	2 (3.1%)
I have received satisfactory online training to be able to manage the technology required	70 (24.1%)	164 (56.4%)	57 (19.6%)	I was able to implement online strategies to accommodate the student's practicum.	6 (9.2%)	55 (84.6%)	4 (6.2%)
Technology is a major obstacle for me when completing my practicum	193 (66.3%)	55 (18.9%)	43 (14.8%)	I received adequate technical support to facilitate practicum activities.	14 (21.5%)	46 (70.8%)	5 (7.7%)

Technology has been an essential resource for me when completing my practicum	13 (4.5%)	228 (78.4%)	50 (17.2%)	I was able to navigate the needed online platforms with ease.	9 (13.8%)	53 (81.5%)	3 (4.6%)
I can access academic and technological support and resources through my institution**	44 (15.2%)	222 (76.8%)	23 (8.0%)	Technology has been a benefit during COVID-19**	1 (1.6%)	61 (95.3%)	2 (3.1%)
				Technology has been a primary challenge during COVID-19.	40 (61.5%)	23 (35.4%)	2 (3.1%)

\*The number of responses for these questions were n=289.

\*\* Total responses differ for question (n=64).

**Note:** This table represents the level of agreement students and field instructors provided with statements regarding technology, online learning and academic support during COVID-19.

The findings show significant variations in student and field instructor perceptions on online training and accommodations. This variation could be due to the nuance between the technology-related barriers in practicum versus challenges with technology as a communicative device or practice element. However, both groups expressed similar perceptions of utilizing online technology during the pandemic. The majority of students agreed (80.8%) that they had access to technology (programmes and equipment) required to complete their practicum. As articulated by a student, they noted benefits, as 'Zoom videos allowed for a connection with clients.' Most students did not perceive technology as a barrier (66.3%), and acknowledged that it was an essential resource to successfully complete their practicum (78.4%). Nevertheless, in the qualitative responses, some students expressed concern on the switch to remote practice, including feelings of being isolated, overworked, exhausted, generally displeased with having to complete a practicum in a virtual setting and finding a work and home life balance to be nearly nonexistent. For example, one student shared: 'It is not the same when done through technology, and not all communities have stable access to technology (stable internet

connection, etc.). I also missed out on many ceremonies that were meant to be part of my learning plan.'

Despite these responses, students generally believed that they had received adequate training to manage technology, and were satisfied with the accessibility of support and resources through their institution. Field instructors also reported having a positive experience with technology and online learning (84.6 %). One field instructor shared their positive experience by articulating:

The adaptations our agency made at the beginning of COVID made students' onboarding virtually easier. Technology has made it easier to support virtually than it would be in person (observing sessions in Zoom, recording sessions and viewing, being able to support in sessions using the chat function, etc.

On the other hand, some field instructors discussed challenges with technology. In fact, in the qualitative question asking what the most significant change was to their practice, most field instructors noted the change to remote practice. One field instructor indicated that there were changes with 'virtual delivery (partially in our department), when we know many clients and families need us in person more than ever.' Unlike students, and despite the higher level of agreement with being able to shift to online platforms, some field instructors indicated that technology was a primary challenge during COVID-19 (35.4%), with one field instructor emphasizing that working remotely '[and] not having face-to-face with clients increases the challenge of working through trauma.'

Given that field education plays a crucial role in preparing students for social work practice and perceptions of future career prospects are discussed in the next section.

### *Perceptions of Future Career Prospects*

Both students and field instructors expressed some doubt that students experienced sufficient learning in their field placement during the pandemic to acquire the skills necessary for entry-level social work post-graduation. Student concerns primarily revolved around not gaining meaningful learning in preparation for professional practice (81.5%), and not gaining adequate experience for future job prospects (79.3%). Given that 63.1% of students experienced a complete change in their practicum placements as a result of COVID-19, the concerns raised regarding future

career prospects reflects the societal and emergent contexts of COVID-19 and its impacts on preparing the next generation of professionals.

The opportunity for students to gain meaningful and valuable social work experience in their pursuit of professional practice was identified as a concern by both field instructors and students. One field instructor noted the following issue:

I am concerned that the university will support students to graduate without adequate practical experience. As a hiring manager, I want MSWs with direct experience in the field. Online exceptions to accommodate COVID won't adequately prepare students to do the real work. COVID shouldn't be treated as a 'pass' for the learning required.

This concern was not only expressed by field instructors. In terms of employability, students worried about being able to pay their tuition and not being able to obtain a job after graduation to pay off their student loans. To emphasize this point, one student noted: 'I am also worried at prospective future employment due to the cost of COVID.' Students worried about their ability to pay back their student loans and other costs.

As students noted challenges regarding the quality of their learning and opportunities for future job prospects, field instructors echoed concerns about student workload and capacity. Field instructors reported being concerned about being readily available to support students (50.8%) and providing students with a manageable workload during COVID-19 (66.7%). The disparity between student concerns regarding adequate learning and direct experience is contrasted by field instructor unease about overloading students and being concerned about student well-being.

Students and field instructor perceptions of mental health are outlined in Table 4:

## Wellness and Mental Health

**Table 4***Students and Field Instructor Perceptions of Mental Health*

Student Perceptions				Field Instructor Perceptions			
Statements	Likert Ranking Scale (n=294)			Statements	Likert Ranking Scale (n=65)		
	Disagree	Agree	N/A		Disagree	Agree	N/A
COVID-19 is negatively impacting my mental health	60 (20.5%)	227 (77.5%)	6 (2.0%)	COVID-19 has negatively impacted my mental health/wellness.	19 (29.2%)	46 (70.8%)	-
Social distancing/isolation is negatively impacting my mental health	61 (20.8%)	232 (79.2%)	-	I have been able to effectively manage my mental health/wellness during COVID-19.	4 (6.2%)	61 (93.8%)	-
Online practicum is negatively impacting my mental health	79 (27.0%)	131 (44.7%)	83 (28.3%)	I believe that supervising the student(s) during COVID-19 has placed additional burdens on my mental health/wellness.	45 (69.2%)	20 (30.8%)	-
I feel that I can maintain a healthy work and home life balance during practicum**	118 (40.4%)	142 (48.6%)	32 (11.0%)	I have embraced the challenges and feel empowered by this new learning experience during COVID-19.	6 (9.2%)	57 (87.7%)	2 (3.1%)

\*\*The number of responses for these questions were n=292

**Note:** This table represents the level of agreement students and field instructors provided to different statements regarding their mental health during COVID-19

Student mental health concerns were supported by field instructors who reported student mental health challenges while completing practica (88.9%). With the constant challenges, concerns and disruptions related to the pandemic, student mental health and manageable workloads during COVID-19 became an additional concern for many field instructors (66.7%). The majority of students identified that both COVID-19 (77.5%) and social isolation (79.2%) negatively impacted their mental health. Regarding isolation, one student stated: 'I felt very isolated and tied to my desk and the kitchen.' Similarly, most field instructors (70.8%) also noted that COVID-19 negatively impacted their mental health/wellness. Students generally

agreed that they were encouraged to practice self-care during their practicums, but many identified that they had difficulties in maintaining a healthy work and home life balance (48.6%) during practicum. In contrast, a significant number of field instructors (93.8%) noted that they were able to effectively manage their mental health and well-being during COVID-19. Many field instructors (87.7%) embraced the challenges they experienced, and felt empowered by the new opportunities COVID-19 made available to them. However, one field instructor shared mental health concerns within the workplace: 'Staff in general (especially those unwilling to come into the office despite adequate space) appear to be experiencing higher mental health issues due to what I speculate as related to social isolation.'

Another student commented on difficulties with working at home: 'It was a challenge working from home with small children, but I was able to complete my practicum with the support of my direct supervisor and also support from the university.' This steep learning curve and additional pressure on students due to the lack of face-to-face interactions was noted in the student response: 'This increased their stress level and my responsibilities as a supervisor.' Field instructors noted the mental health challenges experienced by students due to COVID-19; as one field instructor shared: 'I feel disappointed that I cannot provide the same caliber of experience due to the remote work environment, my workload demands and my own mental health needs.' For one student, having a supportive supervisor assisted them in managing the additional stresses caused by COVID-19. The student stated: 'I had a tremendously supportive supervisor (this makes all the difference) who was able to help me value my own self-care and that was important learning in my practicum.' In qualitative responses, both students and field instructors identified the importance of positive instructor-student relationships in mediating these challenges and creating a supportive environment for all.

## **Discussion**

Through the comparison of field instructor and student perspectives on field education during the pandemic, the study found that while the field instructors and students experienced similar impacts to their practice, they had varying perceptions on the experience, especially noted in supervision. As noted in the literature, field education was in a state of crisis before the pandemic due, in part, to shortages in

practicum placements, lack of resources and difficulty retaining competent field instructors (Ayala et al., 2017, 2018; Bogo et al., 2017; McConnell, 2016; TFEL, 2020). Our findings reinforce these concerns, and identify new challenges specific to the pandemic. These include an increased disconnection between students and their educational institutes, a greater burden on mental health/well-being due to social isolation and increased worry from students on their practicum learning and readiness for social work practice. The analysis shows that, despite these challenges, there were positive experiences as reported by students and field instructors alike, including an increased competency with technology and technology being recognized as essential in field placements during the pandemic.

Regarding the reduction in required hours to complete practica, both field instructors and students provided mixed remarks. While some students expressed gratitude for the reduced requirement, it was also noted by field instructors and students that the reduction caused for a less enriched practicum experience. This correlates with the current debates around this reduction in hours for field placements across Canada, as it is known that to develop competence for practice requires an opportunity for practice, receiving feedback, practicing again in incorporating that feedback, for example, deliberate practice theory (Dempsey et al., 2021). This study provides several recommendations to improve social work field education. A recommendation to value the concerns of both the opposing views of hour reduction would be to keep the reduction, yet changing the tasks to ensure that the time the students have is used for high-quality tasks and functions, as meaningful learning is the priority. With the very real possibilities of future disasters, training for virtual platforms will be an ongoing need (Mitchell et al., 2021). Online training opportunities, for both field instructors (Ayala et al., 2014) and students (Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020), have demonstrable benefits to field education. This recommendation was also offered by several field instructors, who noted that it would be helpful for instructors to be familiar with technology, as well as how to access and modify student learning agreements prior to the placement start date.

Field instructors and students agreed that there was a need for greater communication between students and the post-secondary institution, specifically social work education programmes. Field education coordinators/directors and faculty

liaisons are advised to check-in more often, by requesting more meetings with practicum students to ensure they are meeting their learning goals and do not feel disconnected from the institution.

As public health directives caused the shift to remote learning (CASWE-ACFTS, 2020), field education coordinators/directors are now encouraged to support students in taking an active role in their own learning, in choosing a practicum and deciding between an in-person and remote placement. Students require information on the placement context to assess potential safety concerns and risks associated with the site. The recruitment of additional quality field placements has been a concern for field education prior to the pandemic, and this need has become an even more pressing concern for the future of social work education.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the challenges that exist within field education, this pandemic has not been solely a negative set of events for students and field instructors. This pandemic has deepened and amplified field challenges and their impacts, but at the same time it has also constituted a space for positive and creative alternatives to field education. For instance, the pandemic, beyond the emergent shifts that were challenging for all involved, has vicariously heightened, modified, and/or amplified the lingering struggles, structural chasms and crises in field that existed. The findings from this study highlight and examine the impacts of COVID-19 on field education from the perspective of students and field instructors. The experiences of students and field instructors may potentially help create an opportunity to momentarily rethink our strategies for field education in ways that we perhaps would not have done, or at least done as fervently, if it had not been for the transformation of field education caused by COVID-19.

### **Limitations**

In this study, two separate and distinct surveys were conducted with each population group: students and field instructors. The student survey was completed from July 8th to 29th, 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic. The field instructor survey was conducted four months later. The second survey may have allowed field instructor respondents more time to reflect, prepare and adapt to the impacts of the pandemic on their practice. As such, the survey data represents the perceptions of

students and field instructors at a specific moment in time, which may be impacted by the different phases of the pandemic. A longitudinal study, with multiple data collection points, would provide a more thorough representation of the impacts of the pandemic on field education. Furthermore, a longitudinal study would allow for a better understanding of how social work practice was negatively impacted and adapted, and mitigating strategies for these diverse challenges.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented circumstances affecting all spheres of society, including social work field education. The impacts of the pandemic on field education created both new challenges and new opportunities. This article considered the impacts of the pandemic on social work practice, field supervision, practicum flexibility and accommodations, the shift to remote learning, perceptions of future career prospects and the effects on mental health. The perceptions of field instructors and students is of interest to social work field education programmes, field education coordinators/directors, field instructors, field agencies and undergraduate and graduate social work students.

Although field instructors and students described a number of challenges, they also noted some opportunities and benefits. Future research on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is needed in the year ahead. It is critical for field education programmes to consider the perspectives of students and field instructors on field education to inform practices and placements in the future.

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