

Field Education as the Signature Pedagogy of Social Work: Rhetoric or Reality?

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Abstract: *As the social work profession emerged, the primary method for training social workers was the apprentice model, now referred to as field education. In 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) declared field education the signature pedagogy of social work education in the Educational Policies and Standards (EPAS), thus connecting it to accreditation. Despite this prioritization over other areas of social work education, debate continues as to whether field education meets the criteria of signature pedagogy. This study applied a contextual analysis to determine the extent to which a sample of 16 undergraduate social work programs demonstrate alignment with the signature pedagogy designation. The tool for analysis was the EPAS self-study, a primary document required in the CSWE accreditation process. The selected criteria for examination were two defining features of signature pedagogy: evidence of widespread recognition and routine inclusion across the curriculum. Findings revealed significant variation in both criteria areas among the sample group, likely influenced by ambiguity regarding signature pedagogy found within the EPAS. While data within the EPAS self-studies substantiates the important role of field education, additional themes revealed an opportunity to re-define and expand the signature pedagogy of the profession that could benefit both social work education and the practice community.*

Keywords: *Signature pedagogy, field education, transformational leadership, bi-directional integration*

Greater than, less than, or equal to. The debate on the status of social work compared to other practice-based professions has endured since the first social work training schools emerged in the early 1900's (Bruno, 1944; Flexner, 2001; Gitterman, 2014; Reisch, 2019; Wayne et al., 2010). Similarly deliberated is the primacy of field education in comparison to classroom instruction in preparing a student for professional social work practice (Bruno, 1944; Farber & Reitmeier, 2018; Garthwait, 2017; Gordon, 1962; Holden et al., 2010). The purpose of social work education extends beyond solely delivering education to students. More importantly, the intended outcome is equipping social workers to effectively lead the profession's commitment to achieving economic and social justice for individuals, families, and communities (CSWE, 2022). As such, further attention surrounding current standards and practices in social work education is called for.

While field education has had long-standing recognition as an integral component of social work education, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) pronounced field education the signature pedagogy of social work education in the 2008 Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), aligning the declaration to the accreditation process (CSWE, 2008; Garthwait, 2017; Holosko & Skinner, 2015). Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education was reaffirmed in the 2015 EPAS, the version that most accredited programs are currently operating under (CSWE, 2015). Over a decade

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after the CSWE elevation of field education, stakeholders within the field continue to debate the distinction (Asakura et al., 2018; Bogo, 2015; Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; Holden et al., 2010; Lyter, 2012; Wayne et al., 2010).

The term “signature pedagogy” refers to the characteristic features of teaching and learning that define and organize the ways in which future practitioners are educated for their specific discipline and is first attributed to Shulman (2005a), a distinguished scholar on pedagogical content from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. A defining feature of a signature pedagogy is the provision of a framework that guides a discipline’s values, content, and competence (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; Shulman, 2005a). Central to this definition includes the widespread recognition of the signature pedagogy as well as its consistent inclusion across fundamental instruction (Shulman, 2005a). Relative to field education, the associated framework is the EPAS, which includes the policies and standards required for program accreditation. As a condition of accreditation, recognition and inclusion of signature pedagogy should be apparent within a program’s EPAS self-study.

The purpose of this study was to explore how accredited undergraduate social work programs, the first building block of social work education, demonstrate alignment with field education as signature pedagogy as a part of their accreditation process. While several researchers have examined field education as pedagogy, this article contributes to the literature by analyzing the presentation of field education in EPAS self-studies using two key criteria of signature pedagogy: widespread identification and inclusion across curriculum (Shulman, 2005a). Specifically, a content analysis was applied to examine the existence of the pervasive recognition of field education as the signature pedagogy and consistent focus on field instruction across the curriculum.

Literature Review

Higher Education, Professional Practice Programs, and Social Work Education

Over 100 years ago, the responsibility for training those within practice-based disciplines was moved from an apprentice-style model to higher education (Day & Tytler, 2012). Prior to this, it was typical for students within professional practice programs to learn by doing (i.e., situated in the field as opposed to in a classroom). Forging a relationship with academia provided leverage for practice-based fields seeking the recognition and status bestowed upon professional disciplines. Flexner (2001), a major influencer in education, furthered this battle of legitimacy by singling out medical education as superior, citing the “deficient” curriculum and lack of scientific methods of other fields.

Findlow (2012) specified social work as one of the practice fields that shifted their hands-on training approach in search of an academic identity. Attempts for social work to define itself ultimately deferred to the metrics used within the medical and science professions for validation (Bruno, 1944; Gitterman, 2014). However, those outside of the field still challenged the legitimacy of social work as a profession. Addressing the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1915, Flexner (2001) concluded that social

work did not meet the defining criteria of a profession. His claim, in part, was based on the breadth of roles that social workers fill and on the interdisciplinary nature of the field (Flexner, 2001; Tosone, 2016). Flexner's landmark attestation served as a catalyst that pushed the social work field toward professional stature and away from its community-based roots (Austin, 1983; Gelman & Gonzalez, 2016).

As a result of moving practice fields under the auspices of higher education, a safety net was created for those disciplines yearning for the prestige associated with professional status. To maintain the validation as a worthy profession, practice disciplines have since sanctioned and participated in a variety of litmus tests such as the accreditation process and declaring a signature pedagogy.

The Litmus Tests

Accreditation. Accreditation was introduced into higher learning institutions in 1871 (Hegji, 2020). Within higher education and professional programs, accreditation processes are led by an independent body and include a self-assessment and external peer review. The accreditation standards applied to each profession are developed by experts in the field to assure the public that a program meets accepted standards and adheres to a process of continuous improvement. The 81 higher education accrediting bodies in the United States are recognized by either a governmental entity, the U.S. Department of Education, or a non-profit organization, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

While the influential oversight of the various accrediting entities provides the framework for American higher education, a review of the literature yielded little to no findings on empirical research done to validate the accrediting bodies themselves. In 2005, the U.S. Department of Education admitted a more transparent and accountable accreditation system was needed (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In 2009, Wiley, the CHEA board chair, contended there were many strengths to accreditation, but justified skepticism in the current self-regulatory system and urged for extensive improvements (CHEA, 2020).

Citing the significant time and cost related to the accreditation process within the medical field, van Zanten et al. (2012) argued for increased research on and evidence to substantiate the standards. In order to ensure the reliability and validity of assessment standards used within the medical community to determine physician competence, multiple medical groups are now working in concert to test current approaches and to develop new models (American Board of Pediatrics, 2020). The medical field's nature of scientific inquiry is widely regarded as a model for other professional fields. As such, dedicating a similar level of commitment to research and evaluation of accreditation standards and policy decisions should be considered by other fields as well.

Signature Pedagogy. The term "signature pedagogy" was developed by Shulman (2005a) to describe the distinct and consistent methods of a specific profession to impart knowledge and values of the field. Within practice fields, the responsibility of identifying and applying these practice guidelines extends beyond the classroom and have real-life

implications for the specific profession and larger society. Yet, many professional disciplines with a declared signature pedagogy are criticized for failing to meet Shulman's definition (Crookes et al., 2020). Crookes et al. (2020) suggested the need to better utilize research and evidence-based findings to authenticate alignment with Shulman's signature pedagogy framework.

Social Work, Accreditation, and Signature Pedagogy. Furthering the pursuit of professional recognition, in 1930 the Professional Standards of Education for Social Workers, a branch under the National Conference of Social Work, was established (Bruno, 1944). This group began oversight of social work education programs comparable to current day accreditation site visits (Bruno, 1944). In 1952, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) was founded and is the sole entity recognized by the CHEA with authority for present-day accreditation of social work education (Thyer, 2009).

Despite the longevity of social work accreditation, a review of the literature reveals long-standing debate on the caliber of the process. Arkava and Brennen (1975) discussed early dilemmas faced by social work accreditation to simultaneously address both student-centered priorities and the economic realities of institutions. This plight resembles current struggles facing social work education and higher learning today. For instance, Karger and Stoesz (2003) contended that the expedited growth of accredited social work programs has propelled universities to engage in a desperate competition for student enrollment and tuition. Kagle and colleagues (2002) argued that CSWE accreditation standards relating to the qualifications for program leadership are too restrictive and may jeopardize the future advancement of social work education. Stoesz and Karger (2009) further suggested that a different accrediting entity be established, alleging that CSWE lacks accountability, offers inadequate research on its own standards, and advances negligible scholarship produced by CSWE leadership or program deans and directors.

Watkins (2008) of CSWE offered a response to the criticism explaining that the primary goal of accreditation is quality assurance, thereby providing the structural framework that defines quality while providing freedom for institutions to develop their own mission, goals, curriculum, and faculty expectations. While Watkins also contended that the quality of a program extends beyond the number of published articles one produces, multiple researchers document the trend of universities to hire based on the production of scholarship and research (Green, 2008; Johnson & Munch, 2010; Thyer, 2009). Thyer (2009) refuted the idea of establishing a new accrediting body and instead advocated that CSWE strengthen current accreditation standards. Several researchers recognized the ongoing improvement made to the CSWE accreditation process. This includes a refinement of the competency standards and defining components of an integrated curriculum design, both reflected in the 2008 EPAS (Petracchi & Zastrow, 2010). Poulin and Matis (2017) noted that evaluation of student learning no longer includes student self-assessment and requires a higher level of validation from faculty and/or field supervisors. As well, the 2015 EPAS introduced competency-based learning standards, a new norm found within higher education social work (Poulin & Matis, 2017; Rissi & Gelmon, 2014).

Also aligned with the approach of other professional fields, CSWE declared a signature pedagogy for social work education. Shulman (2005a) argued that within professional

fields there is a central and accepted method of teaching and learning to prepare one for professional practice and to socialize students to the values of the field. Field education was elevated with this distinction and the 2008 EPAS was updated to reflect a signature pedagogy for social work education for the first time (Boitel & Fromm, 2014). Yet, there is ambiguity regarding the status of field education as signature pedagogy found within the EPAS, the same document in which CSWE has proclaimed the distinction. For example, in the 2008 EPAS Education Policy 2.3 and in the 2015 EPAS Educational Policy 2.2, field education is identified as the signature pedagogy while also equating, not elevating, its role to classroom instruction. In addition, delineated in the first line of each version of the policy, CSWE appears to diminish the magnitude of signature pedagogy from serving as the “central form of instruction and learning” in 2008 (p. 8) to “elements of instruction” in 2015 (p. 12). This language raises questions about the alignment of field education, as Shulman (2005a) asserted that signature pedagogies are “critical aspects” that “organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions” (p. 52).

While there is general consensus about the essential importance of field education to social work education, the status of field education has held shifting ranks of importance over time. Even after the initial curriculum was established for social work education, the amount of time spent in field-related training versus classroom instruction remained inconsistent among schools (Bruno, 1944). Garthwait (2017) noted that CSWE began developing standards for social work education upon inception, yet 20 years passed before field education was mandated at the undergraduate level. The early issues surrounding the relationship of field education to both classroom instruction and to social work education as a whole remain contemporary concerns.

Scholars, too, hold a difference in agreement as to whether field education embodies the role of signature pedagogy. Multiple studies identified field education as the premier experience that socializes students to the field and prepares students for professional practice (Bogo, 2010; Globerman & Bogo, 2003; Lager & Robbins, 2004; Parker, 2006). Wayne and colleagues (2010) noted that field education standards possess some consistent organizational mandates deemed important to signature pedagogy, such as a minimum number of hours and requirement of social work supervision to support student learning and socialization. Yet, Wayne et al. (2010) also remarked on the lack of consistency that exists within field education programs as well as a variance in the practicum experience, both contrary to defined pedagogy. Earls Larrison and Korr (2013) argued that field education is not signature pedagogy, citing that the practicum is not distinct to social work education and is only part of the fundamental framework for instruction. Others have contended that the fixation on molding social work education to fit a predetermined definition of professionalism endangers the fundamental role that the field education experience has in adequately preparing students for professional practice (Bruno, 1944; Farber & Reitmeier, 2018).

Although scholars differ on many aspects of the field, there is little debate that CSWE holds significant power over the entirety of social work education. CSWE’s landmark decision to elevate field education as the profession’s signature pedagogy in the EPAS mandates programs to comply with related requirements as a condition of accreditation.

Recognizing field education as signature pedagogy may influence how social work programs are designed and how students are educated to deliver critical social work practice to individuals, families, and communities. Therefore, further exploration of the connection between accreditation and signature pedagogy in social work education is warranted.

Method

Content analysis is an accepted approach to examine textual materials in order to conceptualize explicit and implicit treatment of a subject and to identify patterns (Hong & Hodge, 2009; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mehrotra et al., 2017). As such, a content analysis using both deductive and inductive approaches was applied to explore the extent to which a sample of accredited undergraduate social work programs recognize field education as signature pedagogy in the EPAS self-study. The EPAS self-study component of CSWE accreditation is a comprehensive self-review of program development, implementation, and evaluation which includes written detail and accompanying evidence of adherence to the standards (CSWE, 2008, 2015).

While qualitative in nature, conducting a content analysis of this textual document yielded outcomes that include quantitative data. Although the quantitative data is descriptive in nature, and therefore may not be generalizable, it provides a type of analysis that is not available in the current literature. For this content analysis, field education includes both the field seminar, which is facilitated as a classroom course as well as the field experience or practicum, which is the hands-on training of students within an approved agency setting under the supervision of a qualified social work field instructor. As the data to be collected was publicly available online, this study was deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Collection

The accessed EPAS self-studies were publicly available online and were identified using general search terms such as “CSWE self-studies”, “EPAS self-studies”, and “social work accreditation self-studies”. For purposes of this analysis, the selected EPAS self-studies were from accredited undergraduate programs and dated after 2008, the year field education was first recognized as signature pedagogy in the EPAS. In total, the study sample consisted of 16 EPAS self-studies. Although this study does not reveal the names of the involved universities, information was collected on whether the program operates as a separate school of social work or as a department as well as if field education is run as a block placement or concurrent to classroom instruction (see Table 1). Also, the university location is identified using the nine established CSWE regions (see Table 1). All regions, except for the Northeast region, are represented.

Table 1. *Sample of Social Work Programs by Region, Structure, and Type*

ID Number	CSWE Region	Structure	Program Type
BSW1	Great Lakes	Concurrent	Separate School
BSW2	West	Concurrent	Separate School
BSW3	New England	Concurrent	Department
BSW4	Rocky Mountains	Concurrent	Department
BSW5	Mid-Atlantic	Concurrent	Department
BSW6	South Central	Concurrent	Department
BSW7	Great Lakes	Concurrent	Department
BSW8	Great Lakes	Block	Department
BSW9	Southeast	Block	Separate School
BSW10	South Central	Concurrent	Separate School
BSW11	South Central	Concurrent	Department
BSW12	Northwest	Concurrent	Separate School
BSW13	South Central	Block	Department
BSW14	Mid-Atlantic	Concurrent	Separate School
BSW15	Great Lakes	Concurrent	Department
BSW16	Rocky Mountains	Concurrent	Department

The content analysis focused on two key criteria of signature pedagogy defined by Shulman (2005a): the “pervasive” or widespread recognition of the signature pedagogy by the specific field and its “routine” or consistent use across the curriculum. First, data were collected to determine the extent to which field education is recognized as signature pedagogy in the EPAS self-studies across all four standards: Program Mission and Goals, Explicit Curriculum, Implicit Curriculum, and Assessment. The four standards remained consistent in title but not in identifying number across both versions. Then, evidence was gathered to establish if a consistent focus on field education as the central form of teaching and learning was present in two areas: in the full section of Explicit Curriculum which contains the formal educational structure and curriculum, and in the Faculty section of Implicit Curriculum, which details the educational environment such as policies and practices.

Data Analysis

NVivo was selected as the tool to collect, organize, and assess the data. To analyze the data, an inductive strategy was used to determine frequency and a deductive approach was applied to assess treatment. This content analysis provides the foundation for future research involving EPAS self-studies and other accreditation-related materials.

Determining Widespread Recognition

To determine widespread recognition of field education as signature pedagogy across all four areas of the self-study document, the number of times the term “signature pedagogy” was linked to field education was examined. Excluded was presence of the term when it was a predetermined title contained in the EPAS or referencing a CSWE policy or standard. Also excluded were references to pedagogy as a general practice of teaching or philosophy.

Assessing for Evidence of Routine Use

The two pre-identified sections of the EPAS self-studies were assessed for evidence of field education as the central framework for teaching and instruction across program design. Affirmative data was defined as language that prioritized field education as the fundamental way students are socialized to the profession and/or focused on field education in course descriptions, learning objectives, and/or across curriculum design. Additionally, the rank or tenure status of the field director and the extent to which any social work faculty had published research related to field education were assessed; both indicators would support field education was embraced as a signature pedagogy.

Findings

Frequency of Widespread Recognition

The number of times the sample EPAS self-studies included references to field education as signature pedagogy ranged from 0 to 15, with zero occurrences having a larger representation than the other groupings. Overall, five programs (31%) had zero occurrences, four programs (25%) had a single occurrence, one program (6%) had two occurrences, two programs (12%) had three occurrences, one program (6%) had four occurrences, one program (6%) had five occurrences, one program (6%) had six occurrences, and one program (5%) had 15 occurrences. The 15 occurrences from the one program were all references that explained the connection of each course to field education.

Three patterns of frequency were found: those with zero occurrence, those where occurrence was found only in the Explicit Curriculum section, and those where frequency was found across multiple sections. Of the three identified patterns, those with occurrence in only the Explicit Curriculum section was the largest group. Of the 16 EPAS self-studies, five (31%) had a pattern of zero occurrence, seven (44%) had occurrence solely in the Explicit Curriculum section, and four (25%) had occurrences in two different sections. Two (13%) of the programs with multi-section occurrences had one brief reference to signature pedagogy each in the Mission and Goals section.

Evidence of Field Education as Central Form of Learning and Instruction

Two themes were identified in the Explicit Curriculum section. The first was related to the way programs explained how field education was integrated into the curriculum and the second was the expressed equity communicated by programs between field education and classroom instruction. In the Implicit Curriculum: Faculty section, two themes surfaced. One involved the connection between field education as signature pedagogy and tenure status of the field director and the second focused on the relationship between field education and faculty background and/or expertise.

Explicit Curriculum

Direction of the Integration of Field Education. In general, the sample EPAS self-studies echo the language of the CSWE Educational Policy 2.2 describing field education as the responsible entity for the integration of classroom knowledge and skill development. For example, the EPAS self-study of BSW13 credited field education as the "...richest component for discussing operationalization of curriculum content." Similarly, the EPAS self-study of BSW10 assigned the field practicum as the sole element to "offer students the opportunity to apply classroom knowledge to practice." This one-way direction of curriculum integration, often occurring at the end of the educational experience, does not support Shulman's definition of signature pedagogy as pervasive or routine instruction, nor does it uphold the distinction as the fundamental component of curriculum design. In addition, there was a varying degree of structure to and frequency of the field seminar with the sample group, a component available to strengthen integration between theory and practice.

Eight of the EPAS self-studies provided evidence of partial integration of field education across the explicit curriculum design. Specifically, this included the description of a bi-directional integration between field education and a limited number of classroom-based courses. For example, the EPAS self-studies of BSW1 and BSW2 required that a practice course and field education be taken concurrently. The EPAS self-study of BSW14 revealed reasoning for requiring that a research course be taken concurrently with field placement stating this "...facilitates students' application of theory and research to their practice." Other EPAS self-studies described the intentional use of assignments in select classroom courses that are based on experiences in the field practicum.

A focus on student readiness for field education also was identified in relation to integration. Typical solutions were the inclusion of a new course or the addition of a specific learning module within the existing field seminar. For example, the EPAS self-study of BSW12 stated, "...juniors were not ready for field in some cases so the program wanted to provide a bridge course..." In this program a new course was developed to prepare students for field experience as opposed to realigning all courses to support these efforts. Of note is the mention that the newly developed course was "a very popular class...students wanted practical skills and foundational work...practice is essential and important."

Two EPAS self-studies, BSW3 and BSW8, stood out with high and consistent levels of integration across the curriculum, supporting field education as signature pedagogy. The EPAS self-study of BSW3 described the level of integration of field and classroom instruction as "immersion," pointing to "...a coherent and integrated curriculum...competencies serving as a primary vehicle for linking classroom curricula directly to field curricula and practice." This program designed the field education component to occur over six semesters stating that this "facilitates translation of classroom learning into the field setting in real time." While this level of integration supports Shulman's definition of signature pedagogy, the authors of the self-study then contradicted field education as signature pedagogy by contending "The entire BSW curriculum is the pedagogy of the field." BSW8 required a 40-hour practicum as a part of the Introduction

to Social Work course. Here, the introductory course was described as the “gatekeeper” for students, as they must successfully complete the course before being allowed to declare social work as a major. The BSW8 EPAS self-study demonstrated alignment with signature pedagogy by explaining, “Because field education is the signature pedagogy it is critical that students begin their studies with both classroom and field experiences, providing the opportunity to intellectually integrate learning from both.” Distinct from all others in the sample, the EPAS self-study of BSW8 included course descriptions detailing how each class prepared students for field education.

In some of the EPAS self-studies, the importance of integrating learning across the curriculum overlooked field education, and instead focused on specific professional behaviors, other social work courses, and even general education courses. For example, the EPAS self-study of BSW13 highlighted a commitment to “infusing through the curriculum” components such as ethics, diversity, and identifying as a professional. Although the EPAS self-study of BSW13 acknowledged the ongoing assessment of and changes within their program to align with the 2008 EPAS, no information was provided on prioritizing the inclusion of field education across the overall curriculum. The EPAS self-study of BSW16 stated that the Human Behavior and the Social Environment course “is an integral part of the social work curriculum...the content undergirds subsequent practice, policy, and research courses...,” yet failed to mention the role of field education in relation to the integration of learning. While the content analysis revealed multiple variations in program design and structure of field education, all programs identified field education as the one course where each of the required learning competencies would be assessed. Yet, the process for assessing how the competencies would be demonstrated was wide-ranging.

Expressed Equity Between Field Education and Classroom Instruction. A common theme across the sample EPAS self-studies indicated an equal standing between field education and other social work courses. For example, in the introductory paragraph of the Explicit Curriculum section, which clarifies the purpose and structure of social work education, the terms “courses” and “field education” were equally identified with no mention of a signature pedagogy. Also, the EPAS self-study of BSW6 identified the five professional foundation areas as “HBSE, Policy, Practice, Research and Field.” While this equity is consistent with the language of the EPAS standard, it does not distinguish field education as the signature pedagogy. In other areas, a de-prioritization of field education was found. For instance, of the three educational policies included in the Explicit Curriculum section, the one related to field education as signature pedagogy is listed last, seemingly incongruent for a discipline’s signature pedagogy. Further, in reviewing the EPAS educational policy focused on field education as signature pedagogy, there was a weakening of the defining criteria for a signature pedagogy from “the central form of instruction and learning” in the 2008 EPAS to “elements of instruction” in the 2015 EPAS. In this same section of both EPAS documents, equal importance was assigned to field education and classroom instruction.

Implicit Curriculum: Faculty

Connection Between Field Education as Signature Pedagogy and Tenure Status

Of the 16 field directors identified in the sample EPAS self-studies, seven (44%) were tenured field directors—six with a doctoral degree and one with an MSW. Yet, three of the seven tenured faculty were in programs whose EPAS self-studies had no references to field education as signature pedagogy. Of those nine (56%) in non-tenure track positions, eight held both a MSW degree and a social work license and one had a PhD and a social work license. Although doctoral status appears connected to tenure status, no apparent relationship exists between a program which demonstrated alignment with signature pedagogy and the tenure status of the field director.

Field Education as Signature Pedagogy and Faculty Expertise. Only four (25%) of the 16 social work program deans or directors had previous experience with field education as indicated on their resumes. Three of these were program directors within social work departments and one was the director of a program that operates as a separate school of social work. The director of the separate school of social work was from one of the five programs with no references in the EPAS self-study to field education as signature pedagogy.

The sample of EPAS self-studies showed varied topic areas of published scholarship among faculty. Only one of the 16 field directors had any identified published research. This field director had two published articles; one focused on global opportunities in field education and the other was not related to field education. The vast majority of the social work program directors and other tenured staff had at least one published journal article, yet none were related to field education. Although typically not regarded as scholarship, many field directors were involved in writing field education manuals, assisted with the accreditation process, and presented at conferences.

Discussion

This study offers a novel perspective to the existing research on field education as signature pedagogy by considering how social work programs demonstrate alignment as a part of the EPAS self-study, a component of the accreditation process. As undergraduate programming serves as the foundational level of social work education, starting with an examination of this stage of education was deemed appropriate. Although the small sample size of EPAS self-studies in this analysis presents some limitations, the ability for direct examination of explicit and implicit communication in a text allows for descriptive quantitative and qualitative analysis. As only one coder was involved in the data collection and analysis, the frequency assessment in NVivo was replicated to confirm data and ensure accuracy. To address validity, the analysis was framed using two of Shulman's defining criteria for determining signature pedagogy: widespread recognition and pervasive use. The self-study component of the EPAS is a primary document used as a part of accreditation, thus a strength of the study is the use of a readily understood tool for analysis. In addition, as many EPAS self-studies are publicly available on the internet, they provide

a replicable and inexpensive option for further analysis. The potential exists that the programs in the sample may not have adequately reflected their level of alignment to field education as signature pedagogy in the self-study. Future analysis could be strengthened by increasing the sample size, including interviews with field directors or other key stakeholders, examining other relevant program material, or comparing current and archival data.

The findings of the content analysis reinforced the important role of field education in social work education, yet it revealed a hesitance by programs to adopt language and action needed to affirm field education as signature pedagogy based on Shulman's defined criteria. This raises justified questions as to whether the distinction of field education as signature pedagogy is rhetorical language or if it exists in reality and can be substantiated by evidence. Arguably, recognition of a signature pedagogy would be expected in the explanation of a program's mission and goals. However, only two of the 16 sample EPAS self-studies had a reference in this defining section; both were brief mentions with no explanation. In addition, although all of the 16 sample EPAS self-studies were dated after the 2008 landmark decision by CSWE to elevate field education as signature pedagogy, nearly one-third included no direct reference to this relationship. While written documentation may not fully capture what is being done explicitly within social work education programs, the inconsistent and/or nonexistent recognition of field education as signature pedagogy cannot be overlooked. Regardless of the various misalignments, all the programs in the sample were accredited by CSWE. This discrepancy, alone, suggests the need to further examine the expressed and applied definition of signature pedagogy within social work education.

Over a decade after CSWE declared field education as the signature pedagogy for social work education, there remains ambiguous language within the CSWE accreditation policies and standards themselves. This lack of clarity impedes the ability of a program to demonstrate alignment. For example, within the EPAS document is the required CSWE standard that programs "develop a coherent and integrated curriculum for both classroom and field" (CSWE, 2008, 2015, p. 11). The meaning of "integrated" is left vague and reinforces the generally accepted practice that field education assumes the primary responsibility for the integration of theory and practice. The continuum of what constitutes integrated curriculum in education was examined by Drake and Reid (2020). They contended a higher-level use of integration, either interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary, may yield better learning outcomes for students (Drake & Reid, 2020). Additional research findings showed that in addition to advanced learning, the integration of a signature pedagogy across the curriculum in academia reinforced learning of required core competencies and improved faculty collaboration (Uchiyama & Radin, 2009; Watts & Hodgson, 2015). This bidirectional integration appears to be more aligned with Shulman's definition of signature pedagogy.

The discrepancies within both the sample of EPAS self-studies and the CSWE policies and standards reveal insufficient evidence to affirm field education as signature pedagogy based on Shulman's defined criteria. The additional connection of a signature pedagogy to accreditation exerts a consequential influence on how social work programs are designed

and how future professionals are educated to deliver critical social work practice. This provides an opportunity to re-envision a signature pedagogy for social work education that better meets the charge to prepare future practitioners “to think, to perform and to act with integrity” (Shulman, 2005a).

Instead of positioning either field education or classroom instruction as more central to social work education, CSWE could maximize the relationship between them. This can be accomplished by upholding, not disregarding, the unique tenets of social work as a broad-based field that engages teaching, scholarship, and practice. Many have called for a strengthening of social work education and an end to the separation often found between field education and classroom instruction, enabling authentic university-agency partnerships that extend beyond the field experience (Buck et al., 2012; Raskin et al., 2008; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000). A bi-directional integration of field education and classroom instruction could include extending the use of the learning plan and the related evaluation of competencies across the entirety of the curriculum. Additionally, the impact of field education could be advanced by ascribing a base level of standardization to the seminar component. Shulman (2005b) suggests the seminar is the signature pedagogy of liberal education due to its similarity to the essential interaction and engagement among students and instructors of professional pedagogies.

Finally, implementing program-wide strategies could result in an expanded and more accurate framework of what constitutes an authentic signature pedagogy for social work education. These includes steps such as requiring all faculty to be involved in preparing students for field education, ensuring the learning objectives for all courses support the preparation for entry into field education, and updating program materials to clearly demonstrate a commitment to a bi-directional curriculum design. Shulman argued signature pedagogies are not static, instead they must be able to respond to changes in the field and in the practice environment (Shulman, 2005b). As such, engaging in ongoing curriculum mapping and regular evaluation could confirm program compliance and identify needed adjustments to ensure continuous alignment to the signature pedagogy.

As the sole accrediting body, CSWE can provide clarity in the next version of the EPAS on the function of a signature pedagogy and advocate for the full integration of field education and classroom instruction. Beyond meeting a prescribed definition of a professional discipline or claiming a signature pedagogy, this reimagining has the potential to reconnect theory to practice and enhance the competencies needed by students to become social workers prepared to fulfill the vital purposes of the social work profession.

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