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## Role Plays to Enhance Readiness for Practicum: Perceptions of Graduate & Undergraduate Social Work Students

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### ABSTRACT

Although field education is considered the signature pedagogy of social work education, there is a paucity of research examining how Bachelors of Social Work (BSW) and foundation year-Masters of Social Work (FY-MSW) students perceive strategies designed to prepare them for field placement. To enhance readiness for practicum, an interactive role play activity was introduced to BSW and FY-MSW students, and their perspectives of the activity were elicited using focus groups. A thematic analysis of the transcripts resulted in five themes: enhanced perspective-taking, “we have a voice”, reflections on supervisory relationship, pressure to excel in student role, and opportunity to practice in a safe space. The findings provide guidance for implementing pre-practicum activities appropriate to students’ level of education and training.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Social work education in North America takes place at the undergraduate and graduate levels, providing students with knowledge, skills, and values required for practice. Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs prepare students to enter the profession; the Master of Social Work (MSW) is considered an advanced practice degree. The field placement, wherein a student enters a health or social service agency and obtains practical experience under the supervision of a field instructor, is considered the “signature pedagogy” of social work (Bogo, 2015, p. 317; Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 12). It has been well-documented that graduate and undergraduate social work students experience moderate levels of anxiety prior to their first practicum placement (Bogo et al., 2014; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, et al., 2019). Of equal concern is the fact that students do not always feel prepared for their field placement (Maidment & Crisp, 2011). In an effort to enhance readiness for practicum placement, several experiential learning strategies have been implemented at North American faculties of social work, including orientation sessions and role play simulation activities (Council on Social Work Education, 2015; Fulton et al., 2019). Although research on the efficacy of interventions to enhance practicum-readiness has been conducted on BSW (e.g., Carter et al., 2018) or foundation year-MSW (FY-MSW) (e.g., Fulton et al., 2019) students independently, studies have not examined the experiences of those entering their first field placement across these two cohorts.

### Literature review

#### *Social work practicum*

The purpose of the social work practicum is to support students in developing practical skills, integrating theory and practice knowledge, and applying social work values and ethics (Fortune

et al., 2001; Hemy et al., 2016). Ultimately, the practicum allows students to develop the skills needed to become competent social workers by transforming practical experiences into professional practice skills and knowledge (Bogo, 2010; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Davys & Beddoe, 2009).

Through practicum placements, students are challenged to apply theory and other forms of knowledge to practice (Bogo, 2018; Tam et al., 2018). Gaps in knowledge can create stress and moderate levels of anxiety have been reported by students who feel incompetent in their skills (Baird, 2016; Katz et al., 2014). Anxiety has the potential to affect a student's performance in field placement (Eysenck, 1979; Maidment & Crisp, 2011). Thus, Gelman (2004) recommended students receive specific training about roles, expectations, and the student-supervisory relationship to maximize the quality of their experiences in practicum and manage anxiety.

Students entering the BSW or FY-MSW commonly have limited social work practice experience given these programs represent the first stage of social work training and education. In one study with a sample of 61 FY-MSW students, for example, 65% had not taken any prior social work courses, and 26% had no work or volunteer experiences in social services (Gelman, 2004). Differences exist between BSW and FY-MSW students' readiness for practicum, preferences for experiential learning, and anxiety levels surrounding field education, given their previous educational training and practice experience (Rompf et al., 1993). Rompf et al. (1993) uncovered that undergraduate social work students were more anxious than graduate students prior to practicum, with age and previous experience being positively associated with feeling prepared for practicum. Thus, there is a need to examine how BSW and FY-MSW students approach and prepare for their first practicum experience, as well as strategies that may benefit these cohorts. This will allow for practicum preparation activities to be implemented in ways that maximize the quality of students' experiences and readiness for placement.

### ***The student-field instructor relationship***

In social work, training and mentorship in practicum occurs under the supervision of an experienced social worker, referred to as a field instructor. The relationship between the student and field instructor is important in encouraging learning and facilitating a positive student experience (Giddings et al., 2003). Field instructors assign tasks to students to help them develop skills, observe their students, and provide feedback (Giddings et al., 2003). In addition, they support students in integrating theory and research with practice (Bogo et al., 2014; Homonoff, 2008).

Research indicates social work students have concerns about their ability to meet their supervisors' expectations in placement and to communicate their own needs effectively (Gelman, 2004). To work with their field instructors, students require the confidence and skills needed to communicate any challenges they are experiencing and seek advice appropriately. Experiential and simulation-based learning activities, including role plays, have been used in social work education to enhance competence and readiness for practicum (Bogo et al., 2012; Craig et al., 2017; Fulton et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020).

### ***Experiential learning strategies***

Role plays have been identified as a useful strategy to support the connection between theory and practice in social work, allowing students the opportunity to practice clinical skills and solidify their knowledge (Bogo et al., 2014; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Hargreaves & Hadlow, 1997; Lee et al., 2020; Moss, 2000). In addition, role plays are critical in social work education for enhancing professional development and shaping the values of future social work practitioners (Hargreaves & Hadlow, 1997). In fact, Quinn (1999) explicated that experiential learning strategies like role plays lead to increased self-awareness among students, allowing for enhanced reflection on how their experiences, biases, and values influence social work practice. The role that experiential learning strategies play in supporting student preparation for practicum placement, in particular, is an area requiring further exploration.

## **Study rationale**

Although research exploring social work students' readiness for field education has been conducted (Fulton et al., 2019; Gelman, 2004; Gockel & Burton, 2014), little is known about how BSW and FY-MSW students compare in their perceptions of experiential learning activities in preparing for field placements. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of BSW and FY-MSW students of a role play activity designed to enhance readiness for field placement. This study may provide direction on—and strategies for—implementing prepracticum activities for social work students based on their level of training and education. This work expands on a previous study (Fulton et al., 2019) that explored the use of role plays for FY-MSW students by applying the same intervention to two cohorts of students and then analyzing their perceptions and experiences of the activity using data from focus groups.

We sought to explore the perceptions of graduate and undergraduate students who participated in experiential learning strategies at baseline to prepare for practicum placement. In the province of Alberta, students in the FY-MSW program are required to complete a practicum placement following completion of their coursework, which is completed in their first year of the program, while BSW students complete their first practicum in year three or four, once they have completed the equivalent of 2 years of course work on the foundations of social work. Although students from these two cohorts (BSW, FY-MSW) enter practicum placements with similar levels of education surrounding social work theories and principles, they may vary in their goals, anxiety levels, and preparedness for placement given they enter into these degrees with differing levels of prior education and professional experiences.

A role play activity was implemented for BSW and FY-MSW students across two social work education sites in a Canadian province in September 2018 and January 2019 prior to students beginning their practicums. In addition to an orientation session, the role play activity was implemented in an effort to enhance student readiness for practicum. Our guiding research question was: How do BSW and FY-MSW students perceive a role play activity in preparing them for their first field placement? The Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research Design (American Psychological Association, 2020) were adhered to in the preparation of this article.

## **Methods**

### **Role play activity design**

At a prepracticum orientation session, the BSW and FY-MSW students were provided with an overview of the role play activity by the research team. The overview included a demonstration of the role play activity by two experienced social workers. Next, the students broke up into triads and were given a list of five scenarios from which to choose, each with a focus on issues that may arise in interacting with a field instructor. The scenarios were developed by a team of researchers consisting of academic social workers, field instructors, and field education coordinators, after consulting the literature and identifying issues students experience during their field placements. Details of the five role play scenarios are described elsewhere (Fulton et al., 2019). Briefly, the first scenario addressed the issue of student apprehension about being perceived as incompetent by their supervisor and by clients due to a lack of experience in the social work field. Scenario two highlighted discrepancies between the student and supervisor's expectations of responsibilities the student should be assuming according to their learning contract, and how to approach the supervisor to express these concerns. Scenario three centered around how to manage ethical dilemmas in the context of a field placement; specifically, how to intervene when a student overhears two coworkers discussing private client information in a public space. Scenario four addressed the topic of how to approach a supervisor after receiving feedback from them that feels overly critical following a client session. In the final scenario, students were asked to consider how they would approach their supervisor to discuss feelings of overwhelm and burnout within the placement. Students were also given the opportunity to tailor any of the five scenarios to

align with the context of their field placement; for example, considering the specific population with which they may be working (i.e., age, cognitive ability) or the organizational structure/mandate of their placement setting (i.e., hospital vs. community-based organization).

In the orientation session, each student was tasked with playing one of three roles: field instructor, student, or observer. Students had 10 minutes to role play a scenario of their choosing, followed by 5 minutes of discussion and debrief, rotating so that each student had the opportunity to experience each role. In addition to the student assigned to the “observer” role, each triad was assigned an experienced field instructor who would observe the role plays, provide feedback, and facilitate the debrief. The field instructors rotated after each role play to provide feedback to different triads of students. Following the 1-hour role play activity, lunch was offered to all students. Over the lunch hour, students were invited to participate in a voluntary 1-hour focus group to debrief the orientation session and share their perceptions of the role play activity.

### ***Participants and recruitment***

Students in the BSW and FY-MSW programs at three sites were informed of the study prior to their orientation session via e-mail. A convenience sample of 82 BSW students from two cities in Canada participated in the role play activity. Of those, 22 BSW students volunteered to participate in the focus groups. The FY-MSW students were from a third city in Canada. There were 15 FY-MSW students at the orientation session, and 6 agreed to participate in the focus group. Written informed consent was obtained from all students prior to the focus groups. Role play attendance was a mandatory component of the orientation day, while the 1-hour focus groups that followed the role plays were voluntary.

### ***Data collection***

A total of four focus groups were conducted, three BSW student focus groups and one FY-MSW focus group, using a semistructured interview guide. Focus groups consisted of six to eight students to ensure each student had an opportunity to share their opinions. Each focus group lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was facilitated by one member of the research team, with a second member of the research team present to observe and take notes. None of the students were known to research team members prior to the focus groups. All research team members had social work education, clinical, or field instruction experience. Questions in the interview guide centered around participants’ perceptions of the scenarios, the role play activity itself, levels of preparation for placement, suggestions for improving the role play activity, and most/least liked components of the activity.

### ***Data analysis***

Framework analysis was used to analyze the transcribed focus groups in this study. This method consists of five stages and is commonly used for analyzing focus group data, wherein multiple participants share their perspectives and engage in dialog with one another (Gale et al., 2013; Smith & Firth, 2011). Data analysis occurred in several steps. First, focus group transcripts were read and reread by three team members to familiarize themselves with the data. In addition to immersing themselves in the transcript data, researchers reviewed the notes on focus group processes recorded by a member of the research team during facilitation (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). Next, initial perceptions of the focus group transcripts were noted and shared among the team and a thematic framework was identified (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). The process of identifying a thematic framework took place over several team discussions wherein the researchers made judgments about the meaning, importance, and relevance of particular issues that emerged in the focus groups (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). The thematic framework was shared with a fourth member of the research team, who was the principal investigator and has significant expertise in qualitative research. Upon agreement on a thematic framework, the next

stage involved indexing the data by mapping relevant segments of text onto the corresponding theme (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). Three team members conducted this in-depth analysis by hand independently. Each focus group was analyzed by two of the research team members and indexing documents were compared across coders. The fourth step involved charting the data by reorganizing quotes and segments of text into a new chart with the headings and subheadings identified in the previously agreed-on thematic framework (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). Mapping of the data and interpreting the findings comprised the final stage of data analysis (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). Researchers sought to identify patterns, key characteristics, and associations between areas of the data.

Several measures were taken to ensure methodological rigor in this study (Elliott et al., 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the focus group guide was developed by a team of social work clinicians, educators, and researchers with considerable experience in the field. Thick descriptions were used in the results section to meaningfully illustrate concepts and ideas using quotes from our focus group participants (Elo et al., 2014). The three data analysts received training in qualitative data analysis from the principal investigator or had previous qualitative research experience. Monthly debriefing meetings were facilitated by a member of the research team to allow for an opportunity for discussion of relevant themes, codes, and concepts emerging throughout data analysis.

## Results

Five overarching themes were identified across the focus group transcripts: (a) enhanced perspective-taking, (b) “we have a voice,” (c) reflections on supervisory relationship, (d) pressure to perform in student role, and (e) opportunity to practice in a safe space. Illustrative quotes will be used, with the level of training indicated for each student.

### Theme 1: Enhanced perspective-taking

Students reflected on the benefits of participating in the role play activity, including an increased ability to engage with multiple perspectives. They found it helpful to observe how their classmates would approach challenging situations within the role plays, as this allowed them to consider new and alternative ways of managing conflicts with their field instructors. Students identified many different approaches to addressing challenges, thus enabling different ways of thinking about how to navigate these challenges within the student–field instructor relationship.

#### *Subtheme: Role of field instructor*

By role playing not only a student, but also a field instructor, students uncovered a newfound appreciation for the challenges field instructors experience in their role as supervisor, educator, and mentor. This was demonstrated by a BSW student: “I think it was a really good practice and a good reminder to look at things from the supervisor’s point of view.” Another student expressed, “I think it helped me when I had to play the role of the field instructor because it helped me to think about what they’re thinking about.” One FY-MSW student took this sentiment a step further and was able to reflect on being in the field instructor’s shoes and initiating tough conversations with students, given she had been a field instructor in a previous professional role: “[The role plays] just got me to feel a bit more empathetic towards the field instructors. I remember how difficult it was to have some conversations with students.”



***Subtheme: Learning from peers***

Students highlighted the benefits of working in small groups during the role play activity. Observing and discussing each student's approach to the scenarios, communicating concerns and managing conflict were noted as helpful to student learning. A BSW student captured this:

I think too, seeing how everybody interprets the situations totally different speaks volumes itself. You're going to walk into these scenarios in the workplace and everybody's going to take something different away from it or going to interpret it differently and I think just being aware of that is extremely helpful.

Students reflected on the importance of ensuring that discussions with field instructors were respectful, yet also articulated what students' needs were. One BSW student found that observing other students determine how to approach a situation helped provide awareness of alternative ways to work with their field instructors: "I appreciated seeing what I shouldn't do . . . another person was talking about how they would approach the situation and realizing that it is easy to be hesitant . . . but then realizing you need to be assertive but also cordial." A FY-MSW student expressed a similar sentiment surrounding the importance of learning strategies from peers: "The most helpful thing for me was actually seeing other people's ways of responding because I noticed a big difference between how you practiced. . . . I realized that you're more direct."

***Subtheme: Opportunity for feedback***

Being able to observe and offer feedback to one another allowed students to expand their understanding of communicating with their field instructors in the context of a placement. In addition to obtaining feedback from peers, students valued support from the field instructors who observed and facilitated the debrief: "[T]he feedback from the field instructors gave me a little bit of peace of mind of 'okay some of these might be a little uncomfortable' but you also do have support and people who are going through similar things" (BSW). Given that field instructors rotated following each role play and debrief, students were able to obtain perspectives from three different instructors, who each brought their own experiences to the discussions. One FY-MSW student found this particularly helpful: "I really liked the rotating field instructors. I thought that it gave variety in such a short amount of time that we are doing this." Another student found interactions with actual field instructors to be the most beneficial component of the activity: "I definitely loved the aspect of getting in contact with field instructors, and sort of getting their experience of like what it's like to have practicum students" (BSW). By obtaining feedback from staff and observing peers participate in the activity, students developed more insight into different ways of addressing concerns.

***Theme 2: "We have a voice"***

The role play activity gave students the opportunity to reflect on their own goals in placement and how they planned to communicate with their field instructors.

***Subtheme: Increased confidence***

Students found the activity helpful in increasing their confidence to bring concerns to their field instructors. Taking control of their own learning was raised by a BSW student:

I think being able to read the scenarios and see that in all of them, the student is initiating the conversation. That really gave me a confidence boost because it helped me see that you really are the captain of your own ship and it's about your learning.

Students also described the importance of asserting themselves so that they could get the most out of their practicum placement: "[Y]ou have to somehow assert yourself and stand up for [what you want] because it's my experience and I want to get the most out of it that I can" (BSW).

FY-MSW students described feeling enhanced self-efficacy and also articulated that the role plays offered a space to integrate learning from the classroom into the field:

The more you role play, the more you build that self-efficacy, feel ready and have that self-reflection, because you're getting observed, you're getting feedback, you're debriefing. And you also start thinking about how you are enacting the things that you've been reading and writing about and researching and learning in class for months on end.

### ***Subtheme: Self-advocacy***

Students expressed an increased recognition of the importance of self-advocacy following the role plays, and the value in having challenging conversations as a means to ensuring their learning needs were met. A BSW student identified that "it's nice that you can advocate for yourself or be the one to make suggestions for improvement." Throughout the FY-MSW focus group, several students alluded to the importance of articulating their needs:

Something that came up in our group quite a bit, was that that we have a voice in this, we're paying to be there, not only are we there, working for free, but we are actually paying to be there for free. And so, make the most out of it, right?

Another FY-MSW student corroborated these thoughts:

We're supposed to advocate for ourselves, and we wouldn't be having role play practice like this if we weren't supposed to be advocating for our learning. [Advocacy] is actively encouraged and practiced, and obviously the university cares that we understand that.

## **Theme 3: Reflections on supervisory relationship**

The role play activity allowed students to consider the dynamics of their upcoming supervisory relationship, including the role of their field instructor, and the fact that the placement is designed to facilitate student learning.

### ***Subtheme: Making mistakes***

Many students acknowledged that mistakes happened during the role plays and recognized that these supported growth. As one FY-MSW student reflected, "[I]t [reminded me] that it's not going to be perfect, that there are going to be issues and preparing us for that." One student acknowledged that mistakes were part of the learning process: "I'm paying to learn so if I make a mistake or if I'm having difficulty, it's my time to try and get something out of it and learn to be better" (FY-MSW). The role plays appeared to normalize mistakes for another FY-MSW student:

I was very anxious about getting into the field practicum and thinking about what if I do a mistake, or how to deal with that, it was a good reminder that it's OK to make mistakes and from the mistakes, you will be able to learn.

### ***Subtheme: Interacting with field instructors***

The students found that the role plays added value by offering a space to practice communication skills. Some students indicated an increased confidence in their ability to use these skills to have proactive conversations with supervisors regarding learning plans and managing conflict. This was demonstrated by one BSW student: "It brought up questions that I'll definitely be asking, like: who's supervising me? Especially understanding how they give feedback and how I like receiving feedback. It [might] even stop things from coming up while you're building your learning plan." Students also



learned the importance of being accountable for their own learning by entering into discussions with their supervisors with solutions to challenges that arise in placement:

If you're going to a supervisor about something, you should always be prepared with a solution to your problems and work with them, so that collaborative piece of it. That's helped to ease some stress about having to go talk to an instructor, there is some responsibility on myself too, to come up with a solution. (BSW)

Some FY-MSW students affirmed the benefits of the role plays in assisting with confidence to address concerns with their field instructors. One FY-MSW student, for example, attested that "for me, it was just getting comfortable having difficult conversations." Students also highlighted the value of practicing and role playing how to approach difficult conversations: "I found it really helpful in informing how to approach any concern that I may have with my field instructor. Like how to share, what things to say, what not to say, what are the guidelines the instructor should follow while advising" (FY-MSW). Additionally, students reflected on their own patterns of behavior and how these may translate into their interactions with their field instructors, as was powerfully conveyed by a FY-MSW student:

[W]e come to our supervisors with some of our own patterns of behavior, maybe even baggage. And getting that identified early, consequence free, in a safe space to realize that I come forward with a problem to a person in authority in a certain way because of the way that I have been told my asking for help can be resolved or not resolved. . . . That's a lot of baggage to bring somebody who's never met me, who's there in a professional capacity to help me learn.

Through the role plays, students were able to recognize the importance of talking to field instructors when they felt they could not manage situations independently, recognizing the value of the field instructor's role. This was captured by a FY-MSW student:

I'm feeling comfortable to have that conversation with my field instructor, because having those conversations, and having those stressful scenarios, it's like: maybe it's not actually a bad idea to let my instructor know that actually, I need support here, I need help, or I don't think that this is really working.

#### Theme 4: Pressure to perform in student role

One theme that came up prominently in the focus groups was the immense pressure students felt to perform in their *first practicum placement*. One FY-MSW student felt that her entire professional identity rested on this placement:

[W]e're going into situations where we are being evaluated. . . . [O]ur professional identity is resting on this first practicum, and we're seeing whether or not we are cut out for it. And to go to our supervisor and say you know, I really need some self-care, like that's not really something I'm going to be super enthusiastic about doing, and if I have to do it, it's only because I'm past the point where I need self-care.

Students also expressed apprehension about how they would balance the multiple demands in their lives once practicum began. One student who had multiple obligations expressed foreboding about the balance of all of the responsibilities:

What can we expect? How do we plan our lives? What are we going to do over the next three and a half months when we're not working? I'm worried about how many hours outside of my actual placement I will have to live my life, maybe make some income, look after my family, have some time to sleep and relax and do some self-care. Like, how much time can I expect to do that? (FY-MSW)

Students shared their perceptions of embodying the role of a student in placement and how this differs from being an employee. A BSW student reflected feeling more naive being in the student role:

[W]e envisioned what it would be like and how it would be different if you were a coworker going into the scenario instead of a student and just reflecting on the unique experience of being a student and what that means and sometimes you feel naïve or ignorant about things and just what it's like being a student versus a peer or a coworker.

In another example, students felt voicing concerns about breaches of privacy would be more challenging than if they were employed by the organization:

If I was an employee, I'd instantly call it out because you're comfortable in a position, you've worked with these individuals for a long period of time. As a student, you still feel like a bit of an impostor or you're not really part of the organization yet. That's why it makes it extra uncomfortable. (BSW)

## **Theme 5: Opportunity to practice in a safe space**

### ***Subtheme: Benefits of rehearsing***

Both BSW and FY-MSW students valued the opportunity for a “dry run” of particular issues that may arise in their practicum setting in a low-pressure environment. This was expressed by a FY-MSW student:

[T]he role play that I chose was a concern that I have, and a conversation that I expect to have. [I used] it as an opportunity to put my ideas, thoughts and concerns forward. [It was] a good dry run to make the mistakes and then get feedback.

Students found the role plays beneficial in bringing awareness to strategies they may be able to use in future practice. One BSW student stated:

I think being able to discuss with other people and run through ideas and try things again. Because, then if you're stuck in a real-life situation, you can refer back to those methods that somebody used. So collaborating and having the practice, because then you can maybe use it in the future. I think that was probably the most useful.

As a FY-MSW student expressed, “[P]racticizing in a risk-free environment has actually been very helpful.” Being able to rehearse actual conversations that may arise in the supervisory relationship was highlighted as a beneficial aspect of the role plays by a BSW student:

[R]ole playing it and getting it out there instead of actually being in a position where like “I need to talk to my practicum supervisor about this” and sitting with it for too long or jumping the gun too early and then messing up that whole relationship.

Students also acknowledged the upcoming transition out of “summer mode” and articulated the value of the role play activity in preparing them for placement:

I've been in summer mode and to come back into this and do it in a low pressure way before we actually have to start makes me excited because we spent all of last year in a classroom and social work is something that can't just be learned out of a book, so it's driving home that we get to now go out and like prove that we've learned it. (BSW)

### ***Subtheme: Difficulties applying role play learnings in practice***

Some students noted that the opportunity for rehearsing challenging conversations may not affect readiness for placement due to their personality characteristics: “Especially someone who's an anxious individual anyways, [it] is so daunting. I don't even know if roleplaying would ever prepare you . . . it doesn't change the emotion you're going to feel about it or how scared you are” (BSW). Another BSW student found that the learnings from the “safe space” of the role plays may not translate into practice:

[It] kind of puts you in a rock and hard place in real life. It's easy to roleplay and say “oh, this is how I'd approach it.” In real life, I'd probably not approach it. I'd probably just swallow it and keep moving forward. So it's different than what real life would present.

Additionally, students who had not yet been assigned a practicum placement had difficulty seeing the relevance of the role play activity to practice due to the unknown. This was expressed by a BSW student:

[A] lot people said they didn't know what they were doing in their practicums yet. We're totally on the fence, we have no idea what we're doing, what the role entails, so it's really hard to imagine then being a student in the position to bring up these things to a supervisor when you actually have no idea what you're doing.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore how social work students from two cohorts (BSW and FY-MSW) perceived experiential learning strategies in preparing for practicum placement. Five prominent themes arose from focus groups that were held with students immediately following the role play activity. These included: enhanced perspective-taking, “we have a voice,” reflections on the supervisory relationship, pressure to perform in the student role, and an opportunity to practice various skills in a safe space. Overall, research shows that role plays have been perceived positively by both students and field instructors (Logie et al., 2013). The results of this study affirm previous findings, while also suggesting that role playing can be a useful tool in assisting students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels in learning strategies to address concerns and communicate effectively with their supervisors.

Our study findings serve to add to the literature by acknowledging the benefits of conducting role plays prior to placement while highlighting the experiences of both BSW and FY-MSW students in a single study, which has not been explored. These differences shed light on possible modifications to be made when using role plays with students entering the program with varying levels of prior education or experience in the social services field.

It has been well-documented that social work students experience feelings of anxiety prior to their first field placement, particularly when they are young or lack professional experiences (Chui, 2009; Gelman, 2004; Sun, 1999). The present study identified immense pressure to perform in the student role during the first placement as a prominent theme across the graduate- and undergraduate-level focus groups. Students in both cohorts alluded to previous experiences in placement or employment-related settings when describing their feelings of anxiety about placement, suggesting that these emotions are common across different levels of educational training. Promisingly, however, BSW and FY-MSW students highlighted that participating in a focused role play activity and debriefing discussions allowed them a safe space to rehearse difficult conversations and prepare for placement. This finding aligns with the concept of “risk-taking” within the safe classroom environment that has been identified in other studies using role play techniques (Moss, 2000, p. 482). The role plays in our study also provided students an opportunity to reflect on their expectations for field placement. They described increased self-advocacy following the role plays and feelings of ownership over their learning and problem-solving strategies.

In the present study, participants articulated that the role plays allowed them to develop and strengthen their communication skills and confidence in approaching their field instructors as well as in their placement. The relationship between the student and field instructor is paramount in helping students to apply what is learned in their practicum to practice (Miehls et al., 2013). To foster a positive relationship with which a student can also voice their needs, students need to know how to communicate with field instructors in a professional yet assertive manner. Our previous findings revealed that FY-MSW students who participated in a role play activity prior to practicum were able to better advocate for themselves in placement and experienced an enhanced level of self-awareness regarding negotiating the student-supervisor relationship (Fulton et al., 2019). The importance of communicating their needs in a professional manner can help maintain a positive student-supervisor relationship while also serving to ensure that their learning needs are being met. In fact, increased confidence in raising concerns with supervisors arose as a key theme in the present study. Students appreciated that

the scenarios were based on real-world issues, allowing them to practice communicating their needs in a safe environment.

Feedback from field instructors has been shown to be beneficial to student learning (Ketner et al., 2017). Results from an exploratory qualitative study by Kourgiantakis, Sewell, et al. (2019) expanded on the scope of feedback from others and found that following simulated activities, many students developed a better understanding of interviewing techniques, particularly as a result of obtaining feedback from peers, field instructors, faculty, and actors. Moreover, students in the aforementioned study attested to constructive feedback providing them the determination to make adjustments in their approach to situations, thus enhancing their ability to think critically about issues that may arise (Kourgiantakis, Sewell, et al., 2019). Although the study conducted by Kourgiantakis, Sewell, et al. (2019) was focused on simulations with clients as opposed to field instructors, results demonstrate the importance of feedback for knowledge acquisition and solidification of communication skills for the real world. Following each role play scenario in the present study, students had the opportunity to debrief and receive feedback with two peers as well as a field instructor or a faculty member. Study results revealed the value students placed on the debriefing sessions from those in both cohorts.

Ethical decision making in social work practice is a complex process that requires the integration of moral reasoning, critical thinking, theory, and values into practice (Gray & Gibbons, 2007). Previous research suggests that social work students require further support in navigating and resolving ethical dilemmas in practice (Bent-Goodley, 2007). Interventions have been developed to support social work students in learning to identify and deal with ethical issues (Gray & Gibbons, 2007). In their study, Gray and Gibbons (2007) described that social work students felt incredibly challenged during a 15-hour “learning unit” curriculum focused on ethical decision making. A strength of the present study is the use of an experiential learning activity aimed at allowing students to practice communicating about ethical issues in a contained environment, while receiving feedback from experienced field supervisors. In fact, students in the focus groups acknowledged differences in how they would approach ethical dilemmas as a student trainee versus an employee. This suggests that future experiential learning interventions incorporate case scenarios containing ethical dilemmas to serve as a starting point for discussions about how students can approach these in practice.

In the present study, students with previous experience in supervisory roles were able to reflect on how these professional experiences could be applied to their practicum setting. In addition, students gained insight into the role of their field instructor by participating in the role plays. This study suggests that students were able to learn about different perspectives and increase their empathy for field instructors by playing this role during the scenarios. In future applications of role play scenarios prior to placement, students can be asked to draw on previous employment/volunteer experiences that may enhance their ability to apply learnings to practice.

Challenges were expressed by many of the BSW and FY-MSW students regarding the relevance of the role plays when they lacked knowledge about their field placement. According to Bogo et al. (2017), for skills to be retained, they have to be understood within their new context, in this case the field placement. The present study aligns with other work by Bogo et al. (2017), which suggested that more information is needed about student placements to adequately transfer learning into practice. Findings from our focus groups do, in fact, suggest that students would prefer to engage in role play activities once they are aware of their practicum setting, supervisor, and organizational context.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. Considering that it can be uncomfortable for experienced field instructors to provide feedback to students (Bogo et al., 2007), it may be particularly challenging for students to provide feedback to their peers, thus losing some of the authenticity of feedback. Because feedback has been shown to be fundamental in learning (Kourgiantakis, Sewell, et al., 2019), when students are not forthcoming with their observations, particularly constructive feedback, other students may not benefit as much from the role plays.

Another potential limitation is that the role plays were conducted with peers who were known to the students. Given that they have taken other courses with many of the other students, reactions of others may be more predictable. Consequently, this poses the question about whether or not the role plays would be approached differently had students been role playing with people they did not know. Results from previous studies (Bogo et al., 2012; Carter et al., 2018) reveal that students who participate in role plays with simulated clients identified not knowing the client as a helpful aspect of their learning. Although these studies have focused on students interviewing clients, the results may also be true of interviewing participants whom students have not met. Incorporating interviews with others whom students do not know may assist with the authenticity of the role plays in the future.

Student-specific characteristics were not accounted for, nor were demographics collected for the students who participated in the focus groups. However, there is the potential that practice experience and maturity level may play a role in how the placement is perceived and what activities promote satisfaction in field education. Zosky et al. (2003) explored how student characteristics, such as demographics factors, levels of preplacement anxiety, learning style, and mental health challenges affected learning in social work field placements. Similarly, Gelman (2004) explored anxiety levels of FY-MSW students in preparing for field education. Concerns surrounding placement primarily centered around students' self-perceived lack of experience, preparedness, and skills. She noted that FY-MSW who were older, who had taken at least one social work course prior to field education, and those who had worked or volunteered in social services for over a year experienced less anxiety than their peers (Gelman, 2004). Because the different student characteristics were not accounted for, there is no way to determine how much influence student demographics played in their responses.

### **Implications for practice and social work education**

This study provides insight into the experiences of BSW and FY-MSW students that have implications for social work education. The intent of our study was to explore the perceptions of BSW and FY-MSW students regarding the effect of role plays on practicum readiness. Despite the limitations, results from this study have led to several implications for practice and recommendations. Ultimately, students across the cohorts identified that the role play activity positively affected levels of readiness for practicum.

Both performing and observing role plays appeared to contribute to participants' perception that they could communicate effectively with their field instructor in a professional yet assertive manner in their practicum placements. In line with other studies examining the effect of role plays on student outcomes (i.e., Kilgour et al., 2015), the current study demonstrates that active learning was achieved, wherein students reflected on their communication and advocacy skills and considered how they would behave in real-world scenarios accordingly. Given that students benefitted from one another's feedback, we contend that debriefing following the role plays with other students and field supervisors is essential to facilitate learning acquisition. In light of our findings, we recommend social work educators incorporating role plays into the curriculum allow ample time for processing and reflection following these exercises, given this appeared to deepen learning and understanding among the students involved in this study. During processing, it would also be helpful to introduce probing questions for students to reflect on how the communication and self-advocacy skills they are acquiring in the role plays could be applied beyond the student-supervisory relationship. For example, students could be invited to consider how these skills could be translated into their work with clients, with members of multidisciplinary teams, into employment settings, and into their personal lives.

We also suggest educators place an emphasis on the importance of self-advocacy and making "mistakes" as a normal part of the learning process in preparing students for practicum placements. More information regarding tools to manage placement, school, work and family responsibilities, and the expectations of the placement may serve to decrease some of the anxiety associated with work-life balance for students entering practicum. Offering students the opportunity to tailor the scenarios to the organizational context of their field placement may support the development of concrete skills that

can be applied in practice. Finally, where possible, pairing students with varying professional backgrounds or educational experiences (i.e., BSW vs. FY-MSW) together in role plays may allow for enhanced learning.

A noteworthy finding from our study was the importance of considering how and when to use role plays as a strategy to enhance preparation for practicum. Students identified that it was difficult to conceptualize applying learnings to practice if they had not yet been assigned a practicum setting. Given the students in this study expressed concerns about their ability to balance the demands of work and their personal lives, tailoring role play scenarios to the needs of the students, including advocacy related to managing an appropriate work–life balance, may be warranted. We recommend that the role plays take place within educational institutions (and outside of practicum settings) to provide a safe space for students to engage in experiential learning. Future directions may also include exploration of the use of role plays over virtual platforms given the prominence of remote learning. Consideration should also be given to the fact that practicum placements may be offered in alternative formats (i.e., places of employment) due to COVID-19; thus, flexibility in the content of role plays is recommended to address issues of power and boundaries, for example.

This study suggests social work programs consider the content and timing of experiential learning strategies aimed at enhancing readiness for placement, ensuring that all students are aware of their settings before introducing such activities. Students who were aware of their practicum settings were able to tailor the scenarios to their particular agencies, thus increasing the relevance of the role plays to practice. While discussions with field instructors and social work educators are needed to determine the optimal timing of role plays, based on our research, we recommend introducing these activities one to two weeks before the placement begins to provide an opportunity for learning and preparation. We also invite social work educators to consider using role plays at various time points throughout the practicum placement, including halfway through and at the end of the term. To consolidate learning about communication in the practicum setting, journaling could be introduced as an additional tool for students to reflect on how they have grown and learned throughout the placement, with opportunities to examine how their journal entries evolve across timepoints.

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## Notes on contributors

*Brooke Allemang* is a PhD Candidate, Clinical Research Associate and Sessional Instructor in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. *Gina Dimitropoulos* is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. *Tara Collins* is a PhD Candidate and Sessional Instructor in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary – Lethbridge Campus. *Priyanka Gill* is an MD student at the University of Calgary. *Amy Fulton* is an MSW Field Education Coordinator and Sessional Instructor in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. *Anne-Marie McLaughlin* is an Associate Professor, the Associate Dean, and the Graduate and MSW Foundation Coordinator in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary – Edmonton Campus. *Jessica Ayala* is the Vice Dean and a Teaching Professor in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. *Carrie Blaug* is a BSW and MSW Foundation Field Education Coordinator in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. *Angela Judge-Stasiak* is a Field Education Coordinator in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. *Lorraine Letkemann* is a Senior Instructor, the Director of Field Education and the Academic and Staff Operations Coordinator at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary – Lethbridge Campus.



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