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Authors	Short, Monica;Halton, Carmel;Morris, Brenda;Rose, Joanne;Whitaker, Louise;Russ, Erica;Fitzroy, Robyn;Appleton, Cherie;Adamson, Carole;Woolven, Mark;Rush, Emma;Ivory, Nicola;Berger, Lynn;Morton, Natalie;Duncombe, Rohena;Boyd, Bill
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**Title: Enablers, markers and aspects of quality innovative placements across distance:
Insights from a co-operative inquiry**

Monica Short¹, Carmel Halton², Brenda Morris³, Joanne Rose², Louise Whitaker⁴, Erica Russ⁴, Robyn Fitzroy⁵, Cherie Appleton⁶, Carole Adamson⁶, Mark Woolven⁷, Emma Rush¹, Nicola Ivory⁸, Lynn Berger⁴, Natalie Morton⁹, Rohena Duncombe¹ & Bill Boyd¹⁰

¹School of Social Work and Arts, Charles Sturt University, NSW Australia

²School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Ireland

³School of Social Work, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, Canada

⁴School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University, Australia

⁵University Centre for Rural Health, Sydney University, NSW, Australia

⁶Human Services and Social Work, Auckland University, New Zealand

⁷Sahara Services, Hornsby, NSW, Australia

⁸Psychology, Charles Sturt University, NSW, Australia

⁹School of Allied Health, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia

¹⁰Office of Vice-Chancellor, Southern Cross University, NSW, Australia

Abstract

Internationally, COVID-19 has forced educational reform and disrupted already strained social work field education systems. This inquiry began pre-pandemic, responding to placement scarcity, which was only exacerbated by the pandemic as agencies migrated to online service delivery and universities responded to sudden placement cancellations. Educators found themselves navigating two interlinked global trends: 1) workplace learning that was changing radically; and 2) the immediate need to identify and develop placement opportunities. This article presents themes from a co-operative inquiry that interrogated four innovative international placement scenarios from Australia, Canada, Ireland, and New Zealand, highlighting enablers, markers and aspects of quality learning. The four exemplars evidence the pedagogical challenges and opportunities presented by placement innovation and online learning. These placements reveal how tensions regarding placement scarcity, rapid placement innovation, and the concurrent need to mitigate risk while preserving placement quality were managed. The authors propose that creativity and innovation guided by well-articulated educational principles, learning outcomes, and pedagogical practices, promote the construction of quality placements that transcend potential risks. The challenge moving forward is upholding contemporary approaches to placement teaching and learning

that ensure social work students' acquisition of professional knowledge, values and skills that are necessary for practice.

Keywords: International, workplace learning, organisations, collaboration, field education, co-operative inquiry, narrative approaches, research, qualitative methods

Introduction

Internationally, social work field educators are challenged to identify and provide quality social work placements to meet the needs of students (Ayala et al., 2018; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic destabilised already stressed field education systems, creating further pressure to rapidly progress innovative placements. Consequently, field education was extended to agencies beyond existing catchments and disciplinary areas, and/or project or innovative social work placements were introduced. During 2020 and 2021 many placements were cancelled (Trede & Flowers, 2020). Where they continued, students often relocated to working from home, reducing opportunities for learning practice skills in person. Accreditation bodies and social work schools were called on to modify their requirements for fieldwork (Canadian Association for Social Work Education [CASWE], 2020), raising concerns about the integrity of practice-based placements during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid forced transformation of field education raises urgent questions about ensuring quality learning experiences alongside disciplinary, educational and pedagogical standards, both now and into the future (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2011).

Initiated prior to, and continuing during, the pandemic, the current inquiry addressed the question: What are the challenges to, and opportunities for, delivery of quality social work placements that preserve integrity while overcoming distance and/or responding to disaster? This inquiry aimed to interrogate placement practices across distance, to ascertain how they sought to uphold the quality of student learning and meet the expectations of stakeholders. Its purpose was to identify approaches to distance placements from Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand and critically review the learning opportunities offered. Through this inquiry process we uncovered enablers and markers of quality placement delivery and the opportunities they provide for professional development.

Contextualising the inquiry through the literature pre and post-Covid-19.

Internationally, fieldwork, also known as field-placement, practicum or field education, is an essential part of social work education (Maidment, 2006). Pre-pandemic placement scarcity created a strong incentive to develop a range of options, where on-site social work supervision, a physical workspace, statutory agency mandates or direct practice opportunities with service users may not be available. The resulting innovative placements were considered non-traditional (Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Todd & Schwartz, 2009). Todd and Schwartz (2009) distinguish non-traditional placements from mainstream or traditional placements. In this inquiry, we defined non-traditional as being any placement that would be considered new or different relative to their context and location. Synonyms for non-traditional placements include alternative or innovative placements.

Defining quality in social work field placements is challenging for two reasons. First, neo-liberal measures regarding quality can focus on concrete and quantitative items rather than experiential and qualitative ones. Neoliberal measures of quality can include notions of value for money, service excellence, consistency and ability to meet customer requirements (Todd & Schwartz, 2009). Second, the definitions can fail to include transformational student learning grounded in “a process that is not unidirectional, but dialectical with a negotiated outcome” (Todd & Schwartz, 2009, p. 382). In contrast, student-centred measures of placement quality and satisfaction centre around supervision, setting and learning goals (Todd & Schwartz, 2009). Canadian scholar Bogo (2015) promotes environmental and pedagogical aspects of quality.

In the context of placement scarcity, the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated pressures on sourcing sufficient quality placements (Author’s own et al., 2021a; Zuchowski et al., 2019). For example, in the pre-pandemic period, placement scarcity and practicum insecurity led Canadian authors to declare a crisis in social work field education (Ayala et al., 2018; author’s own et al., 2021a). In Ireland, there was increasing concern about the availability of registered social workers in practice (Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs debate, 2019). The recent Hanafin Report (2019) concluded that while social worker availability was of immediate concern, any expansion of student numbers in social work programmes was predicated on an expansion of placement and supervisor availability. One could not expand without the other.

In rural Australia, many sectors report difficulty attracting staff, and placements were often an essential staff recruitment strategy (Salter et al., 2020). Although there were high rates of

job growth and demand for social workers (National Skills Commission, n.d.), there were also significant shortages of supervised social work placements. Agency funding constraints and intensification of social worker workload linked to neoliberal service rationalisation had further reduced social work placements (Baines, 2010). Consequently, many educators have been increasingly looking to innovative placement arrangements (Zuchowski, 2017).

Globally, COVID-19 impacted the human services, education and health sectors, with social workers reporting increasing demand for and disruption to service delivery (Craik, 2020; Golightley & Holloway, 2020a & 2020b; Pawar, 2020). The challenges to meeting service and workforce demand prompted rapid innovation to increase placement availability (International Federation of Social Work [IFSW], 2018; [author's own], in press(a); Wood et al., 2020). Social work field educators around the globe urgently scoped and instituted innovative international, national, urban, rural, remote, and/or technology-supported online placements (described in the literature as panic-gogy; Dean & Campbell, 2020). Simultaneously, the urgent migration of social and human services to online and technology-enabled environments changed the context of social work practice and education. Some universities and organisations responded by partnering to develop new and alternative placement arrangements (author's own et al., 2021b) to achieve program outcomes.

In response to pandemic pressures, some international accrediting bodies modified requirements for fieldwork; examples of the pressures included campuses closing, courses transferring online, the cessation of face-to-face teaching, and the increased demand for remote placements (Henrickson, 2020; author's own et al., 2020a; Zegwaard et al., 2020). This has included reducing required hours, providing greater flexibility around timing, and permitting off-site work (Australian Association of Social Work [AASW], 2020; CASWE, 2020). Concurrently, many programs rapidly embraced technology to overcome barriers to educational access. Some universities adopted simulation (where students experience aspects of the practice setting within an educational environment) and others implemented off-site, work from home practice learning options (Kirschner et al., 2004; Wood et al., 2020). Remarkably, what initially seemed impossible was made possible through significant rapid adaptation and innovation.

Although pragmatic, such adaptations have also triggered concern around both the quality and the integrity of pandemic placements. For example, from a student perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic 'crashed' already stressed systems and the student experience suffered

(Semmens, 2020, p.516). Students like Semmens (2020) reported being deluged with information about COVID-19 and watching the psychological burden of COVID-19 upon people. Canadian educator Bowen (2020) also identified challenges to quality online-learning including: the inability to access library services, and appropriate educational and professional spaces. In these environments, students can become invisible and feel isolated and disconnected from the people they are serving; as well as finding it hard to engage with their teachers, develop professional trust, set professional boundaries and observe professional activities (Bowen, 2020).

In New Zealand, scholars highlighted that while the closing of educational institutions and agencies helped control the spread of the virus, it also forced field education to be reconfigured (Henrickson, 2020). It added “precarious layers of adversity” to the lives of students (Glubb-Smith & Roberts, 2020, p. 46). These included financial challenges faced by social work students, which were well-established in the literature pre-pandemic (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Gair & Baglow, 2018), and which continue to be reported by students as persisting and worsening throughout COVID-19 due to limited opportunities to supplement income and cover the costs of full-time education.

Despite these challenges, others argue there are benefits to online-learning, such as access for students from rural or remote areas, technology-enabled access for students with disabilities, and the ability for students to balance work or family commitments with study (Groton & Spandola, 2020). Agencies, employees and students also report that novel experiences are empowering some students to be independent learners; grow their problem-solving and written communication skills; and be more professional, credible and trustworthy (Hodges & Martin, 2020). As recognition of the advantages of online learning grows in both professional discourse and literature (McLaughlin et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021), some have suggested that the lack of curriculum development relating to the adoption of technology for social work practice is an area of critical uncertainty for the profession (Wilkerson et al., 2020). Students see placements as providing experiences that prepare them for the world of work (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012), so the opportunity to learn online and in technology-enabled placements emerges as cutting edge and distinctly advantageous in the pandemic era.

This inquiry presents four case studies exploring how placement quality and integrity can be retained in innovative placements. As social work field education evolves, we are committed to quality and transformational placement learning which prepares people for entry to

practice that aligns with the social work objectives of “social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people” (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014; 2018). We are committed to ensuring placements align with accreditation and regulatory standards.

Methodology

Answering the research question required a collective critical reflection process that accommodated knowledge from colleagues in four continents. Co-operative inquiry was identified as the appropriate methodology for addressing this question. This is because co-operative inquiry provides a structured, yet flexible, process that can guide an international collaborative investigation and which has proven functionality in researching social work innovations (for example, Godden, 2017; Author’s own, 2021). Co-operative inquiry is deliberately inclusive, embracing the experiences and perceptions of all participating in the research, capturing a greater breadth of perspectives. The current inquiry’s purpose was to interrogate four placements, ascertain how they overcame issues associated with distance and disaster, and identify how they preserved the quality and integrity of student learning consistent with universities, community partners and professional bodies’ expectations internationally.

Our inquiry commenced prior to and continued during the pandemic, with experiences of the changes associated with the pandemic incorporated into the analysis. In total, sixteen researchers connected with a pre-existing research community, self-identified to participate in this inquiry: eight social work academics, one academic each from geography, psychology and philosophy disciplines, three fieldwork coordinators, one senior manager from a large national welfare organisation and one director of a university health centre. Five researchers reside in urban areas, two in regional and two in rural Australia; one in Canada; two in Ireland; and two in New Zealand. All participants had an interest in work integrated learning and an association with social work field education.

Consistent with co-operative inquiry, everyone came together as equals in the process, sharing their professional wisdom about the topic. All participants were co-authors, co-participants, co-subjects and co-inquirers (Godden, 2017; Reason & Heron, 2013). Each reflexively shared their own narratives of supporting field education across distance. All had power over inclusions in this article and the conclusions reached (Godden, 2017; Author’s

own, 2018, p.234). Given the co-operative inquiry process, ethics approval was not required for this low-risk project. This article is written in first-person to honour each other and the experiential nature of the methodology.

The method

Pioneered by Heron and Reason, co-operative inquiry is participatory research, facilitating dialogic exchanges about a focus area (Reason & Heron, 2013; Author's own, 2017, p. 190). Co-operative inquiry circles through four phases, as depicted below.

Figure 1.

Co-operative inquiry phases (Reason & Heron, 2013; Author's own, 2017, p. 190)

In phase one, people assume the role of researchers. The research focus is established, key ideas developed and decisions made as to how to collect data (Reason & Heron, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Our group examined the question: What are the challenges to, and opportunities for, innovative delivery of social work placements that preserve integrity while overcoming distance and/or responding to disaster? Through this, we considered the implications during and post-COVID-19.

We met every three weeks by video-conference. A shared electronic document was established for keeping our transcripts and notes. In this phase, we also agreed on the principles bolstering the inquiry. For example, the authorship order was agreed upon by the group based on the number of hours contributed to the research. Collective authorship allowed the article to be peer-engaged, capturing key observations.

Phase two involved the researchers becoming co-subjects, reflecting on the focus area, engaging with literature and collecting resources (Reason & Heron, 2013). In this phase, we shared experiences of placements across distance in the context of scarcity. Our inquiry was complicated by external events of a catastrophic nature, including the Australian 2019/2020 Black Summer Bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events strengthened group cohesion, and our commitment to 'no-guilt research' where everyone contributed 'as much as they could when possible'. This inquiry became a sustaining self-care strategy.

In phase three, co-subjects become immersed in the topic, sharing deeply, agreeing on actions and evolving themes through the critical examination of four exemplar placements (Reason &

Heron, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). We utilised outsider witnessing, a narrative therapy technique with proven versatility in exploring the exemplars (Author's own, 2021b). Outsider witnessing involves a person being interviewed for their story by an interviewer in front of an audience (a group setting), which is drawn from their community (Carey & Russell, 2003; Author's own, 2021b; White, 1995). Utilising outsider witnessing helped ensure the rigour of the research, facilitated a rich narration of the exemplars, facilitated reflexive and reflective thinking, and enhanced the data generated (Anderson, 1987; [author's own], in press(a); White, 1995).

Additionally, in this phase, given the contemporary experience of disaster, we collectively decided to extend our inquiry field regarding supporting placements across distances to include our experiences of responding to disasters.

Phase four involves analysing the data (through NVivo® and manually), reflecting on actions and refining the focus area (Author's own, 2017). In this phase, we reassembled as co-researchers, reviewed the research question and our data, and agreed on a process for writing this article (Reason & Heron, 2013). We collectively formulated the themes listed below. To ensure rigour, we presented the exemplars at an Australian & New Zealand Social Work & Welfare Education & Research (ANSWWER) conference and also cycled through the themes four times, until we were convinced that what was written represented our conversations and a rounded inquiry had been achieved (Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Author's own, 2017).

Four case studies

In our experience geography appears to dominate conversations about distance in field education. However, in examining the four case studies - from Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, Canada and Ireland - we also observed relational, professional, and cultural distances. Additionally, our analysis included an unanticipated exploration of and reflection on the implications of overcoming distance associated with disaster. Three of the four case studies presented pre-COVID-19 experiences. See Table 1 for a summary of the four case studies collected between September 2019 and March 2021.

Table 1.

Summarising the four field placement case studies

Country (Placement type)	Key Accreditation Requirements	Introducing Case Study	Understandings of Distance
Aotearoa (New Zealand) (Non- traditional/ innovative placement)	120 days/900 hours in a supervised field placement in the final two years of the programme. A day is not less than 7.5 hours (Social Work Registration Board, 2021).	Pre and during COVID Rural, interprofessional placements with First Nations community. Challenged student's cultural awareness, understanding of rural disadvantage and required increased flexibility and self- reliance.	Navigating geographic, relational and cultural distance.
Australia (Traditional NGO placement)	1000 hours across 2 placements in 2 different settings Onsite social worker required for one placement.	Pre-Covid Urban placement where the context challenged students to consider cultural diversity, professional commitment and advocacy	Navigating professional and personal barriers causing distance.
Canada (Non- Traditional/ innovative placement)	Minimum of 700 hours of field education for baccalaureate programs and a minimum of 450 hours for master's programs (Council of Social Work Education, 2015).	Pre-COVID Rural land-based placement developing mental health programs and undertaking a reflective walk abroad. Support and monitoring via technology.	Negotiating geographic and relational distance.

Ireland (Non-traditional/ innovative placement)	Students must spend at least 1,000 hours in practice placements, 350 hours of which must be in one block and full-time. (CORU, 2014)	During a disaster: COVID-19 Remote, online placement developing and delivering group programs internationally.	Navigating geographical, sociological and professional distance.
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NB: Country = Country of placement; (placement type) = traditional or non-traditional placement in that country. Accreditation requirements = Key accreditation requirements for placement at the time of the case study in the identified country; Enablers and markers of a quality learning experience = Identified characteristics of quality in overcoming distance and disaster

Case study 1. Aotearoa (New Zealand): Respecting Indigenous culture

Context

[Anonymised-Ch-Aotearoa] and [anonymised-Ca-Aotearoa] presented a placement that upheld the Treaty of Waitangi and its principles of partnership, participation and protection underpinning the relationship between the Government and Māori (Ministry of Health, 2014). Partnership involves working together with iwi (tribe), hapū (subtribes), whānau (extended family) and Māori communities to develop strategies for Māori health gain and appropriate services. Participation requires Māori participate in all levels of the health and disability sector, including in decision-making, planning, development and delivery of services. Protection involves the Government ensuring that Māori have at least the same level of health as non-Māori, and safeguarding Māori cultural concepts, values and practices.

Description

In response to these principles, in 2012, [anonymised-Uni-A] established a Rural Health Interprofessional Immersion Program [anonymised-Uni-program] ([anonymised-location] (anonymised), Aotearoa New Zealand) (anonymised) rural communities. Bachelor of Social Work students can choose this non-traditional placement in their final year.

The placement involves 20 days with [anonymised] and 40 days with a social work agency within this rural community. The students are immersed into Māori culture, lifestyle, systems and community as part of interprofessional teams contributing to a Government Indigenous

Māori Health Strategy Project 'He Korowai Oranga Māori' (translates as the cloak of Māori health/wellbeing). This project aims to raise student awareness of 'long term conditions' affecting Māori Health, develop interprofessional teamwork, and gain a deeper understanding of rural Māori health needs. Students bring a holistic analysis and learn an Indigenous-informed aspiration of Hauora (well-being).

Analysis

The markers of quality and the community and educational contribution is evidenced by the generation of understanding, respect and new perspectives of Māori culture for students.

[Anonymised-Ro] highlights the richness in this learning.

... the daily discoveries, the special perspectives.

[anonymised-Ro]'s observation about this project aligns with the students' feedback.

Students report delight regarding their unique reflective conversations; peer supervision; exposure to Te Ao Māori lifestyles and perspectives; immersion in community, resulting in deep connections to the people and the land; and appreciation of the different pace of life, values and challenges experienced by rural communities. Many students have shared about their intense growth: developing authentic self, deep listening skills, enhanced communication skills and appreciation of the different approaches of the interdisciplinary occupations involved. They love the local support, the natural environment, and the exposure to the realities of remote communities dealing with acute drug and alcohol misuse with few resources and support services. In this placement, the students develop creative responses, innovative thinking, and a different and perhaps more pragmatic way of operating. This placement option, as the following quotes highlight, assists in overcoming relational and cultural distances.

[anonymised-Ch]: *...Students get life-long learning and benefits, exposure to the professionals and community. ...*

[anonymised-Ca]: *... students having a shared collective relational experience, something that some professionals do not have in their training. Maori indigenous lens for learning and living...*

Case study 2. The Australian case study. Respecting the realities of the work: agency, colleagues, and people receiving services.

Context

[Anonymised-Ma] was a senior manager in a large national organisation, supporting refugees and asylum seekers, covering urban and regional Australia. In 2014, the organisation extended services to people from 72 different cultures, many suffering from trauma.

Description

One event, challenging for all involved, including students on placement, was where a traumatised young person self-harmed. An experienced worker accompanied the young person to hospital, and remained overnight, advocating for mental health interventions and admission. At the subsequent group supervision session some indicated surprise regarding the amount of work required to adequately support the person.

Analysis

In cross-cultural practice, some students flourish while others struggle, as cultural differences can create relational distance. In this field, students need to respect the agency, their colleagues and the people they are assisting. Similarly, students need to wonder what practice means in this field; recognise limitations and boundaries; and accept the legality of being a refugee and Australia's responsibilities to refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015). For us, this scenario reinforced the importance of discussions regarding ethical dilemmas and supervising students on placement 'well' for quality placement experiences, as the quotes below highlight:

[anonymised-Ma]: *Supervision at least once a week. ... Talk about the differences regarding what they are learning and what they are seeing in the workplace. ...*

[anonymised-Ro]: *... Trauma informed supervision*

The markers of quality for this placement are evidenced by the students developing strong critical self-reflection skills; recognising their positionality; positively engaging with weekly supervision, regular briefings and debriefings; and having deep empathy for the people with whom they are working. [anonymised-Lo] highlights this:

preparing students to know themselves and to know life is complex.

Additionally, [anonymised-Lo] observed, that the students on this placement are encouraged to grow their professional identity and to be flexible, overcome barriers, develop their knowledge of the field, recognise the limitations of organisational systems, policies and legislation, resolve ethical dilemmas and be sensitive to cultural tensions. These skills were useful for students on placement and came to the fore during disasters.

Case study 3. The Canadian case study: Geographic and professional distance

[anonymised-Br-Canada]: *[Distance options for field education] help[ed] us deal with the saturation in our area...the crisis in field capacity.... [Students have] the opportunity to engage in specialised fields of practice.*

Context:

Many Canadian programs end with a final placement experience. As quoted above, distance options constitute one strategy for managing “practicum insecurity” when student placements exceed local community supply (Authors own et al., 2021a). Final year students who request a distance placement submit a proposal for approval prior to proceeding. Appropriate learning goals, supervision, the opportunity for social work competency development, and student maturity are core criteria guiding the approval process.

Description:

[anonymised-Br] shared her challenge in establishing a self-directed distance placement for a student. The student identified learning goals that extended their understanding of ecopsychology and its applicability to their own professional social work practice framework around self-awareness, land-based healing, self-care, reflection and innovation in mental health service delivery. The placement was rurally-located and culminated with an international experiential component – a reflective walk. This placement included: group program development and participation, supervision, a literature review, the delivery of mental health services, and reflective writing. The university and the practice supervisors regularly communicated by telephone, email and online video-conferencing - which is standard in the distance option.

Analysis:

A marker of quality for this placement was the student's placement proposal which outlined the relevance of the experience to the practicum course, listed the transferable learning tasks, and described available supervision including the guidance and structured reflections occurring during the experiential walk. The approval process concluded that the practicum complied with accreditor and academic requirements for a quality placement. [Anonymised-Br] sensed that the placement was deeply meaningful for the student - as demonstrated by the student's engagement with both the approval and the learning processes. Further markers of quality include the student growing their social work identity through articulating learning goals that align with expected practicum learning objectives, participating in land-based eco-social/psychological learning, engaging cross-disciplinary experiences, and exposure to diverse knowledge culminating in transformational learning. The supervisor possessing significant experience in supervision of professional practice supported the student in achieving their social work learning goals. Finally, the student demonstrated a firm commitment both to the placement and to the process of ensuring that it aligned appropriately with expectations for social work placements ensuring an overall successful outcome.

Case study 4. The Irish Case Study: Respecting non-traditional placements

Context

Contrasting with the above three studies which occurred pre-COVID, this case study presented by [anonymised-Ca-and-Jo] demonstrates a reconfigured placement responsive to the changed context of professional practice caused by COVID-19. In March 2020, some social work agencies shut their doors to onsite work and staff began working remotely. Based on government public health advice, the university ended placements immediately. Adopting a strengths-based approach (Saleebey, 1996), the university consulted with key stakeholders to address concerns about placement cessation and the impact on the public, agencies and students. Some students transitioned to blended or remote placements. To ensure social work placement quality and student preparedness, students completed an online pre-placement preparation module comprising material such as working and communicating online and remotely, undertaking supervision online, self-care, and skills-based knowledge. Similarly, practice teachers engaged in a teaching and learning process via a series of webinars and online continual professional development.

Description

An existing partnership between the University and an Irish Community Services agency offering a youth and family service located in Chicago was reconfigured to align with service user needs, the student's learning needs and the changed circumstances presented by COVID-19. Weekly online programs were reconfigured into a week-long series of online activities fostering the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in their community. One student designed a research method for assessing participants' use of technology to overcome distance and produced recommendations for engaging online with children with intellectual disabilities. Parental and agency feedback was positive, results of an evaluation survey found 100% of parents said the programme had increased their child's confidence.

Analysis

This placement was a successful quality learning experience. The student was equipped with a laptop by the agency and received pre-placement preparation, training and support from the university. Weekly formal remote peer supervision was the linchpin of the practice teacher's model of teaching and evaluation. The general attitude, openness and character of both student and supervisor/setting was important. Supervision included critical reviews, debriefing and reflection. Peer feedback provided the student with alternative perspectives while promoting their communication skills. Regular online communication between the parties, prior to and during the placement, was a key marker of quality ensuring placement integrity and alignment with regulatory standards, attention to student learning needs and the achievement of best outcomes for families and children.

Nevertheless, there were challenges. These included the time difference between Ireland and Chicago, the remoteness from Ireland, and overcoming digital exclusion as a technological engagement barrier to using an online platform with children, coupled with the additional demands on parents during the pandemic. Heutagogically, the student needed to be self-directed, show initiative, and manage their own workload. The placement provided limited access to individual casework and informal on-site workplace learning including contact with other team members. At the outset, the student reported anxiety about this non-traditional placement meeting regulatory standards, but the evidence of their experience on placement moderated the risk.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has required a revision of expectations of placement by all parties. Some students were on-site on placement, or in a blended placement, many others

were working remotely. Students reported increased self-reliance, confidence and autonomy because they “*had to get on with it*”. They reported that blended/remote placements encouraged creativity, independent working, and professional development. They believed they had improved their communication skills competency, IT skills, person-centred practice, creative interventions, and research skills. They reported an awareness of what the “process” of social work entailed.

Discussion: Promoting enablers of quality in field education across distance.

This inquiry uncovered the common factors that facilitated learning and which ensured quality in field education. These are known in this article as the enablers of quality learning and markers of success. Placement scarcity, both before and during the pandemic, demanded innovation. The pandemic confirmed educators’ licence to expand the parameters of practicum delivery, yet not without concern about quality placement learning, student experience and educational integrity (Golightley & Holloway, 2020a; 2020b). The disruption created by COVID-19 resulted in the opportunity to: critically-review social work pedagogy; pare away non-essential activities; and expand learning opportunities through processes and criteria that align with social work commitments to “social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect” (IFSW, 2014). The pandemic continues to be a disruptive catalyst for change with the challenge being sustaining transformational social work education. Enablers and markers identified in this research are indicators of quality learning within innovative placements during periods of disruption and ongoing placement insecurity. These indicators can be instrumental in maintaining the integrity of professional social work principles and quality practice experience.

Enablers of quality learning experiences in field education

The following enablers were identified: welcoming placement diversity, respect for the multiple parties in placement contexts, and technical affordances.

Welcoming placement diversity: Respecting traditional and non-traditional placements

Our inquiry revealed that despite the challenges, the diverse and innovative approaches to placements that emerged were successful and valued. As we said:

[anonymised-Ly - Aust, SW Field Education Coordinator]: ...*An oyster ... represents [non-traditional placements] ... It's got a pearl in it, but there is a lot of trauma, discomfort, resistance and complaint to work through before it's ... a pearl...*

They also referred to the importance of: *shift[ing] perceptions and get[ting] students more open/excited to do non-traditional placements...*

[anonymised-Ni - Aust. Psychology academic]: ...*I felt a little sad that ... [this] ... type of placement was described as 'radical' and not initially seen as possible within the usual framework ...*

As these above comments illustrate, placement is an essential part of social work education (Maidment, 2006) and what constitutes a quality placement is contested. Concerns arose that non-traditional placements would be perceived as 'second-best' (McLaughlin et al., 2014). Privileging traditional at the expense of non-traditional placements undermines the view that "social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development" (IFSW, 2014, para. 1). Focussing only on traditional practice also risks inertia and resistance to change at a time of critical demand for social workers who are skilled to meet current conditions. Thus findings revealed the benefits of reviewing placement parameters that maintain quality and ensure practitioners are prepared for practice in current conditions.

Respect for the multiple parties in placement contexts

The placement triad (industry-student-university) was recast in these innovative placement arrangements. This adaptation of placements was captured in this comment by [anonymised-Em, Aust. Philosophy Academic]: *Are we redefining the concept of who is the host organisation and the associated partnerships?*

[Anonymised-Bi, Aust. Geographer] encouraged us to contemplate practicums through a sociological lens; and to identify the systemic consequences of pandemic-induced placement innovations: *Social work tackles the system....It is timely for us ... to be questioning the tsunami of managerialism and compliance.*

By examining the influences of placement structure on quality, we confirmed that quality is not dependent on traditional structures and can be maintained in a changing context. The

enablers and markers observed provide insights into creating opportunities in field education, surviving pedagogical turns and navigating the contemporary environment of placement shortages and pandemic disruption.

Technological affordances and cautions: Creating opportunities, addressing challenges and overcoming distances

Technology is increasingly utilised to overcome distance in the human services sector in non-urban locations. Teleworking and online working predates the pandemic (Bowen, 2020). Long-term reasons for working outside conventional spaces include overcoming geographical distances, service access flexibility, employee privilege, increasing business effectiveness, cost reduction, employee wellbeing and supporting those requiring flexible work schedules (Bowen, 2020).

COVID-19 caused further challenges, where social work staff and students were unable to meet face-to-face with managers, supervisors and service users, and were restricted from physically accessing workplaces; this impacted the nature and context of placement. Such uncertainties meant some agencies were unable to offer placements, while others innovated to offer placements. Those offering placements utilised technology to reduce barriers and meet their commitments to institutions, students and the people receiving services. Technology such as live document sharing and video-conferencing enabled effective communication (Author's own, 2020a). In brief, the use of technology itself did not compromise the quality of the learning experience.

Markers of quality learning experiences in field education

When accounted for within placement planning and delivery, the markers of quality can facilitate quality practice learning that engages and reflects changes occurring within the profession itself (Crisp & Hosken, 2016). Pedagogically, there is a need to consider the impacts of change and the influence of distance. The current inquiry identified some of the quality markers already captured in current literature (for example, Bogo, 2015), as well as additional markers (as per figure 2 below).

Insert figure 2 here please

Figure 2.

Markers of quality learning for each case study.

Figure 2 reflects the underlying aspects of quality common to all case studies, as follows: *cultural sensitivity* that fosters an ability to work across diverse and unfamiliar contexts in a respectful manner; *supervision* that was not only more frequent but of a high standard and including a broader range of supervision forums such as peer supervision; *role clarity* across the placement team with all members being able to collaborate effectively and creatively; and *student selection* with a focus on being able to operate independently and flexibly. These common aspects were identified as being underpinned by the placement team (including the student), which were operating from a strengths-based, problem solving approach. Significant prior preparation of the student, placement provider and supervisors enabled the trust necessary to manage potential risks and challenges, and enhanced the ability to problem-solve and adapt. This required building strong connections across the team with frequent open and effective communication enabled through technological affordances (Authors own, 2021). Additional markers that emerged were: the achievement of learning objectives; development of entry-level practice competency; professional integrity; critical review and reflection; and meeting responsibilities to service users, students, accrediting bodies, professional associations and institutions. These factors within the four exemplars have the potential to be transferred to other non-traditional placements in order to promote quality.

Given the seismic shifts in this post-disaster and COVID-19 world, social work professionals recognise **the requirements** for new norms and ways of **practising** social work and **providing** social work education. This identification of distance learning opportunities and the factors supporting positive field education experiences can reassure educators about delivering quality placements across distance and/or during a disaster.

Limitations

This project drew together a **group of people** with a common curiosity about overcoming barriers to **accessing** placements ([author's own], 2018, p. 241). The co-inquirers shared their experiences and perceptions about overcoming the issue of distance within field **education**. The themes generated are vulnerable to subjectivity, could be influenced by group-think and may not necessarily be representative of the field ([author's own], 2018, p. 241). Nevertheless, we consider that there is value in conversations about overcoming distances, both geographical and sociological, **and responding to disaster**, whilst maintaining

placement quality. Similarly, the cyclical, reflective and critical nature of **co-operative inquiry** provides a level of reliability and robustness to the data collection and analysis process.

Conclusion

Tensions have emerged over how to conduct field education. The current inquiry investigated these tensions by examining: What are the challenges to, and opportunities for, delivery of quality social work placements that preserve integrity while overcoming distance and/or responding to disaster? COVID-19 has accentuated the pre-existing and growing concerns about the scarcity and quality of placements for social work education. Consistent with the literature, our inquiry identified and grappled with these concerns. We agree with Bowen (2020) that quality, flexible, remote, online placements are currently necessary for field education to thrive. The commitment of educators to developing the next generation of social workers in a time of placement scarcity means online technologies are being embraced. Further research about the impact of new approaches to placement on service users and students would benefit our understanding of the enablers and markers of placement quality. This could include considering how the enablers and markers of quality can be transferred to other non-traditional placements.

This inquiry discussed four international case studies and how field education can overcome geographical and sociological distances to provide quality learning. These exemplars demonstrate how educators can embrace creativity, manage associated risk, and maintain the integrity of placements in complex contexts whilst providing abundant opportunity for personal and professional growth for students. The common factors identified in this article help guard against social work learning being compromised due to distance or disaster. We argue for the preservation of quality placement opportunities which ensure integrity of the profession. We affirm the need for educator creativity during the shortage of placement opportunities and COVID-19 disruption, to equip students for a lifetime of practice in contexts of rapid social change. This will give emerging social work practitioners the resilience to stand strong with professional integrity, think critically, make evidence-based decisions, be self-aware and creative. It offers the future workforce the opportunity to uphold social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities (IFSW, 2014) in the new normal in which they will be practising.

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