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Field Education in Social Work: The Need for Reimagining

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Abstract

Understanding the neoliberal restructuring of social services cannot be outside the implications of these processes for field education in social work. The neoliberal agenda creates contradictions in field education as the site where the service sector and the academy come together, where critical synergies can be realized or jeopardized. From the critical activist stance of ourselves, and our school, we recognize and seek to resist the neoliberal control of social work settings and the practices therein. Recognizing that many schools of social work practice an agency based model of field education, we examine the limits of this approach, suggesting a shift towards a community issue based model is necessary to maintaining a commitment to preparing and supporting critical activist practitioners.

Keywords: activist practice, field education, neoliberalism

While much attention has been paid to the neoliberal restructuring of social services, little attention has been paid to the implications of these processes for field education. We seek to expose the tensions and contradictions that are created and sustained by a traditional agency based model of field education within a neoliberal context. We have felt these tensions most when it comes to field education as that is the site where the service sector and the academy come together, where critical synergies can be realized or jeopardized.

We come to this task as social work academics, teaching in a school with a radical and transformative curriculum, but with a traditional agency based model of field education. We are becoming increasingly aware of the inadequacy of this model. In this paper, we examine the limitation of an agency based model of field education, suggesting that a shift towards a community/issue-based model is becoming increasingly necessary. It is imperative that the impact of neoliberalism on field education, and subsequently on the broader curriculum, be exposed and challenged. Given the centrality of field education in preparing our students for social work, we are at risk of involuntarily acquiescing to a more mainstream curriculum, thus jeopardizing our commitment to educating students for critical social work.

Our commitment also extends to practitioners that form pockets of resistance, politicizing the issues and processes, though often working in isolation (Aronson & Smith, 2010), seeking support from their activist educational partners. If we do not respond then we are at risk of alienating these critical activist social workers and not preparing students to continue the work of activist practice. As such, those pockets of resistance that currently exist could shrink and disappear, similar to the earlier critique of social work's "acquiescence" (Cloward & Piven, 1977, p. 55) to supporting capitalism. If we concede to a more mainstream curriculum of field education, we risk contributing to, rather than, resisting the neoliberal agenda. Those pockets of resistance that currently exist could shrink and disappear as activist faculty, students, and practitioners will be unable to keep the resistance alive. Recognizing field education as a potential shared site of resistance, we seek to expose the impact of neoliberalism as the first step to managing and reimagining field education.

Problematizing Social Work and Field Education

Our understanding of social work and field education is informed by our shared commitment to anti-oppressive practice. This framework builds upon structural, feminist, critical, anti-colonial, and anti-racist traditions under the umbrella of radical social work. With transformation at its core, there is a commitment to new forms of knowledge, political engagement and a change-focussed practice. Anti-oppressive practice "is a set of politicized practices that continually evolve to analyze and address constantly changing social conditions and challenges" (Baines, 2007, p. 20). As such, practice and education are framed by understandings of power, social structures, collectivism, and resistance. Knowledge is derived from everyday experiences of communities (including service users), from understandings of marginalization and difference, and from critical reflexivity. Anti-oppressive social work practice and education seek to build alliances, embrace participatory ways, and infuse a politicized understanding of oppression and dominance into all aspects of our work (Baines, 2007; Campbell, 2002; Dominelli, 1998; 2004). These understandings, within the neoliberal

context, inform our problematizing of the neoliberal influence on social work and field education.

We also recognize that social work and field education exist today in a neoliberal world filled with managerialism, economic rationalism, and decreased political efficacy of citizens. We understand neoliberalism as “an approach to social, political, and economic life that discourages collective or government services, instead encouraging reliance on the private market and individual skill to meet social needs. ... [This] has resulted in a growth of poverty, decrease in democracy and increased social and environmental devastation” (Baines, 2011, p. 30). This focus on market values and individualism is antithetical to the welfare state and collectivism, resulting in a diminished social service structure focussed on efficiency and productivity, not on service and well-being (Abramovitz, 2005, 2006; Bischoff & Reisch, 2000; Birkenmaier, McGartland Rubio, & Berg-Weger, 2002; Dominelli, 2002; Lightman & Riches, 2000; Lonne, McDonald, & Fox, 2004). Consequently, the complexity of social work practice becomes reduced to simple answers and short-term solutions (Aronson & Sammon, 2000) that focus on minimalist service provision, specialization, and fragmented services that address only surface and thus decontextualized issues in the lives of service users. Concurrently, such practices also impact social workers and their workplaces, whereby the individualistic approach of service delivery plays out in the alienation of workers from each other, and thus also between agencies as they compete for scarce resources; such practices leave little room for building community and resisting inequity (Baines, 2004, 2011; Dominelli, 2002; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004; Fisher & Shragge, 2000; Leighninger, 1999; Mullaly, 2001; Razack, 2002).

Tensions within Social Work Practice

Social work has been fraught with two contradictory parallels, sometimes characterized as a divide between casework and community work (e.g., Salle, 2003), other times between ecological practice and radical practice. Implied by these contradictions, two competing visions of social workers emerge, as agents of control or agents of change (Hick, 2006). On the one hand, social workers as agents of social control may perceive individuals from a deficit stance, requiring service to help them adapt to the norms and practices of society – the precursor of casework. On the other hand, social workers as agents of social change take a different stance, recognizing the threats inherent in mainstream societal values and practice, and the need for solidarity in resistance to such threats - the precursor of community work (Leiby, 1978 as cited in Hick, 2006). The casework/ecological approach was born of moral reform and continued to be rooted in liberalism. With the political and economic shift from liberalism to neoliberalism, mainstream social work appears quite compatible with neoliberal understandings of individualism and social control. Meanwhile, activist social work has worked outside or against liberalism, and that resistance continues today in response to neoliberalism. George and Marlowe (2005) note “conventional social work operates within existing social institutions to assist individuals to adjust and adapt to the status quo. In contrast, critical social work maintains that existing social institutions cannot adequately meet human needs and instead works towards fundamental structural transformation” (p. 6). However, even in the more radical or activist stream of practice, the era of globalization and neoliberalism has led social work to become increasingly individualized and depoliticized (Fisher, Weedman, Alex, & Stout, 2001), thus becoming more entrenched in traditional casework. In response, the International Federation of

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Social Workers' (2005) newest definition of social work attempts to recapture the more progressive focus:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (para. 1)

While we recognize that social work practice is constrained by local, state, and global forces, we also suggest that such constraints need not limit social work's potential as a social force to challenge oppression (Thompson, 2003). We further suggest that a critical or activist approach to social work is necessary for such challenges to occur. Inherent in critical social work is a critique of social structures and the operations of power. Critical social work is committed to action that exposes, resists, and changes these oppressive structures and processes, through a shared transformative experience with service users – individually, in families, in groups, in communities, in organizations – through direct practice, advocacy, policy work, research, and education. This critical approach differs from the more mainstream approach in its values, its methods, and its outcomes, by repositioning the practitioner and the service user, and social work itself, recognizing that social structures are both constructed and constructing in their intersect with people's lived experiences. This approach resists a hegemonic understanding of power only as dominance, and instead reflects the nuanced experience of shifting social relations and the potential of resistance to counter oppression and marginalization (Fook, 2002).

Tensions within Social Work Education

Social work education also has a mixed history, with some schools more focussed on mainstream practice and others on more critical practice. The philosophical orientation of the school is often reflected in its mission or vision, which, in varying degrees, may guide student admission, curriculum design, faculty hiring, scholarship and field placement choices. As such, it can influence the prospective students it attracts and the practitioners it produces. It also can have an impact on where students are employed after graduation, and thus the school's philosophical orientation may influence the field itself.

We also know that practitioners continue to be involved in academia, in the classroom as guest speakers and sessional instructors, and in the school community as donors, field instructors, and committee members. The presence of practitioners in the academy richly enhances the school and has the potential to support a stronger connection between the university and the community. Understandably, the presence of practitioners who are alumni of a particular school also will have an impact on the school, based on their philosophical inclinations. Additionally, practitioners may be influenced by the school's mission through school workshops and events, as well as through engagement with faculty scholarship and students. Through this presence of practitioners in many aspect of social work education, we are reminded that practice and education both shape and are shaped by each other.

However, our experience suggests that social work education tends to be more critical than most social work practice. In reviewing social work scholarship about practice, we see strong references to critical social work, reflecting commitments to social justice and equity (e.g., Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002; Pease, Briskman, & Allan, 2003; Carniol, 2010; Fook, 2002; Gil, 1998; Healy, 2005; Hick, 2005; Lundy, 2011; Rossiter, 2005; Shragge, 2003). Such literature informs the theory and practice components in classroom learning. However, in the standards of social work practice itself, we see less of a focus on this commitment to social justice and equity. For example, in looking at codes of ethics, and scopes and standards of practice, we see a strong emphasis on service delivery with an intent of optimizing “psychosocial and social functioning” (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW), 2008, p. 7) of individuals, signalling a primary focus on individual change rather than societal change. This focus at best ignores a critical engagement with larger societal forces that contribute to the issues service users present in their interactions with social workers. At worst, this focus accepts and reinforces the status quo.

This trend bears scrutiny, as it is leading to a separation between practice and education, and risks positioning academics as ideologically superior to practitioners. Perhaps as academics, we have the security of the university, giving us space to be more critical. With the protections afforded through academic freedom, wherein faculty have autonomy in their production and critique of knowledge, universities are not under the same advocacy and activism restrictions that many government-funded social service agencies face. As such, our balance of teaching, service, and scholarship provides the space within our workload to engage with radical thinking and doing. Keeping in mind that there are also some freedom restrictions within the neoliberal academy, wherein particular kinds of scholarship are encouraged over others (Osei-Kofi, Shahjahan, & Patton, 2010; Servage, 2009), we nonetheless recognize our privileged position of taking an activist stance in social work education as one of the factors that may reinforce the divide between mainstream practice and critical education.

Accreditation standards have moved slowly towards an understanding of social work from an anti-oppressive perspective, though these have focused on curricular content and not on the practicum. With respect to curriculum design, we have made progress in many classroom-based courses, infusing these with critical theory and practice. However, field education continues to be delivered mostly in the same way it was originally conceptualized (see for example, Bogo, 2006; Schneider Corey, & Corey, 2003; Ward & Mama, 2006; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). This difference further reinforces a divide between the classroom and the field. Moving forward, if social work is to be critical, we must consider all aspects of social work education.

Another challenge to consider is the question of educating students for whom and for what? This highlights the tension between educating employable practitioners and educating activist social workers (Rossiter, 2001; Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007). Specifically, is our role solely to educate future social workers who can pass the registration exam and practice in the current climate, or is it also to educate future social workers to be critical and to challenge and change social work in the current neoliberal context?

Differing Responses to Tensions

We see how the context of practice has changed over time, and how social work has responded in some sectors. In particular, we have witnessed mandated services and agencies, largely funded by government, relinquish their critical lens amidst new pressures (Dumbrill, 2002; Fisher & Shragge, 2000; Neysmith, 2000; Swift, 2001). Some have succumbed to the neoliberal demands of accountability (surveillance of practice through regulation) (Abramovitz, 2005; Dominelli, 2002; George, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007), effectiveness (evidence-based practice and the focus on predicted outcomes that reinforce capital) (Moxley & Manela, 2000), and efficiency (short-term, individual intervention that assume a deficit characterization of service users and communities) (Chouinard & Crooks, 2005; Moffatt, 1999; Pedlar & Hutchison, 2000). These organizations appear to be practicing in a haze, disconnected from institutional discourses that construct social work as devoid of power and social relations and reinforce notions of expertise and individualized need within a prescribed and static interventionist approach.

We acknowledge the challenges that many government-funded agencies face in terms of limits on advocacy, control over service models, and spaces for resistance. However, even within these challenges, some organizations still find ways to resist the neoliberal stronghold, taking an activist stance in practice (Baines, 2007; Barnoff, 2002; George, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007; Lepischak, 2004; Moffatt, Barnoff, George, & Coleman, 2009; Pearlmutter, 2002; Smith, 2007). We challenge universal understandings of people and social structures that construct binary identities and ignore the fluidity of power. We seek opportunities for building alliances with service users to engage in reconstructing knowledge and identities and creating new discourses about power within an activist agenda. Additionally, in doing so, we resist the neoliberal discourse that individualizes social issues, fragments communities and reifies the market.

Meanwhile, we recognize that once in practice, graduates also may become constrained by managerialism and other aspects of neoliberalism. Poole (2010) argues that while students may be progressive throughout their education, they may become mainstream or depoliticized after graduation. Students often do this to satisfy the expectations within social work practice settings where they seek employment. Perhaps a stronger focus on radical practice in field placements can support students in managing these tensions, such that they are better prepared once they graduate and are employed. We suggest that as academics, we also can be challenged about our activist stance. It is not enough to be critical and challenge the status quo in the classroom; we have to challenge elsewhere. We cannot simply be classroom activists – it is not enough. Otherwise, we replicate the very thing we challenge about students and practitioners – we become critical theorists outside of practice.

This analysis of social work practice and education leads us to consider the current context and logic of field education.

The Traditional Model of Field Education as Agency Based

Field education is designed as a means to bridge theory and practice in social work. “The goal of the [field placement experience] is student acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values by

combining academic learning with real world experience” (Boitel, Farkas, Fromm, & Hokenstad, 2009, p. 401). It exposes students to social service settings, social work processes, and various organizational cultures. Students tend to be placed in social service agencies, usually with an individual field-based practitioner from the agency, who provides direct supervision to the student. The student and supervisor complete a contract that supports the learning objectives of their field education course; this contract guides the work of the student throughout the time of their field placement. Academics assigned to these students provide input and oversee final evaluations but students are most connected to and influenced by their on-site supervisor.

Field education is often agency based; this provides students with a “real” experience of what it is like to be a practitioner in a social service setting. The student/supervisor relationship and evaluation process model the worker/supervisor relationship and practices that students will encounter in the workplace after graduation. Being matched with a single on-site supervisor also provides opportunities for students to work directly with service users under the guidance of a practitioner who has the ultimate responsibility for service delivery, thereby offering some degree of protection to service users.

In many schools, field education is offered through an integrated model (Boitel, Farkas, Fromm, & Hokenstad, 2009), whereby students spend time on campus in classrooms discussing, debriefing, and problem solving their field placement experiences, sometimes with the same faculty member overseeing their field placement. The intent of such integration is to provide a true praxis between theory and practice, whereby students learn theory in the classroom, apply such concepts in their field placement, and then reflect back on the strengths and limitations of theory, through discussions with their classmates and faculty member. In addition to providing opportunities for student learning, field placements also provide opportunities for schools of social work to forge connections with the community, to help keep academics current with practice issues and explore potential partnerships for research and service.

Given its centrality, it is surprising how field education is undervalued in many schools. Field education often only counts for a small number of credits in a BSW curriculum and yet it is central to the knowledge, skills, and values that students develop in their training as future social workers (Garthwait as cited in Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, & Ferrell, 2011). Even structurally, field education is often not an integral part of schools of social work. Faculty are rarely in a leadership role in field education; field education offices seem overseen mostly by managers. In addition, field education courses often do not count the same as other courses for workload credit and tend to be segregated to the workload of part-time instructors (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). Additionally, some faculty have limited experience in social work practice prior to their academic career (Lager & Cooke Robbins, 2004), and faculty hiring practices can favour scholarship over practice.

The field practicum continues to be delivered within and defined by the context of the agency. Students are placed in an agency setting, within a particular sector or geographic location, where they tend to be engaged in program based tasks and activities to meet specific learning objectives. The focus of the student experience becomes very insular wherein the student’s exposure is limited to the agency context, and sometimes only to the program context. The student also connects with one field supervisor, and likely only with that supervisor’s team

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or colleagues. This experience is not that different from what new graduates experience in their first social work job and thus we recognize that this model can prepare some students to engage in agency based social work. However, we also recognize that it poses limitations when the context of practice is under siege (Aronson & Sammon, 2000).

In the current neoliberal stronghold, with its emphasis on managerialism and individualism (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Baines, 2011; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Ife, 1997; McDonald, 2006), we suggest that agency based field education may actually reinforce the very neoliberalism that we critique and seek to resist in our classrooms. We further contend that most field education currently occurs with program or agency based practice learning, in settings that have become depoliticized due to government funding restrictions, potential funding loss, or overall increased service delivery workloads (Baines, 2010; Ferguson, 2007; Webb, 2006). As such, students potentially face a myopic experience that neglects the social, political, and economic context of practice, and that limits the opportunity for broader practices that challenge norms, build alliances, and work towards a transformative social agenda. Without these more radical encounters, students may experience a disconnect between their classroom learning and their field placement experience (Campbell, 2002).

Layered through what is happening within schools, we also recognize the contradictions in how social work education is regulated through accreditation standards. The actual validity of standards themselves has been questioned, noting the over-reliance on anecdotal evidence rather than using rigorous empirical criteria to inform the standards (Raskin, Wayne, & Bogo, 2008). Clearly, there is the need for a significant review and overhaul of such standards, rather than incremental revisions (Nyquist as cited in Kendall, 2002; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). In Canada, a significant review of the accreditation standards was undertaken, resulting in a deliberate progressive shift towards anti-oppressive perspectives (Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), 2009). While these revised standards stress critical analysis, diversity, community needs and understanding oppression, power, and social injustice (CASWE, 2008), our review suggests that such foci is not equally reflected in the field curriculum component of the standards. Field accreditation standards “place little emphasis on social justice” (Wiebe, 2010, p. 70), with a focus mostly on the number of hours in placement, qualifications of field instructors, and evaluation processes (CASWE, 2008). Such foci further reflect a managerial and neoliberal discourse of accountability and credentialism (Smith, 2008) rather than reinforcing the more progressive standards of the curriculum overall. Hence, field education may risk becoming a depoliticized site, where the primary service delivery focus reinforces rather than challenges individualist understandings of social issues.

We value service and strongly acknowledge the importance of social work practice with individuals, families, and groups, and we recognize that in some circumstances, with particular practitioners, there are opportunities for a social justice lens to infuse front-line practice. However, we also recognize that service alone is mostly limited when it comes to more radical goals, and therefore field education that is agency based and focussed on service alone is limited. We suggest that this neglect of a critical framework for field education, though benign, has allowed it to morph into a neoliberal guise. We need to consider how field education can be reconceptualized and realigned with the curriculum, to promote and reinforce the critical

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intentions of social work education. In the following section, we expose the tensions created by the misalignment within social work education.

Tensions within an Era of Neoliberalism

We suggest that within the current model and context of field education practiced by many schools of social work, there are significant tensions. These tensions exist within the curriculum, the classroom, and the agency setting, as well as with the student, the practitioner/on-site supervisor, and the faculty members. Here we consider these tensions, how we manage them, and opportunities for disrupting them.

Exposing and Managing the Tensions

Given our experience in the classroom, we see this tension when students or their field supervisors sometimes question radical theory, as students try to apply those theoretical constructs to practice. Our classrooms are rife with debate as course content and classroom practices challenge the status quo. The debate does not necessarily continue in field placement experiences. On the contrary, students often encounter hierarchical structures and extensive policies and procedures that seem more focussed on liability and risk aversion than challenging societal structures and systems. These experiences can create tensions between classroom content and field experience.

In the process of negotiating these tensions, some students reject neoliberalism and challenge agencies about their mainstream approach and lack of attention to social justice and equity. This fits with Wiebe's (2010) assertion that "the field education experience ought to provide students with the opportunity to go beyond analysis to active engagement in social justice work" (p. 70). In this way, some students are seeking ways to better align the theory of their classrooms with the practice of their field placements.

However, we also have observed that some students take up the dominant discourses of neoliberalism and align more strongly with an agency's mainstream agenda. In this way, they minimize the critical activist content from their classroom learning. Similar to what can occur after graduation (Poole, 2010), such students suggest critical approaches are irrelevant or not realistic in practice, and begin erring on the side of neoliberalism. Dismissing the critical stance and instead accepting the status quo is their response to the tensions between the classroom and the field setting.

We also see agencies constrained by neoliberal funding policies that restrict the social justice agenda of social work within social service agencies (Eakin & Graham, 2009). Without funding, these practices often fall outside the focus of service delivery. It has been our experience that when students are not exposed to such practices, their understanding and application of merging front-line practice with activism becomes limited, thus remaining at the theoretical level only.

Similar to the tensions that students experience in integrating their radical classroom learning within their field placement, field education supervisors may struggle with the tensions

between their commitment to social justice and their agency's focus on individualized service delivery. Many of them may understand the complexity of social issues and the challenges of practicing within the mainstream constraints of neoliberalism. However, within their agencies, they may have little space to explore these tensions. Some supervisors tell us that in their search for spaces of critical reflection to manage these tensions, they attend our field education workshops, where they also build alliances with faculty and other practitioners. In their continued commitment to hold on to their radical selves, they also seek and welcome new knowledge and support from faculty, through faculty field visits and other contact (Wiebe, 2010).

As academics, it is too easy to suggest these tensions vibrate only for students and practitioners within the context of social service agencies as placement settings. Neoliberalism and its tensions also are defining the academy, with its focus on outcomes, efficiency, and the entrepreneurial professoriate, constructing faculty as neoliberal academic subjects (Fairweather, 1996; Gaffin & Perry, 2009; Green, 2008; Hughes, 2007; Larner & Heron, 2005). We pride ourselves on our classroom activism, imagining a type of social work that we aspire to. However, we also have to manage the tensions of neoliberal academic requirements as they challenge our commitment to an anti-oppressive perspective. In addition, we have to be conscious of the risks we take in embracing a critical stance in the broader neoliberal academy.

The tensions are further realized in the challenges that faculty face in teaching practice/field integration seminars. As increasingly neoliberal subjects defined by peer-reviewed outcomes, faculty are spending less and less time in the field, creating a disconnection between classroom and field experiences and a disengagement with the field overall (Kilpatrick, Turner, & Holland, 2006). As this separation between the classroom and the field continues to grow, anti-oppressive social work education is at risk of becoming irrelevant. Within social service settings, constricted and disciplined by neoliberal policies and funding structures, students may model the practices they see in those settings, and supervisors may reinforce this more traditional approach that minimizes context, denies discursive influences, and evades challenges to dominance. In effect, students become trained in the social service setting rather than being prepared for critical practice. This possibility, combined with a disconnected academy, runs the risk of radical social work education becoming immaterial and "[education being redefined] in terms of its contribution to the economy" (Hirsch, 2000, p. 13).

Strategies of resistance are further fraught with risk. Similar to activist academics, activist practitioners risk becoming a vulnerable island of critical thought and practice amidst a sea of neoliberal compliance. Given this vulnerability, we may concede, or fear retribution if we engage in any form of resistance, inadvertently supporting and reproducing the very neoliberalism we are seeking to dismantle. Given that both practitioners and academics are being shaped by neoliberalism, realizing the potential of field as a site of resistance has been limited. What has occurred is tinkering and incremental piecemeal adjustments that have not made a significant change to how field is delivered. If we continue to deliver field education in this manner, are we supporting rather than challenging neoliberalism? Can a radical shift in how field education is practiced actually challenge and resist neoliberalism? We dispatch hundreds of students every year to social service agencies and contribute thousands of hours of service. Are we creating a sizeable labour force of students that both complies with and reproduces the status quo?

Disrupting the Tensions

As we are writing this paper, we are beginning to consider how we might resist the encroaching neoliberalism in social work field education. Our purpose here has been to problematize field education and reveal some tensions inherent in current practices, all within the experience of an activist curriculum in a neoliberal world. It seems there are two broad directions for resisting mainstream constraints and creating a stronger link between classroom and practice learning. One approach might be to create different relationships with agencies and communities, wherein there are stronger roles for faculty in those settings, and for practitioners in the academy. However, such an approach mimics tinkering and risks being subsumed under a neoliberal understanding of partnerships.

Instead, we imagine a more radical transformation of field education overall, drawing on a new understanding of the realm of collaboration between academics, social workers, students, and service users, in constructing new knowledge that is grounded in the experience of service (Healy, 2005). The transformation that we are considering involves a shift away from field placements that are focussed mainly on agency based service-delivery with a limited critical analysis and social justice focus, to placements in which communities and larger social issues are the focus of the field placement. We envision a shift from the traditional agency based model of field education to a community/issue based model. With this shift, field education potentially bridges both service delivery and activism. Field supervisors may shift from individual student responsibility to broader roles in advancing activist strategies in the field. Faculty may find ways to bridge the gap between classrooms and practice by becoming more engaged in field settings, and integrating teaching, research, and practice. We propose a new model of field education, predicated on principles that contextualize marginalization within social relations and centre both reciprocity and reflexivity. Our model, as discussed in detail elsewhere (George, Silver, & Preston, 2013), envisions placements based in communities rather than specific agencies, with the school's field education office acting as a hub for dialogue, collaboration, and action. The next step in our agenda is to explore these and other possibilities for disrupting the neoliberal stronghold on field education, towards a more activist practice.

The time has come when we must rupture the stranglehold that neoliberalism has on social work by focussing attention on field education. We need to reimagine field education creatively, thinking outside the box in a way that exposes and unsettles current practices. This unsettling is not to abandon the agency, but to support their activist intentions that become veiled and constrained within the current context. In effect, we dare to reimagine field education as a site of activism and resistance. We have envisioned one approach (George, Silver, & Preston, 2013), but encourage other schools to consider new models that suit the context in their communities. Overall, we suggest that field education be reconceptualized in ways that link agencies and sectors to the issues that are most relevant to marginalized communities. Further, we posit that as field education becomes organized around issues and communities, the focus of the placement shifts accordingly and unveils opportunities for alliance building. While we recognize the difficulty of shifting the historical model of field, dire times oblige radical responses. The intensity of our response must at least match the intensity of the neoliberal assault. To do otherwise risks submission to the dominant neoliberal discourse and practices – to the detriment of social work's vision and intent.

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