

## Field Placements During a Global Pandemic: Lessons Learned from Positive Experiences

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**Abstract:** This study describes research conducted with Master of Social Work (MSW) students and alumni who completed all or part of their graduate practicum during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It arises from observations by the first three authors, who are all faculty in a post-secondary social work program in northern British Columbia. These faculty observed that, despite myriad challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, many graduate students reported benefits from completing a practicum during this time. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 participants, revealing three themes: 1) advantages from flexibility in completing practicum requirements, 2) enhanced connections, and 3) richer learning experiences. This article discusses those themes and their sub-themes, and offers suggestions for how the people involved with post-secondary professional programs can use what was learned from the unprecedented time around the COVID-19 pandemic to inform field education. As people involved in post-secondary professional programs, faculty and staff, university administrators, community organizations and professionals, and accreditation bodies may find this study helpful.

**Keywords :** Field education, practicum placements, COVID-19, student experiences



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## **Stages pendant une pandémie mondiale :**

### **Leçons tirées d'expériences positives**

**Résumé :** Cette étude décrit la recherche menée auprès d'étudiants et d'anciens étudiants en maîtrise en travail social (MSW) qui ont effectué la totalité ou une partie de leur stage d'études supérieures au plus fort de la pandémie de COVID-19. Elle découle d'observations effectuées par les trois premiers auteurs, qui sont tous professeurs dans un programme postsecondaire de travail social dans le nord de la Colombie-Britannique. Ces professeurs ont observé que, malgré la myriade de défis associés à la pandémie de COVID-19, de nombreux étudiants diplômés ont déclaré avoir tiré profit de la réalisation d'un stage pendant cette période. Des entretiens semi-structurés ont été menés avec 11 participants, révélant trois thèmes : 1) les avantages de la flexibilité pour remplir les exigences du stage, 2) l'amélioration des relations et 3) des expériences d'apprentissage plus riches. Cet article aborde ces thèmes et leurs sous-thèmes, et propose des suggestions sur la manière dont les personnes impliquées dans les programmes professionnels post-secondaires peuvent utiliser les enseignements tirés de cette période sans précédent de la pandémie de COVID-19 concernant les formations pratiques. Les personnes impliquées dans les programmes professionnels post-secondaires, le corps enseignant et le personnel, les administrateurs d'université, les organisations et les professionnels de la communauté, ainsi que les organismes d'accréditation, sont susceptibles de tirer profit de cette étude.

**Mots-clés :** Formation sur le terrain, stages pratiques, COVID-19, expériences des étudiants

## Introduction

Since the surge of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, Canadians have had to navigate new ways of living, working, learning, and connecting with others. These shifts have resulted in challenges to every facet of Canadian society, including post-secondary institutions and the ways that professional programs navigate field education programs. Despite these challenges, post-secondary programs worldwide developed unique and creative ways to ensure that students could complete their education. During this period, it was noted by faculty at the University of Northern British Columbia (BC) that, although the COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges for graduate students completing practicums, students also reported significant benefits. With the potential to learn from the strategies used to navigate the pandemic, along with the continued uncertainty of COVID-19 and the prevalence of other community crises such as wildfires (Owen, 2023) and floods (Gillett et al., 2022; Insurance Bureau of Canada, 2022), faculty set out to discover more about students' experiences. The research question for this study is as follows:

*What benefits did Master of Social Work (MSW) students who completed their practicum during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic experience and how can those experiences inform field education programs?*

Challenges in field education are not limited to social work (Bosveld et al., 2021; Gay & Swank, 2021; Kidd & Murray, 2020; Korucu-Kiş, 2021; Maykut et al., 2021; Palmaria & Osmar, 2021; Singh et al., 2021). We invite people connected to

other professional programs to consider our findings, including post-secondary faculty and staff who facilitate practicum placements, university administrators who create practicum policies, community organizations and professionals that support students in their placements, and accreditation bodies that create and monitor standards for post-secondary education.

## **Literature Review**

In Canada, post-secondary social work programs are accredited and follow strict guidelines, with field work and direct practice being cornerstones of social work education (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Crocetto, 2021; Smith et al., 2015; Vassos, 2019). Two crucial components of this requirement are theoretical course instruction and practicum placements. This combination of theory and practice helps establish core values and competencies for students, while simultaneously acting as a gatekeeping process for the profession.

Field education has been facing challenges for a long time. One of the challenges is the overall sustainability of a system that relies heavily on community volunteers and agency support, resulting in a strain as budgets have been cut and approaches to education and community practice have changed under neoliberal policies (Ayala et al., 2018; Kostecky et al, 2021; Neden et al., 2018). At the same time, competition for placements has increased as the profession of social work, student enrolment, and the number of educational programs has expanded. Growing student numbers have increased competition

for placements, especially in northern and remote communities (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Jefferies et al., 2021; Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020; Morley & Clarke, 2020). Meeting students' practicum needs through distance education has caused some programs to have concerns about their ability to remotely teach clinical skills, directly observe students' performance in skill development, and facilitate meaningful communication between faculty and practicum supervisors (Jung et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2013). In addition, today's social workers are often juggling heavy caseloads and have minimal agency or institutional support, resulting in limitations on their ability to take on the role of practicum supervisors (Vassos, 2019). These pre-existing issues were exacerbated as new issues emerged with COVID-19 (Jefferies et al., 2021).

Responses by institutions varied throughout the pandemic. With the initial group of students needing to complete field requirements, their programs worked out alternate methods for them to finish their mandatory hours. Many programs encouraged students to postpone their practicum until restrictions were dropped or reduced, creating additional financial barriers for students by prolonging graduation (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Buchanan & Bailey-Belafonte, 2021; Cox et al., 2021; McFadden et al., 2020). At the same time as the body that accredits post-secondary social work education temporarily reduced the practicum hours required from students, students were being supported to complete independent projects or training (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Beesley & Devonald, 2020; McFadden et al., 2020). Over the next two years, students

requiring practicum placements faced increasing pressures as in-person services offered by agencies were halted or students were removed from placements out of concern for their health and safety (Jefferies et al., 2021). Those who had acquired placements faced challenges. There was a lack of office space due to social distancing requirements, and supervisors and other staff were working from home. There was increased external supervision and limited direct contact with service users, along with increased project-based work. In addition, there was a lack of control over personal wellness and quarantine or self-isolation laws throughout the year, and increased family or caregiving responsibilities (Crocetto, 2021; Jefferies et al., 2021; Mclaughlin et al., 2020; Morley & Clarke, 2020).

Despite the growing acceptance of online learning and the values of distance education, switching to an alternative model for practicum placements also presented challenges. The primary challenge was whether distance practice or simulated experiences could develop practice skills and competences in the same ways as face-to-face placements. Additionally, few social work education programs were equipped to deliver online programming and most did not have the time, expertise, or funding to prepare for a reliable alternate practicum program. Field supervisors expressed concerns about using technology and many students did not have adequate access to the equipment needed to learn online. Distance learning programs were also found to be much more labour-

intensive for both students and supervisors because they tended to be based on projects and assignments (Jefferies et al., 2021).

An unanticipated outcome of the pandemic for field programs was the highly reported success rate of alternate or hybrid programming (Crocetto, 2021). Innovation and creativity exploded worldwide as students and field coordinators worked together with community agencies and governing bodies to create new experiences for students.

Online training included the following:

- Use of pre-existing online courses combined with targeted case study assignments (Csoba & Diebel, 2020; Maykut et al., 2021; Papouli et al., 2020)
- Student-led projects and research (Korucu-Kıř, 2021; Morley & Clarke, 2020; Morris et al., 2020)
- Student placement groups or teams (Jefferies et al., 2021)
- Live simulation (Bay et al., 2021; Jefferies et al., 2021; Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020).

## **University of Northern British Columbia**

The university is located in northern BC, Canada. It has four campuses: the largest one is in Prince George, while three smaller campuses are in the rural cities of Quesnel, Fort St. John, and Terrace. The School of Social Work has two entry routes to the MSW: an advanced year (AY) route for students with a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and a foundation-year (FY) MSW route for

applicants without a BSW. Students in the FY must complete a mandatory 450-hour practicum before moving into their AY. Both FY and AY students have the option of choosing to complete either a final thesis or a 450-hour practicum. Students who complete a practicum are supported by a committee consisting of their academic (faculty) supervisor, another faculty member within the School of Social Work, their practicum supervisor and, if that supervisor does not have an MSW, a consultant with those credentials.

The University of Northern BC hails as a university “in and for the North” (University of Northern BC, 2024). As a program that supports students across a large, primarily rural geographic area, the University’s School of Social Work has historically offered many graduate and undergraduate courses virtually through web-based learning platforms (e.g., Bluejeans and Blackboard) that use both synchronous and asynchronous approaches. However, because some core courses have only been available face-to-face, students were unable to complete all of their degree requirements remotely. Three years prior to the onset of COVID-19, the School of Social Work began to pilot an MSW AY program that allowed students to complete their degree through distance education if they chose specific courses. Other than giving students the ability to complete coursework remotely, the program remained mostly the same for distance and in-person students. For example, practicum placements were face-to-face, faculty continued to meet with distance students primarily by email or



phone, and thesis defenses were still held in person and could only be completed virtually with special permission.

## **Research Design and Methods**

This study set out to explore students' experiences using a social constructivism framework. *Social constructivism* is a theoretical model that views individuals as active participants in the creation and understanding of their knowledge. It posits that learning is a social and collaborative activity in which we create meaning through our interactions with one another (Barker, 2014; Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Because students bring their individual worldviews to the learning environment, their social interaction allows for diverse perspectives and can help them develop an appreciation of personal and cultural differences (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). A social constructivism framework was chosen for this study because it was designed to give primacy to the voices of graduate students and the meaning they attributed to their experiences. In addition, our exploration of practicum experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic was premised on a belief that meaningful learning occurs through interactions with others rather than in solitude.

The criteria for participation was completion of all or part of a practicum between March 2020 and April 2022. The recruitment pool was relatively small (23 students or alumni). Faculty on the research team have a significant amount of experience in graduate field education. Collectively, they bring 16 years of

experience as Field Education Coordinators and three years experience as Graduate Program Coordinators. Two of the faculty are graduates of the FY MSW offered by the University of Northern BC. Research ethics board and institutional approval E2022.0622.037.00 were obtained from the University of Northern BC.

## **Sample**

The sample was made up of 11 participants: 8 entered through the AY route and three through the FY route. Each had completed all or most of their practicum between March 2020 and April 2022. During that period, students in the FY program had completed both their FY year and their AY year placements. At the time of the interviews in the Fall of 2022, every participant had completed their course work and practicum hours, and many had graduated.

## **Data Collection**

Participants were recruited through an email script sent from an address created for that purpose. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that lasted 45 to 60 minutes. The use of semi-structured interviews fits well within a social constructivist lens, which acknowledges that everyone creates subjective knowledge, rooted in their life experiences (Barker, 2014). To maintain consistency and decrease the potential for conflict of interest, the interviews were conducted by the faculty member who had had the least contact with the participants as students. The interview guide contained context questions (e.g.,

Can you please tell me a bit about your practicum setting?), as well as experiential questions (e.g., Do you feel there were any positive experiences or outcomes that came from you completing a practicum during COVID and, if so, can you please describe them?). Participants were able to choose whether to meet face-to-face or via video conferencing (Zoom). All of the participants chose to meet virtually. A \$50 gift card was given in thanks for participation.

## **Data Analysis**

The fourth author, a senior undergraduate research assistant, transcribed the interviews. The interviews then underwent an iterative process of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). All members of the research team took part in the analysis and write-up:

1. The first author conducted an analysis of the themes after listening to and reading all of the interviews.
2. The second and fourth authors (who had conducted and transcribed the interviews) provided their initial impression of codes to the first author.
3. The first author compared and contrasted the initial impression of the codes with the identified themes.
4. Each member of the research team reviewed the interviews and themes/sub-themes before they were finally defined, named, and written into the report.

## **Findings**

Three primary themes in the experiences of students arose from the interviews:

- Advantages from flexibility in completing practicum requirements
- Enhanced connections
- Richer learning experiences

These themes will be presented in this section along with their sub-themes.

## **Flexibility in Completing Practicum**

Following the onset of COVID-19, graduate students in the University of Northern BC, School of Social Work were given the autonomy to be creative in how they completed their required practicum hours. Participants described experiencing a sense of “*grace and understanding*” (P9), and an open-mindedness that came with the reality that there was no precedent for planning a practicum during a pandemic. Students exercised their autonomy by working flexible hours, working remotely from home or alternating between on-site and off-site, and considering all their options while choosing a practicum site. It is important to note that pre-COVID-19, FY students had to complete their practicum in Prince George because their courses were held face-to-face. In contrast, AY students have always been able to complete their hours in a Canadian community of their choice because their placements generally happen after course completion. However, during the period of this study, all graduate students were able to choose their practicum location. In addition, because courses were online, the vast majority of students did not move to Prince George and were more likely to choose a practicum in their community or in a community that offered their ideal learning environment.

### ***Benefits to Health, Well-Being, and Quality of Life***

As participants shared their experiences, there was a pervasive message that the flexibility they were afforded had significant benefits to their health, well-being, and quality of life. As one participant shared:

*Having flexibility . . . was the most valuable thing that helped me make the most out of this practicum. It was really empowering because I was able to go and make the most of it without worrying about things like, well, what happens if I can't make this date, or what happens if I missed three hours on this day? (P2)*

Participants noted physical health benefits from the flexibility they experienced, including being able to take sick days as needed and engage in already established self-care routines in their community such as spending time in familiar nature spots, and decreased exposure to the COVID-19 virus for themselves and their loved ones. They also described decreased stress and costs due to not having to move to Prince George and miss time from their paid work, as well as increased well-being from receiving paid job opportunities close to home. In addition, they noted the advantages of being able to choose a practicum that best fit their learning and/or career needs.

### ***Increased Ability to Benefit Community***

Participants also described the personal benefits of being able to extend flexibility to others. Being able to complete their practicum in their home community allowed them to build capacity and strengthen relationships with members of their community that could be extended beyond their practicum: “/

*was able to be in my home community. I was able to deepen into the relationships that I already had because people already knew me and my capacity and my skills" (P3).* They also described how being able to work flexible, virtual hours allowed them to better meet their client's needs; for example, it decreased the need for clients in rural and remote communities to travel to meet with them.

## **Enhanced Connections**

The second primary theme was enhanced connections between students and those involved in their education. This included their academic and practicum supervisors and consultants, student peers, program and university support staff, and practicum colleagues.

### ***Virtual Communicating and Improved Connections***

With COVID-19 came the normalized use of virtual platforms for all types of formal and informal communication. Prior to the pandemic, virtual communication with graduate students occurred relatively infrequently at the University of Northern BC and communication during a student's practicum most often took place in person, by email, or over the phone. With the onset of the pandemic, the university provided access to the conferencing platform called Zoom to its students, faculty, and staff. This made virtual communication much easier than it had been previously.

Participants shared many benefits they experienced as a result of being able to meet virtually. Many described being able to create a practicum

committee that included people from diverse communities and backgrounds, resulting in a strong and experienced team. Their committee members were able to offer more frequent, meaningful support than they would have been able to pre-COVID-19. They also described being able to create meaningful connections with their practicum colleagues and with practitioners in other communities. In addition, they noted that some administrative offices within the university (e.g., Admissions) began to offer virtual meetings, which made it much easier than it had been pre-COVID-19 to obtain required information.

On a personal level, participants described the isolation they sometimes felt as graduate students prior to COVID-19. In contrast, during the pandemic, everyone was in front of their computers, so connecting virtually was quick and easy. This resulted in an increased sense of connection to other students in the program and to those in the student's personal support system.

#### ***A Shared Experience of Pulling Together***

Threaded throughout the interviews were stories about how the need for everyone to get through the COVID-19 crisis created "*a sense of community*" (P6), and of being aligned towards a common goal. One participant recounted:

*I remember the first time I ever went driving was in a snow blizzard, and I thought, oh, my goodness, how am I going to do this? But then I realized, actually, if you get stuck everybody is willing to help you, as opposed to in the summers, where you are expected to navigate it on your own . . . .*

*No one's going to get mad at you . . . because they know that you've just parked somewhere, and they will park in relational space to you, and then the lines will just go like that. That . . . analogy fits [my practicum experience] because there wasn't really a right or wrong. Everyone was just doing what they were doing, and nobody was sure about whether or not that was acceptable to do. (P2)*

Participants said that because some people were no longer available to support them due to COVID-19, others stepped forward to fill the gap, resulting in rich, meaningful, informative connections. One repeated example involved practicum supervisors who were not easily available due to working remotely and, or, their own life crisis. In these situations, students benefited from practicum colleagues who informally offered mentorship.

Participants also described how the sense of shared experience elicited their compassion and concern for others, and caused them to think in concrete ways about how to best support those who were not faring well during the pandemic.

As one participant said:

*Human adaptability . . . it's pretty . . . neat to watch. I think sometimes when we adapt or we focus on what is possible, so much more can happen. It has sparked different conversations, predominantly around accessibility . . . . What is still possible given the, like, current restrictions that we have? How can we connect with each other? How can we be supportive to people who are still feeling isolated, or needing that support? (P9)*



## Richer Learning Experiences

Pre-COVID-19, University of Northern BC practicum placements predominantly involved face-to-face work, primarily within one organization. Embedded throughout each interview, were descriptions of how the need to think "*outside the box*" (P2/5/6/7/10/11) resulted in richer learning experiences than the students would have experienced pre-pandemic. This arose as the third primary theme.

### ***New Learning Opportunities***

Participants repeatedly described the benefits of being able to be creative in choosing their practicum location and tasks. COVID-19 regulations meant many offices had fewer staff and fewer clients, so students were given the opportunity to explore their practice in diverse settings away from the office. For example, one participant described the meaningful learning that came from being able to spend their practicum hours in various elementary and high schools, creatively planning workshops and group sessions, rather than being mostly in an office as previous practicum students had done.

Participants shared many other examples of practice opportunities connected to the pandemic. One participant shared that because she was one of the few people in their office who were vaccinated and therefore permitted to be in the office physically, she was able to have more in-office counselling sessions with clients than she would have pre-COVID-19. Participants also shared that being able to do their practicum in their home community meant

they were able to take on more challenging work because their skill set was already known.

Finally, numerous participants talked about valuable learning that took place that was not directly related to their practicum goals. One participant shared:

*I think I just got a lot of secondary learning that I didn't anticipate—for example, sort of being on the outside and watching [the practicum organization], trying to come up with creative solutions, but also to watching my supervisor and her colleagues sort of try to figure out like, oh, my goodness, what the hell are we gonna do, right? But also watching people's reactions as, as counsellors themselves dealing with uncertainty, and trying to navigate technology, and with the restrictions of the organization, right? (P5)*

### **Expanded Tools and Techniques**

In keeping with the previous sub-theme, most participants described having a greater ability to expand their practice tools and techniques during their practicum than they would have had pre-COVID-19. This sub-theme predominantly arose in discussions about students' ability to learn through video conferencing the skills needed to provide services. Participants said they went into their practicums with pre-existing biases against virtual meetings as effective practice tools. Being forced to meet with clients virtually taught them that video conferencing can be a useful tool. They described developing the technical skills needed to use various video conferencing platforms (e.g., Telehealth, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams). They also described developing various

techniques for effective virtual meetings such as honing-in on facial expressions, assessing a client's physical home environment, using cues such as hand signals to maintain confidentiality during sessions, and communicating clearly and directly.

Interestingly, some participants noted that they continued using these techniques once they resumed in-person practice. One participant shared:

*[I] gave people permission to send an email or a question that kind of came up after the session was done. So, in those ways I think it's shifted my practice in-person as well. Being able to ask a question when it comes out is really important and powerful, and I wouldn't have given that as an option to clients if it wasn't through COVID and the chat and the email kind of communications versus in-person. So, those things I offer now that I didn't [before]. (P1)*

### **More and Different Learning Materials**

During COVID-19, autonomy was given to students to seek out learning materials they could access away from the office. Participants described the useful learning that came from being able to spend time immersing themselves in materials they would not have typically accessed (e.g., books relevant to their practicum and counselling modality webinars), as well as materials that would not have normally been available online (e.g., crisis line training). One participant explained:

*I think it really pushed me to learn differently, and I had those opportunities to slow down, and think. What do I really want to learn here? . . . . Where are the gaps in my practice? And because I had a lot*

*of time to do that, with not a ton of client hours because of COVID . . . I got to fill in a lot of knowledge gaps in my practice. I did a lot of um reading and webinars . . . . I think if I didn't do a practicum during COVID, that wouldn't have happened. (P11)*

### **Expanded Understanding of the Profession**

Many participants said that completing a practicum during COVID-19 provided additional time to self-reflect deeply and critically, and that it also brought a general sense of open-mindedness about what was possible in the world around them. This reality led to a significant shift in their understanding of their profession and their views on how they wanted to practice in the future.

One participant said:

*I feel like a lot of that reflection happened then and . . . really challenged me to analyze my practice and what it was going to be for me . . . . Stuff comes into my practice now, in the sense of like, am I doing this this way because this is the most optimal . . . way to do it for my client, or am I doing it because this is the way I've been trained? So, I think it helps me ~~to be~~ more flexible . . . think a bit more outside of the box . . . . I think I question myself. (P11)*

Another explained:

*Before the pandemic, I might have been like, I don't know if that's going to work. I do think there's a piece [now] that's like, okay . . . let's give it a try . . . . Can it work? How can there be more openness to that? Because there have been things that I wouldn't have thought would work super well, that, you know are working well. So, if there is some alternative way like, I think it's pretty cool to think about, to be curious about other ways*

*of like doing this work or having environments that better meet everybody's needs. (P9)*

Completing a practicum during a global crisis made self-care especially important. Participants described how they had no choice but to develop improved self-care habits during the pandemic; this important learning later remained embedded in their practice:

*I protect those times fiercely now, because it's just, I know what happens if I don't. It's not sustainable, right? So absolutely, yeah, it's changed how I view self-care. It's changed how I build self-care into my day for sure. (P5)*

### **Self-Discovery and Growth**

A final sub-theme that arose involved the personal growth participants attributed to completing a practicum during COVID-19. They described how this experience improved their understanding of themselves and how they interact with the world:

*It feels like a big deal to go through something and get a clear understanding of who I am. (P4).*

*I think the COVID piece just, it just threw a curve ball in there, and it changed the whole dynamic of things to the point where in my own life it definitely drew light on things I had never thought about before. (P6)*

*It made me become more patient, and I recognized it at home, too, like with my kids. My kids would be like oh, can we read another book? [Before, I'd say,] no, it's bedtime. Now I'm like, why not? It's another book. It's little things like that. (P8)*

## Discussion, Implications, and Limitations

As stated previously, the research question for this study was as follows:

*What benefits did MSW students who completed their practicum during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic experience and how can those experiences inform field education programs?*

The ideas discussed in this section are offered with full acknowledgement of the complexity of offering field education (even outside of a global crisis), the lack of support within professional programs for field education, and the existence of non-negotiable national accreditation standards that social work programs must follow (e.g., a 450-hour graduate practicum).

### Meaningful Learning Experiences

During the period of time covered in this study, faculty and staff grappled with whether it would even be possible to support meaningful learning experiences for students given the realities of the pandemic. Direct, in-person client contact had always been viewed as the most important learning component of a social work practicum placement. In addition, some of the solutions geared to ensure graduate students could complete their practicum during this period, such as working predominantly from home and holding virtual sessions with clients, were essentially unheard of prior to COVID-19 and their efficacy was unknown. A leap of faith was required to provide space for the innovation and creativity needed to get through this crisis. Although our understanding of the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on post-secondary

education continue to unfold, this study suggests that the measures taken by professional programs between March 2020 and April 2022, while arguably not resulting in the exact same learning outcomes as occurred pre-COVID, did benefit students with rich and meaningful learning experiences. This finding is echoed in other research done with social work students who completed their practicums during the pandemic (Lomas et al., 2023; Sheepway et al., 2022; Zuchowski et al., 2022).

### **Benefits of Flexibility, Creativity, and Innovation**

Throughout each interview, there was an overarching message about the advantages of completing a practicum during a period of time when everyone was forced to think in ways they had never thought before. Participants described the rich learning that came from being able to think deeply about their practice gaps, and then find books and online curriculum to fill those gaps. They shared about having the freedom and resources to create a committee of diverse and caring individuals from a large geographic area. Participants discussed the benefits of having the time and space to reflect on their profession and future practice deeply and critically. In all of these areas, participants consistently said that the ideas that resulted from the “outside the box” (P2/5/6/7/10/11) thinking had benefits that changed both their life and their practice. This finding suggests that flexible, innovative field education programs have significant benefits to students. Other research on the experiences of students completing a practicum during the pandemic has similarly highlighted

the benefits of flexibility to students, including enhanced supervision opportunities, autonomy, time management, creativity, work-life balance, and savings in travel time and costs (Lomas et al., 2023; Zuchowski et al., 2022).

This idea has important implications as we work as a global community to find a *new normal* now that the COVID-19 crisis seems to have abated. The ability to do things differently has opened people's eyes to possibilities and in many ways has led to an expectation that we will be able to continue to do things differently. For example, post-secondary programs like the University of Northern BC, School of Social Work program that offered online or hybrid (online and in-person) courses during COVID-19 are regularly being asked by potential applicants to extend these offerings. Pivotal meetings such as thesis defenses that occurred virtually during the pandemic restrictions still have the option of being held virtually even though travel and contact restrictions are no longer in place. Essentially, people are asking why some of the innovations we came up with during the height of the pandemic that benefited them cannot continue. Although professional programs with practicum placements must ensure the quality of their education, the benefits of flexibility and innovation to students cannot be ignored.

A willingness to reconsider what is possible may be especially important given the reality that field education programs were already strained pre-COVID-19 (Ayala et al., 2018). For example, for northern, rural universities like the University of Northern BC, finding enough placements with qualified supervisors



to meet the needs of students has been an ongoing challenge. This challenge has only proven more difficult as competition for placements with other institutions has grown, the diversity of the student population has increased, and organizations and practicum supervisors have experienced burnout. Indeed, pre-pandemic, many people had called for a fundamental revisioning of field education (Bellinger, 2010; Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Gair & Baglow, 2018). Although we will undoubtedly return to some of our previous methods (i.e., prioritizing direct client interaction in a profession that hinges on social interactions), ignoring this unprecedented opportunity to learn and returning completely to how we used to do things would be a missed opportunity to revitalize field education. Lomas et al.'s (2023) study provides a concrete example of how this finding could be conceptualized. They explored the use of a remote, research-based practicum for social work students and found the students experienced authentic learning opportunities, developed their professional communication and relationship-building skills and social work identity, and reported positive supervision experiences. Although a focus on project-based learning is not typical in social work practicums, their study suggests that social work educators may want to consider research-based practicums as an option. This idea may be especially relevant given the previously described placement shortages programs are experiencing. An openness to practicums being completed within a model that embraces the possibilities of distance education may lessen those

shortages (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Jefferies et al., 2021; Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020).

Interestingly, some of the flexible strategies participants attributed to the pandemic, although perhaps not common practice, had been available to students pre-pandemic and would likely continue to be permitted in the University of Northern BC, Social Work program regardless of the pandemic status. For example, if a student approached their academic supervisor with an identified learning gap and a plan to use some of their practicum hours to engage in self-directed learning to fill that gap, it is likely their request would be supported. In addition, some benefits students attributed to the pandemic, such as the ability to meet with committee members virtually, were possible pre-pandemic. These realities suggest that understanding available flexible strategies, normalizing flexible tools such as video conferencing, and communicating these to students could all contribute to additional flexibility.

### **Empowering Students to Take Charge of Their Learning**

Many of the stories participants shared included feeling like they had to take charge of their learning experiences. Although this reality was described as challenging, participants spoke in many different ways about the personal and professional growth taking charge created in them. For example, participants shared the uncertainty they experienced in having to find a practicum placement without the advantages of the pre-established options available in Prince George, the difficulty of having to find mentorship when their practicum

supervisor was unavailable, and the complexity of finding appropriate self-directed learning materials. In spite of these challenges, every story ended with the participant not only finding a solution, but also experiencing personal growth and empowerment. The experiences of our participants are echoed in Zuchowski's et al.'s (2022) study, in which social work students who had completed their practicum during the pandemic advised future students to take control over their own learning. They emphasized that this was particularly important in terms of scheduling and planning, seeking support, taking charge of the project, being a motivated learner, using the learning opportunity, and exploring additional learning and goal setting. This finding suggests that students benefit when they are required to take responsibility for their own learning and the people who support field education might want to explore ways to best empower students to do so. For example, in keeping with the previous section, perhaps students could proactively be given the task of identifying a gap in their practice and coming up with a self-directed strategy to fill it.

### **The Value of Shared Experience**

It is interesting that, during a global experience characterized by people feeling disconnected from others, participants consistently described experiencing a sense of belonging and new opportunities for connection. Throughout the interviews, participants indicated that during the pandemic, there was a sense of "*grace and understanding*" (P9), of experiencing a shared

crisis and needing to join together to get through it. Participants described how people stepped forward to join their committee and provide mentorship within their practicum. They talked about being given the autonomy to complete their practicum hours in a way that allowed them to care for their health and well-being, and that of their loved ones. Participants indicated that they were empowered to choose the curriculum, work hours, and practicum location most meaningful to them. This finding suggests an interesting opportunity for the people involved in field education to consider where there are spaces to continue offering a sense of grace and empowerment, and thereby to continue cultivating community and the sense of a shared experience. Although COVID-19 brought an unprecedented need for people to pull together globally, there are many other realities within the human experience that connect us and could benefit from us working together.

Goldman et al.'s (2021) study provides one example of how programs could operationalize this idea. They describe how virtual meetings held during the pandemic to help medical residents make up lost client hours led to an increased sense of community. Residents' schedules do not typically allow time for them to connect with one another. As a result, they tend to be quite disconnected and isolated from one another. By starting each educational meeting with a wellness check, the residents were given the opportunity to share their feelings and vulnerabilities regularly. The study specified that this

sense of community helped residents to learn the curriculum, while also mitigating stressors related to COVID-19.

This potential for increased connections aligns with the social constructivism framework used for this study. As previously noted, this framework posits that knowledge is co-constructed as our life experiences relate to those of other people with whom we are sharing a particular moment (Fisher, 1991). The stories shared by our participants underscored how meaningful the connections they were able to create while completing a practicum during the COVID-19 pandemic were, connections that in many cases they described as being stronger than they might have otherwise experienced. In turn, we believe these connections led to rich, deep learning experiences.

### **University of Northern BC and Distance Education**

Although this study was not specifically geared towards providing insight into distance education, it does leave us with some important learning in this area. Previously, it was shared that the University of Northern BC, School of Social Work piloted a distance option for MSW AY students in the three years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pilot was intended to increase accessibility for students and many graduated successfully through this route. At the same time, perhaps our biggest learning from this study is that meaningful distance education requires more than a commitment to offer courses and practicum placements virtually so students do not have to move in proximity to a university campus. As a university “in and for the North” (University of Northern

BC, 2024), we are currently moving towards targeted recruitment for our distance MSW program aimed towards students in northern BC. This includes students who are potentially living in some of this province's most remote communities. As we move forward, we will bear in mind the lessons learned from this study such as the possibility of research practicums or clinical virtual practicums which could significantly benefit students living in rural areas. Given what we learned about our students' experiences, we recommend other institutions remain open and flexible about distance learning opportunities, particularly those with similar geographical constraints.

## **Limitations**

At the time of the interviews, all of the participants had completed their courses and many had graduated; however, there was still a potential for a conflict of interest given that three of the researchers are faculty members. To mitigate this concern, interviews were conducted by the faculty member who had had the least contact with graduate students, a general email address was used for recruitment, and the participants' ability to withdraw from the study without penalty was reinforced during the consent process. Despite these measures, participants likely experienced some vulnerability in responding to the questions and may have responded differently if interviewed by researchers from outside of the program. The interview questions focused on positive experiences and therefore elicited participation by those who had experienced benefits and encouraged participants to share information focused on benefits;

research that looks at both benefits and detriments may turn up additional findings. Participants experienced different COVID-19 restrictions during their placements and their experiences may not be directly comparable; research that focuses on specific periods of the pandemic may highlight different experiences. This study looked exclusively at the experiences of graduate students; research that includes undergraduate students may result in different findings. Finally, participants were not able to compare their situations to a non-COVID time and it is important to note that the benefits they described were self-reported and based on their understanding of what was different during the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

Although the acute crisis of COVID-19 and its impact on post-secondary education seems to have abated for the time being, the need to create field education programs that can withstand times of community crisis will continue in this changing world. Canadians have experienced several other significant, unprecedented crises in recent years. For example, BC experienced its four most severe wildfires on record in 2017, 2018, 2021, and 2023 (Owen, 2023), as well as devastating floods in 2021 (Gillett et al., 2022; Insurance Bureau of Canada, 2022). The effects of climate change are expected to continue to bring crises such as droughts, floods, heat waves, hurricanes, and wildfires and the crises are expected to grow in intensity, spatial extent, and duration (IPCC et al., 2022). In the context of post-secondary education, this reality means

professional disciplines must create resilient field education programs that can support students despite times of community crisis.

At the same time, this research is offered with full acknowledgement that field education programs are under significant pressure, that many of those pressures existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that additional supports have long been needed. The pre-existing issues of field education were exacerbated with COVID-19 as new issues emerged (Jefferies et al., 2021). The need to find a *new normal* amid these budget restraints, student expectations, and continued uncertainty about the future has added to these issues. The suggestions arising from this study would require additional time and effort on the part of the people involved in practicum placements. If field education programs are to continue to meaningfully support students during times of crises, and if they are to take what has been learned to enhance supports post-COVID-19, the programs must be appropriately supported by university administrators on all levels.

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