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PANDEMIC: ADJUSTING SOCIAL WORK PRACTIUM. AN ISOLATED INDICENT OR AN ENTRY TO A LARGER DISCUSSION?

Peter Choate, Christina Tortorelli and Gina Adams

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Article abstract

On March 13, 2020, Mount Royal University responded to the pandemic declaration of the World Health Organization (WHO) and local health directives by stopping all face-to-face learning, including practicums. This sudden cessation was done for reasons of safety and liability. Rapid shifts were required, presenting functional, ethical, and privacy challenges for students and faculty who recognized that practicums are vital for social work students preparing to enter practice. Using a theoretical framework of compounding complexity, the paper considers eight key learnings from the authors' experiences managing a social work practicum program, contemplating implications for current and future crisis-oriented fieldwork. This paper goes further to challenge a re-evaluation of social work as a result of the pandemic, social movements including the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the changing socio-economic factors that influence service users' lives. These conversations have emerged within the pandemic context and afford a moment to reflect on the place and role of social work.

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Abstract: On March 13, 2020, Mount Royal University responded to the pandemic declaration of the World Health Organization (WHO) and local health directives by stopping all face-to-face learning, including practicums. This sudden cessation was done for reasons of safety and liability. Rapid shifts were required, presenting functional, ethical, and privacy challenges for students and faculty who recognized that practicums are vital for social work students preparing to enter practice. Using a theoretical framework of compounding complexity, the paper considers eight key learnings from the authors' experiences managing a social work practicum program, contemplating implications for current and future crisis-oriented fieldwork. This paper goes further to challenge a re-evaluation of social work as a result of the pandemic, social movements including the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the changing socio-economic factors that influence service users' lives. These conversations have emerged within the pandemic context and afford a moment to reflect on the place and role of social work.

Keywords: pandemic, COVID-19, practicum, social work theory and practice, field education

Abrégé : Le 13 mars 2020, Mount Royal University a répondu à la déclaration de l'Organisation mondiale de la santé (OMS) au sujet de la pandémie et aux directives sanitaires locales en arrêtant tout apprentissage

Peter Choate is a Professor, Christina Tortorelli is an Assistant Professor and Gina Adams is the Program Advisor and Practicum Coordinator in the Department of Social Work, in the Faculty of Health, Community and Education at Mount Royal University.

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en présentiel, dont les stages de formation pratique. Cet arrêt brutal a été fait pour des raisons de sécurité et de responsabilité. Reconnaissant que les stages sont essentiels pour les étudiant.e.s en travail social se préparant à exercer la profession, des changements rapides ont été nécessaires, présentant des défis fonctionnels, éthiques et de confidentialité pour les étudiant.e.s et les professeur.e.s. À l'aide d'un cadre théorique de complexité croissante, l'article examine huit enseignements clés tirés des expériences des auteur.e.s dans la gestion d'un programme de stage en travail social, et envisage les implications actuelles et futures pour les stages en contexte de crise. Cet article va plus loin en questionnant et demandant une redéfinition du travail social en réponse à la pandémie, les mouvements sociaux dont Black Lives Matter, ainsi que de l'évolution des facteurs socioéconomiques qui influencent la vie des usager.e.s. Ces conversations ont émergé dans le contexte de la pandémie et offrent un moment de réflexion sur la place et le rôle du travail social.

Mots-clés : pandémie, COVID-19, stage, théorie et pratique du travail social, formation pratique

ON MARCH 13, 2020, HEALTH AUTHORITIES in our jurisdiction determined that various forms of group gatherings would not be permitted. This decision followed the announcement by the World Health Organization that defined COVID-19 as a pandemic (WHO, 2020). Mount Royal University simultaneously determined that all face-to-face forms of practicum (also known as field education) must cease. This stoppage led to significant changes in how social work education was delivered. In this paper, we consider the impact of public health decisions on practicums. At the onset of this rapid change, 120 first- and second-year students were about halfway through clinical, research, social justice, and community development practicums. Throughout the COVID-19 practicum experience, we anticipated existing disparities for racialized students would be enlarged.

At time of writing, the Omicron variant of COVID-19 is spreading, extending online and blended practicum experiences. Literature is beginning to emerge that the practice environment has become increasingly difficult, and more so with at-risk populations (Katz et al., 2021).

In Mount Royal University's Department of Social Work, Peter Choate is the program coordinator, Christina Tortorelli is the field director, and Gina Adams the program advisor and practicum coordinator, placing us at the forefront of navigating the practicum experience, including the intersections between students, agencies, and the university. When dealing with the uncertainty of navigating our roles during the pandemic, without losing our ability to create meaning (D'Cruz et al., 2007), we found reflexivity (Ferguson, 2018) to be an appropriate methodology.

Literature Review

Practicums are an essential part of the learning experience, integrating practice with theory (Bogo, 2010; CASWE-ACFTS, 2020; Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020). They serve a foundational requirement for entering the profession and gaining practice hours for provisional licensing and registration (Alberta College of Social Workers, 2021). The practicum course specifies the number of hours that must be completed, which the university includes in graduation requirements. As Drolet et al. (2021) illustrate, social work has faced a variety of challenges with practicums prior to the pandemic, including declining opportunities for placements due to economic pressures for agencies as well as increased competition arising from a growth in social work programs and students (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020). While the literature on COVID-19 and the social work practicum is emerging, it is not yet extensive and generally focuses on impacts on practice, with a small body of literature on social work education separate from practicum issues.

Adjusting practicum experiences to pandemic conditions and still achieving learning outcomes requires a cooperative approach, bringing together colleagues, agencies, and stakeholders, as well as the students impacted by the changes (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020). Adding to the pressures of adaptation are the ever-changing public health rules and guidelines, which create the challenge of ongoing adjustment as opposed to static shifts (Sabru & Unwin, 2021). As De Fries et al. (2021) frame the challenge, social work educators have moved into largely uncharted territory, with students overwhelmed by change — including responding to shifts in their home lives — while attempting to preserve the skill development that prepares them for practice. Davis and Mirick (2021) advocate for contingency planning as essential to the ongoing adaptation process.

To support students in this process of adjustment, Mirick and Davis (2021) note that strong communication is needed along with emotional support and clear understandings of how the program requirements are adjusted. Dempsey et al. (2022) frame the context of the adjustment as a shared trauma consisting of losses of various types: field projects, service users and supervisor relationships, traditional ways of learning skill-based practice, as well as carefully developed field placements for students who need accommodations. Trauma is also occurring for field supervisors who must struggle to find new ways to do their front-line work while meeting practicum expectations (Turner, 2021).

Micsky (2021) notes that the sudden shift out of traditional practicums at the beginning of COVID-19 meant that key opportunities to apply skills such as terminations were lost. She notes that new approaches may be needed. When face-to-face practicums are not available or limited, one

possible experiential learning strategy for teaching new skills is simulation (Asakura & Bogo, 2021; Jefferies et al., 2021; Tortorelli, et al., 2021).

There are optimistic perspectives. Zuchowski et al. (2021) describe the pandemic as offering opportunities to increase flexible learning and balance skill development — yet they are cautious, noting that students might be left to drive their own learning, particularly if structure, support, and communication are weak. Baciú and Trancă (2021), in a small study, suggest in-person opportunities may not necessarily be better than online ones, subject to planning and delivery. Mantulak et al. (2021) speak of remote learning plans focusing on the building of knowledge acquisition, practice skills, values, ethics, and professional conduct. They make a poignant observation that COVID-19 offers an opportunity to “wad[e] into the discomfort or the uncertainty” (p. 548) while implementing a philosophy of pragmatically “doing what needs to be done” synonymous with crisis theory so crucial to the social worker skill set” (p. 548). Arrow and Grant (2021) see shifts required from the pandemic as offering opportunities to think about the needs of specific populations for whom traditional pathways to field learning presented various barriers. They argue for a rethink to a disability-justice method that focuses upon the possibility of the whole person and ways for all students to engage in learning through multiple means.

Methodology

Our research goal was to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on practicums as observed from our role and positionality. We approached this work from a reflexive framework (Ferguson, 2018) seeking to understand what we were observing as COVID-19 quickly shifted practicums and intersected with other issues. The work of Murphy et al. (2010) seemed relevant, challenging social work to be creative with new knowledge and application being drawn from what is occurring in practice. Reflexivity allows examination of what is happening within the discipline while being critical of sustaining what demands rethinking (Watts, 2019). Thus, we have brought together complexity, intersectionality, and reflexivity to draw upon COVID-19 as a place of change.

This theoretical orientation led us to numerous conversations about the traditional model of practicums and whether they are flexible enough to address not only the challenges of COVID-19 but also socioeconomic contexts and lived experiences of racialized students. There is a significant gap in the literature regarding how COVID-19 shifted the lives of racialized social work students, especially in relation to their practicum experiences. Reflexivity enabled us to consider what could be learned from the pandemic and how practicums, crises, and student lived experiences need to be considered collectively and not as unique issues. We saw these practicum changes in concert with the shift

to online learning, the parallel decreased satisfaction with the learning environment, and the increased social isolation that came with the pandemic (Lawrence et al., 2021).

Almost by definition, this work will be limited as these are preliminary observations during an evolving pandemic. This article is an entry point for further inquiry at a time when students can actively reflect on their experiences. Identifying those at risk for adverse academic and psychosocial outcomes because of COVID-19 is important. Jabbari et al. (2020) suggest that “universities might consider fitting their pandemic responses into longer term solutions for equity beyond the pandemic” (para. 3). Observations from their study showed “notable disparities by race and ethnicity, international student status, first-generation student status, and gender” (abstract).

Background

Enabling practicums to continue despite COVID-19 was a priority in order both to preserve students’ academic progress and to meet community needs as demand for services rose (Gignac et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2021).

The university permitted students to continue their practicum experiences if their work could be done remotely. We anticipated agencies would not be able to continue offering placements based upon the rapidly changing demands and abilities to serve service users when access was diminishing due to public health restrictions. To our surprise, about 40% of agencies found ways to accommodate this change by completing program development, evaluation projects, and research, and by shifting service user contact to electronic formats. Other agencies were not able to move away from direct service user contact or their staff were working remotely, making supervising a student too challenging. Agencies were becoming overwhelmed with demands as their staff too had to respond to COVID-19 isolation and increased childcare responsibilities.

As COVID-19 extends across academic years, agencies are willing to support student practicums in highly restricted ways, resulting in a decline in the number of opportunities. We continue to hear from agencies about their decreased capacity to take students, which they link to government austerity programs and the loss of private funding, which is secondary to economic downturns from the pandemic. There is increased competition for placements, which was already challenging as social work programs were not only competing amongst themselves but with other disciplines such as nursing, justice, education, child studies, and social entrepreneurship (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Drolet et al., 2021). These complex and intersecting factors have meant continuing creativity is required to meet educational, licensure, and practice requirements.

Theoretical Considerations

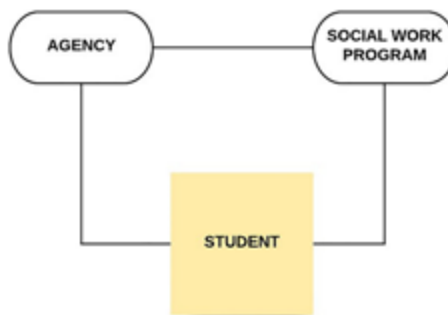
Morçöl (2012) offers a view of complexity theory placed in the world of public policy. Social work, intersecting with such policy, is itself based upon social constructions that intersect with lived realities. Complexity arises as problems are non-linear with multiple pathways by decision-makers whose own interests and priorities may collide or align with the public good (Morçöl, 2012). The issues being analyzed or considered in this paper intersect and interfere with each other in patterns inviting chaos, which creates the complexity (Tomé & Açıklan, 2019).

Complexity theory sits nicely next to Crenshaw et al.'s seminal work on intersectionality (1995), which illustrates how structural systems reinforce societal patterns and takes into consideration the racial intersectional issues noted above. Crenshaw et al. (1995) drew from the notion that a person does not sit in discrete positions, but rather has multiple routes intersecting with each other, which alter what is possible in each circumstance. When the intersections are blocked by forces such as racism, then alternate pathways exist that are fueled by the dominant forces (power).

Traditional View of Practicum

Pandemic realities facing both the program and students demanded traditional intersections now required reconstruction. Traditional frameworks might have looked like Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Traditional view of the student in practicum.*



Prior to COVID-19, we had been increasingly uncomfortable with the view represented in Figure 1, as it was too simplistic and was increasingly disconnected from the realities of student lives — especially those of non-traditional students who are often present in social work programs. Such students may have one or more dependents, act as a single caregiver, be Indigenous or a person of colour, have come into the profession later in life, or have challenging lived experiences (Adcock, 2017). The

inapplicability of Figure 1 to these non-traditional student populations had been evident to us in our classrooms pre-COVID, especially as austerity measures from neoliberal government agendas placed increasing pressures on students (Browning & Elnagar, 2022). Before COVID-19, we began adjusting our view of practicum and student intersections (Figure 2), being mindful of the impacts of additional change on those already reporting challenges with the struggles of managing personal and student obligations.

Figure 2. *The emerging reality of student intersectional complications existing Pre-COVID-19.*

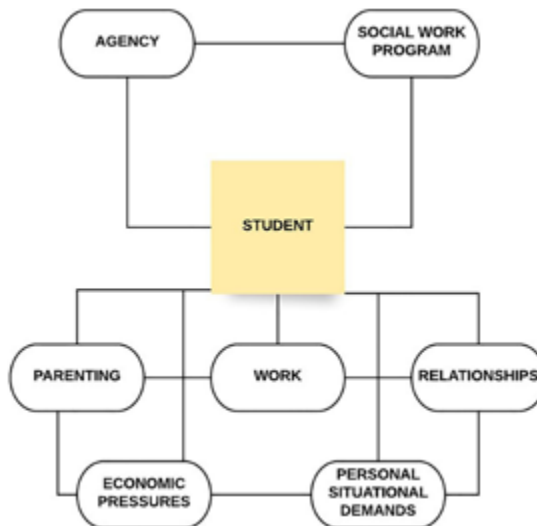


Figure 2 accounts for the emerging reality of student intersectional complications, which had existed before COVID-19, but were magnified and increasingly discussed during the pandemic. The personal situational demands included race, childcare, geographic location, internet access, ability-based needs, and family and personal economic needs.

Emerging Reality of Practicum

Ryan and El Ayadi (2020) note that social work has already been faced with issues of race, racialization of voices, structural racism, and racial positionality. Universities are rightly being challenged to think about how that discourse belongs in social work education, in a way that brings together multiple, valid perspectives on theory and practice. Simultaneously, the agencies that provide practicum experiences are engaging in their own reflection, seeking ways to ensure social work

education is preparing students to work with decolonizing and inclusive social work for a multitude of service needs across diverse communities (Datta, 2020).

Adding the Pandemic

The onslaught of the effects of COVID-19 changed the equation. We recognized that these increasingly complicated intersections required a fluid and flexible approach in order to ensure that practicums could be successfully accomplished. Some agencies that were engaged in high-risk work might have been willing to continue with students, but the university's initial foci — safety, aversion to risk, and liability of working on the frontline of a pandemic — precluded that option. As the pandemic continued, agencies and students promoted the need to learn practice in riskier settings. Other programs at the university, such as nursing and midwifery, were also examining their responses and feeling that practical, applied work experience was necessary for students. In some ways, the pandemic became an opportunity for enhanced, intensive experiential learning. Advocacy, including by social work, for the university to shift from risk avoidance to risk mitigation was successful. We had to bring alternative learning plans into place that focused on practice skills but that could be completed through online learning.

Reflexive Learnings

Through our reflexive discussions about our program's practicum experiences in COVID-19, six themes emerged:

Grounding – Despite what we have just noted, students, faculty, and agencies did not have any set way to respond. Disaster preparedness plans offered little guidance in addressing the pervasive and widespread impacts of this pandemic, something de la Sablonnière (2017) terms “Dramatic Social Change” (p. 2). Aspects of students' practicums that needed to be determined on the fly included what were or were not acceptable risks, how personal versus practicum obligations should be balanced, and how to continue meeting practicum requirements. Risk management decisions were made on a university-wide basis. This scope of decision-making meant that the inherent attention to risk within social work practice was not initially taken into account until well into the pandemic. Expectations changed frequently. Students became frustrated and overwhelmed (Beesley & Devonald, 2020).

Three aspects of grounding were identified as critical: (1) clear messaging about what was and was not possible; (2) the university's priority to protect students' health and safety while not compromising their education; and (3) flexibility that recognized the evolving challenges of students, their own lives, and those of clients and agencies, as there

was not a one-size-fits-all approach (Dempsey et al., 2022). Students still needed to learn, reflect, and integrate, even if doing so within crisis, showing the importance of intentional connection to social work faculty. Grounding links as well to the ambiguous losses experienced by students as program delivery, social connections and personal pressures evolved (Boss, 2021).

Risk – Initially, the degree of risk was uncertain. Students with higher risk tolerance or prior practicum or relevant work experiences sought to stay the course with their practicums. They saw risk exposure as part of social work in specific settings such as detox, homeless shelters, health facilities, child intervention, outreach, and mental health. They were committed to the placement and were already confident with such things as personal protective equipment.

Banks et al. (2020) add that decisions must be made within an ethical framework that includes factors such as logistics, social justice, trust, rights, competing interests, and emotional care. The pandemic or crisis responses within these parameters are very different in practice as opposed to the classroom. Students need experience, which comes with risks.

Changes related to **in-person practicum connections** – Consistent with Micsky (2021), we encountered students who were no longer able to physically attend practicum, and who were consequently struggling with professionally ending their relationships with service users. Other students learned to facilitate closure and referral remotely (Dempsey et al., 2022), or developed new skills to connect with service users through multiple modalities (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020).

Personal burden – Many students found themselves managing personal burdens, including caring for and educating children, caring for members of their family, supporting partners laid off, and at times, dealing with their own job losses (Jabbari et al., 2020). Simultaneously, students spoke of increased isolation and loss of time with their emotional and social support. International students, already geographically removed from family, described even more isolation. In our reflections, we note that students from disadvantaged and racialized groups were most impacted by the multiple challenges of the pandemic. With the urgent need to help students to develop plans to complete practicums and the shift to online learning for all courses, little attention was paid to these personal burdens — yet information available from prior crises should have highlighted this need (Institute of Medicine, 2007).

Further, various groups of students attend university with loans, grants, bursaries, and visas linked to full-time enrollment and course completion. Adjustments eventually occurred, but these took some time, leaving students with high anxiety due to the lack of clear information.

Technology burden – In the context of Canada as a wealthier country (albeit with significant disparities), we are used to technology access, and so a lack of it seems improbable. Two themes stood out.

The first were students who relied heavily on technology available from the university via on-campus systems. This access became available only on a very limited basis for traditional coursework and was not set up to accommodate the demands of a 350-hour practicum. For a variety of economic and social reasons, other students left campus to return to rural or remote communities where access to the internet was limited, unstable and, at times, unavailable.

Secondly, technology availability was limited in homes. It needed to be shared amongst several users, including children for online schooling, partners for their employment or education as well as the student. The economic burden of adding more technology or even increasing the speed of their connections in the home was not an option for many students who were financially stretched.

Ethics – Unanticipated ethical challenges emerged. Students joining online from home needed guidance regarding confidentiality and determining who else might be in the room. Many students found themselves introducing us to partners, parents, pets, and children, as well as to the realities of their living circumstances. This personal exposure was true for faculty as well. What had been privileged personal space now became shared space through a form of forced consent (Glubb-Smith & Roberts, 2020).

When the above items are looked at as a unit, there is a collective ethos of going through the pandemic together while also going through it separately. We could see how each student was trying to manage the personal challenges while striving to meet their educational needs. Their own resilience was being challenged (Glubb-Smith & Roberts, 2020). Faculty too went through a sense of being overwhelmed through increased time online, managing student stress around completing practicums, working with agencies responding to COVID-19 demands, meeting health and university COVID-19 management guidelines, all while rapidly adjusting courses to online delivery (Schmidt-Crawford et al., 2021). Students looked to faculty to be a grounding force who could ensure that course and practicum objectives would be met. Online time with faculty became, in part, a forum for emotional support and social connection. Faculty sought to present some level of calm, even though their own lives were undergoing the same upheavals as many students.

In our reflections, we noted a general theme of COVID-19 taking centre stage while students managed issues that seemed harder to both navigate and express. Examples include ongoing medical issues, death and serious illness in the family unrelated to the pandemic, and emerging challenges arising from other sectors of their lives. Again, the pandemic took over the conversation.

Discussion

COVID-19 continues to be a reality and ongoing adaptation is needed. This pandemic is not a static or linear situation. Social work is an essential service, and social workers have demonstrated their ability to adapt for years. In our view, this context represents an opportunity to think about what socioeconomic changes are occurring in our society and how social work is positioned to respond. The pandemic has created multiple economic shifts that are likely to take years to overcome, such as loss of businesses, decreased funding, the closure of not-for-profit agencies, layoffs in public services, increased health expenditures, and decreased tax revenues. Governmental austerity programs continued through the pandemic. It is doubtful any change to this approach will be seen for some time (Hargreaves, 2021).

These gaps, in turn, create social and community dynamics that enhance population vulnerability, adding pressures to justice, healthcare, child intervention, and poverty systems. These consequences are examples of learnings that need to be incorporated into practicum preparation and supervision. Inequities were magnified during COVID-19 (Rodriguez, 2020) while access and supports diminished. Indeed, we experienced students raising strong ethically based conversations regarding the intersections resulting from COVID-19. Fear and uncertainty were expressed by students in seminars aligning with the issues identified by Fitzpatrick et al. (2020) and Hunter (2020). Also highlighted are matters already extant such as poverty (Liegghio & Caragata, 2020) and race (Krouse, 2020; Raifman & Raifman, 2020), along with exacerbation of existing problems for which social interventions were in place, such as school meals, child social connection and family security measures (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). COVID-19 may make all these social indicators of health worse by increasing poverty and its impacts (Amadasun, 2020; Sumner et al., 2020). While working with service users experiencing these problems in practicum, we were aware that many students were experiencing similar issues in parallel.

Practice Implications

There is a need to draw upon this pandemic experience with students and take a futures approach (Gidley, 2017; Nissen, 2020). We must address the gaps that have existed between traditional practicum approaches and more flexible ones that address disparity in a rapidly changing world. As Nissen (2020) observes, the pandemic has shown the profession has lacked such a perspective:

How might the emerging 'perfect storm' of dynamics in our society at large (technological advancements, inequality, climate change – multiplied now by Covid-19 experience) coalesce to not only shake and disrupt human well-being as we know it, but introduce even deeper forms of vulnerability, inequity and injury? (p. 2)

The pandemic has highlighted institutional gaps around diversity and inclusion, as universities are often structured for delivery premised upon a variety of assumptions about the resources students have to engage in learning, such as funding, technology, housing, and formal and informal supports. One discipline, social work, cannot solve these larger systemic issues, although we have an obligation to be a voice for change.

As practicum leads, we are committed to reflexivity as we explore lessons learned. Informed by students, we have heard the need for space and time to process their chaos, their own stories, and their sense of overwhelm, uncertainty, and fear as they have tried to figure out the abrupt changes in their lives, much of which was beyond their control. Our experience was that students did better when they had the opportunity to influence what their practicum experience would look like. We are mindful that this learning process is to prepare students to enter practice and that our graduates will be working on the issues lingering from the pandemic for the foreseeable future (Jabbari et al., 2020).

When climate change, economic degradation, and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic collide, the compounding complexity overwhelms people and systems. COVID-19 should not be seen as an isolated event, but rather as a harbinger of events that social work will need to address, planning to deliver services in non-traditional ways, and adapting to a world in which ‘normal’ is the unknown.

The micro experience of our students is seen globally. Is social work prepared? Nissen (2020) urges that we “engage in deeper and more disciplined exploration of its own future” (p. 4). De la Sablonnière (2017) advises that the social and emotional impacts of dramatic social change have been under-researched as economic and recovery efforts take precedence. Social work is ideally positioned to lead this work in partnership with allied professions through and beyond the pandemic.

Theoretical Implications

Looking again at complexity theory (Morçöl, 2012; Tomé & Açıkalin, 2019; Tompkins & Vander Linden, 2020) and Crenshaw et al.’s intersectionality theory (1995), we return to the interconnections of relationship, situation, and emotional factors. This leads us to ask: how do we honour the complexity of students’ lives when they must adapt to the pandemic and yet manage the intersectionality of continuing on as a student? How do we think about relationship in this situation as an opportunity to maximize versus manage quickly emerging challenges? During the pandemic, we have continued to see a vital need to step out of traditional views of practicum and engage in relational discussions with students about creative options. The students embraced this approach and showed that reviewing relevant literature, course content creation and legal research are part of social work practice. The relationship

between social work and the needs of service users and the systems with which they interact could be approached differently. Bridging theory with application—even in a crisis such as the pandemic — is achievable.

Online learning made the expression of ideas, emotions, and needs more challenging. Relationships became distant. It was harder to offer empathic responses amidst a chaos in which connection with service users was based more on electronic than direct personal interaction. Managing in uncertainty became the norm. Mclaughlin et al. (2020) suggest that the impact of COVID-19 is such that “social work education will never be the same” (p. 981), and we feel it should not be.

Reflecting on the time that has passed since March 2020, we have learned a lot about our adaptability as academic leaders, the resilience of our students, and our options for travelling the social work education journey together in the future. For the most part, students stepped forward despite the challenges and completed their practicums with integrity and pride. They demonstrated that the online environment — and especially the combination of in-person and alternative learning (online, research and simulation) — can fulfill institutional and regulatory learning expectations. We are aware more than ever of the equity gaps that students face both within the university, within the profession, and in the community. If we can harness positive results and lead pedagogical change, social work will be ready for the next inevitable crisis with which we are presented.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to rethink and reframe a futures perspective (Morris et al., 2020). As a meme on social media notes, “If you were asked where you would be in five years, would you imagine this?” What can we imagine for our profession?

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