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Integrating Research Activities and Field Experiences in Graduate Social Work Education

Irene Carter, Sung Hyun Yun, Connie L. Kvarfordt and Wansoo Park

Introduction

The integration of classroom learning with student field experience is one of the most important educational goals of social work education. In field education social work students acquire experiential knowledge by being placed in a social service agency for a specific period of time, such as a school term. These settings provide students with the possibility of integrating classroom learning and real life experience.

Student field experiences are often referred to as “field education,” “field placement,” “fieldwork,” or a “practicum.” For the purposes of this paper, these words are interchangeable.

Fieldwork is often a source of anxiety for students. Studies report that students experience significant anxiety as they anticipate their field placement (Gelman & Lloyd, 2008; Gelman & Baum, 2010). For example, Gelman and Lloyd (2008) note that social work students expressed the following four concerns about being in a field placement: fear of lacking the necessary skills and experience, fear of making mistakes, fear of being overwhelmed, and fear for their physical safety. In addition, students expressed concern about working with clients, the instructor-intern relationship, course work, and management of anxiety. Gelman and Lloyd suggest that linking fieldwork to course work is likely to relieve student anxiety about working in the field as well as enhance their opportunities for learning. To optimize student levels of knowledge and skill and to reduce anxiety, Gelman and Baum suggest that students benefit in acquiring knowledge and skills training from reassurance that is reinforced by

professors, field instructors, field advisors, and small forums (Gelman & Baum, 2010). Wayne, Bogo, and Raskin (2006) argue that it has become increasingly difficult to provide quality field experiences in social work because of changes, such as fiscal and time restraints faced by faculty, agencies, and the student body. However, as Bogo (2006) indicates, field instruction continues to be valued when it includes “reflective and conceptual learning activities such as providing a conceptual framework for understanding students’ practice, assistance in analyzing cases and integrating theory and practice, including concepts studied in the classroom” (p. 176). Supportive activities -- such as feedback, direct learning, and activities that encourage self-critique -- are also important.

The value of integrating classroom learning and field experience has been outlined by social work accreditation bodies such as the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) (2008a) and the Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) (2008). CASWE stipulates that “the programs should provide regular opportunities for students to undertake integration of field and classroom education” (p.18). The Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2008) is the American counterpart to the CASWE accreditation standards. EPAS indicates that field education and classroom education hold equal levels of importance. Specifically, Accreditation Standard M 2.0.5 states that the program “provides a rationale for its formal curriculum design (foundation and advanced), demonstrating

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how it is used to develop a coherent and integrated curriculum for both the classroom and field” (p. 9).

This paper explores the benefits of integrating theory and practice by combining student research activities with field experiences in completing a research proposal while engaging in both fieldwork and a classroom seminar. A research proposal involves a literature review and a proposed evaluation component that meets the needs of an agency. The authors explore how the intersection of research activities and field experiences exists on a continuum, from research to field. They conclude with suggestions on how the research proposal combined with fieldwork adds value to social work education, and they offer recommendations for future research.

Benefits of Integrating Research Activities and Field Experiences

Connecting the conceptual knowledge and skills learned in the classroom with field experience has the potential to increase student confidence. Along these lines, Bandura (1993) suggests that perceived self-efficacy contributes to academic development and achievement. He wrote that “students’ beliefs in their efficacy to regulate their own learning and to master academic activities determine their aspiration, level of motivation, and academic accomplishments” (p. 117). He takes this further suggesting that people’s belief in their ability to influence events affects their lives and depends on perceived self-efficacy, a belief he described as the foundation of human motivation, performance accomplishments, and emotional well-being (Bandura, 1997). Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy suggests that people experience greater incentive to take on tasks when they believe they can accomplish these tasks or make a difference by their actions.

The benefits of making connections between research activities and field experiences have been discussed by several authors (Bieschke, Bishop, & Garcia, 1996; Gredler & Johnson, 2001; Trevisan, 2004). For example, field experi-

ence associated with research activities allows students to increase their levels of confidence and/or self-efficacy to the point where students think and feel they are capable of completing a variety of research tasks (Bieschke, Bishop, & Garcia). Although self-efficacy is only one factor relevant to social work education outcomes (Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, & Onghena, 2007), it is an important consideration. When students with integrated experience in research and in the field feel comfortable, effective, and successful, it is more likely they will conduct actual research within their professional social work practice following graduation.

A sense of empowerment is another benefit that arises when students believe they can apply a range of knowledge and skills effectively to different situations. To increase empowerment levels, Gredler and Johnson (2001) promote a field experience that is conducted within a teaching environment that provides access to faculty and a small group of peers in order to develop valuable hands-on research as well as evaluation skills. They “suggest that it can serve as an alternative to within-course evaluation projects, and introduce students to the real world of evaluation” (Gredler & Johnson, p. 102). Furthermore, Gredler and Johnson emphasize that directed research experience, “the development of practitioner skills in real-world settings” (p. 97), as described above, results in more than simply the practice of previously acquired skills. They point out that a course project, without student involvement in fieldwork, presents only limited opportunities for experiencing the complexity of research.

Gredler and Johnson (2001) propose that students need to develop not just technical and methodological research skills but others, such as communication and administrative skills. For example, in a directed evaluation experience involving an agency-related project, Gredler and Johnson had the student work independently in proposing and developing an agency project under the guidance of faculty as well as the field instructor, acquiring communicative, planning, and project-

management skills. Gredler and Johnson indicate that students benefit from a directed evaluation experience by modeling faculty, receiving assistance from faculty, and collaborating with others as a professional. A research proposal that is part of a course and is related to a field placement is relevant, and it is a directed research experience that provides opportunities for students to gain real-world experience about developing research proposals (Gredler & Johnson, 2001). Thus, Gredler and Johnson conclude that when educators are able to incorporate real-world research experiences into an educational program, students gain a better understanding about the skills needed to bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and its practical application.

It makes sense that a research proposal that strengthens practical learning would be considered superior in a professionally applied social science program like social work. Trevisan (2002) argues that practical experiences may be the only way students can appreciate the challenges in evaluation work (Trevisan, 2002). He identifies field experience, since the 1970s, as being considered a highly enduring and practical approach to learning (Trevisan, 2004) in that students appreciate the challenges of working with incomplete data, clients who do not communicate well, and resource restrictions.

Trevisan (2004) describes options for incorporating methodology and/or evaluation theory into educational experiences as a way to build professional competencies. He presents the findings of the following four approaches to providing practical training in evaluation: simulation, role-plays, single course projects, and practicum experiences. Simulation, a cost effective approach, employs a case with issues for a group of students to resolve that involves a needs assessment, planning, evaluation, outcomes, and dissemination of findings. Although similar to simulation in that it involves faculty who teach evaluation skills, role-plays add a flexible and dynamic component that requires greater student imagination in choosing programs to evaluate where there are opportunities to inter-

view actual program stakeholders. A single course project provides an opportunity to conduct an evaluative assessment of an agency by teams of students who then learn about program delivery while confronting agency constraints.

Practicum experience presents an opportunity for students to learn about research projects in agencies for a substantial period of time while working with clients. Specifically, Trevisan (2004) highlights the practicum as an opportunity through which a student can gain experience in working directly with agencies, conducting evaluation projects, and identifying agency needs, all under the supervision of faculty. The faculty member helps the student apply theoretical frameworks to issues arising out of the student's research project. Trevisan further notes that although coordination between faculty and social work agencies can be challenging in terms of resources, particularly where hands-on projects are concerned, this kind of coordination is necessary for providing students with opportunities for developing and using critical thinking and reflection skills.

A Canadian Experience of Integrating Research Activities and Field Experiences

The literature indicates there are benefits to linking research experiences with field placement experiences. Both the CASWE (2008a) and the CSWE (2008) support integrating the classroom curriculum with fieldwork placements, but neither provides specific guidelines for doing this. CASWE standards state that "each program may vary in its delivery of the field education component of the curriculum" (p.17). Data collected from the websites of seventeen Canadian schools of social work indicated research proposals were part of the MSW program, but varied in how the research proposal was connected to a course, integrative seminar, or field experience. The Canadian Association of Social Work Education (2008b) website listed 36 Canadian Schools of Social Work. Twenty-eight of these schools offered a masters degree in social work (MSW). Infor-

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mation was not available from one school, and another was excluded because it had a thesis-only option. Also, nine French language schools in Quebec were excluded due to limitations with translation services. The authors were successful in collecting information from the remaining 17 Canadian Schools of Social Work that offered graduate programs in social work.

Most Canadian graduate social work school websites listed the requirement of at least one research course as a prerequisite for engaging in any type of research proposal. Six of the 17 MSW schools offered students a minimum of three research courses and included opportunities to enroll in both qualitatively and quantitatively oriented research courses. Nine of the MSW schools provided two courses on research methods, while two schools provided a stand-alone research proposal or project course without prerequisite classes on research methods. Most schools offered instruction on research methods through a research proposal course.

The degree to which Canadian schools of social work required research proposals that are integrated with fieldwork varied among Canadian MSW programs. Although the schools relied on fieldwork to drive student interest in a particular area of social work, most MSW programs did not provide a clear direction, or requirement, regarding the ways in which the field experience could be involved in helping to produce a research proposal.

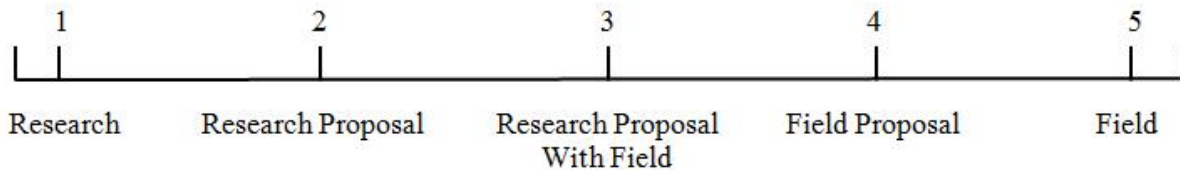
Continuum of Research Activities and Field Experiences

Canadian MSW programs implement research proposals in varying ways with or without a fieldwork component. The degree of variation Canadian MSW programs exercise in how they implement research proposals raises questions about how and to what degree MSW schools need to consider integrating field education with the research curriculum. Canadian MSW programs use different approaches for meeting the CASWE

(2008a) requirements for research proposals. CASWE stipulates that students should have the opportunity to engage in undertaking the “integration of field and classroom education” (p. 18), allowing individual programs to vary the delivery of the field education component. The approaches used by schools exist on a continuum with regard to ways in which research and fieldwork are integrated in their programs. The various experiences used by the schools include the following:

- **Research:** Research involves a complete research project that is carried out through the use of a research proposal, ethics application, implementation, data analysis, findings, discussion, and implications.
- **Research Proposal:** The Research Proposal is a research plan that is prepared but not carried out. It involves completing a literature review and designing the methodology. It results in a paper that discusses the implementation of the research proposal and involves an evaluation.
- **Research Proposal with Field:** The Research Proposal with Field integrates the research proposal with field experience. Students create a research proposal involving a literature review and methodology that apply directly to the fieldwork to which they have been assigned. This approach requires that the proposal be initiated according to the needs of the agency at which the student conducts their fieldwork, and be supervised by MSW school faculty in the classroom, and by agency staff at the field agency. Faculty may supervise such a research proposal involving fieldwork through the various formats of a seminar, colloquium, or advisement arrangement.
- **Field Proposal:** The Field Proposal is a research proposal initiated by the student and conducted in the field agency, solely by the students, without assistance of faculty or through the structure of a course. Inde-

Figure 1. Continuum of integration between research activities and field experiences in MSW programs in Canada



pendently, students arrange to carry out a research proposal with an agency. The Field Proposal is supervised by field agency staff who provide consultation as well as supervision.

- **Field:** In the Field approach, students are placed with a community agency in order to gain experience in the field but are not required to complete a research proposal or project.

As noted in *Figure 1*, the ways in which research proposals relate to field work exist on a continuum. Conducting a research project or proposal is at one end, and doing fieldwork to gain experience but without the expectation of any level of research is at the other end. The research and research proposal approaches are usually used in classroom research courses where research is either planned and implemented (as in full research) or simply planned but not implemented (as in the case of the research proposal). However, in neither case do students integrate the knowledge and skills acquired in these approaches with practical experiences in the field. They are both completed independent of field experience.

The next two approaches -- the research proposal with fieldwork and the field proposal -- ensure the integration of research activities with field experience. The former integrates a classroom course and field experience, which provides the opportunity for a concentrated emphasis on discussion regarding both the research proposal and the students' experiences within their field placement. It is initiated as a result of agency need, and is developed with the guidance of fac-

ulty and the field supervisor, as well as feedback from classroom colleagues. This combination helps to relate its development to agency need, and allows suggestions concerning appropriate and relevant literature sources and research methods.

The field proposal is also connected to a field placement, but there is a significant difference between it and the research proposal with field approach: the process is conducted with the assistance of the field supervisor, but it is not in any way connected to an academic course. Therefore, it does not have the advantage of input from faculty or fellow students. It requires students to cooperate with their field supervisor in picking a research assignment that fulfills an agency need, and then to arrange to carry out the research with consultation and supervision provided only by field staff from the agency. This approach, however, is rarely used because providing guidance regarding research methodologies that are necessary to develop a field proposal is often too challenging and time consuming for field staff. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the last approach, "field," provides students with the experience of fieldwork without any expectation of research activities.

Canadian MSW programs use various methods through which to satisfy CASWE criteria in completing a research proposal or project. The research proposal with fieldwork is an approach that offers a concentrated emphasis on academic discussions with faculty and fellow students regarding the research proposal itself as well as concrete experiences in the field.

A Course Example of Integrating Research Activities with Field Experiences

Arising from a series of discussions on how to best connect field experience to research when designing research proposals in the final year of an MSW program, the authors developed a field seminar course that illustrates how to create this effective relationship. Similar to Trevisan's (2004) integration model, it promotes learning through providing students with both work experience in agencies and the added opportunity to participate in a research project, identifying agency needs under both faculty and field supervision. This practicum model used by Trevisan highlights the importance of a high level of cooperation and coordination between the class instructor, the agency supervisor, and the student in the development of a research project which is specifically geared towards the needs of the agency. Importantly, this approach provides opportunities for students to use critical thinking and reflection. With this in mind, the authors structured the course to:

- Integrate research and the field curriculum with course assignments that allocate a significant portion of the final grade to a research/evaluation project.
- Examine personal, professional, practice, and societal values as these impact research with vulnerable populations.
- Utilize instructors and peers as practice and research consultants using small groups of 10-12 students in weekly classes.

The instructors encouraged students to produce a research proposal based upon a comprehensive review of the literature and a research or evaluation strategy for advanced generalist social work practice with a particular vulnerable population. The purpose of the research proposal is to provide students the opportunity to develop research planning skills that relate to their field placement as well as their personal research interests. Based on observations in the field as well

as discussions with the field instructor, each student is encouraged to select a topic for his/her research proposal which is relevant to, and helps address, an agency need. Thus, the process of creating a research proposal with the help of the agency supervisor offers students the opportunity to develop and integrate the research and theoretical skills learned in the classroom with the practicalities of their practicum placements.

A student designs and creates an evaluation plan for a study with the help of faculty who work with the student in an advisory capacity. According to such an agreement, as the student carries out their research, the faculty member continues to advise until the final report is completed. Typically, the research proposal would not be followed through to completion by the student. However, there may be circumstances in which either the student or the agency chooses to implement the research proposal. Thus, depending on whether or not the student carries out the research, the research proposal may or may not require a formal ethics review for approval by the student's university or agency in the field education setting.

Adding Value to Social Work Education

This paper describes the different approaches to implementing a research project or proposal in Canadian MSW programs. Based on the literature review, the authors suggest that social work programs consider integrating the research proposal with field experiences, appreciating that options are necessary for addressing resource issues. The authors presented a course example to highlight the option of creating collaborative and integrative efforts between schools of social work and field organizations in order to maximize student learning. Exploring the methods through one Canadian school of social work and how it implemented the design of its research proposal, the authors suggest that the research proposal with field option approach is an efficient way of ensuring the professional development of excellent

research and practical skills in MSW graduates.

The literature suggests that it is important to explore the relationship between field education, academic courses, and competence in social work education (Ryan, McCormack, & Cleak, 2006). Field education plays a significant role in developing skills and abilities in social work students (CASWE, 2008a; CSWE, 2008). Knowledge, values, and skills gained through undertaking research proposals allow students to integrate their more academically oriented knowledge with their field experience. Therefore, it is of central importance that MSW programs pay close attention to the content of the courses they offer, and in particular it is important to attend to the ways they can integrate the research proposal with learning that is beneficial to the development of professionalism in students. This experience helps students identify their strengths, and it highlights academic endeavors that can be of value to the field agencies with which they work.

The needs of the agencies that employ graduates of MSW programs are a major influence in favoring the adoption of a model that integrates the research proposal with fieldwork. This approach allows agencies to identify their own needs and to secure students who work, with the help of faculty from their academic institutions, to address these needs (Trevisan, 2004). This practice demonstrates the capabilities and value of social workers to employers who hire graduates of MSW programs. It also takes into consideration that students are most likely to gain employment as a result of field placements where they were found to be helpful. Moreover, employers are always seeking stronger professional skills in their employees (Wright, 2008). Masters of Social Work students are expected to have an integral understanding of the research process and, often, to be able to prepare grant proposals for submission to external funding agencies. Routinely, they need to consult the scholarly literature, seeking alternative methods and novel applications of their expertise. Students who have been trained to

integrate research and fieldwork are thus able to demonstrate both scholarly abilities and effectiveness to their employers. These students are likely, as Wright suggests, to be able to demonstrate a vision while being capable of, collaboratively, identifying problems, offering solutions, and empowering others.

The integration of a research proposal with fieldwork adds value to social work education by increasing confidence in the professional training provided in social work education. Having the research proposal simultaneously grounded within an academic course and in the field creates an environment in which the instructor can clearly outline project expectations (Hurley, Renger, & Brunk, 2005). A well-structured course decreases the potential for confusion by clearly delineating the “purpose of the project, the scope of work, data collection methods, the responsibilities of both the student evaluator and the agency” (Hurley, Renger, & Bunk, 2005, p. 573). Furthermore, grounding the project in a course environment allows the faculty to model, in behavior and vocabulary, professional responses and actions to reported incidences from the field. As described by Gredler and Johnson (2001), students view the experience as one which allows them to feel like professionals who are supported by other professionals, as well as their peers, in the field as well as in the classroom. The authors suggest that a research proposal embedded in a course and linked to fieldwork is more likely to produce students with professional skills and creative approaches to the solution of problems faced by agencies, and to add value to the students’ social work education.

Future Direction

The authors focused on the benefits of integrating the research proposal with fieldwork, suggesting that, for the creation of a superior learning experience, MSW schools aim to integrate the research proposal and fieldwork through an internship course. Areas recommended for further

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research include whether or not the student should be required to implement the research proposal, the extent of the role played by the field agency in developing the research proposal, and how the research proposal contributes to the feeling of confidence in professional roles. Further studies should also investigate how combining research activities and field experiences can benefit community agencies as well as graduate social work education.

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