



A Conversation on the Experience of Field Education for Students with Disabilities

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[Editor's Note: This issue's Conversation features an interview by Elizabeth Whitney, MSW, Assistant Director of Field Education-Curriculum and Training for Simmons University's online program SocialWork@Simmons, with Sharyn DeZelar, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor and Lisa R. Kiesel, PhD, MSW, Associate Professor, both at St. Catherine University. They explore themes from their recent article (written with Elizabeth Lightfoot, Professor at University of Minnesota School of Social Work) Challenges, Barriers, and Opportunities: Social Workers With Disabilities and Experiences in Field Education published in the Journal of Social Work Education in 2018 available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2018.1507365>]



Sharyn DeZelar, PhD



Elizabeth Whitney, MSW



Lisa R. Kiesel, PhD

Elizabeth Whitney: Lisa and Sharyn, thank you so much for joining me for this conversation today. The article we're discussing, and another that you have had published, focuses on social workers who identify as living with some kind of disability. What has motivated your interest in this area of research? And, more specifically, how did you come to focus on the field education experience for students with disabilities?

Lisa Kiesel: The project is motivated for myself in both professional and personal ways. I'm a social worker with a disability. My own experiences, and those that I began to observe with students in my new role as a faculty member after nearly 20 years of clinical practice, led to a first inquiry.

I had begun to wonder about the experiences of social workers with disabilities and attitudes about social workers with disabilities. I conducted a survey study examining licensed professional social workers and their attitudes about disability. Although it was a small study and largely descriptive, one finding that stood out had to do with the various factors that impacted upon attitudes.

For instance, one factor that was associated with improved attitude, or a more positive attitude towards social workers with disabilities, was having had a coworker with a disability, which was really interesting to me. This was as opposed to a family member, a child, a friend, etc. It was a colleague that was associated with higher positive attitudes. That just really piqued my interest in wanting to know more about experiences of social workers with disabilities in the workplace. I began to think more about that along with my experiences in my job and in academia and with seeing students who were preparing to go into the professional workforce and dealing with the issues of disability. That was where my interest started.

Sharyn DeZelar: For me, I focused on a wide range of disability issues throughout my doctoral studies. This is a personal interest area of mine due to some close family connections with people with disabilities. I had the opportunity to explore a wide variety of disability-related research topics, as well as focused studies during my doctoral work.

Also, I've always been really interested in field education, in general. As a practitioner, I have supervised a number of field students and held the role of field supervisor. Field education is something that's really interesting to me.

Lisa and I used to work together in our clinical practice and now are both in academia. Through that connection with each other and some shared interests, along with the other author of the article, Liz Lightfoot, we decided to work on something together. We were able to recruit and conduct qualitative interviews with a group of social workers who identify as having disabilities, as you had brought out at the beginning. The findings really fell into two camps, which is where this field article came out of. There was a lot of discussion around field and then there was a lot of discussion around employment. That's what put a name to the two articles so to speak.

Elizabeth: This is maybe a personal preference, but I love that both of you have such deep experience as practitioners and it sounds like at least for you, Sharyn, as a field instructor. It makes a lot of sense. You've anticipated my next question. I'm really hopeful that this conversation will inspire others to read your article and perhaps both of your articles. For now, though, can you tell us what some of the key outcomes are that are most relevant to field educators?

Sharyn: There were a few key outcomes that came from this particular article. First, that field really can present an opportunity for social workers who have disabilities to learn about being a social worker with a disability.

While field education certainly for all future social workers is an opportunity for them to learn and engage, and practice, which was the case with our participants as well, there was an added learning opportunity of learning how to navigate being a social worker with a disability. This included things such as the impact of having a disability on their practice, which could include limitations, but also how to overcome those limitations: being creative; challenging one's self to try new things; identifying what their strengths were, and maybe what assets their disability experience might bring to the profession.

A second key finding is that field supervisors really matter. Again, of course, they do in all aspects of field education, but specifically for future social workers with disabilities, good supervision really provides an opportunity to process just what my previous point was. Some of our participants commented that with really good supervision they were able to figure out how to navigate being a social worker with a disability. They were able to do a lot of good self-reflection and have discussion of self as a social worker. That was very strong with some of our participants.

The maybe not so good side related to supervision was that there were some cases of participants reporting real challenges with their supervisor. Perhaps the supervisors, themselves, did not have a lot of understanding of disability issues. One participant reported feeling as if she was being treated as a client versus as an intern and a mentee. It points out that supervision really does matter, which connects closely, of course, to a third key finding related to faculty roles.

Faculty roles, which include field liaisons, advisors, professors, and field coordinators, were key in shaping the experience for social workers with disabilities. Some of the helpful things identified by the social work students included help with finding appropriate placements and discussing the choice of disclosure. For example, for those with invisible disabilities, whether or not to disclose that they had a disability became a choice. Some have felt that the field liaison and other faculty were really helpful in navigating that choice and also in seeking accommodations.

Some participants did identify some cases in which faculty were not helpful for them in the field process. These findings included examples of people reporting faculty not appearing to be knowledgeable about disability, or perhaps not being realistic about expectations for fieldwork, or not really being helpful with the accommodation negotiation.

The fourth key finding was that there seemed to be a lot of confusion regarding accommodations. There was a lot of uncertainty about whose responsibility it is to either ask for accommodations or provide accommodations. For example, students didn't know if that was the school's responsibility or the field site's responsibility. Also, a lot of participants did not feel comfortable asking for accommodations. They reported feeling some shame, self stigma, fear of not getting the placement, and some were not even aware that it was an option to ask for accommodation.

In this outcome, there were some key differences between those with visible versus invisible disabilities. Obviously, if a student presents with a very visible disability, the potential need for accommodations is out in the open and could often be discussed up front versus situations in which students have invisible disabilities. Again, those [the students with invisible disabilities] are the students that reported a lot more uncertainty about what to do, what to ask for, what's even an option.

In addition to those four key findings, there was an overall fifth finding that had to do with an overall sense of disappointment that our participants expressed. This came up both in this field experiences paper, as well as the other paper that is more about employment experiences. Just a lot of disappointment in the profession of social work. Some participants reported that they chose social work as a profession thinking it would be accepting and inclusive and accommodating. One participant even discussed awareness that the profession seeks to address discrimination. And then, it was very discouraging to have such challenges related to her field placement.

Some of the participants talked about feeling that they had gifts and strengths as social workers that weren't necessarily being accessed because of some of the challenges they experienced with inclusion and the accommodations. It was heartbreaking to hear such a significant level of disappointment that a lot of the students and social workers felt in the field of social work.

Elizabeth: Thank you, Sharyn. That's comprehensive and valuable. Lisa, is there anything that you wanted to add to that?

Lisa: Another finding was the universal experience that participants reported in different ways of their very strong belief that having a disability made them a better social worker across the board.

We didn't even solicit that. They offered it. Everyone offered some aspect of feeling like it lent authenticity to their relationship with clients. They felt that they could understand the complexity of feeling and experience of people differently, and could understand the experience of discrimination.

Despite all of it, they feel like they had an asset to bring to the profession. I think that connects to the disappointment in the profession. They are feeling like, "I have so much to share and I don't really feel like the profession is as welcoming as it could be." Or, "I have a lot to give," and yet feeling that the door was not wide open to be able to do that.

Sharyn: Right. Not as open as it could be, but also as open as they thought it would be. Their experiences as receivers of the services were that social workers were really helpful to them and they wanted to do the same for others. There was more than one participant that said that they came into the profession based on their personal experience, but their experiences of navigating it as more of a peer or a colleague social worker versus as a client, differed.

Elizabeth: That's a really important point. It is looking at that shift that students from the study experienced, and that some of us can see in our own experience as faculty. It's about shifting from seeing people with disabilities as people with limitations who need service to people who have, as you have said, assets and strengths that can actually enrich the social work profession and our social work workforce.

Sharyn & Lisa: Right.

Elizabeth: I can see how that becomes a real Catch-22 if a social work program or a placement site hasn't looked at that, hasn't made that shift. Then students are going to be less likely, perhaps, to disclose and may feel more alienated, and it can become quite a difficult cycle.

Lisa: Our participants did identify also this experience of feeling some isolation as social work students with disabilities. We also heard from a lot of students about the shame and the fear of not being seen as competent, which ties to the confusion about accommodation, but also ties to self stigma. Many participants talked about self accommodating as a strength, but also as a strategy to not have to disclose and the pressure to try and figure it out on their own.

This strategy could be really empowering, but also it's an additional burden and not always as helpful as it could have been. There was some confusion about self care versus accommodation. There is overall confusion about what it is to be successful as a professional social worker with a disability.

Elizabeth: One thing that came up in talking about your article with others connected with field education was the question of how field directors, let's say, or field faculty, work with the tension between our responsibility and our desire to create equitable

opportunities for all students and ensuring that students are able to meet the technical standards of a course. When students do request accommodations that may seem like they are not going to meet the technical standards of a course, how do faculty navigate that? Does that question make sense?

Lisa: Yeah, it does make sense. I hear that and I can feel that tension. Yet, I'm going to take a step back from it and say that I think some of that tension is more anticipated, what might happen, what could happen, versus the reality, which is that accommodating most students does not alter things so dramatically. I think our fears about that are sometimes greater than the reality and I think the fears can become a barrier to the problem solving that I think is really critical in all of these cases. In the finding that had to do with the role of faculty, when faculty acted as collaborators with problem solving and thinking through – when it happened – it was terrific. It doesn't mean it's easy and it doesn't mean that there's a simple response or a standard that will apply to all situations. I really think it is having to use our creativity and our professional skill at understanding people and environments, and really needing to engage that.

I understand we have to get students through programs, we have to meet accreditation requirements, all of these things are important. And we have to provide meaningful and challenging field experiences for students. I get all of that. Yet, I also think this is a wonderful area where we in education can really lead and influence. The responses of our participants reflect through the social work profession broadly: that social work has more work to do, to embody its commitment to empowerment and advocacy for people with disabilities.

People with disabilities are recognized within our professional societies as amongst marginalized and oppressed groups and groups that we consider a part of an aspect of diversity as we broaden our understanding of culture and inclusion. One of the findings from the study that looked at employment [of social workers with disabilities], in terms of unemployment and accommodation, is what we characterize as a failure of imagination, to be able to imagine doing social work in a wide variety of ways.

There is not one way to be a social worker. We are such a diverse field with so many job opportunities and so many ways that people can be successful in this people work. This failure of imagination is a failure to be able to think about how we can equip this individual to do the work to meet the client need. Even the client need, of course, has to happen; that's not something that will be compromised. But, there's lots of ways to do that. How do we, as social work professionals, set the tone that we're looking to equip the broad array of diverse social workers to be able to meet the needs of a broad array of diverse clients?

When we look at some of the recommendations that come from our exploration, we think of this opportunity to lead and influence. We recognize there is a need for there to be more training about working with students with disabilities. We need to make sure that our faculty as well as our community folks understand the different processes and the possibilities of accommodations and the opportunities we have to assist students, to learn about their accommodation needs, and the possibilities within social work.

Building on these ideas, we can take the lead also in a universal approach of making social work accessible to all, informing everyone about accommodations and ways to enter this field successfully. As part of our leading the way, we can help hold agencies accountable to perhaps meeting ADA definitions of essential functions in field placements. Not just for job positions, but how do we define those essential functions, as well as those that are not essential, so that we can help our students and our field personnel to best navigate a fit for a student in the placement based on what is actually essential versus what's open for problem solving and various ways of doing it? This takes us back to the beginning where, in my survey, I learned that the factor that made a difference for people in terms of more positive attitudes about people with disabilities was having a co worker with a disability. What would it be like if we can help bring more and more people with disabilities into the workforce so that, over time, this isn't such a hard thing for us to manage? Those are lots of thoughts, things that the study has inspired.

Elizabeth: It reminds me of going back to when Sharyn was talking about the outcomes and that on the positive side, that when field instructors or when faculty had more openness and knowledge, they were able to be much more helpful. It makes sense to think that everyone can get to a similar place through training and through examining attitudes.

Sharyn: Also, training for field supervisors, the supervisors out in the field.

Elizabeth: Without a doubt.

Sharyn: Many programs do regular trainings and workshops with their field supervisors. It's an easy opportunity when we have them there, and it wouldn't really take much time to talk about accommodations and talk about these essential work functions, as Lisa was sharing.

Yes, for instance, in some placements, it is essential that the student drives, but probably in many, it isn't. Do we really need to be requiring, as an example, that a student has a driver's license, if maybe, they could fill this role without that? We do

have an opportunity, again, as faculty to bring that out to the community to field sites and do some education there. It's very feasible to do that.

Elizabeth: It makes me think, as well, about looking at the places where this is working well and finding out what the elements are. What can we learn from what has happened in these places that has made them more accommodating, and beyond that, more affirming places for students with disabilities in order to learn from those settings? There could be a lot of value in looking at that.

Lisa: What you just said, there is learning from what works. That is actually something Sharyn and I are talking about and with other colleagues, in continuing this exploration, because we see this study and our other study as the starting point and just sensitizing to these ideas and raising these questions, and we really would like to know more about what works.

We're hoping to learn from others in the field and other aspects of social work education what's working and to be able to see what is not just specific to a program but maybe, something that others can borrow from.

Elizabeth: That sounds ideal. It sounds like a really worthwhile direction to go. I would hope within that to be able to highlight agency partnerships that have worked well.

Lisa: Absolutely.

Elizabeth: This may be a perfect place for us to wrap up. You've really given us a lot of food for thought. Before we finish, are there closing thoughts that you would be interested in sharing with our reading audience?

Sharyn: There is one thing I want to say, and it has to do with the way we talk about many of these sorts of issues in social work and social work education and it is around the terminology of being "gatekeepers." I want to challenge us as professionals and educators to think about what the gate is doing. Are we protecting clients, which I think is legitimately the role for gatekeeping, or are we protecting ourselves, or our agency partners, or the field generally from the challenge or the difficulty of figuring this out?

I get it; we are a taxed profession. There's a lot to do and the work is hard, but this is a part of the work. If we're going to be advocates and live up to our social justice commitments, I feel we need to not close that gate, but really examine, "What is the difficulty? Is it for us, or is it for clients? How do we get clear in that conversation?" It's a challenge. Again, I am in no way pretending that this is easy and at all

straightforward and it can all be different tomorrow. I think the difference can be that as we more and more challenge our fears and assumptions about what it is to have social workers with disabilities, the more we're going to be able to live up to our inclusion expectations and bring really capable and skilled people into our shared profession.

Lisa: Yes, and to live up to the values of our profession.

Sharyn: Yes.

Elizabeth: Yes, without a doubt. I thank you for addressing that. That's important. As you're both saying, it is both to live up to the values of our profession and to welcome people who have a potentially unique perspective from their own lived experience. Thank you for addressing that.

Lisa: It's very exciting to do this.