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## **Social work practicum students experiences, challenges, and aspirations during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

Field education is considered the signature pedagogy of social work education, yet there are numerous challenges including a shortage of field instructors and available placements and barriers to advancing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), which were heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. This articles shares the results of research designed to investigate practicum students' experiences, challenges, and aspirations during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to answer the question: how did students' experiences, challenges, needs, and aspirations vary due to their identity factors (e.g., gender and ethnicity), post-secondary institution (e.g., universities), and placement types (e.g., clinical/research)? To this end, a cross-sectional web-based survey was conducted to document the perspectives of BSW/MSW practicum students in Canada, with both open and close-ended questions. This article presents the survey results to two open-ended questions in three broad themes, namely mental health and wellness, students' perception on field learning, and professional readiness. Female students across different ethnic groups reported challenges in balancing their gendered roles and responsibilities in caregiving and as a practicum student, which consequently impacted their mental health and wellness. Two major factors shaped practicum student learning, such as post-secondary institution (e.g., universities) and types of placements. Due to the pandemic, practicum students were unable to gain direct practice experience in person in their placement, which affected their perception of professional readiness. This article concludes that through an evidence-informed institutional and programmatic response and support, diverse challenges, needs, and aspirations of practicum students could be addressed to promote EDI in field education in the context of pandemics, emergencies, and disasters.

### **Keywords**

field education, pandemic, gender, EDI, Canada

## Résumé

La formation sur le terrain est considérée comme la pédagogie phare de la formation en travail social, mais il existe de nombreux défis, notamment une pénurie d'instructeurs sur le terrain et de stages disponibles, ainsi que des obstacles à la promotion de l'équité, de la diversité et de l'inclusion (EDI), qui ont été exacerbés par la pandémie de COVID-19. Cet article partage les résultats d'une recherche conçue pour étudier les expériences, les défis et les aspirations des étudiants en stage pendant la première vague de la pandémie de COVID-19. Cette étude visait à répondre à la question : comment les expériences, les défis, les besoins et les aspirations des étudiants variaient-ils en raison de leurs facteurs d'identité (par exemple, le sexe et l'origine ethnique), de l'établissement postsecondaire (par exemple, les universités) et des types de placement (par exemple, recherche clinique)? À cette fin, une enquête transversale en ligne a été menée pour documenter les perspectives des étudiants en stage BSW/MSW au Canada, avec des questions ouvertes et fermées. Cet article présente les résultats de l'enquête à deux questions ouvertes portant sur trois grands thèmes, à savoir la santé mentale et le bien-être, la perception des étudiants sur l'apprentissage sur le terrain et la préparation professionnelle. Les étudiantes de différents groupes ethniques ont signalé des difficultés à équilibrer leurs rôles et responsabilités sexospécifiques en matière de soins et de stage, ce qui a par conséquent eu un impact sur leur santé mentale et leur bien-être. Deux facteurs majeurs ont façonné l'apprentissage des étudiants en stage, tels que l'établissement postsecondaire (par exemple, les universités) et les types de stages. En raison de la pandémie, les étudiants en stage n'ont pas pu acquérir une expérience pratique directe en personne pendant leur stage, ce qui a affecté leur perception de leur préparation professionnelle. Cet article conclut que grâce à une réponse et un soutien institutionnels et programmatiques fondés sur des données probantes, divers défis, besoins et aspirations des étudiants en stage pourraient être abordés afin de promouvoir l'EDI dans l'enseignement sur le terrain dans le contexte de pandémies, d'urgences et de catastrophes.

## Mots clés

éducation sur le terrain, pandémie, genre, EDI, Canada

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## Introduction

Field education is considered the signature pedagogy of social work education (Egan et al., 2018; Wayne et al., 2010). It is a critical component of students' learning, providing them with practical experience and enhancing their competence as social workers who can effectively serve individuals, communities, and systems in need (Bogo, 2010; Bogo & Sewell, 2019; Katz et al.,

2014). These skills are essential for social workers, making field education an integral component of their degree program. However, despite its significance in preparing future social workers, field education programs encounter significant challenges in delivering the necessary skills to students (Briggs et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Omorogiuwa, 2023).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, field education programs faced various obstacles. This included a shortage of field instructors and available placements, inadequate resources and funding, as well as overwhelming workloads for field education coordinators and directors (Ayala et al., 2018; Bogo, 2015; Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Transforming Field Education Landscape (TFEL), 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic heightened some of the challenges, intensifying an ongoing crisis in field education (Ashcroft et al., 2022). While students experienced these challenges differently based on their own needs, the agency, their field instructor, and the context of work (Black et al., 1997; Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021; Razack, 2001), no one escaped the consequences of the pandemic. The Council on Social Work Education highlighted the impact of COVID-19, which directly affected many students studying social work (Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), 2023). For example, according to a study, 3564 students were surveyed to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their education and found that it negatively affected their financial security, mental health, and access to resources (Dempsey et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique opportunity to look at a cataclysmic change and strain in field education from the perspective of students.

Beyond and amidst challenges in the pandemic, there is a continued call to transform social work field education in Canada (Drolet et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2022). Attempts have been made to transform social work field education by promoting EDI in field education itself and removing systemic barriers that impede students and instructors in equity-deserving groups to meaningfully participate in field education (Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021; Razack, 2001). There remains a gap in understanding how identity factors (e.g., gender and ethnicity), post-secondary institution (e.g., universities), and placement types (e.g., clinical/research) intersect to shape differential experiences. Our research contributes to these considerations by documenting students' experience of field education during the COVID-19 pandemic, which are critical to promote EDI in, and transform, social work field education.

This article considers social work students' field experiences during the pandemic in Canada through students' perception of their: 1) mental health and wellness, 2) field learning, and 3) professional readiness. The three themes demonstrate how gender, ethnicity, post-secondary institution (e.g., universities), and placement types (e.g., clinical/research) intersect to better understand differential needs, aspirations, experiences, and challenges.

## **Conceptual considerations**

The principles of EDI are central to social work field education because they contribute to fostering a learning environment that embraces diverse perspectives and experiences (Beasley et al., 2022; Teclé et al., 2020). Social work field education programs that incorporate EDI principles are believed to foster cultural humility, amplify and challenge biases, and facilitate the

development of culturally responsive practice skills (CSWE, 2015). Most studies of EDI in field education are focused on discrimination against, and marginalization of, students and field instructors of color, or racialized students and field instructors, or how White supremacy and microaggression play out in field settings (Black et al., 1997; Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021; Razack, 2001; Mehrotra & Gooding, 2022). Razack (2001) indicated that students' experiences are likely to differ based on the agency, field instructor, and context of work. Srikanthan's (2024) institutional ethnography focused on the challenges and struggles experienced by racialized MSW practicum students due in part to a racially-segregated labour market and managerialist strategies in social work education, calling for intersectional approaches in responding to the field crisis. Gooding and Mehrotra (2021) documented that students of color or racialized students often experience microaggression in field settings from service users and students, resulting in feelings of isolation, lack of professional identity, and decreased confidence. They also identified three factors that can potentially contribute to a meaningful field experience, including 1) connection to the practice area or community being served, 2) the importance of relationships with field instructors, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) field instructors, and 3) a supportive agency context. Many studies examine diverse learning experiences and challenges of diverse student groups (such as racialized, Indigenous, and disabled students) (de Bie et al., 2021). Studies are needed to better understand how students' identity factors (e.g., gender and ethnicity) intersect with post-secondary institution and placement types to create differential needs, aspirations and challenges, especially at a time of crisis like the pandemic.

EDI aims to create equitable opportunities and fair treatment for all individuals, with the objective of addressing historical and systemic barriers that marginalize certain groups and promote diversity and inclusion in organizations (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021). Equity refers to achieving fair outcomes, recognizing diversity, and addressing inequality through intervention (Henry et al., 2017). Diversity recognizes and values the unique characteristics, experiences, and perspectives that individuals bring based on their identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age, religion, and socioeconomic status. Embracing diversity involves actively promoting inclusion and representation from all segments of society (Henry et al., 2017; Tamtik & Guenter, 2020). Inclusion focuses on creating environments where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered. It involves actively removing barriers to participation, providing accessible services and fostering a sense of belonging for everyone, aiming to create a society where diverse individuals can fully participate and contribute without discrimination or prejudice (Ahmed, 2012).

EDI in social work field education is critical in enhancing understanding and promoting inclusivity, as well as providing social work students with the knowledge and skills necessary to address the complex needs of diverse populations. Incorporating EDI into social work field education helps prepare students to work effectively with diverse populations, gain an understanding of the social contexts that shape clients' lives, and address structural inequalities (Weiss, 2023). It encourages self-reflection and critical awareness of students' and field

personnel's own biases and privileges in order to promote ethical and culturally sensitive practice (CSWE, 2015).

Social workers across a variety of practice sectors have witnessed the devastating impacts of the pandemic on marginalized and vulnerable populations (Banks et al., 2020). As a result of this pandemic, many people have lost their jobs, faced financial hardships, and experienced mental health challenges (Abrams & Szeklers, 2020). This article defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in” (World Health Organization (WHO), 2022, para 1).

Social workers have been actively engaged in addressing the psycho-social issues associated with the pandemic (Amadasun, 2020; Bern-Klug & Beaulieu, 2020). According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC, 2020), many frontline workers and others, including social workers, struggled to ensure equitable access to resources, support, and healthcare services for all individuals and communities. Despite a universal healthcare system, communities experiencing social and economic marginalization in Canada were among the hardest hit in each wave of the pandemic. This shed light on a fragmented system and resulted in resounding calls to address inequities, which were further exacerbated by the pandemic and the response particularly for aged people (Clark, 2023). In light of this inequity, a new series published by the British Medical Journal in July 2023 called for an independent inquiry into Canada's COVID response (Pelley, 2023).

Social work research on the impacts of the pandemic on social work field education has been reported from the perspective of students, field instructors, and innovative institutional responses. In Canada, for example, Au et al., (2023) and Ossaïs et al., (2021) found that the pandemic impacted students' mental health and hands-on learning opportunities, and created a sense of isolation due to remote learning. Davis and Mirick (2021) and Christensen et al. (2023) reported similar findings in the United States. Other studies reported on how postsecondary education institutions were able to deal with the pandemic with innovative responses (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2022; Clarke & Morley, 2020) with the pandemic creating opportunity for self-directed and reflexive learning (Matutini, 2023). However, these studies did not specifically examine diverse students' learning experiences, challenges, and aspirations that vary due to factors such as gender and ethnic identities, post-secondary institution (e.g., universities), and placement types (e.g., clinical/research). Our study sought to fill this gap in knowledge and aimed to answer the following research question: How do students' experiences, challenges, needs, and aspirations vary due to their identity factors (e.g., gender and ethnicity), post-secondary institution (e.g., universities), and placement types (e.g., clinical/research)?

## **Methodology**

### ***Survey Design***

A cross-sectional web-based survey was used to examine how the pandemic affected field education from the perspectives of undergraduate Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and graduate Master of Social Work (MSW) students in Canada (Braun et al., 2017; Lam & Green, 2023). Survey methods, both online and in-person, were used to procure quantitative data through structured questions. In recent years, online surveys have also been identified as a qualitative research tool, or qualitative survey tool, to provide a nuanced, in-depth, and at times, novel understanding of social issues (Braun et al., 2021; Seixas et al., 2018). Qualitative surveys include a series of open-ended questions crafted by the researcher(s) on a specific topic. This method allows for a broad reach, exploring perspectives comprehensively. Unlike traditional talk-based techniques (e.g., qualitative interviews) with relatively small sample sizes, qualitative surveys can include larger samples, possibly up to 500. The choice of sample size depends on the study's scope, topic, breadth, research question nature (e.g., experiences, perspectives, practices), population characteristics and diversity, participant motivation, and the depth of individual responses (Braun et al., 2021). Previous studies on social work field education during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic (Drolet et al., 2013) and the current impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian postsecondary students (Frontiers 2020; Statistics Canada, 2020) were considered and informed the survey design. A team of researchers with direct experience in field education and research, provided training and mentorship to student research assistants, which informed the selection of the research topic and the formulation of survey questions.

The survey included 27 questions and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey incorporated both closed-ended questions to collect quantitative data and open-ended questions to gather qualitative insights from the participants. These questions included Likert scale items, rankings, open-ended short answers, and multiple-choice questions. According to Omrani et al. (2018), using different question formats can improve a survey's reliability and quality because respondents are more involved.

Out of the 27 survey questions, two were open-ended. These questions were: 1) In a brief statement, please describe your experience with practicum during COVID-19, and 2) Please provide any additional comments or thoughts you would like to share. These open-ended questions were included so that participants could discuss their own experiences and opinions. This article shares the results to these two questions with a focus on students' identities and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Recruitment***

The survey respondents were students enrolled in a social work program accredited by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS). Recruited participants comprised BSW and MSW students who had finished or were planning to complete at least one practicum or field placement between January and December 2020.

The survey links were sent via email to all 43 CASWE-ACFTS accredited post-secondary institutions. Emails were sent to faculty members, field education coordinators and directors, field staff, and student groups, with survey links both in English and French. Additionally, recruitment notices and posters were shared on TFEL 's website (<https://tfelproject.com>) and social media (Facebook and X (formerlyTwitter)). The notices and posters invited eligible students to participate in the online survey. The survey was open between July 8-29, 2020, for students. In total, 480 responses were received. However, 113 of these responses were excluded as they were either left blank or the respondents did not meet the eligibility criteria. Specifically, these respondents were either not affiliated with CASWE-ACFTS accredited institutions or did not complete a practicum in 2020. Thus, a total of 367 BSW and MSW students participated in the study. Among these participants, 356 responses were in English and 11 in French. Participants came from various regions across Canada, representing different provinces and territories. It is important to note that not all participants answered every question; among the 367 respondents, 237 students responded to these two open-ended questions.

The research study obtained ethics approval from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Informed consent was obtained from each respondent before commencing the survey.

### ***Data Analysis***

Thematic analysis was used to code and analyze the open-ended responses, following the approach outlined by Williams and Moser (2019) in which the data was coded to assemble, categorize, and thematically sort in order to construct meaning. The qualitative data obtained from the survey were downloaded into Microsoft Excel for analysis. The researchers identified themes and sub-themes to gain a better understanding of the different aspects of the participants' experiences (Williams & Moser, 2019). A subsequent review of the data was carried out by two members of the research team; both researchers engaged in discussions to reach a consensus on emergent themes (Saldaña, 2009). Accordingly, the themes emerged from the analysis.

### **Findings**

According to the demographic data collected for this study, there were 367 BSW and MSW students' respondents to the entire survey, with 237 responses for the two open-ended questions. The majority of participants (89.1%) identified as female, while 5.1% identified as male, and 3.8% identified as gender fluid, nonbinary, and/or two-spirited. In terms of racial or ethnic background, 70.9% of respondents identified as White/Caucasian. BSW students comprised the largest group of participants (72.2%), followed by MSW students (27.8%). Furthermore, 59.3% of the survey respondents were currently involved in a practicum. Detailed information is available in Table 1.

**Table 1** Survey Respondents Demographics (General)

<b>Gender</b>			<b>Female</b>		<b>Male</b>	<b>Gender Fluid, non-binary, and/or Two-Spirit</b>		
Count (n=266)			237		19	10		
Percentage (%)			89.1		7.1	3.8		
<b>Degree working towards</b>			<b>BSW</b>		<b>MSW</b>			
Count (n=270)			195		75			
Percentage (%)			72.3		27.8			
<b>Indigenous heritage</b>			<b>Yes</b>		<b>No</b>			
Count (n=266)			14		252			
Percentage (%)			5.3		94.7			
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>South Asian</b>	<b>Indigenous</b>	<b>Latinx</b>	<b>East Asian</b>	<b>Other</b>
Count (n=261)	185	26	10	9	7	7	6	11
Percentage (%)	70.9	10	3.8	3.4	2.7	2.7	2.3	4.2
<b>Disability</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>						
Count (n=265)	64	201						
Percentage (%)	24.1	75.6						

As noted in Table 2 below, most participants (88.69%) who responded to the open-ended questions identified as female, with 6.96% identifying as male, and 4.35% identifying as gender fluid, nonbinary, and/or two-spirited. Regarding racial or ethnic background, 76% of the respondents who completed the open-ended survey questions, self-identified as White/Caucasian. BSW students constituted the largest participant group, accounting for 72.34%, while MSW students comprised 27.7%.

**Table 2** Survey Respondents Demographic (Open-ended Questions)

<b>Gender</b>			<b>Female</b>		<b>Male</b>	<b>Gender Fluid, non-binary, and/or Two-Spirit</b>	
Count (n=230)			204		16	10	
Percentage (%)			88.69		6.96	4.35	
<b>Degree working towards</b>			<b>BSW</b>		<b>MSW</b>		
Count (n=235)			170		65		
Percentage (%)			72.34		27.7		
<b>Indigenous heritage</b>			<b>Yes</b>		<b>No</b>		
Count (n=230)			12		218		
Percentage (%)			5.2		94.8		
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>South Asian</b>	<b>Indigenous</b>	<b>Latinx</b>	<b>East Asian</b>	<b>Other</b>
Count (n=234)	178	9	12	11	7	1	16
Percentage (%)	76.07	3.8	5.1	4.7	3.0	0.4	6.8
<b>Disability</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>					
Count (n=218)	47	171					
Percentage (%)	21.56	78.4					

The following sections present the themes developed from the open-ended survey responses. The first theme includes discussion on mental health and wellness while students' perception on field learning and students' perception of professional readiness are the second and third theme, respectively.

### ***Mental health and wellness***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, female students across different ethnic groups reported challenges in meeting their roles and responsibilities as a practicum student and in caregiving. They noted that, in addition to dealing with their own stress, their children also experienced stress due to the transition to remote schooling. In contrast, male students did not report any similar challenges in meeting their roles and responsibilities. This gendered discrepancy in the reported challenges during the pandemic underscores the need to consider roles and responsibilities of students based on gender.

The confluence of factors, including the demands of their roles as students and in caregiving, compounded the difficulties experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. One key finding from this study is that the experiences of mothering were consistent across ethnocultural groups. The following quotes illustrate some shared experiences of practicum students who were mothers:

I am a mature student with 2 school-aged children. Balancing family, school, and work has been challenging. (Caucasian Female Survey Respondent)

As a parent of 2 young children who had no school to attend due to school being cancelled, this was stressful, and I had no childcare or ability to plan.... My kids were also extremely stressed but I was unsure if I did not attend practicum during this time if they would allow me to do it in the future as the school would not agree to push the dates. (Caucasian Female Survey Respondent)

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. (South Asian Female Survey Respondent)

The main challenge for me was having my young kids suddenly at home with me full time when their schools were closed. So accommodation for that was important. (Indigenous Female Survey Respondent)

It was a stressful period because students not only worry about their success in their practicum placement but also the health and safety of themselves and their loved one, financial constraints, and extremely higher level of stress due to a lot going on at the same time. (Black Female Survey Respondent)

Due to the challenges related to gendered roles and responsibilities in caregiving, female students reported that they also suffered from mental health issues and indicated that post-secondary institutions did not take appropriate or sufficient measures to reduce stress on students. Some students experienced periods of financial hardship that multiplied the adverse impact on mental health. They expressed that universities should have offered initiatives to reduce financial hardship on students by providing stipends or exempting some portion of tuition fees. The acknowledgment of the financial strain experienced by students revealed a need for institutions to adopt comprehensive approaches that extend beyond academic accommodations. Such measures, it was argued, could significantly contribute to the overall well-being of students, particularly during unprecedented challenges like the pandemic. However, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was found to be extremely helpful in dealing with financial hardship. The CERB was a federal social protection initiative to financially support employed and self-employed Canadians who were directly affected by the COVID-19

pandemic. The following quotes explain the nature of financial and mental stress on students due to the pandemic:

This impacts our mental health, our well-being and our ability to take care of our family and loved ones, Through this all, we should be given financial leniency by an organization we have supported for years.

It was hard. It was very difficult to be self-disciplined when the stress of the virus was looming. The school offered no breaks (even a day-weekend) and that was hard while moving provinces and trying to maintain my grades.

As opposed to the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on managing gender roles and responsibilities and on mental health and well-being, some students spoke of the pandemic as a type of ‘blessing’. They welcomed initiatives to reduce the practicum hours and the opportunity for a virtual field placement. Such options were thought to help students spend more time with their family members and look after family members who were at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and needed special care and attention. The flexibility offered by reduced practicum hours and virtual field placements allowed students to allocate more time to fulfill their caregiving duties, thereby addressing the pressing needs of family members. One student elaborated on how flexible practicum hours helped her spend more time with family members:

I was very lucky, my practicum was designed to be longer, January to June, and to be part time, so this allowed for me to be less disrupted by COVID and to have flexibility to adjust my hours as I needed to care for my family.

### ***Students’ perception on field learning***

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted students’ learning goals, objectives, and expectations. Students’ gender and ethnicity reportedly intersected with their post-secondary institution (e.g., universities) and type of field placement (e.g., clinical versus research), creating diverse learning needs, challenges, experiences, and expectations. The types of field placement (clinical or research practicum), shaped students’ experience during the pandemic. Students who had clinical placements were found to be more adversely affected than students with a research placement. This is largely because a clinical placement required more hands-on learning, which was impeded in the pandemic. The shift to virtual placements during the pandemic made it difficult for students to learn from service users (clients) and community, as reported by responses to the open-ended question:

I did get the chance to make a community agency guide and read about therapy modalities, but I feel like I definitely missed out on a lot of direct practice skills since it was based on clinical work. (Caucasian Female Survey Respondent)

It has been as good as it could be, I think, while I am also worried about how to make up for missed depth of direct clinical social work practice. (Gender fluid, non-binary and/or Two-spirit Survey Respondent)

Conversely, students involved in research practicums, particularly those with self-directed research placements, reported encountering fewer challenges and generally had a more positive learning experience. The inherent flexibility of research placements allowed students to adapt more seamlessly to the virtual learning environment necessitated by the pandemic. The autonomy granted in self-directed research placements enabled students to navigate the challenges imposed by the pandemic more effectively, as indicated by students:

As my placement was research-based, it was largely unaffected. However, flexibility and understanding of multiple responsibilities during COVID-19 was essential to my ability to thrive. (Caucasian Female Survey Respondent)

Post-secondary institutions (e.g., universities) also significantly shaped students' learning experience across different social identities. The effectiveness of these institutions in addressing challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic played a pivotal role in shaping students' learning experiences. For example, students shared positive learning experiences when universities were able to effectively deal with COVID-19 related challenges. The following quotes illustrate some positive learning experiences of different groups of students:

Thankful for the flexible measures taken by ACSW [Alberta College of Social Work] and the faculty. (South Asian Female Survey Respondent)

[Name of] University went above and beyond for all students. I have experienced support with placement and classes. I have very little concerns for the next academic year. (Indigenous Female Survey Respondent)

It was challenging at times, however with the overwhelming support of the faculty it was manageable and deeper learning was facilitated. (Black Female Survey Respondent)

The inability of some postsecondary education institutions to meet the learning needs of students during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in feelings of dissatisfaction due to poor communication and ineffective supervision. These issues, along with a sense of isolation especially in institutions lacking sufficient support, significantly diminished the overall quality of the learning experience. The following quotes illustrate some negative student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Poor communication regarding what to expect, or what's expected of me or my practicum. Feels like we're left to figure it out ourselves. (Indigenous Male Survey Respondent)

The school was also very unclear on what was happening, and communication was fairly poor. We were getting messages from our individual instructors that were sometimes contradictory. (Caucasian Female Survey Respondent)

My placement was not supportive of my learning goals, and they did not include me in staff meetings. I did not feel supported during COVID-19 from my placement. (Caucasian Female Survey Respondent)

My school lacks the proper supports for effective practicum experiences. There are many aspects to placement coordination that are disorganized and delayed including how they have responded during COVID-19. (Caucasian Female Survey Respondent)

Students also reported mixed learning experiences at this stage in the pandemic. While required hours of practicum, learning objectives, and goals were shortened during the time of pandemic, some students opined that they were not able to learn according to their expectations. The following quotes illustrate mixed experiences of survey respondents:

There are both positives and negatives. I gained knowledge and had worthwhile experiences, while also losing desired opportunities and missed out on building required skills.

There was no proper closure with my instructors and other students. I felt that the requirements or learning objectives were shortened.

It feels inadequate for the learning that I was expecting to get and feel that I need.

The last theme focuses on students' perception of professional readiness where students shared their experience of how the pandemic impacted their aspirations for direct hands-on learnings, jeopardizing professional readiness.

### ***Students' perception on professional readiness***

A corollary to the previous theme on students' perception of field learning is students' perception of professional readiness. One of the primary goals of social work field placement is to prepare students for social work practice. Students indicated that, due to the pandemic, they were unable

to gain first-hand experience in their placement. While reduced hours of practicum was welcomed by many students, it was perceived to hamper experiential learning. This reduction in direct engagement with fieldwork was perceived to have consequential effects on their overall professional readiness. The inability to immerse themselves fully in the practical aspects of social work practice during their placements led to concerns among students about their preparedness for the challenges of the profession. This was mentioned by students with diverse gender and ethnic identities:

I feel less trained (less practical direct experience) and more marginalized as I emerge from this program, into likely frontline (higher risk in a pandemic context) work. (Gender fluid, non-binary and/or Two-spirit Survey Respondent)

Reduced practicum hours meant I got less client experience than expected. (Gender fluid, non-binary and/or Two-spirit Survey Respondent)

It was not bad, I just feel like I was unable to gain valuable face to face experience and it makes me worried since this was my last practicum before I graduate in the fall. (Black Female Survey Respondent)

This placement experience has exposed me to very surface level information about criminal justice and social work which was upsetting as I was looking forward to this role and excited about going above and beyond basic volunteer roles. (South Asia Female Survey Respondent)

It has been an absolute disaster. My placement in pediatric mental health was cancelled, and now I do not have the experience I need to work in my desired field, pediatric mental health. Even still, some of my peers were not even able to graduate, so I feel grateful to be graduating, albeit without the skills I need. (Caucasian Female Survey Respondent)

## **Discussion and implications**

This article considers students' experiences of field education during the COVID-19 pandemic and implications for promoting EDI in, and thus transforming, social work field education. Findings reveal that students' experience of field education during the COVID-19 pandemic varied due to their gender identities and roles, caregiving responsibilities, post-secondary institution (e.g., universities), and types of placements. Lessons learned from this study will have implications for equity, diversity, and inclusion in social work field education, especially during times of pandemic and other forms of disasters, discussed in the following paragraphs.

In terms of gender roles and responsibilities in caregiving, female students across different ethnic groups reported challenges in meeting their gendered roles and responsibilities as a mother and as a practicum student. They had to deal with their own stress as well as with the

stress of their young children, which impacted their overall well-being. The findings suggest that the pandemic had a disproportionate effect on female students, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive policies and interventions to address the unique challenges faced by women in meeting academic and caregiving responsibilities (often ascribed and unequally distributed) during times of crisis. Other studies concur with our findings. For example, in a scoping review on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of social work students, Hong (2023) documented that mental health is associated with sociodemographic and behavioral factors, interpersonal factors, socio-economic vulnerabilities during the pandemic, and academic-related concerns.

Regarding sociodemographic factors, Kim et al. (2022) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, ethnic and gender identities of social work students were associated with feelings of hopelessness and level of depression. They highlighted that Caucasian social work students are more likely to feel hopelessness compared to BIPOC students while BIPOC students are more likely to be depressed than Caucasian students, also female students experienced more depression than did male counterparts (Kim et al., 2022). Concerning interpersonal factors, they noted that students who had responsibilities of children or living with children had higher mental health-related distress. Our study did not investigate mental health issues in detail, but indicates that female students experienced challenges due to their gender roles and responsibilities in caregiving. Other contextual factors (e.g., post-secondary institution and social support) and individual factors (e.g., interpersonal) may offer underlying reasons or considerations for such variation.

Multidimensional perceived social support is indicated by some studies as a protective factor against mental health-related stress (Martín-Cano et al., 2022; Scheffert et al., 2021). A host of recent studies indicated that socio-economic vulnerability during the pandemic was a major contributing factor for mental stress (Díaz-Jiménez et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2022; Martín-Cano et al., 2022). Our study indicated that financial hardship further exacerbated the stress on mental health. Students indicated that universities should have offered initiatives to reduce financial hardship on students by providing stipends or exempting a portion of tuition fees. Financial support from the federal government in Canada, such as CERB, was found to be extremely helpful in dealing with financial hardship.

In terms of students' perception of field education during the pandemic, this study documented two major factors shaping students' perception of learning and associated challenges — across student groups in terms of ethnicity and gender — namely post-secondary institution (e.g., universities), and placement types (e.g., clinical/research). Research has demonstrated numerous factors associated with positive and negative learning experiences of students during the pandemic (Christensen et al., 2023; Davis & Mirick, 2021; Mirick & Davis, 2021). A positive learning experience was found to be associated with institutional and programmatic support while a negative learning experience was often associated with lack of institutional support (Mirick & Davis, 2021; Scheffert et al., 2021). Findings from this study concur with these studies and found that the post-secondary institution, and institutional and programmatic

supports were perceived to impact learning experiences during the pandemic. This study also documented an additional factor, that is the nature of an either clinical or research-based placement, which was viewed to differentially contribute to one's learning experience. Research practicum students had an overall positive learning experience compared to the clinical practicum students.

In relation to perception of learning, students expressed concern regarding their professional readiness as a social worker. While the reduced hours of practicum were welcomed by many students, others indicated that it significantly hampered their experiential learning. There is an ongoing debate about how many hours students need to complete as part of their practicum to demonstrate competency (Petra et al., 2020; Raskin et al., 2008), and if there should be more focus on quality of field education than number of hours required. Our study indicated student perspectives that reduced hours of practicum resulted in limited hands-on learning and consequently may have negatively affected professional readiness. Other studies of students' perspectives similarly found that students felt less confident as a social worker due to limited field experience (Toth et al., 2022).

This study identifies several key implications for EDI in social work field education in the context of pandemics, with potential implications for other emergencies and disasters. However, even before or aside from the COVID-19 pandemic, field education was recognized as being in a state of crisis, with a shortage of field instructors and available placements, inadequate resources and funding, and overwhelming workloads for field education coordinators and directors in neoliberal labour markets (Ayala et al., 2018; Bogo, 2015; Morley & Dunstan, 2013; ; Srikanthan, 2024; TFEL, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this negative condition and differentiated even more dire impacts on social work practicum students, thus offering resounding calls to address inequities exacerbated by the pandemic (Clark, 2023).

We assert that through intentional and evidence-informed institutional and programmatic response and support, diverse challenges, needs, and aspirations of students need to be addressed to promote EDI in field education. For example, students who also were mothers were noted to have greater challenges related to gender roles and responsibilities in caregiving as well as financial support needs. Lack of recognition of these challenges and commensurate financial support from universities increased mental health stress. Lastly, reduced hours of practicum were welcomed by many, but some students noted gaps in students' aspiration to optimal learning experience. This reminds us that one size does not fit for all and calls for flexibility in approaches and field offerings.

## **Limitations**

There is a lack of research on the impact of pandemics, specifically COVID-19, on social work field education. The findings of the open-ended questions cannot be applied to a larger population due to the relatively small and non-random sample. Additionally, there was no control group for comparison purposes. This study did not aim to isolate the influence of students' previous experiences in field education, such as distinguishing between MSW and BSW

students, which might have shaped their perspectives of the impact of the pandemic. Additionally, we did not explicitly inquire about challenges unique to gendered and racialized students. Also, we relied on written comments as opposed to eliciting what likely would have been more in-depth responses in qualitative approaches such as interviews or focus groups. Therefore, it is important to be cautious when interpreting and applying survey results. In addition, the recruitment of participants for this study took place during the summer of 2020, which was a challenging time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that the timing of the survey resulted in a lower response rate than otherwise would be attained.

Another limitation of this study is that most survey responses were obtained from one ethnic group (Caucasian) and primarily from females. To enhance the study's representativeness and capture a more diverse range of perspectives, it would be beneficial to gather more responses from individuals of various ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, the demographic information did not collect a range of identity characteristics such as disability, etc. This would help ensure a more inclusive and well-rounded analysis of experiences related to the topic under investigation.

Still another limitation of this study is that it only considered the experiences of social work students during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to recognize that COVID-related situations and experiences might have changed during later phases of the pandemic, and there could have been new or unexpected challenges and more positive experiences later in the pandemic. To fully understand the long-term effects, more research was needed to explore and compare the experiences of social work students in field education at different stages of the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the multifaceted aspects of social work field education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. Students' diverse experiences are significantly shaped by the intricate relationship between identity factors (e.g., gender), post-secondary institution (e.g., universities), and placement types. In particular, female students reported a struggle in gender roles and responsibilities in caregiving and as practicum students.

The study did not find substantial differences in the experiences and perspectives of students due to differences in ethnicity; however as noted, we had few ethnically diverse students in the sample. However, it is important to note that financial challenges were found to negatively impact some students' mental health. This study did not examine the connection between ethnicity and mental health. More granularity in data collection may be needed to more fully assess the relationship between ethnicity and student mental health in a pandemic. Students expressed the need for universities to take initiative to reduce the financial burden on students, such as providing stipends or exempting portions of tuition fees to alleviate stress and support well-being. However, this is an area to further explore particularly as it may differentially impact diverse students. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, practicum hours were reduced, which resulted in limited opportunities for hands-on learning, which in turn, affected students' perceived readiness for professional practice. The identification of these factors emphasizes the need for a

more comprehensive and nuanced approach to social work field education. The study adds a valuable dimension to existing knowledge by emphasizing the importance of placements in shaping students' learning experiences as well as transforming social work field education with increased attention to EDI.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors state that there is no conflict of interests.

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