IMPLEMENTATION OF PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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Research is an integral component of social work education, yet social work students often experience considerable fear and anxiety when faced with the prospect of engaging in research and research-related activities. Student reluctance towards research can cause significant challenges for social work educators. Literature suggests that certain pedagogical practices can increase engagement and improve student learning outcomes, such as integrating experiential practice components and creating practical opportunities for students to apply their classroom knowledge to real life settings. This paper describes the development and implementation of practice-based research curricula and practica in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary to enhance student experiential learning.

Keywords: social work, education, research, practice-based, community-based

The development of research-related knowledge and skills is an essential part of undergraduate and graduate social work education (Walsh, Gulbrandsen, & Lorenzetti, 2019). However, engaging students in research can be a major challenge for educators as social work students often feel anxious and uninterested in engaging in research and the research process (Berger, 2002; Cameron & Este, 2008; Knee, 2002), and there is evidence that social work students in particular fear research more than university students from other disciplines (Green, Bretzin, Leininger, & Stauffer, 2001; Royse & Rompf, 1992; Unrau & Grinnell, 2005). Social work students also tend to be unaware of why learning about research is important and how research can be integrated into their future professional practice (Cameron & Este, 2008; Green et al., 2001). Literature suggests that certain pedagogical practices such as integrating more practice-based and/or experiential learning components into the research curriculum can have a positive effect on students' experiences and learning outcomes (Cameron & Este, 2008; Healey, 2005; Kwong, 2017; Walsh, Casselman, Hickey, Lee, & Pliszka, 2015).

Given this knowledge that providing social work students with opportunities to apply research knowledge to real life situations can improve student outcomes and experiences, our research team developed a number of research-focused experiential learning opportunities for students in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary and created a plan to evaluate whether these opportunities enhanced students' experiences.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

This research project was created to explore the question of how the implementation of practice-based research into social work research courses and research practica can enhance social work student experiential learning at the University of Calgary. Our objectives were (1) to

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develop a practice-based research curriculum in collaboration with Faculty of Social Work students, (2) to increase student self-efficacy and attitudes around research by integrating meaningful community-based research practices into courses and practica and allowing students to apply the skills they build in the classroom, and (3) to bridge the academic/community research divide by nurturing strong and sustainable partnerships between the university and community organizations. The research team was comprised of teaching faculty, field education coordinators, and community organization members.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

For this project we sought to develop a pedagogical model designed to improve social work students' research experiences and knowledge about research by creating community-based research opportunities which allow students to apply their research knowledge and skills in a real-world, professional practice context. To do this, we decided to integrate community-based, practice-based research components in curricula and practica across all levels of education in the Faculty of Social Work - undergraduate, graduate, and doctorate.

Wood's Homes is a community-based children's mental health centre located in Calgary that works with children who are dealing with mild to severe emotional and behavioural issues, and their families. They house their own research department and collect data on all their programs and clients in an effort to monitor and improve service outcomes. Wood's Homes has a long history of partnering with the University of Calgary's Faculty of Social Work, from the provision of student practice placements, to sessional instructors in child mental health and leadership courses, to the joint funding of a research chair in children's mental health.

Implementation in Undergraduate Level Research Course

The first part of this project involved enhancing the curriculum of an undergraduate research course in the Faculty of Social Work by co-developing curriculum changes with students and implementing practice-based research elements in the curriculum, and then evaluating the effects of these changes on self-reported student experiences. To this end, a focus group was conducted at the end of the Fall 2018 semester with students from the SOWK 355 – Research in Context course to learn about students' experiences and perspectives of the current curriculum and to help inform any potential future curriculum changes.

During the final class, to discourage any potential feelings of coercion, the instructor left the classroom early and research assistants entered the room to explain the study and recruit students. Students were asked to meet in a separate classroom after a short break. Students were asked about their experiences with research and how the course improved or did not improve their attitudes and knowledge about research. The focus group was audio recorded, transcribed, and anonymized before analysis by the research team.

There were seven major themes that came out of the qualitative analysis of the focus group data. Students talked about a general feeling of fear about research being too complicated and confusing. They discussed a lack of knowledge about the potential for research in social work practice, and the need for meaningful connections to research. Students talked about research as a method of social justice and research as an agent of change. Students also mentioned a desire to engage with research in a practical and applied way, and that exposure to research can break down barriers and build confidence. Finally, students suggested various tools that could engage students in research. The research team used this data to develop new course materials for implementation in the Fall 2019 semester. This part of the project is still in progress.

Implementation in Undergraduate and Graduate Level Practica

As part of our mandate to create practice-based, community-based research opportunities, we created new research practicum positions for both bachelor's and master's level students. In these practica, students complete several different research activities. First, students work with Wood's Homes to conduct program mapping assessments of various Wood's Homes programs to identify potential areas for additional student research. Students summarize their findings in a structured format to present to organizational staff as potential new opportunities for exploration and collaboration. Second, using the Wood's Homes program mapping results, students can create a project list of practice-based research projects for future practicum students to choose, complete and report back on to the organization. In the first year of this project, one undergraduate and four graduate level students completed research practicums created by this project, and there have been five program mapping summaries drafted for Wood's Homes program.

Implementation in Doctorate Level Research Course

In the current doctoral level social work research course, students complete quantitative analyses by using secondary quantitative datasets produced by Statistics Canada. In an effort to engage students in more practice-based, community-based research, a quantitative dataset of anonymized, amalgamated client information from Wood's Homes will be created and used in the course instead. Students will be surveyed after the curriculum has been revised to include this change, and this data will be used to evaluate whether students have found the new curriculum changes useful. This part of the project is still in progress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

One of the first challenges we encountered in this project was the logistical challenge of implementing new programming into two large organizations (the University of Calgary and Wood's Homes). For example, creating new research practicum placements to be advertised within the Faculty of Social Work that would meet the needs of practicum requirements, which often privilege direct clinical experience as opposed to data collection and analysis activities. Additionally, to create suitable research projects for practicum students, we had to identify Wood's Homes programs that first, needed research projects completed; second, would be able to provide supervision and guidance to students without adding additional burden to staff; and third, could provide adequate supervision to students with only limited research personnel. We reduced some of these barriers by having weekly research team days where students would spend one morning together learning about a research concept, project or methodology (for example, workshops on conducting focus groups, qualitative interviews, conducting community-based research projects), and the afternoons spent as a group either conducting data collection (phone surveys, individual interviews, file reviews) or data analysis. Students had time on their own to conduct and write up literature reviews and actively turn academic literature into best practice recommendations or resources.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In May 2019, this project was presented at the Conference on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching, hosted by the University of Calgary. After sharing the details of our progress so far, we invited conference participants to consider what they understood student difficulties and

anxieties about research to be, and to share their own experiences with engaging students to embrace research and experiential classroom activities. Some of the questions we considered included possible reasons for student anxiety about research, as well as the types of conversations being had with students/colleagues about student research anxieties. We wanted to learn from others about strategies used to stimulate research interest and asked specifically about the use of experiential research activities and other means of engaging students in learning about research.

The conversation that evolved confirmed that this is a common issue across other faculties and that there are still opportunities for growth for educators to learn how to stimulate research interests and improve opportunities for student experiential learning. To this end we are continuing to recruit research practicum students and are developing such opportunities for experiential learning so that we might learn from student and faculty experiences moving forward. Additionally, we will be implementing curriculum changes to both the undergraduate and doctoral level social work research courses, and will run additional focus groups and individual interviews with current students and past practicum students in the upcoming academic year. We look forward to exploring the outcomes from curriculum changes to inform our work in social work education in research practices.

CONCLUSION

Scholarship on teaching and learning practices is complicated, dynamic and rewarding. Our team has experienced first hand the careful planning and thought that goes into designing a research project that has so many facets from curriculum development to practicum placement and supervision as well as the creation of data sets and future projects for continued impact and ongoing development in this area.

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