

Reflections on Teaching and Learning in Field Education: A Teacher-Scholar Model

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Abstract:

The purpose of this brief article is to report an innovative attempt to promote high quality field education utilizing Specialized Field Education Units (SFEUs) while overcoming both the internal and external barriers noted above. This approach, an integrated field unit using a teacher-scholar model, has been implemented for the past five years by the joint field education programs of the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro BSW and MSW programs. The results have been a higher level of full-time engagement in field education by full-time tenure-track faculty members, high student success as measured by achievement of CSWE competencies, and higher rates of faculty publication and funding for research programs.

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Introduction

Field education has long been an important part of professional social work education (Abbott, 1942). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) *2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* states that social work field education is the signature pedagogy of BSW and MSW programs (CSWE, 2015).

Developing high quality field education programs must be a high priority for social work educational programs. However, internal and external barriers often exist to

achieving this goal. Externally there is often competition between schools in close proximity to one another for quality field placements and field instructors. Internally, increased emphasis on research and publication placed on faculty members can limit time available for full and active investment in the field supervision process (Bogo, 2010; Dalton, Stevens, & Maas-Brady, 2009).

Of importance to quality field education is the role of the faculty liaison. The faculty liaison, the connection between the university and the agency, has a complex and difficult role in ensuring students have high quality field instruction experiences. Teaching, monitoring of educational quality, student evaluation, and (occasionally) conflict resolution are all important duties of the faculty liaison (Bogo, 2006). The liaison role is vitally important because most agency field supervisors lack an intimate knowledge of the social work program curriculum (Carbone & Hunt, 1986). Faculty members face many demands, chief among them the need to be scholars and to publish their research in order to remain employed (Green, 2008; Marsh, 1992). The competing pressures on faculty to be productive and effective scholars while also serving in roles such as field liaisons often results in less time being devoted to field education.

The purpose of this brief article is to report an innovative attempt to promote high quality field education utilizing Specialized Field Education Units (SFEUs) while overcoming both the internal and external barriers noted above. This approach, an integrated field unit using a teacher-scholar model, has been implemented for the past five years by the joint field education programs of the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro BSW and MSW programs. The results have been a higher level of full-time engagement in field education by full-time tenure-track faculty members, high student success as measured by achievement of CSWE competencies, and higher rates of faculty publication and funding for research programs.

The Field Liaison Teacher-Scholar Model

In this approach to field education, full-time faculty members are assigned to SFEUs that match their areas of research and scholarship interest. The Field Education Director interviews all students and assigns them to an agency and unit which matches their practice interest. For example, SFEUs in child welfare, mental health, family services, school social work, substance use disorder, and immigrants and refugees have been established. Faculty liaisons are selected and assigned to the SFEUs based on their research and practice interests. Students complete their field education in their assigned agencies, and the full-time faculty liaison supervises the educational process in the agencies, mentors students, and works with the agencies on common research interests while also including students in the teaching and learning process. Each

SFEU has between eight and twelve students. The following narratives present faculty members' reflections on their participation in this field education model.

Homelessness, Mental Health, and Substance Use Disorder Field Unit Dr. Kelly Jay Poole and Prof. Fran Pearson

In this SFEU, a grant-funded program entitled *The Congregational Social Work Education Initiative* (CSWEI) selects students, through a competitive process, and places BSW and MSW students with interests in homelessness, health, mental health, substance use disorder and gerontology into appropriate field practicums. Operating continuously for over ten years with funding from the Cone Health Foundation in Greensboro, NC, the CSWEI has three educational components:

- 1) preservice training in: mental health, substance use disorder, crisis management, integrated care, utilizing evidence-based practices, working with those experiencing homelessness, and working with immigrants (including refugees);
- 2) field instruction on site/co-located in religiously-affiliated organizations, shelters, and community centers serving persons experiencing homelessness and those who are immigrants (including refugees); and
- 3) the use of a collaborative group team approach involving social work students, community health nurses in partnership with the Congregational Nurse Program, clergy, and other professional disciplines that are affiliated with locations served by the CSWEI.

The CSWEI director, who is a full-time licensed clinical social work faculty member and registered nurse in the Department of Social Work, serves as field instructor/supervisor and liaison.

In addition to CSWEI's unique administrative structure, the CSWEI student cohort is a 'blended' team, whereby MSW and BSW interns work together and mentor one another within the community agencies they serve. This also affords MSWs the opportunity to develop leadership skills as every MSW is assigned a placement to serve as the 'team lead' for that placement. CSWEI interns also have seminar together. Lastly, to provide as diverse and enriching field experience as possible, every CSWEI student has a minimum of 2 separate field placements per week for the academic year.

In this unit, we teach students about the psychosocial-spiritual approach, and health and mental health issues, including specific topics such as co-morbid or co-occurring mental and physical disorders. Content on the major developments in treatment and psychological dynamics of major physical illnesses, with specific focus on an

integrated and holistic approach to assessment and intervention, is emphasized. Additionally, students discuss cultural competence and responsiveness, safety, ethical considerations, service documentation, boundaries, leadership, the role of medications and medication management, and risk assessment, including assessment for suicidal and homicidal concerns. Specific attention is given to conducting biopsychosocial diagnostic and functional screening, assessment, and service planning in a multidisciplinary environment using an integrated approach.

We have found that students learn best by doing under the supervision of a skilled practitioner. They have caseloads, learn about community services, and develop skills in working with individuals, groups, and other professionals in a multi-disciplinary environment. Because the field instructor/liaison's office is housed on-site, continual teaching and feedback is provided to the students. Students learn and practice their clinical and case management skills while increasing their competence and understanding of complex physical and mental health needs.

Our research program is also enhanced using this model. We have been able to collect data, write about service delivery, and include students in national and regional professional presentations and manuscripts. Our research productivity has grown with the publication of numerous articles and presentations. Most importantly, there is a connectedness between student learning, faculty scholarship, and effective service delivery to marginalized populations such as persons who experience homelessness. Our footprint in the community is very strong with over 10 years of continuous funding by a local health-focused foundation – the Cone Health Foundation. This is a win-win for all involved including the community which receives a skilled group of students serving people most in need.

Child Welfare Field Unit - Dr. Tyreasa Washington

My research addresses families' contributions to social, academic, and mental health outcomes for African-American children, especially those in kinship care and foster care. I am able to incorporate my research in my SFEU which includes students in child welfare practice in departments of social services. For example, I present articles that I and other scholars have authored in field seminar as evidence of best practice with children, families, and care providers served by the child welfare system (including kinship care families). We discuss findings from these articles and then I present students with a scenario about a kinship care family, and ask them to describe how they could use information from the articles to assist them when working in protective services, foster care, adoption, or with a kinship care family.

I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who has worked in child welfare and mental health settings. I use my practice experience in employing the teacher-scholar role

in my field education unit in addition to utilizing the results of research that I have completed. As a researcher I participate on several research teams and value two things: evidence of effective practice and critical thinking among individuals. Thus, in class I encourage a mutual exchange of ideas and philosophies between students and myself. For example, I ask questions and enjoy learning about students' experiences in their field placements especially how they use and incorporate research to enhance better direct and indirect service delivery. In doing so, I have used findings from my studies and other research to examine its implications for social work practice and policy. In addition, I have shared research subject recruitment flyers with students placed at child welfare agencies. This helps in recruiting subjects for the research study, as well as providing an opportunity for students to ask questions or provide observations about the study, especially how it will advance knowledge, skills, procedures, or policies to improve working with children, families, and care providers in the child welfare system.

How does the student benefit? When a student in field instruction joins one of my research teams, it provides them with the opportunity to work alongside social work professionals/educators. Additionally, other members and consultants of the research team have degrees in various disciplines such as developmental psychology, education, and counseling; thus, the networking opportunities on this interdisciplinary team are unique and invaluable to students.

Publications and presentations are crucial to the success of my research agenda; therefore, utilizing the teacher-scholar model (e.g., students on my research team) enables me to advance my research agenda (e.g., disseminate the findings of our research projects via manuscripts and presentations). Also, as a faculty member, I mentor undergraduate and graduate students which includes inviting them to serve as co-authors and developing journal articles for publication. These publications usually take two to three times longer to complete versus if I were to publish with my peers or as a single author. Furthermore, it's time consuming to develop abstracts with students for conference presentations and preparing them for participation at the conference. While there are trade-offs in using the teacher-scholar model, I do believe my research and teaching have benefited, and students have grown into competent beginning practitioners.

Family Services Field Unit - Dr. Yarneccia Dyson

My research agenda is focused on health disparities, marginalized communities, and mentoring/leadership. It is easily merged into my approach to field education because one of my teaching strategies with students involves mentoring and coaching students to be effective future social work practitioners. The populations I engage in research also often face challenges such as poverty, homelessness, or other social determinants

of health which require the intervention of a helping professional. My teaching in field education informs my research because I am able to work with students who are in agencies serving low-income families who experience homelessness.

Students receive benefits such as hands on learning within the agency practice setting as well as the ability to translate knowledge learned in the classroom to their field placements. I have noticed that students appear to think critically and are able to approach interventions with clients from a strengths-based perspective. I model focusing on clients' strengths as a means to work on challenges and have seen students engage in client interviews that also involve an inventory of successes in their lives, not just challenges that caused their homelessness or incarceration.

Benefits to my career include research and publication as well as the reciprocal learning experiences that happen between teacher and student. It enables me to hone in on strategies that work well with students as well as identify other ways to be effective. A major challenge is that millennial students typically experience annoyance or frustration in receiving constructive feedback. It is important in utilizing the teacher-scholar model to be sure to apply the same strengths-based approach with students that is used with clients, in order to maintain a positive working relationship.

School Social Work Field Unit - Prof. Michael Thull

Prior to my current appointment as BSW Field Director, I coordinated a field program at another institution in which students were assigned a seminar and faculty liaison based upon the physical location of their field site. The reasoning was two-fold: 1) the ease and efficiency of conducting in-person agency visits, and 2) the belief that students coming together from a variety of internship settings would provide for rich discussion in the co-requisite field seminar course.

While geographic proximity was often convenient, I found that benefits were limited due to the varying scheduling needs of agency field supervisors for site visits. Regarding course content, conducting an in-person seminar course comprised of students completing field experiences in a variety of settings led to rich conversations early in the academic term about the availability (or lack) of community resources. Frequently students would connect with one another to coordinate client referrals after hearing about the services offered at other field sites. However, beyond an 'Agency Presentation' assignment, I found class discussion around specific client issues to be surface-level in nature. Additionally, it was often problematic to present specialized information in specific topic areas due to the lack of applicability across practice settings.

In my current role, I serve dually as Field Director for the BSW Program's approximately 100 students in field education, as well as faculty liaison and seminar instructor for 15 undergraduate students pursuing licensure in school social work. Coming from a clinical background in mental health and crisis intervention, initially I found it necessary to devote considerable time to the study of issues and trends specific to school social work. Additionally, traditional field assignments such as the 'Agency Presentation' required revision in order to provide benefit to these students who shared the same practice setting.

As the semester progressed, I found that students were in the process of becoming well-versed in school social work through their field learning experiences as well as a School Social Work co-requisite course. The areas in which I found students in need of skill development included assessment, case management, selecting and applying evidence-based practices, and group facilitation. These areas, central to my expertise in clinical social work practice in mental health, were easily integrated into the seminar course. Through engaging in case analysis and role-play activities, students were encouraged to develop skills with applicability across practice areas. Benefit was also evident as students collaborated with one another to explore systemic problems found in the school social work setting.

Placing the school social work students in a common seminar allows mutual student support and contributes to an improved skill set and confidence in their abilities. Student support of one another has grown significantly among the group through their shared professional experiences. Learning activities such as process recordings and case presentations were rich and in-depth, due largely to each student's familiarity with the shared practice setting. The teacher-scholar model has provided a richness and depth to the field education experience providing benefits to both students and this faculty member.

Student Reflections

As part of this exploration and reflection, students who graduated in 2019 were asked to comment about their experiences in the SFEUs as described in this article. The quotes below support three major themes that emerged as students reflected on their experiences:

1. Bonding

"Being in a focused seminar has been an incredible experience. Throughout the past year, seminar has provided a safe space for our team to support one another and reflect on our experiences in field. I feel that it has created a bond among the team that is unlike any previous seminar class I have attended."

“The great thing about having the team together in one seminar is that you have people that are very aware of the complexity of the placements and can relate to the internship-specific challenges. I have loved my time in seminar and hope the team will stay together going forward.”

2. Competence

“Having the seminar with our cohort helped me build team and leadership skills, grow my clinical skills and language, as well as biopsychosocial research and education. I feel very prepared for the pursuit of my Master’s degree.”

“Every assignment contributed to the competent social workers we are now and acted as a catalyst for our overall confidence and in the work we do.”

“I found our seminar to be unique and able to cultivate our own strengths and provide us with tools that were specific to our internships.”

3. Support

“Seminar to me is a place where I can discuss what is going on in field and talk about obstacles that I may be going through in field and having only CSWEI students made it that much more supportive and understanding because we were all essentially experiencing the same thing and could relate better.”

“The great thing about having the team together in one seminar is that you have people that are very aware of the complexity of the placements and can relate to the internship-specific challenges.”

“Not only did my peers provide support for me but they knew exactly what my struggles were during field which allowed for a stronger learning experience and heightened level of skill sets to add to my education!”

Other Student Experiences

The following comments reflect what students have experienced by participating in the SFEUs, concerns interns placed in regular internship placements have to the experiences versus SFEU interns, remarks made to faculty members in the BSW or MSW programs, and experiences by current and former students who completed their internship in a specialized field education unit:

- Both BSW and MSW students in the SFEUs expressed the highest satisfaction with undergoing the intensive three-week pre-service content designed to prepare them to move quickly into working with clients or patients in any number of settings or situations. Class confidence related to entry into the field has also been measured, with BSW and MSW students combined assessing themselves as experiencing an increase of 94.2% in their confidence level after completing pre-service instruction. This has been the strongest feedback both on written evaluations and feedback from current students and former graduates.
- Students not in the SFEUs have expressed jealousy, frustration, and resentment to their peers and faculty members, that they did not have adequate preparation or confidence to move easily into working with clients in their assigned agencies. This is reflected in the quality of case presentations, treatment plans, culturally responsive intervention strategies, and the overarching discussions between students in the SFEUs and other students in other courses in either the BSW or MSW programs.
- Student interns outside the SFEUs have expressed to their peers and field faculty members that they had to endure lengthy agency orientations before they are assigned a client or patient, which reflects the increasing concerns about liability issues in traditional agencies or institutions. Unfortunately, this has led to interns not being assigned a client or patient until four weeks before end of fall semester. This delay impedes actual case material for class case discussions, class assignments, or regular field supervision. Interns in the SFEUs do not have to “shadow” their field supervisor for weeks at a time as they complete various parts of a lengthy orientation schedule.
- Agencies, institutions, and community programs continue to merge, close, or contract for service delivery as a result of system reforms. Interns, other than those in the SFEUs, have to confront change and challenges. Interns report having to change placements and start again (new orientations, schedules, personnel, policies etc.); having a current supervisor take on a new role in the agency and no longer being able to provide necessary supervision; or, increasingly, interns assigned a daily task supervisor and a clinical supervisor leading to “student drift” where the intern has no consistent oversight. Another disturbing trend has emerged where interns report receiving supervision by an outside consultant who has no insight into the agency’s norms, culture, organizational dynamics, and, in some cases, do not have a social work education background.
- Students in SFEUs express repeated satisfaction with having a faculty member serve as both field instructor and field liaison, who models professional social work skills and values, especially in difficult situations. This is revealed when students express confidence in knowing how to respond to belligerent clients, who threaten harm to

self and others, and what steps to take to de-escalate the crisis. Students are gratified and quietly relieved, when field faculty “walk with them and through” the process of involuntary commitment through a civil magistrate for emergency psychiatric hospitalization.

- One assignment students in SFEUs universally resist is where they must research, develop, and direct a psycho-therapeutic group or educational module to reflect an aspect of health literacy or wellness, mental or behavioral health or wellness, or an aspect of utilizing or accessing community resources. They must use research skills in preparing content, their interpersonal skills with participants, and evaluation skills by developing and administration of individual pre- and post-tests. After completing the assignment, students consistently write in their end-of-year evaluations that this assignment forced them out of their comfort zones, strengthened their self-confidence, and developed presentation and facilitation experiences in a supportive environment.
- Graduates who participated in SEFUs often attribute their career choice and success to their field internship. A former MSW intern who completed a community needs assessment on homeless and presented the work at the 2008 Council on Social Work Education’s Annual Program Meeting expressed, “Without CSWEI and their intensive focus on both micro and macro practice, I would have not advanced as quickly as I have within the VA system. My knowledge of organizational and community dynamics and how to engage ‘street wise’ homeless people including ‘invisible veterans’ was developed through my CSWEI experience” (L. Vrbsky, personal communication, October 16, 2016).
- A BSW student became inspired to work with older people; she received her MSW in the JMSW program. According to T. Transou (personal communication, May 8, 2016) her enthusiasm for working with older adults started with her BSW internship, “My experience with CSWEI provided me a solid foundation for my graduate study and my passion for working with older adults, their families, or caregivers.” She completed her MSW advanced internship in a gero-psychiatric unit and has advanced rapidly to become one of the lead clinical social workers.
- Field faculty members in each of the SFEUs encourage students to participate in research, either on their own or with faculty member. Faculty members have invited their students to present their work at local, state, regional, and national conferences, workshops, or educational events. This provides opportunities for students to learn the myriad of elements in preparing grant, conference, and workshop proposals and to further their experience in professional speaking and presentations.

Discussion

Reflections on the use of this field education model by faculty indicate that there are both strengths and challenges. Students benefit from being placed in a Specialized Field Education Unit consistent with their practice interests, grouped with others who have common interests and with a faculty liaison who is an expert in their area of practice, utilizing the teacher-scholar model where research-informed teaching helps them to develop into competent beginning social workers. Agencies receive a dedicated liaison who is knowledgeable about their agency mission and services as well as guidance on current evidence-based practice methods which can aid agency service delivery. Faculty members as teacher-scholars are able to increase the connectedness between teaching, learning, and research. Importantly, by increasing the consistency between teaching and research, faculty members in SFEUs feel more satisfied with their liaison role and are able to increase their research productivity. Students often communicate that the impact of participating in a SFEU has been very influential in developing their knowledge base, confidence, and career paths.

The challenges of this approach are being able to carefully match faculty and student interests while also serving the needs of the agency and their clients. In the example of the *Congregational Social Work Education Initiative*, this is almost seamless because the field unit is dedicated to an agency, students have a very defined role, and the faculty liaison/supervisor is based in their agency where the teaching, learning, and service delivery take place. In many ways this approach harkens back to a settlement house approach to teaching and learning. A second challenge is time. It is time-consuming to work intensively with students and include students in the teaching and learning process. In addition to teaching practice, the liaison is also teaching students about research and often including them in professional presentations and writing projects. As these narratives suggest, however, the faculty feel engaged with their students and agencies and research productivity has grown. Perhaps most importantly, this model has resulted in more full-time faculty being involved in field education which is the heart of social work education.

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