ASSESSING STUDENTS' 'READINESS FOR PRACTICE'

ASSESSING STUDENTS' 'READINESS FOR PRACTICE': FIELD INSTRUCTORS' EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES

By: DONNA M. LAZARUS, B.S.W. Honours

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AUTHOR: Donna M. Lazarus, B.S.W. Honours (York University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Stephanie Baker Collins, Ph.D.

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Abstract

This study aims to explore and understand the ways in which social work field instructors assess 'readiness for practice', particularly in situations where a BSW student has experienced a placement breakdown or failure. Through the examination of existing literature, themes of gatekeeping, assessments of readiness, field instructors' relationships with the academic institutions and tensions between the worlds of social work values and gatekeeping emerged. Rooted in an interpretive methodology and supported by in-person interviews, the study sought the feedback and experiences of five BSW field instructors, with the intention of better understanding the ways in which field instructors assessed 'readiness for practice'. Emphasizing the use of the term 'readiness', the findings suggest that assessing readiness for practice is a multi-layered process. They presented some similarities in the skills and values deemed essential for BSW students to possess to demonstrate readiness and discussed some of the problematic behaviours that contributed towards lack of readiness and placement breakdowns/failures. The findings also discussed the tension that field instructors experience in relation to their mentoring and gatekeeping roles and their desires to see an increase in the collaborative relationships with academic institutions. This study encourages field instructors and Schools of Social Work to critically analyze and explore ways in which they can advance their relationship and work collectively to address issues pertaining to lack of readiness for practice.

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Assessing Students' 'Readiness for Practice': Field Instructors' Experiences and Perspectives

This study aims to explore and understand the ways in which social work field instructors assess 'readiness for practice', particularly in situations where a BSW student has experienced a placement breakdown or failure. Through the examination of existing literature, themes of gatekeeping, assessments of readiness, field instructors' relationships with the academic institutions and tensions between the worlds of social work values and gatekeeping emerged. Rooted in an interpretive methodology, and through the support of in-person interviews, the study sought the feedback and experiences of five BSW field instructors, with the intention of better understanding the ways in which field instructors assessed readiness for practice. Emphasizing the use of the term 'readiness', the findings suggest that assessing readiness for practice is a multi-layered process. They presented some similarities in the skills and values deemed essential for BSW students to possess to demonstrate readiness and discussed some of the problematic behaviours that contributed towards lack of readiness and placement breakdowns/failures. The findings also discussed the tension that field instructors experience in relation to their mentoring and gatekeeping roles and their desires to see an increase in the collaborative relationships with academic institutions. This study encourages field instructors and Schools of Social Work to critically analyze and explore

ways in which they can advance their relationship and work collectively to address issues pertaining to lack of readiness for practice.

1. Introduction to the Topic

Field education is a critical component in any undergraduate social work program. It represents the bridge between practical and theoretical knowledge and the translation of a student's theory based learning into more concrete, tangible, practice/clinical skills and knowledge. Wendy Foote states that the "experience is compounded by a new pedagogical method: students learn and develop and practice skills in a 'real' setting as they are assessed" (2015, p. 287). My love for social work education, particularly field placement began as an undergraduate student embarking on my own practicum experience. The exciting clinical opportunities, nurturing environment, and the wealth of knowledge that I gained from my peers and field supervisor contributed to a solidified love for social work and a hunger to venture out into the professional world as a social worker. My interest in being an active field instructor for BSW students stemmed from my undergraduate experience and a desire to be able to create and provide that positive opportunity for someone else.

Early on in my social work career, I found myself intuitively developing mentorship relationships with new staff and students and was encouraged by a supervisor to become a field instructor. I viewed field instruction as an opportunity to give back to the social work community and sought to continue fostering nurturing environments for

students to learn and develop. As an instructor who has been in this role for the past four years, I take great pride in being able to provide critical and integral learning opportunities to students who are looking to develop their clinical skill and knowledge and prepare themselves to be social work professionals entering the work force.

As previously mentioned, my passion for field instruction and the importance placed on it by Schools of Social Work, greatly influenced the way I approach field instruction as a supervisor- with the utmost respect, and dignity. I relish the energy that students bring to their learning, the thirst with which they approach all new opportunities and the critical ways in which they examine and challenge the status quo in the placement environment. Having had such enriching experiences, I was surprised when one of my students experienced a placement breakdown. Through the support of the school and the wonderful collaboration of the faculty liaison we were able to navigate this delicate and challenging situation in a respectful manner.

This experience caused me to wonder how other field instructors navigate challenging situations with students and how they assess readiness for practice. There is a great onus placed on field instructors (as they bear the responsibility) to conclusively ascertain if a student is fairing well or not, and potentially to determine that a student is not performing well enough to pass the placement. Historically, some instructors have shied away from challenging and difficult conversations pertaining to readiness for practice, due to the fear of the implications that it may have for students.

More recently McMaster University along with other Schools of Social Work have started to engage in conversations relating to the idea of 'readiness for practice' and 'preparedness' and the best ways to support students as they journey towards completing their undergraduate degrees. The concept of 'readiness' undoubtedly presents many complexities and layers; but as many educational institutions shift towards the necessity of assessing readiness for practice, how does that impact the educational experience that Schools of Social Work offer? The emergence of this conversation with the institution, coupled with my own experience supervising a student whose placement resulted in a breakdown, intrigued me and created a desire in me to further explore this area of study. Through my research I will be exploring the contributions of field instruction towards the larger academic experience of BSW students.

1.1 Research Purpose and Question

This qualitative study sought to explore the concept of assessing readiness for practice; looking particularly at the experiences of field instructors who have supervised students whose placement had resulted in a breakdown or failure. It also aimed to extrapolate first hand, the perspective and experiences of field instructors, their conceptualization of readiness and the ways in which they define "readiness". The study was developed with the collaborative input and support of Christina Sinding, Director of the McMaster School of Social Work, Stephanie Baker Collins my MSW Thesis

Supervisor, and Janice Chaplin, Field Co-ordinator from the McMaster School of Social Work, which I will further discuss in the Methodology chapter.

The purpose of this project is to: (1) explore and gain a better understanding of field instructors' perceptions about their process in assessing readiness for practice with BSW students who have experienced a placement breakdown or failure, (2) to identify formal and informal tools that field instructors utilize in their assessment of readiness, (3) to compare and contrast the findings of the study with current literature and practices, and (4) to apply the findings and suggestions to current social work practice.

As will be demonstrated in the "Methodology" and "Findings" chapters, most of my questions are situated around the instructors' experience, observations, insights, clinical expertise, judgment and their engagement with the school. My hope is that this research project will not only provide further knowledge and insight for field instructors in future years (including myself), but that it will be a helpful tool for Schools of Social Work, as they explore ideas pertaining to readiness for practice. Field placement and field instruction remain a critical part of the social work educational experience. A failure to ensure the achievement of readiness could result in highly compromising situations for future clients of those individuals who are not ready but deemed ready for practice. It is of the utmost importance that we connect with field instructors that are passionate, committed and supportive of the educational needs of BSW students and explore their role in contributing towards the academic success of our current and future students.

1.2 Outline of the Study

The first chapter of this study has outlined the conceptualization of the research question, development of the study and the relevance of this topic to the field of social work and the current study. Chapter Two will provide an examination of the current literature relating to assessing readiness for practice in social work education and field placement. The literature review will focus on the role of field instructors as assessors of readiness and the ways in which field instructors establish the achievement of readiness for practice. Chapter Three will outline and discuss the methodological approaches taken, the research design and the sampling used in the study. Chapter Four will consist of the presentation of the findings of the in-person interviews that were conducted with BSW field instructors and Chapter Five will provide a detailed examination and discussion of the themes that emerged during the data collection process. Limitations and recommendations will also be included in Chapter Five along with concluding comments. Chapter Six serves as a tribute to field instructors and presents their reasons for continuing to engage in field instruction.

2. Literature Review

There is a growing movement amongst Schools of Social Work to explore the ways in which competency and readiness are evaluated. With an increasing need for a critical examination of the current admissions process, curriculum, and field placement requirements, many social work professionals and academics have been exploring the need to ensure that BSW students have demonstrated the skills and values necessary to enter the work force. As a current field instructor and clinician, I am passionate about field education and providing great learning opportunities for future social workers. Having supervised a student who struggled through their placement, I was intrigued by how other field instructors navigated this process, and how they assessed lack of readiness in students who were struggling in their field placement. This propelled my interest in examining the literature surrounding readiness and competency in social work education and field placement.

As I approached the existing literature, I desired to learn how field instructors assessed 'readiness and lack of readiness'. Were there any elements or characteristics that they utilized outside of formal measures that assisted in the process of determining what readiness or lack of readiness look like? The focus of this chapter is to provide an integrated description of the existing literature and to discuss the main themes that emerged: (1) the role of field instructors in gatekeeping, (2) the importance of self-awareness and a willingness to grow, (3) the role of competency-based education models and 4) the relationship between academic institutions and field instructors. I will

also discuss the connections between the existing literature and my research findings in Chapter Five.

2.1 Field Instructors as Gatekeepers

A majority of the existing literature regarding social work education comments on the role of academics, particularly field instructors as gatekeepers to the professional world of social work. Koerin and Miller define gatekeeping as the responsibility of social work educators to "prevent the graduation of students who are not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice" (1995, p. 247). Sobel references Moore and Urwin's work and defines gatekeeping as "the professional obligation of social work educators to ensure that graduates are fit to practice social work by screening out unqualified students who may cause harm to clients" (2012, p.27). Furthermore, Moore and Urwin (1991) urge their readers to consider that, "gatekeeping is the professional responsibility of social work educators to determine whether a student should enter the social work profession" (p. 8). The concept of gatekeeping is not new to the field of social work, and many academics have struggled with the challenges of implementing strategies for gatekeeping that ensure only suitable students are entering the work force. Bearing a similar perspective Lafrance, Gray & Herbert (2004) highlight the importance of implementing gatekeeping measures in Schools of Social Work to determine suitability for the profession. Moore and Urwin (1991) view gatekeeping as a continuous process that "begins with guarding the entrance, includes providing

responsible education, and concludes with guarding the exit" (p. 9). There is a clear emphasis and expectation that academic institutions should be engaging in the process of screening for suitability from the onset to the very last step.

Moore and Urwin's (1991) emphasis on gatekeeping fuelled the concept for an admissions process (also known as an evaluation conference) to field education, which aimed to serve as an evaluation tool and an opportunity for students to engage in self-assessment prior to commencing their field education. Their model of evaluation is based on "curricular process" (Moore & Urwin, 1991, p.11). The authors note that the success of this model is hinged on the assumption that students are receiving experiential learning (Moore & Urwin, 1991) and feedback in their courses. To facilitate the process of ascertaining suitability, the authors outlined concrete steps that should be implemented. These steps begin with a student enrolling in an introductory social work class, and completing volunteer hours concurrently. Subsequently, Moore and Urwin (1991) outline that students should complete an application for entrance into field placement, which "describes their strengths and limitations, areas of practice interest, experience with giving or receiving help, and demographic and academic information" (p.11); this, in turn, prepares them for the faculty conference in which students are screened for readiness to enter placement based on skills, goals and learning needs. The conference, Moore and Urwin (1991) identify, revolves around discussions pertaining to academic achievements and progress, work/volunteer experience, and extenuating factors that may have impacted a student's performance. The motivation to become a social worker is also discussed at length and explored for positive and negative attributes, along with historical

trauma and personal experiences. The goal of the conference is to collaboratively evaluate and discuss the strengths and areas of growth of the student, namely "academic performance, sense of responsibility, communication skills, adherence to social work values, and ability to handle feedback" (Moore & Urwin, 1991, p.12) and to develop their areas of interest within the field. In the final element of the process, Moore and Urwin (1991) outline that a decision regarding the approval, removal, or postponement of the student's application is made. The process, although quite extensive, reiterates what the literature has already highlighted as a necessity for gatekeeping roles.

One of the most challenging aspects of the gatekeeping role presented by the literature is the clash between measuring competency and subscribing to social work values (Bogo, Regehr, Power & Regehr, 2007). The CASW (2005) introduced and outlined the following as values that should be upheld by all social workers: (1) respect and dignity for all people, (2) the pursuit of social justice, (3) human service, (4) integrity (5) confidentiality and (6) competency in professional practice. This discussion pertaining to competency in practice extends to conversations regarding the importance of delivering quality service towards clients and increasing professional knowledge; however the need to ensure that unhealthy and unready practitioners are not entering the field and causing harm to clients is missing (CASW, 2005). The gatekeeping role is concerned with the assessment of readiness and the protection of the field, and not just the measurement of competency through skill based evaluations and scales. This objective of the gatekeeping role is to ensure skilled and competent practitioners are entering the field. This entails the

demonstration of non-academic criteria, which are discussed in section 2.3 along with the academic requirements.

Field instructors are often left questioning the effectiveness of current methods and means of measuring student competency that are attached to the gatekeeping responsibilities of social work programs (Bogo et al., 2004). This debate has elicited varied responses that highlight the challenges faced by field instructors in terminating students from placement for non-academic reasons. Respondents in a study conducted by Ryan, Habibis and Craft (1997) indicated that an inability to "define lack of suitability for the profession and to formulate concrete criteria for non-academic reasons" (p.10) were major contributors to their hesitance to terminate a student for non-academic reasons. Some of the issues that result in placement failures are: difficulty with incorporating theory into practice, the wounded helper phenomena, extreme narcissism, and blatant unethical practice (Lafrance et al., 2004). Younes (1998) argues that a lack of clear, defined and consistent policies creates challenges for educators who acknowledge the importance in gatekeeping and take the role and responsibility very seriously; "Educators engage in gatekeeping in response to internal and external expectations for programs to graduate competent and ethical practitioners" (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 151).

2.2 The Conflict between Social Work Values and Gatekeeping:

A substantial amount of the existing literature focused on competency and readiness, illuminates the conflict that has existed between field instructors/academics

espousing social work values and engaging in gatekeeping for the good of the profession. "The mandate of social work education is to prepare students who are knowledgeable, skilled and ethically suitable for professional practice" (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 151). So how then do unsuitable students enter the professional sphere? Finch and Taylor (2013) present a British perspective recognizing that field instructors fear legal ramifications and struggle with the emotional toll that failing a student takes on the field instructor. Bogo et al. (2007) who have written extensively on the subject of competency and measuring suitability, note that field instructors reported a conflict between "the need to determine skill levels and their deeply held professional values, such as being nonjudgmental, using a strengths perspective, individualizing the person one is working with, and understanding behaviours in context" (p. 107). Social workers are taught to uphold social work values and ethics at all times, and the gatekeeping role contradicts some of those values.

The notion of gatekeeping emphasizes the policing of the entrance to the academic institutions and fields of practice, rather than the mentorship and instruction that typically are synonymous with social work education. Although developing concrete measurement criteria can be beneficial to evaluating suitability or readiness Lafrance and colleagues (2004) conclude that it can create a 'slippery slope', which can result in criteria that increase fear, decrease safety and contribute to the creation of harmful conditions for students.

The concept of 'screening-out' is presented as a contentious idea within the world of social work education. Faculty and field instructors struggle to endorse this approach,

as they believe it lies in direct contradiction with social work values. In a study from 2003, Barlow and Coleman looked to review pertinent gatekeeping issues. They discuss the results of a survey conducted in Canadian social work programs on suitability policies and the implementation of a suitability policy at the University of Calgary. This event coincided with a push from the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work to implement gatekeeping tools in social work programs. Barlow and Coleman (2003) identified that while most Schools of Social Work were moving towards the creation and implementation of formalized suitability policies, the process of developing these policies came with its own challenges and struggles. Some of the challenges were identified as follows: "...identifying specific criteria, determining how to avoid punishing 'difference, respecting fundamental human rights, and defining a just and fair process that considers the student, the profession, and the future cohort of clients" (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 163). The authors insist that further research and evaluation is necessary to assess the effectiveness of the suitability policies implemented at the various Schools of Social Work.

Along those lines, another area in which gatekeeping can be enacted is through the admissions process. Regher et al. (2001) in their study on gatekeeping and the "wounded" student explore the benefits of screenings students who may be at risk, by examining their personal statements, which may demonstrate problematic areas such as childhood trauma, history of abuse and neglect. The study examines the reasons that students enter the profession of social work and some of the risk that students who are not suitable pose for the profession and for potential clients. Regher et al. (2001) go on to say, "both faculty

and field supervisors experience internal conflict when, as educators with social work values, judgements must be made about the professional suitability of other individuals" (p. 128). This conflict at times appears to prevent faculty from making tough decisions regarding student suitability, due to the belief that they may mature and grow.

2.3 Key Criteria Measured by Field Instructors Beyond Formalized Tools

Another theme that has emerged from the literature is the struggle to measure competency with the limited evaluation tools provided. Lafrance et al. (2014) approach the idea of readiness from an inquisitive perspective, seeking to ascertain how field instructors assess readiness for entry-level practice. This stems from the idea that field instructors may be using more than the prescribed competency tools to evaluate suitability for practice. Comments from a focus group conducted by Bogo et al. (2004) demonstrate that decision making criteria for suitability was predominantly based on personality characteristics and not on explicit skills. Through their research, Lafrance et al. (2014) asked field instructors to describe potential indicators that identified that an individual may not be suitable for practice in the field of social work, and also required them to define their conceptualization of professional unsuitability. Four themes emerged from the study: (1) Personal qualities (2) Capacity and willingness for self-awareness (3) Capacity for social work relationships and, (4) Personal congruence with social work values (Lafrance et al., 2004). Similarly Bogo et al. (2006) uncovered three themes through their findings, which impacted student performance in field placement: students'

personal qualities which affect their approach to learning, their behaviour within the organization, and their ability to conceptualize practice.

Maturity was highlighted as one of the fundamental elements that field instructors looked for when assessing suitability for social work practice (Bogo et al., 2006; Lafrance et al., 2004). "In describing exemplary students, field instructors often began by identifying attributes such as maturity, initiative, energy, independence, responsiveness to others and commitment" (Bogo et al., 2006, p 582). In the same vein, arguments have been made that chronological age is not an indicator of maturity, an element that needs to exist in congruence with academic abilities (Lafrance et al., 2004). The issue of how suitability is determined has proven arduous for field instructors who identify that elements outside of the scope of formalized measurement tools are utilized as a critical part of the process.

Field instructors also identified the importance of students being able to demonstrate integrity and honesty in their practice, a level of comfort with expressing emotions in a healthy manner, the capacity and willingness to engage in self-awareness, capacity for social work relationships and personal congruence with social work values (Lafrance et al., 2004). A willingness to increase personal growth and self-awareness was also highlighted as integral to the evaluation conference process (Moore and Urwin, 1991). Movement through the process of field placement can only happen if students are open and willing to explore their motivations for entering the field, how childhood experiences and trauma may have impacted that choice and how they believe that experience may unfold or impact their current/future work. The literature appeared to

speak at length about the necessity for students to demonstrate a capacity to learn and grow, utilizing self-awareness. Lafrance et al. (2004) reference previous studies conducted by Russell & Hill and Hawkins & Hawkins, which suggest "social work students report a greater incidence of psychosocial trauma and dysfunctional families than students in other faculties" (p. 332). A lack of self-awareness or recognition of the impact of these experiences can result in problematic experiences for the student in the field and an inability to regulate themselves.

Both Bogo and colleagues (2006) and Lafrance and colleagues (2004) stressed the need for students to demonstrate professionalism in the workplace and the ability to develop healthy relationships with colleagues, collaterals and clients. Field instructors often examine this skill set with a critical lens and assess suitability keeping this aspect in mind. Sussman, Richardson and Granner (2014) looked to identify how field instructors judge readiness for practice amongst BSW students. Through their work they also identified many elements that overlapped with Bogo et al. (2006) and Lafrance et al.'s (2004) findings for measuring readiness for practice in social work students. Personal characteristics such as autonomy, flexibility, openness, maturity, curiosity, and confidence were deemed necessary for entry into practice (Sussman et al., 2014). Ethical practice and dignity, self-reflection and conceptualization abilities were amongst the other criteria identified as crucial (Sussman et al., 2014). While the similarities are many amongst the three studies, only Sussman et al. (2014) reported working with diversity as a desirable criteria assessed in social work students. The literature articulates that despite demonstrations of competence in social work skills and academics, field instructors are

often looking for the value-based characteristics to provide support in measuring suitability for practice. These characteristics are often absent, when considering competency criteria or "necessary" lists of skills and the current criteria is not helpful in measuring or assessing these value-based characteristics that are considered integral to the demonstration of readiness by a BSW student.

2.4 The Relationship between Field Instructors and the Academic Institution

It is evident that in order for practicum experiences to continue happening on a consistent basis, Schools of Social Work and field instructors must work together seamlessly, to support the learning needs of students. Foote (2015) states that, "social work schools and FEs [Field Educators] are involved in an educational partnership: together they ensure that the profession is replenished in this interdependent relationship" (296). Although slightly older, there appears to be a great volume of literature published in the 1980s and 1990s, which focuses particularly on the relationship of the faculty liaison and the field instructor. The significance of this literature relates to the attention it draws to this critical relationship and in turn highlights the fact that writings on this subject, appear to have decreased dramatically over the last 10-15 years. A majority of the research discusses the ways in which collaborative work can be achieved and also presents the tension arising out of some of these relationships. In illustrating the relationship that exists between the field instructor and academic institution, Frumkin (1980) states:

> "In developing ties with the field, schools frequently rely on an appeal to the agency's commitment to professional values – to it's ethical obligation to provide training to future professionals…because the total needs of both schools and agencies are not taken into account, neither is satisfied with the other's performance" (p. 91).

Frumkin (1980) argues that the belief (held by schools) that agencies will feel compelled to support the training of future professionals due to a professional responsibility is an inaccurate assumption. He defines this notion as the "professional commitment fallacy" (Frumkin, 1980, p. 92) and attributes some aspects of the tension that exists between both parties, to this misconceived notion.

Academic institutions are often represented by faculty liaisons, who serve as a bridge between the student, school and field instructor. Although the faculty liaison can advocate on behalf of students, ultimately they serve as an extension of the academic institution and this relationships carries with it, some inherent power, as identified by Rosenblum and Raphael (1983). They further go on to state, "the existence of this threesome – student, field instructor and liaison – holds within it the potential for effective educational collaboration as well as the risk of power plays, triangles, and dysfunctional alliances" (1983, p. 70). In the same vein, McInnis-Dittrich and Coe (1997) also discuss 'triangular relationships in field education' drawing on Murray Bowen's work on the triangulation of family dynamics and relationships and mirrors this concept onto the field education triad- namely practicum student, field instructor and faculty liaison. McInnis-Dittrich and Coe believe that:

> "The process of triangulation can force members of the triad to shift allegiances onto destructive coalitions, to engage a third party to diffuse dyad tensions, or to unilaterally redefine power relationships. The product of triangulation is an

> emotional web which distracts all parties from the ultimate goal of field education" (1997, p.92).

The idea of faculty liaisons developing unhealthy alliances with either field instructors or students presents as problematic to the learning process and can have negative implications for either party. All parties involved, primarily field instructors and faculty liaisons (educational institutions) hold expectations of the other, which at times are not presented clearly. Faria, Brownstein and Smith (1988) conducted a study of 64 field instructors' perceptions of the role of the faculty liaison, seeking feedback on their experience collaborating with the faculty liaisons. Field instructors' perceptions of the role of the faculty liaison appeared to differ from the way in which the schools had defined their role (Faria, Brownstien & Smith, 1988) thus resulting in unmet expectations in certain situations. The responsibilities of the faculty liaison as intended by the schools were divided into four functions and six roles: (1) advisor, (2) monitor, (3) consultant, (4) teacher, (5) mediator, (6) advocate, and the functions comprised of, (7) practicum placement, (8) linkage, (9) evaluation and (10) administrator (Faria et al., 1988). Some of the participants in the study (field instructors) felt that faculty liaisons should provide guidance and support to the student as well as the field instructor and this responsibility went unmet (Faria et al., 1988). Field instructors also felt that the consultative part of the faculty liaison role, as well as the linkage piece, appeared to be lacking at times (Faria et al., 1988). These responsibilities were viewed as important to instructors and the absence of it, resulted in unmet expectations for field instructors.

The research further demonstrates that most field instructors continue taking on students based on the satisfaction they attain from working with future social workers

(Bennett & Coe, 1998) and being able to cultivate a hospitable learning environment. Their satisfaction with a particular academic program hinged entirely on the satisfaction they experienced with the field liaison and their perception of the support offered to them by the faculty field liaison (Bennet & Coe, 1998). A majority of the social work schools offer training for professionals interested in becoming field instructors; however Bogo and Power (1992) highlight the displeasure of some field instructors, who felt that they received inadequate support from academic institutions in supporting placement students. Foote best captures the complexity of the triad relationship:

> "There are ethical dimensions for all involved – the student has to wrestle with the possible consequences of the revelation of personal circumstances that might interrupt their learning; the AE [Academic Educator] (if they are aware of an undisclosed learning issue) must weigh up the possible negative impact on the placement if the FE is not prepared and the possible impact on the client's of the placement; the FE must attempt to guide student learning (perhaps in the absence of significant information), while respecting the student's right to privacy." (2015, p. 297).

What is interesting about the discussion pertaining to the relationship between the academic institution and the field instructor and should be noted is not the direct correlation to the gatekeeping conversation, but rather the gap that exists between the two entities in certain circumstances. Although many field instructors report having positive relationships with the academic institution, a lack of support from the faculty liaison or the larger academic institution can impact a field instructor's ability to make difficult decisions regarding the readiness of a student. It should be noted that although field instructors are the assessors of readiness for practice, they rely on the collaborative efforts of both the academic institution and the student to create and foster an environment

conducive to the learning needs of a student and to make decision regarding the readiness of a student for practice.

2.5 Assessing Readiness for Practice in BSW Students

Gatekeeping and competency within the field of social work are subjects that have been examined at length by researchers in academia. As discussed in this literature review, there is a considerable amount of information, which deconstructs the notion of gatekeeping and the implications on field instructors and academic social workers. It also highlights the conversations surrounding the somewhat contentious idea of competency-based models of education and measurement. However what appears to be lacking, is current literature that examines how field instructors assess lack of readiness for practice in students who are struggling in field placement, resulting in either a placement breakdown or failure. The intention of my research is to examine the intangible elements and judgements used by field instructors when assessing readiness in field settings.

Sussman et al. (2014) and Lafrance (2004) are amongst the few writers that have focused their research on the specific element of capturing field instructors' responses to assessing readiness. Bogo et al. (2006) also contributed to the conversation on suitability and readiness by drawing upon the feedback of experienced field instructors to comment on how they evaluated exemplary and poorly performing students in field placement. Sussman et al. (2014) do a helpful job of focusing in on the specific research topic that I want to explore and providing me with a rich compilation of information; however even

they identify that "... there exists relatively little empirical literature informing how field instructors judge competence, suitability, or readiness for practice." (p.84). Sussman et al. utilize language that reflects the language that I am using in approaching this research topic.

2.6 Summary

The existing literature has demonstrated there is a great deal of information provided on gatekeeping and the explicit role that social work faculty and field instructors are expected to play in ensuring only the "best" students enter direct practice. This expectation asserted by both academic institutions and national accrediting bodies can feel like a contradiction with social work values such as non-judgmental values, self-awareness and person's right to self-determination. Although some researchers have explored the experiences of field instructors in assessing suitability for practice, the literature remains limited. "Social work educators in both the schools and the fields must persist in efforts to evaluate students in a manner that balances concern for the individual with the important responsibility of gatekeeping" (Regher et al., 2001, p.142). My hope is that my research will contribute to the understanding of how field instructors assess lack of readiness with students who are struggling in placement and will provide some insight and helpful strategies for the field instructors and perhaps even suggestions for a tool that can be implemented that can support field instructors in making these difficult decisions, which although unsavoury are very necessary as assessors of readiness

3. Methodology

When exploring the concept of assessing readiness for practice, field instructors play a pivotal role in contributing to the data collection and expansion of knowledge. The theoretical approach applied to an intellectual puzzle is critical to determining what questions will be asked, how the information will be gathered, and the various explanations and arguments that can be developed from the data collection. As I delve into learning more about how field instructors assess readiness for practice with BSW students who are struggling in placement, I approach the subject with curiosity hoping to elicit responses that capture lived experiences and perceptions from individuals who have encountered these situations. Based on the desire to learn more about the *concept* of readiness for practice, I will be applying an interpretive lens to investigate my research question, which is "how do field instructors assess lack of readiness for practice in BSW students who are struggling in placement?" I will also employ an interpretive methodology to collect and analyze the data acquired through this project, recognizing that the understanding of this topic is derived from those with lived experiences and not assumed ahead of time by experts, in this situation, myself.

Through the use of qualitative methodology, field instructors will be provided an opportunity to comment on how assessments of readiness are determined in field settings. This focus contrasts the considerable literature that exists on the topic of gatekeeping. I am interested not so much in the function of gatekeeping, but in the assessment of readiness for practice, which precedes gatekeeping. Building on the limited literature that

exists relevant to this topic, I will develop a comprehensive understanding of how field instructors determine lack of readiness in students, especially within settings in which students are struggling in their field placement. My analysis will be structured around questions that explore field instructors' experiences, rather than students' stories of placement failure or breakdown.

3.1 Theoretical Perspective and Methodology: Social Constructionism & Interpretivism

Based on the epistemological viewpoint of social constructionism, interpretivism emphasizes the belief that the world and knowledge are socially constructed – rooted in the interactions of a person with the world. Social constructionism finds its established origins in the work of Berger and Luckmann who authored *The Social Construction of Reality* in 1966. This body of work contributed towards the shifting of many social science researchers, in their approach to viewing the construction of knowledge. These pioneers proposed that, "society exists as both an objective and subjective reality, and argued that our social world can be understood as a dialectical process of externalization, objectivation and internalization" (Cunliffe, 2008, p.125). A new understanding of both realities contributed towards the strengthening of the interpretive perspective. It is important to note that for social constructionists, "truth is multiple [truths], contextual and communal" (Witkin, 2012, p. 25) and this impacts the ability of researchers to gain greater clarity and knowledge about meaning and truth.

One of the necessities of a social constructionist approach is the creation of a relationship with the participants in order to facilitate the sharing of their stories in their own terms (Charmaz, 2000). It also values, "listening to their stories with openness to feeling and experience" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 525). What Charmaz highlights here is the importance of paying attention to the nuanced nature of the data being collected. My intention is to seek an understanding of the ways in which field instructors assess and define 'readiness for practice' through their narratives, personal truths, and experiences.

The interpretive approach as a theoretical perspective lends itself well to phenomenology and eliciting perceptions/understandings of meaning. Outhwaite (2005) defined interpretivism as "a label for approaches stressing the importance of subjective meanings carried by actions and institutions in the social world" (p. 110). Sheppard (2006) discusses interpretivism as a way in which humans make sense of the world, other people's behaviours and/or social interactions. Rooted in the idea that knowledge is socially constructed, interpretive theory, "is interested in knowledge of *what it is like* to be a social actor of a particular kind, and in how such people understand their social situations" (Outhwaite, 2005, p.11). Mason (2002) comments that the aim of interpretivism is to, "explore people's individual and collective understandings, reasoning processes, social norms and so on…an interpretive approach therefore not only sees people as a primary data source, but seeks their perceptions" (pg. 56). Mason's definition of interpretivism highlights the core of this theoretical perspective, which seeks to understand and tease apart processes, meanings and individual conceptions of existing language and norms.

A critical focus of interpretivism is the importance given to understanding knowledge from the inside rather than providing outside explanations (Outhwaite, 2005) for social phenomenon and meaning. An insider perspective is a valuable component of approaching research from an interpretive perspective, as it targets the source of knowledge and seeks to building understanding from the perspectives provided. Neuman (1997) discusses the relationship between interpretivism and hermeneutics, highlighting the importance of the reader or researcher understanding the insider perspective and applying that understanding to the whole. Adding to this understanding of knowledge construction, Witkin (2012) states that, "the ways in which we describe the world are mediated by language…thus, social constructionists are more interested in the utility of descriptions than in their "Truth"' (p.18). Interpretive researchers often seek to develop "an in-depth understanding of how they create meaning in everyday life" (Neuman, 1997, p. 68) and to dissect the use of language in creating descriptions, which is exactly what I intend to do as I explore field instructors' perceptions and experiences of assessing readiness for practice.

3.2 The Insider View & Reflexivity

An interpretive approach coupled with a phenomenological lens will allow me to approach my intellectual puzzle with curiosity and wonder- seeking meaning and understanding from field instructors' lived experiences. As an active member of the field instructor community, who developed this project out of my own personal interest and

experience, it is essential for me to bring to the forefront the biases, assumptions and presuppositions that I hold with regards to the research topic, so that I can ensure that I engage in ethical research, that allows the voices of the participants to be heard over the beliefs of the researcher. An extremely helpful component in ensuring that I was engaging in reflexive research, was having regular discussion about my thoughts, ideas and intentions (throughout the research process) with my thesis supervisor, who was able to provide an objective perspective at all times. Dowling (2006) argues that engaging in reflexivity "involves an intersubjective process of vibrant tension between oneself as a subject and oneself as an object" (p. 9). The author goes on further to articulate that the creation of this tension is best achieved through the establishment of a relationship with the research supervisor (Dowling 2006) that mirrors the achievements of clinical supervision. Being able to have honest conversations with my thesis supervisor allowed me to develop that tension and critically reflect on the choices that I made at every stage.

Interpretivism will allow me to identify how field instructors construct meaning pertaining to lack of readiness as well as their decision making process in determining student readiness. This lens supports the exploration of experiences and assigned meaning, which can be facilitated through interviews conducted with field instructors. "The interpretive approach notes that human action has little inherent meaning. It acquires meaning among people who share a meaning system that permits them to interpret it as a socially relevant sign or action" (Neuman, 1997, p.69). Through daily life and action we adopt and assign meaning to concepts that exist based on our social reality. Field instructors develop their own perceptions and meanings relating to how they

ascertain lack of readiness for practice, and these elements contribute to their understanding of the concept as a whole.

The beauty of an interpretive approach is that it has a specific research goal in mind but allows for substantial freedom to arrive at that goal. For example, interviews that encourage the sharing of experiences and meaning. Employing an interpretive theoretical and methodological perspective enables me to focus on eliciting responses that highlight the elements that field instructors consider essential in determining lack of readiness for practice in student experiences. I will also be encouraging field instructors to comment on their experiences of assessing lack of readiness for practice, which will enable me to acquire a clear understanding of what this concept means to different field instructors and how they enact the process.

3.3 Applying a Interpretive Approach to the Data

As discussed above, the interpretive perspective is largely consumed with the construction of meaning and lived experiences, which allow individuals the opportunity to comment on how people make sense of their experiences. The open-ended conversation that happens between the participant and the interviewer often leads to new information or the presenting of ideas in a new fashion. Interpretive research does not enter the research space with preconceived conclusions that it is testing but rather allows themes to emerge from the data. These themes would highlight the important aspects of the data that have been vocalized by participants and pay credence to existing knowledge

or encourage new perspectives. The features that I will look for within the text may relate to verbal sequences and the definitions, metaphors and phrases used. I will also be exploring concepts that emerge from the interviews as identified by the participants, and comparing and contrasting the particularly the ways in which participants conceptualize and define readiness.

The interpretive approach is also interested in looking for contrasting views. An interpretive interviewer recognizes the individuality of each participant and the value in evoking narrative responses. This recognizes the uniqueness that each person brings to the interview and accounts for the varying expressions of experience and meaning that arise. Based on the responses of participants there can sometimes be contrasting themes which appear to conflict with each other. This does not mean that either view is wrong or that the data collection is erroneous but rather instructs the researcher to explore the contrast in the themes and what they may be conveying.

3.4 Research Methods

This study was constructed as a project seeking the perceptions and experiences of BSW field instructors as they assess readiness for practice, particularly in situations in which a student has experienced a placement failure or breakdown. As a field instructor myself, belonging to the community and possessing an 'insider' view, I had to be mindful of the beliefs and biases that I held. Engaging in reflexive practice throughout the process was a necessity in order to ensure that I did not influence my participants' responses in

any manner and that I created an environment where participants enjoyed safety, anonymity and comfortability when speaking about potentially sensitive and difficult information.

As briefly mentioned in the Introduction, I met with faculty members at the McMaster School of Social work, to discuss the recruitment process and any potential ethical challenges that may arise, prior to submitting the ethics application. Christina Sinding (Director of the School of Social Work), Janice Chaplin (Field Co-ordinator Assistant Professor) and Stephanie Baker Collins (Associate Professor and my thesis supervisor) all graciously provided me with their time, input and academic perspectives regarding the concept of readiness and the importance of this topic to the social work community. These dialogues were tremendously helpful in allowing me to develop my research project and questions in a comprehensive manner. What also arose out of these conversations, were some of the challenges that recruitment could pose, namely as an insider belonging to the field instructor community. These included (1) the potential for field instructors to know me on a professional level and as a result perhaps feel uncomfortable participating, (2) challenges to recruiting from a specific pool, i.e. McMaster BSW Field Instructors. How would I be able to reach out to this group of individuals without acquiring their information (which would constitute a breach of confidentiality), (3) recruiting without compromising confidentiality or anonymity of the field instructors?

Following the approval of the ethics application (see *Appendix A: Ethics Approval*) by the Research Ethics Board at McMaster University I initiated the

recruitment process by seeking out participants from the McMaster BSW field instructor community, via email (see *Appendix B: Email Recruitment Script*) in which details about the research project and the consent information were provided (see *Appendix C*: *Letter of Information/Consent*) and sent out on my behalf by Janice Chaplin (Field Co-ordinator). Acquiring participants was not a challenging task at all, as several individuals responded within the first two days. Participants were asked to respond directly to me expressing their interest in being a part of the research study and candidates were chosen primarily on a first come, first serve basis. Due to the specific focus of the study, (assessing readiness for practice in situations in which there was a placement breakdown or failure) I did decline some candidates who had not experienced a placement breakdown or failure with a student they supervised, and also had to turn away interested candidates as I had already recruited a sufficient number of participants for the study. I was however extremely grateful for the enthusiastic response that I received from field instructors and appreciative of their willingness to contribute towards furthering field education.

Once the selection and consent process was completed, participants engaged in a face-to-face interview that consisted of ten narrative based, exploratory questions administered by myself (see *Appendix D: Interview Guide*). Each interview ranged between 45-60 minutes in length and was audio recorded, following the provision of consent by the participant. These audio recordings were then transcribed verbatim and that data was utilized to create the analysis that can be found in Chapter 4. Although there was a structured interview guide, there was some flexibility to ask exploratory questions, in order to seek clarification.

3.5 Sample and Sample Selection

The population that I chose to interview for my research project, were BSW field instructors attached to the McMaster School of Social Work. I chose to approach and recruit from this pool of individuals for the simple reason that as a McMaster student, acquiring ethics approval to recruit from McMaster's field instructor pool would be much easier than seeking approval to approach and recruit from other post secondary institutions. It is important to note, that although I approached field instructors connected to McMaster's BSW field education program, I was not seeking out responses solely from supervisors of a McMaster student but rather field instructors who had supervised a student from *any* BSW program in Ontario, in which there had been a placement failure or breakdown. This was the sub-group that I was particularly interested in hearing from. With the permission of the Director of the School of Social Work, Christina Sinding and the Field Co-ordinator Janice Chaplin, the request for participation was sent out via email by Janice Chaplin to the McMaster Field Instructor community.

In order to ensure that confidentiality was maintained at all stages of the process and that participants did not feel pressured to respond, I decided that requesting Janice Chaplin (Social Work Field Co-ordinator) to email the request for participation was the best way to target the desired population. This also allowed field instructors the opportunity to review the proposed research project and to freely respond, based on their own interest. It is also important to note that Janice Chaplin was not aware of who expressed an interest in participating as the responses were sent directly to me, via email, in a confidential manner. I received an overwhelming response within a very short

amount of time, and was humbled and encouraged by the interest of the field instructor community in contributing towards field education and the continued understanding of assessing readiness for practice.

From the many responses I received I was able to gather a sample of five field instructors who had supervised students who had experienced some level of breakdown or failure in their placements. I interviewed four female participants and one male participant, who had field supervision experience ranging from four to twelve years. Field instructors had supervised students from several different BSW programs across Ontario.

Interviews were conducted in person with the five participants in order to elicit narrative responses, however due to a technical error with the audio recorder during the first interview, the recording was inaudible and needed to be recaptured. Participant 1 graciously agreed to resubmit their responses to the interview questions in written form. This may have slightly altered the responses that the participant had provided during the first interview, as follow up and clarifying questions could not be asked due to the means by which the interview had been administered a second time. All the other interviews were conducted in person, as intended, allowing for different narratives to emerge from the participants' sharing based on their own lived experience.

4. Research Findings- Introduction to Findings

My hope for engaging in this research project was to understand the ways in which field instructors conceptualize 'readiness for practice' and the process that they engage in to assist them in that assessment. I had anticipated variations in the responses, as the concept of assessing 'readiness for practice' is quite abstract. However, despite the individuality of each person's responses, there were many overarching themes and commonalities that were present in the data, separated by nuances, and the meaning assigned to concepts such as 'readiness', 'breakdown', and 'values'. I have presented my findings in text and used direct quotes from the participants as much as possible, in order to maintain the authenticity of their voice and their intention in delivering their message. I have referred to the participants as Participant 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 and have refrained from using pronouns such as he/she in order to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of my participants as I present the data. I have also refrained from disclosing the fields in which the participants practice; as I wanted to ensure that there was no way to identify them, thus maintain confidentiality.

4.1 Defining Readiness

The interviews began by asking the participants what values and skills they felt were necessary for BSW students to possess in order to demonstrate readiness for practice. Rather than asking field instructors to define 'readiness for practice' and to

provide examples, I sought out the participants' views and conceptualization of the specific skills, and values that they believed BSW students should possess in order to demonstrate readiness for practice.

4.1.1 Skills. Each participant presented varying responses regarding what they believed were necessary skills for students to possess; however there were commonalities and themes that emerged from the responses, that highlight the importance of specific skills as being more valued than others. Participant 1 believed that an important skill for students to possess was an ability "to collaboratively work with and guide clients…students who display some confidence in their work (which also means they can be honest when they might not know something as well and need to seek further information)." Participant 5 also echoed the sentiment of valuing collaborative work as an necessary skill and stated the following:

> "I think the ability to work in a team environment; I know that's not a skill. I don't think they teach you that in social work to be quite honest. Once you kind of go out there and you start working on a multi disciplinary team like if you're working in a health care setting…they don't teach you how to work with this team, group of people, nurses and doctors and occupational therapists and senior level administration and managers like they don't teach you that."

It was evident by these remarks, that both participants felt that much of the work social workers engage in requires the ability to work well with colleagues, and community partners and is essential to building and maintaining healthy professional relationships.

Participant 1 explained that having strong organizational, time management and proficient paperwork skills were essential to demonstrating readiness for practice. Drawing upon the theme of writing skills, Participant 2 felt that students need to be able to produce clear, articulate casenotes/assessments to reflect the work that they have completed (and the client's thoughts) but this skill seems to be lacking. They emphasized the importance of this and stated the following: "I think writing skills is something that in the field of social work we often minimize and undervalue…and that needs to be something that is reflected in students as they go on in direct practice" (Participant 2). Coupled with strong writing skills, Participant 5 identified communication skills as necessary and stated, "I think they need to have great communication skills. They have to have the ability to have writing skills, it's so important." Issues relating to documentation and the timely and appropriate completion of it were highlighted by Participant 1 as a contributing factor, towards lack of readiness. There appeared to be a belief that students "should be able to document factually and make assessments based on those facts" (Participant 1). Issues connected to time management and fudging the hours also contributed to placement breakdowns (Participant 4) and both participants felt that these skills, which were absent, were essential to demonstrating readiness for practice.

Participant 1 & 5 shared similar views pertaining to the importance of students demonstrating humility and empathy in the practicum setting and their work with clients. These ideas seemed to resonate deeply with both individuals. Participant 1 believed that a "BSW would also show an ability to negotiate, to engage people, to be empathetic and

supportive, to be honest and transparent and to be ready to make mistakes and learn from the constructive criticism that results."

Participant 5 added that giving a voice to the marginalized was important to the clinical relationship and served as a way of demonstrating empathy. "You know like sometimes the clients, the individuals that we work with, don't have a voice and I'm not asking people to be that voice, I'm asking them to have empathy to understand what that voice might look like" (Participant 5). It is clear from the examples that although both participants were discussing the skill of empathy under the same broad context, each nuanced response carried a slight variation in meaning. This example highlights the complexity of defining concepts for which the individual can assign meaning differently.

Openness and a willingness to learn were another common theme that emerged from the conversations. All the participants referred to this concept in one form or another. Participant 3 discussed the idea of students being able to "learn by osmosis…the ability to absorb and learn." When asked further about this concept of "learning by osmosis" the field instructor expressed that it was one of the most important skills for students to have. Participant 3 recalled a situation with a student in which their willingness to learn from a multi-disciplinary team and to seek knowledge beyond the scope of social work served them very well in engaging with clients and being able to deliver holistic service in a mental health setting. Participant 3 went on to say:

> "So I think that ability to absorb from your environment you know with kind of a spirit of openness, which actually really benefited [her] moving forward. I think also the ability to be able to, the ability to go in with a very open mind and observe. I think actually being able to do that is more important than any skills."

The idea of experiential learning was highly advocated by Participant 3, more so than the cultivation of any pre-determined skills.

When asked about what other skills were important, Participant 5 spoke about the need for basic assessment and innate skills, which they defined as engaging in a "conversational assessment".

> **"**So I like to call it- I've made up my own kind of skill. It's called "conversational assessment" right. So basically it's that ability to be yourself and to gather information that's relevant in a person's health and wellness this is pertaining to mental health. It's the ability to have a conversation with somebody but gather information… I'm gathering that information, into a simple, genuine, kind and compassionate conversation with somebody" (Participant 5).

Participant 5 explained that the term/concept arose out of their own personal and professional experience as a placement student, feeling disingenuous in their interactions with clients in a mental health setting. Wanting to eliminate the cold, medicalized nature of assessments, the participant began engaging in more genuine, fluid conversations that tapped back into the humanity of the interaction and organically extrapolated the necessary assessment information. Participant 5 believed this was a critical moment in their development as a social work professional and shared their fervor for emphasizing this skill set with BSW practicum students. Finally Participant 5 echoed the sentiments of some of the other participants in saying:

> "I think really what is most important, and I don't know if you can teach it, I think people have it, you can nurture it, is empathy. I think that you must really have the ability to walk in another person's shoes and genuineness and the ability to be yourself when working with people" (Participant 5).

Both participant 1 and 2 identified flexibility as a value of importance. Each one of them spoke about the need for students to demonstrate flexibility in their practice and their interactions with clients, based on the need of clients and their presenting issues.

When asked what skills were necessary for a BSW student to possess to demonstrate readiness for practice, Participant 4 shared, "I think active listening and just like your very basic engagement skills" were lacking in 4th year students as they prepared to enter the workforce. This participant recounted an experience in which a student struggled with severe shyness and was unable to engage in conversations with clients and families. They felt that the ability to converse with ease was necessary given the nature of social work. Participant 5 felt that "you can't be shy in this work. You have to be able to feel comfortable talking in front of other people and family work; most of us do family work." Being unable to talk in front of and with clients constituted a breakdown for Participant 5, who considered this element essential to the role of a social worker.

Participant 2 spoke of the importance of possessing social skills and a sense of humility. Although most social workers would likely identify these attributes as values, Participant 2 spoke of humility as a skill. Perhaps there is an element of a transferable quality that exists when considering humility as both a skill and a value. "Clinical skills can be taught in a placement setting and that's our role and that's our responsibility, but I think it's more social skills and personality that students really need to bring into the placement" (Participant 2). This field instructor also believe that "…being hard working and having a humble mentality" were critical to demonstrating readiness for practice and

stated, "social work is hard work…so not bringing with you that sense of entitlement and so I think humility is a huge skill set that we need to bring into this field" (Participant 2).

Participant 2 believed that the educational institutions bore some responsibility in ensuring that students possessed the basic skills necessary for a BSW placement, even more so than clinical skills- "because again, interviewing and assessments and conflict resolution and trauma and CBT- all of those things can be taught but those innate skill are what you are hoping the school is starting to put into the students as they come in." Participant 2 described these innate skills as rapport building, professionalism and social skills, which they expected students to possess when entering a placement.

Lastly Participant 5 listed three behaviours that contributed towards lack of readiness: (1) students feelings too comfortable too soon in the placement, (2) the inability for a student to receive feedback and (3) a lack of preparedness when approaching placement tasks and field supervision. This participant felt strongly about their role in facilitating the learning process for the student and the implications that a student doing poorly could have on them as a professional.

> "Lack of readiness to me… what it looks like is people come in and I think they feel too comfortable too soon and how I notice that, is in their body language. It's either too comfortable too soon, or completely uncomfortable and struggling to feel comfortable" (Participant 5).

What is highlighted above is the importance participants placed on both tangible and intangible skills. It is evident that the participants believed that clinical skills such as rapport building, active listening, assessment skills, writing skills were necessary for students to possess but they also valued openness, humility, not being shy and social skills (intangible skills) as essential to demonstrating readiness for practice. The ability to

identify the intangible skills stemmed from participants' years of experience and expertise in the field, rather than the identification of it by a competency tool or formalized evaluation. The absence of these skills contributed towards participants' perceptions of lack of readiness despite the inability for many of these skills to be captured and measure by a formalized tool.

4.1.2 Values. Participants were asked to comment on their perceptions of values that were necessary for BSW students to possess in order to demonstrate readiness for practice. A majority of the participants spoke about the importance of cultivating a non-judgmental environment and the need for students to approach their work with openness and respect. Participant 1 stated, "I believe a successful student who is ready for practice is one who is open minded, is not judgmental (of clients or coworkers), is comfortable with the use of some authority but not abusive with it…" Participant 3 felt that, "one of the most important values is really the value of openness. I find a lot of students come in with a very judgmental attitude towards mental health systems." This participant also referenced a course that they believed was being taught at one of the educational institutions, which stigmatized mental health issues, created a negative perception of the mental health system and contributed towards pejorative attitudes that students held. Participant 5 emphasized the value of demonstrating respect for clients, especially those individuals who are marginalized and stigmatized. "I also try to look at the understanding of what the role of social work really is. You know respecting people,

realizing that people have difference and diversity in their life and you're not there to feel sorry for them but you're there to really guide them" (Participant 5). Participant 1 shared similar beliefs as the other participants stating that:

> "In addition, there would be some level of respect for the clients. They would value them as individuals as well as valuing their confidentiality and they would be able to practice with the understanding that they would work with clients in the least intrusive manner possible while supporting self-efficacy" (Participant 1).

Participant 4 expressed that "maybe a level of, I don't want to call it maturity because it's not necessarily about age, but almost not being so naive to the system" would be helpful for students to possess as a value. The participant felt that this maturity enables students to work within systems of oppression, which a lot of social work roles require. Participant 1 also expressed a desire to have students demonstrate passion for their work and an ability "to question systems and situations that are not in the best interests of their clients" (Participant 1). Based on their comments, one can conclude that the need for a social work student to be able to engage in critical thinking and structural challenging is vital to demonstrating readiness.

Based on years of clinical and field instruction experience, Participant 2 stressed, "optimism and hopefulness are values that are often missing. People are coming into the field thinking already the worst and so what is happening they're missing opportunities for the best to happen." This field instructor recalled the experience of having students who were bogged down in the system of oppression and the challenges that it imposes on the learning environment for the student.

Participant 4 spoke of a more "eclectic value base" that centred around anti-racist, anti-oppressive, strengths based forms of practice and also valued students understanding how to "access service in the most equal way and having that underpinning as your value." Although there were many similarities noted in the responses provided by participants, many nuanced differences could be identified in the perceptions of values assigned to students who are demonstrating readiness for practice.

Some of the other values that were mentioned but not in a prominent or unanimous manner were passion and a "thirst for practice" (Participant 2 & Participant 5). These were named as values that contributed to the overall success of students who are demonstrating readiness for practice. Field instructors appeared to have more varied responses for the values that they considered to be essential for students to possess, naming anti-oppressive practice, a suspension of personal agendas and biases, and understanding of systems of oppression and ways to support clients through them and healthy boundaries as essential. Participant 3 emphasized the importance of encouraging students to understand where a choice or decision is coming from, prior to making any judgments. The participants believed that the values listed above were essential for students to possess and contributed towards demonstrating readiness for practice.

4.2 What Goes Wrong- Behaviours Demonstrating Lack of Readiness

As the interviews progressed, participants were asked about their experiences assessing readiness or lack of readiness in situations where students had either

experienced a placement breakdown or failure. What was particularly interesting, were the similarities that the participants identified regarding problematic behaviours demonstrated by students. What also surfaced from the data were the different meanings and views that field instructors assigned to the concept of a 'placement breakdown'. I did not assign any specific meaning to the term 'breakdown' when asking the participants for their input. Rather I allowed the participants to interpret the word in the manner that they saw fitting and to provide their responses accordingly.

The two major themes that emerged from participants' responses, related to personal issues/unresolved trauma and a lack of or inappropriate boundaries. Issues pertaining to documentation and professionalism were also highlighted as contributing towards lack of readiness. By examining the behaviours that contributed towards a lack of readiness, this in turn provides one with an analysis for how readiness is defined.

4.2.1. Personal Issues & Unresolved Trauma. All of the participants were asked to comment on their experiences in which behaviours demonstrated by students, have contributed towards lack of readiness for practice. It was surprising that the majority of the participants identified personal issues such as unresolved trauma as a key contributor to students being triggered at the field placement. This negatively impacted students and their ability to conduct themselves in a professional manner. Participant 1 believed that placement breakdowns could occur as a result of students who, " are dealing with heir own personal issues that interfere with their own ability to be there in a

professional way" (Participant 1). Participant 3 also noted, " I've had people walk out after 24 hours because it's so triggering, because of their own personal experience." This field instructor recalled a student disclosing his or her own experience of being at a mental health facility shortly before beginning placement. Participant 4 noted that a student has presented with "a little bit of dissociation" as a way of coping and dealing with the heavy and triggering stories that they were hearing on a regular basis.

It is evident from the examples provided by participants that the emotional stresses of the work can negatively impact a student who lacks awareness regarding the impact that hearing the stories of marginalized individuals and working with at-risk populations can have on them. Two participants spoke about the reasons that students are drawn to the field of social work, citing that it is often associated with a trauma that has not been resolved and a faulty desire to use field placement as a means of therapeutic support. Participant 1 noted that, " many individuals in my field have come to the work as a result of trauma in their own lives. It is perfectly acceptable for a person to want to go into the field after experiencing trauma themselves, but it is dangerous if that person has not dealt with their own issues and is using practice as a way to address them." An understanding of the motivation to work in the field was important to Participant 3:

> "I think the value is especially for students who want to come in to mental health and addictions is understanding why that is. I do have a lot of people who come in because of their own lived experience, both with addictions and mental health. I've had students come to me who are floridly psychotic and obviously they've been able to get through school, but there obviously hasn't been a lot of screening" (Participant 3).

Participant 2 felt similarly and stated:

> "Because it is, it is going to lead to monstrous breakdowns, and I've seen it happen when a student comes in and they see it as a point of pride for themselves, that you know, 'I'm a survivor" or, "I have friends and family who have been affected by crime or violence". They haven't processed that prior to coming in, and so all of a sudden the very person that they happen to be sitting in session with, represents their father, mother, brother, themselves. Then they are triggered and have the expectation that placement will become cathartic and that placement will serve as their counseling service, and I don't mean to be heartless in that, but it can't serve both. It can't be your therapeutic outlet as well as your educational experience" (Participant 1).

Participant 3 who had witnessed, "students decompensating in terms of their own mental health, once being in the environment", discussed the overall decline of a student's mental health. They further elaborated that these situations often resulted in staff taking on the role of a counsellor and particularly in one circumstance the participant recalls having to seek out, "outside mental health help, because they decompensated so much during their placement" (Participant 3). The impact of unresolved personal trauma can be significant not only on the student experiencing it but also on the clients with whom the student is interacting. All of the participants felt that students who chose to use field placement as an avenue for personal support were doing a disservice to themselves and the populations they served. Participant 2 stated the following**:**

> "There's lot of social workers who have personal experiences. It's how they've dealt with it… because for the ones who have either fallen apart or are pretty close to falling apart it's been those ones who have been pre-contemplative about it's impacts on them or have been pre-contemplative about what kind of support they're getting on the outside" (Participant 2).

Undisclosed mental health and medical conditions which have impacted a student's ability to "focus on the learning opportunities and to engage with clients in a positive and constructive manner" were cited by Participant 1 as behaviours that were

problematic if left unaddressed. Participant 3 identified interpersonal issues pertaining to undiagnosed mental health as the reason that some students potentially should have been failed, when reflecting back. They also discussed at length the unique relationship between self-disclosure and individuals working in the field of mental health and addictions.

> "I think one of the big behaviours is the need to self disclose, especially for students with lived addictions experience. I actually have a rule. I don't have many rules but I have one rule. I ask that students, especially students who disclose that they have a lived experience with addiction, that they not self-disclose for the first term, because I want them to learn to be professional first" (Participant 3).

This participant attributed self-disclosure in the field to an inadvertent desire for self-recovery. The inability to foresee breaches of trust and consequences that may ensue from self disclosing was critical to Participant 3, and for this reason they encouraged students not to self-disclose early on. This example is specific to the mental health and addictions field of practice and perhaps bears different implications for students who are self-disclosing in other fields; however most participants would identify that many students enter their fields of practice based on their own personal lived experience. This idea of practicing the art of self-disclosure was discussed by Participant 3 in a very methodical manner, and they often encouraged students to implement it into their learning plan if they wanted to develop that skill.

4.2.2. Boundaries. Unhealthy boundaries were another piece identified by multiple participants as reflecting lack of readiness. Participant 1 identified behaviours

that would be harmful to clients such as, "inappropriate boundaries (i.e. secret keeping, inappropriate relationships outside of the professional scope, promising things that are not possible, pretending to know things they don't and giving direction that could be detrimental to their success)." Participant 1 further recalled an example in which a student took on the role of social worker in all aspects of her life and this resulted in the student struggling with maintaining healthy boundaries, over extending themselves, "assuming roles in other's lives that were completely inappropriate and engaging in what seemed to be codependent behaviour to meet a need in herself." Participant 2 shared the same concern as Participant 1 when considering the implication of students engaging in poor boundaries at their practicum settings:

> "I also think that one of the behaviours that are attached to issues of readiness …is having personal boundaries and having personal outlets for stress. Being able to deal with and again we all have our traumas, we all have those kinds of things, that's not where I'm coming from but students who have not dealt with that and are specifically throwing themselves into those clinical settings and that behavior in itself, that inability to cope, to ground ones self, to have that outlet. It's a huge part of non-readiness because all of the sudden they're triggered to having a flashback. They are unable to be a resource for the clientele and so to me they can't be ready for placement" (Participant 2).

Feeling worried about the impact that students who engage in inappropriate boundaries, may have on clients was a major concern articulated by Participant 2 as well. They felt responsible for protecting their clients from problematic students. Participant 3 felt that poor boundaries occurred by way of students developing inappropriate relationship with staff and taking on negative characteristics of the staff. They believed this was detrimental to the development of the student.

4.2.3 A Lack of Professionalism. Participant 2 highlighted a reason unique to the responses of the other participants. She/he believed that a lack of follow-through often contributed to behaviours that demonstrated a lack of readiness for practice. This participant attributed this issue to the lack of consequences demonstrated towards a student by educational institutions: "I hate to put this back on the schools of social work but there are no real consequences for behaviours in school settings" (Participant 2). Participant 2 also discussed the impact that a lack of follow-through on meetings with clients or sessions (direct service work) can have on a client. "The client felt disrespected, they felt alienated, they felt unworthy and this is a client who was attending counseling for self-esteem and value" Participant 2). Participant 2 strongly believed that a lack of consequences in academic and placement settings created a belief in students that life bore no consequences and this problematic way of thinking resulted in negative impacts for many people involved, the student included.

4.3 Rationale for Placement Breakdown or Failure

It should be noted, that when asked about the reasons for placement breakdowns or failures, all participants expressed the displeasure and difficulty that they experience in having to fail a student. As social workers, deciding that someone is not ready for practice can create discomfort; however it remains an integral part of the field instructor's role. Participant 1 identified, "It would take something serious for me to consider failing a student as placements are meant to provide students with experiential learning, not

necessarily an assessment of their employability. I believe in generally moving forward with learning goals instead of failure wherever possible." It appears from this quote that this field instructor identified a disconnect between providing learning opportunities through placements and being assessors of employability. This participant did not feel it was their responsibility to determine if a student was ready to work or not, and chose to approach the placement from a learning perspective. They did however identify that a " [breakdown/failure] would occur if there were serious issues in terms of attendance, inappropriate relationships with clients or a complete lack of disregard for ethics/values/confidentiality (especially ones that cause harm to clients)" (Participant 1).

Participant 2 spoke about the challenges that students have experienced in trying to balance competing demands, i.e. school, placement and sometimes work, which has contributed towards a placement breakdown. Participant 2 also identified a breakdown in trust between the placement supervisor and student as reasons that may result in a placement breakdown and recalled being a student and being told by the school, "wink wink, nod nod, it's very rare that students don't pass." Students should realize that not passing is a possibility if they don't work hard enough" (Participant 2). This participant held near the belief that passing the field placement was something to be earned by the student through demonstrations of learning and knowledge, and not a guarantee. The third participant highlighted the fact that placement breakdowns sometimes occur as a result of the student identifying the problems at the end of the placement, which does not give them enough time to engage in any constructive learning.

The monetary implications for students who fail placement are a huge factor in the consideration afforded by Participant 3. They identified being able to understand the struggles of working hard to pay for school and placement and the guilt that field instructors sometimes feel when exploring the potential for a placement breakdown. Unique to participant 3's perspective was the notion of student's needing to have adequate "clean time" before entering a placement in mental health and addictions. Participant 3 stated, "They don't have enough of their own time in recovery and I've often encouraged people to really think about their motivation for wanting to work in mental health, if they have those experiences, because it is triggering."

Participant 4 spoke about an experience that resulted in a placement breakdown for a student and the multiplicity of issues that contributed towards it. Students have struggled with competing demands and not attained the level of skill that they needed to out of the placement (Participant 4). Students have also falsified casenotes with no understanding for the repercussions of that on anyone (Participant 4). Inappropriate boundaries with clients were another reason highlighted by a participant as contributing towards a breakdown (Participant 1). Participant 5 shared that arguing and presenting as dismissive about feedback provided can be a huge indicator of a placement breakdown.

Although difficult, placement breakdowns do not always have to be the result of the field instructor identifying issues in readiness but rather can be initiated by the student. Participant 5 shared an example of a student who felt they were not emotionally ready for the placement and chose to remove themselves. The participant shared that they

had tremendous respect for this student and the courage it took to make that difficult choice.

4.4 Relationship with the Academic Institution

One of the themes that emerged as a by-product of conversations with field instructors regarding readiness was the relationship that they held with the academic institutions. Participant 1 reported having primarily positive interactions with most Schools of Social Work and found one Ontario-based school to be particularly helpful in supporting them through a challenging situation. Participant 2 highlighted the conflict that sometimes exists for field instructors who may ask, "Do I pass this student who is not ready for practice or do I bring it to the School of Social Work's attention and risk potential backlash or a strained relationship with them." There may be many who disagree with the possibility of an educational institution cajoling a field instructor to pass a student who is struggling, however Participant 2 felt very strongly about this idea, basing it on lived experience.

When asked what they would do differently moving forward, Participant 2 expressed that they would challenge more. They also went on further to say:

> "I think for me a lot of times it's been, I want to maintain a positive relationship with the School of Social Work and unfortunately I haven't always felt supported by the Schools of Social Work in being tougher. So I think that there are more placements that would have broken down that probably have not…" (Participant 2).

This participant also expressed some frustration that certain Schools of Social Work sometimes "chose" the placements for their students rather than having students apply to

different organizations and interview, which contradicts the notion of encouraging students to be self-motivated in securing their own placement.

Participant 3 reported that there had been an incident of theft involving a student and the school attached to the student did not take any action: "So sometimes you actually felt pressure from the school not to terminate placement and sometimes we felt like we're kind of being blamed. It's not in the schools best interest for people to fail either." Participant 4 had talked about their fear of schools being unsupportive of assessing a student as "not ready" but reported a positive "experience with the particular school" and that they were "very supportive to the student, [and] to us as an organization and was there to mediate and to talk it through." Having these experiences of collaboration and support can significantly impact a field instructors' perception of the academic institution and the individuals who represent them in the field, i.e. the faculty liaison. Participant 4 raised a critical point regarding the investment of schools in wanting to see their students succeed and shared the following experience:

> "Where that can be a real concern is if you don't have good communication with the schools as a field instructor and feel a little isolated from the school, which I've had that specific experience as well too. It's sort of like, "ok you took our student and we'll see you at the end." So if you had a concern about somebody not passing, and you don't have a relationship with the school, so that makes it a little bit tricky too. I think the school ultimately wants their students to be successful and to move on and to show that they have a success rate so the fear and the concerns around the school piece is a little bit challenging for me" (Participant 4).

What *all* the participants highlighted through their sharing was the importance of having the support of the academic institution. Although field instructors occupy the role of assessors of readiness for practice, the undertaking to supervise and nurture student

learning can prove difficult if the presence of the school is absent from the practicum experience and relationship. The participants stressed the importance of being able to nurture healthy relationships with the academic institution (faculty liaisons) so that decisions regarding lack of readiness could be addressed in a more helpful and collaborative manner.

4.4.1 Use of Tools in Assessing Readiness. Participants were asked to comment on the tools that they utilized in assessing readiness for practice. Included in this conversation were the participants' feedback on the usefulness of tools from the Schools of Social Work, their critique of the tools provided, and the tools that they incorporated to fill the gap. Participant 1 primarily utilized the formal evaluation tools (mid-term and final) provided by the various Schools of Social Work but articulated that other tools and methods of evaluation would be helpful in the process. Participant 2 spoke about the importance of the learning plan. They identified it as an integral part of the learning process and utilized it as an opportunity to measure growth and learning with the student throughout the year.

Many of the participants echoed the sentiment that the formal evaluation tools provided by Schools of Social Work were not helpful in capturing the students learning and growth. Participant 2 spoke of a narrative evaluation they had utilized, that was conducive to the process of supervision and learning and allowed for the inclusion of narrative reflections rather than evaluating students on a five-point scale. Participant 2, 3

and 5 all felt that the evaluation forms were far more academically geared and did not create space for clinical evaluation and reflection. Participant 3's critique of the evaluation forms from Schools of Social Work were that "it is academic but it doesn't seem like anyone who works in a clinical setting was involved in the development of it".

Personal notes made during supervision were an informal tool that Participant 2 heavily relied on, when making assessments regarding the student's learning, growth and goal achievement. They also discussed the importance of documenting any conversations related to performance issues, so if they ever escalated, the field instructor was able to have a candid conversation with the Faculty Liaison and the student, rather than relying on memory. When asked if they used any tools outside of the formalized evaluation provided by the school Participant 3 shared that they implemented knowledge based tests into the placement as a way to determine if students were absorbing and learning the content. "The test was specifically content and I actually want to go back to that because I do find that it's really easy to miss some of the core content that people should be learning in a placement" (Participant 3). Participant 4 indicated that they utilized an in-house learning tool that evaluates the progress of the student in a more tangible way and their agency utilizes the compassion-fatigue workbook to support students who may be experiencing vicarious trauma and burnout.

This discussion indicates that the majority of the participants articulated that the formalized evaluations provided by the Schools of Social Work were not helpful in assessing student readiness for practice or measuring skill. There was a strong aversion voiced by the participants to the use of a scale in measuring readiness. Two participants

(Participant 3 and 4) shared that they had introduced their own tools to bridge the gap that existed. Participants indicated that a review of the formalized evaluation forms was necessary to truly capture the skills, values and proficiency garnered by a student during a field placement.

4.5 Return to Gatekeeping

Although the participants discussed the tension that they experience in acting as supportive social workers/supervisors and their roles as assessors of readiness, there was a strong message conveyed by them that they bore the responsibility of not putting social workers who might do damage out into the field, very seriously. This belief resonates with the concept of gatekeeping that was discussed in the literature review and one that the field of social work is constantly grappling with. Participant 1 felt that a demonstration of growth, critical thought and self-awareness were essential to the students' performance during their practicum. Participant 2 spoke about the importance of utilizing the learning plan as a way of measuring growth and progress and connecting with individuals involved in the student's learning process to elicit feedback and assess readiness.

Participants 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 all expressed deep concern regarding the emotional harm that students who are not ready for practice may cause to clients. Participant 4 reiterated the importance of engaging in ethical practice and felt that, "if a student is displaying severe ethical concerns I really don't feel comfortable saying, "OK, go off into

the world and good luck.”” Participant 5 also shared these concerns and stated, “I would think that my fear would be that if somebody is going out and practicing social work and they're not ready, yeah they could cause emotional harm.”

Both participants 2 and 5 raised the notion of the professional liability that field instructors face in allowing students who are not demonstrating readiness for practice, to enter the field Participant 2 stated, “I don’t want to put my signature forward for someone who I don’t feel has met their criteria and to think that they’re going to go out and practice and that they may create more harm than good.” Participant 5 shared similar feelings and stated, “my worry is that sometimes your name is attached and there's a sense of integrity that comes with it”. They felt strongly about the implication of having one’s name signify approval and support of a student who potentially is not ready for practice. Ultimately all the participants echoed the same sentiments- that they valued their roles as assessors of readiness and were committed to ensuring that client interests were always held in the forefront, when making decisions regarding students’ readiness for practice.

5. Discussion, Limitations & Implications

The previous chapter presented the findings of the study and allowed the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the perceptions of field instructors as they work through assessing readiness for practice. It also provided the avenue to examine the data and to contextualize the themes that arose. This chapter will summarize and present the breadth of the findings, by highlighting the insights of the participants as they discuss the concept of assessing readiness. It will also provide an examination of the links between the findings and the existing literature. Subsequently, I will provide my own reflections and recommendations for addressing some of the issues raised by the participants and will discuss my hope for the future of field instruction and field education.

5.1 Field Instructors' Perceptions of Readiness for Practice

This study hoped to explore and understand how field instructors assessed readiness for practice in BSW students. The interpretive approach that methodologically informed the development of this study influenced the choice to create a narrative, 'meaning seeking' approach to the construction of the interviews and data analysis. What emerged from the data was rich, vibrant information provided by individuals who had lived experiences associated with the process of assessing readiness. As a field instructor myself, I was intrigued and excited by the diversity of themes that emerged from the

conversations with the participants and appreciative of their commitment to enhancing the field of social work education through their contributions. Three main interconnected discussions emerged from the study: (1) necessities for readiness: the values, skills and qualities that students must demonstrate, (2) the gatekeeping/field instructor dilemma, and (3) building a stronger relationship with the academic institutions.

5.1.1 Necessities for Readiness: Values, Skills and Qualities. The discussion pertaining to skills and values necessary for students to possess was extensive. The participants presented a robust and compressive examination of the qualities, values and skills that they believed students needed to possess in order to demonstrate readiness for practice. The findings showed us that field instructors valued and required students to have strong writing skills, assessment abilities, and organizational and time management skills. There appeared to be a greater emphasis on intangible skills such as humility, confidence and comfortability, rapport building, professionalism and social skills. The findings also demonstrated that participants felt values such as respect for clients, passion for the work, optimism, hopefulness, humility, maturity (not based on age but rather a disposition) and a non-judgmental attitude contributed to a sense of readiness. What is of interest and noteworthy, is that participants arrived at this assessment of skills, values and qualities based on years of experience in field supervision roles. Participants felt strongly that an absence of these skills and values was concerning and would reflect the lack of readiness presented by the student. The participants were not naïve to the complexity of

the practicum experience, but stressed the importance of having well-rounded BSW students who possessed a majority of the aforementioned skills, values and qualities.

5.1.2. The Gatekeeping/Field Instructor Dilemma. Similar to the literature that discusses the tension between social work values and the gatekeeping role, all the participants expressed a continuous struggle that exists as they navigate their roles as field instructors and gatekeepers of the profession. One of the most compelling concerns that presented itself in the findings and within the conversation pertaining to the gatekeeping/field instructor dilemma was the theme of personal or unaddressed trauma impacting students' ability to demonstrate readiness. This issue highlighted the conflict that the participants experience in the duality of their roles. All the participants felt very strongly about the harmful impact that unaddressed trauma can have on interactions with clients and expressed a strong inclination to protect clients from students' emotional distress. Although this was a similarity amongst the participants, a majority of them identified this as a personal dilemma experienced by them as social work practitioners. They acknowledged that screening for personal trauma or personal issues at the entry into the program lay in direct violation of the social work ethics, but recognized the harmful implications that unresolved trauma could have on a student's practice and their interactions with clients and colleagues as they progress.

One of the main dilemmas that was highlighted, related to the concept of assessing students as 'not ready for practice' based on problematic behaviours that they are

demonstrating. As mentioned above, a serious concern lays with students who bring their own unresolved trauma to the field and for whom the lack of resolution will compromise their practice. Field instructors have utilized screening as a tool to address the problem, but struggle with ascertaining whether this is the appropriate response. One of the participants mentioned during the interviews, that they felt that students should have at least two years recovery time before entering a placement in either mental health or addictions (Participant 3). Their opinion regarding this matter stemmed from years of experience as a field instructor witnessing students who were fresh in their recovery struggle in their placement. As an anti-oppressive practitioner I believe it is unfair to force students to self-disclose lived trauma or issues relating to substance use and mental health and the participant acknowledged this as well. This does however, bring us back to the notion that personal experience is often a motivating factor for students entering the program. Knowing that many social work students are choosing to enter the field because of lived experience, how do we as anti-oppressive advocates preserve the safety of the client but also address the issue of the student who may not be ready for the placement experience and the impact of placement?

One of the more subtle differences that I observed was the understanding that field instructors had of their role as assessors of readiness for practice. Participant 1 felt that their role was to provide a learning environment and not to assess students for employability. They viewed employability and readiness for practice as differing entities.

> "It would take something serious for me to consider failing a student as placements are meant to provide students with experiential learning, not necessarily an assessment of their employability. I believe in generally moving forward with learning goals instead of failure wherever possible" (Participant 1).

The other participants did not use the language of "employability" when referencing 'readiness for practice' but rather described it was a way of assessing a student's ability to perform the skills and tasks needed to be competent social workers. It is interesting to see how the perceptions of readiness consequently impact the way that field instructors approach assessing students. These subtle nuances in the use of language indicate the reflection of the field instructors, in their perception of their roles as field instructors.

All the participants expressed the tremendous displeasure they face when contemplating the failure of a student who is not meeting the requirements of their placement, but recognized that it would be unfair and unsafe to clients and the field to allow an individual who is not demonstrating the necessary skills and knowledge, to enter the field.

5.1.3. Building a Stronger Relationship with the Academic Institutions. As was discussed in the previous chapter the relationship the field instructors had with the academic institutions appeared to be inconsistent and lacking connectivity. Most participants were able to comment on positive experiences they had with different Schools of Social Work in Ontario and to identify the elements that worked well in solidifying the collaborative relationship; however almost all participants noted that they desired a stronger and more interactive relationship with the academic institution and the faculty liaison.

As field instructors entrusted with the responsibility of assessing readiness, decisions regarding students' academic/clinical performance are made on a regular basis and can present serious implications for these budding social workers. Many of the participants expressed feeling an unspoken sense that they could not fail a student, as the schools would not be in support of it. This study revealed that field instructors are committed to providing safe and encouraging learning environments for students to learn and grow but sometimes feel detached from the Schools of Social Work and unsupported by them. This experience is obviously based on a case-by-case situation, but there appears to be an undertone of feeling resistance from schools to implement harsher consequences (placement breakdown or failure) on students who are demonstrating a lack of readiness.

The participants also spoke about the impact that being detached from the faculty liaison has on their ability to collaborate and support a student who may be struggling in their placement. At times field instructors did not hear from the faculty liaisons until it was time for the mid-term evaluation or the final. This contributed to feelings of isolation on the part of the field instructor and inefficiencies. Highlighted in these inefficiencies were the frustrations that field instructors experienced when required to use to the formalized evaluation tools provided by the Schools of Social Work. All the participants were able to name at least one Ontario-based School of Social Work that they felt had a user friendly evaluation tool, but most of the participants expressed displeasure when reflecting on the rating system attached to mid-term and final evaluations and commented that the evaluations appeared to have been created by academics, without the input of clinical social workers (Participant 2, 3 and 5). All the participants expressed a desire to

have the faculty liaison/academic institution take a more responsive and active role in supporting field instructors and to value their assessment of lack of readiness when situations of a placement breakdown or failure do arise.

5.2 Links to Literature

When reflecting back to the literature there are two key aspects that have strong parallels to the findings and that is the piece relating to key criteria measured beyond the formalized competency tools and conflicts relating to the gatekeeping role. These are two themes that the participants echoed. What is astounding is the tremendous similarities that the literature and findings bear when discussing key criteria or intangible skills. Lafrance et al. (2004) highlighted four major themes, made evident by the study they conducted. These were: (1) Personal qualities (2) capacity and willingness for self-awareness (3) Capacity for social work relationships and (4) Personal congruence with social work values (Lafrance et al., 2004). When examining the findings, one can observe tremendous similarities in the skills, values and qualities mentioned by the participants, which can be placed under one of the four categories specified by Lafrance and colleagues. What this demonstrates is a strong correlation between the literature and the findings. Furthermore, it speaks to the value of the findings and highlights an important fact – key criterion outside the formalized tools tend to be favoured by field instructors in assessing readiness but Schools of Social Work have done little to capture this in their assessment tools.

Interestingly, participants identified the importance of students presenting with integrity and honesty in their practice and being open to learning (Participants 1, 3, 4). Lafrance and colleagues (2004) and Moore and Urwin (1991) share similar ideas about these qualities. Professionalism and interpersonal relationships were also identified as important aspects of demonstrating competency in the workplace (Bogo et al., 2006 and Lafrance et al., 2004). Almost all the participants spoke of the need for students to be able to demonstrate basic professionalism, and to have a good understanding of the importance of building and maintain healthy and appropriate relationships with colleagues, and clients (Participant 1, 2, 3, 4).

It is astounding how many of the key criterion mentioned in the literature review, are resonated in the findings of the study. It is evident that there is a strong emphasis on these qualities, skills and values and that field instructors have assessed the importance of it in evaluating student competency. Maturity, personal congruence with social work values, and an understanding of their motivation to enter the field were also listed as essential qualities (Lafrance et al., 2004 and Moore and Urwin, 1991). Participant 4 echoed the sentiments of these authors, when speaking about the importance of students not being naïve to the systemic challenges that the work brings, thus demonstrating a sense of maturity. Participants 2 and 3 felt strongly that students needed to have a good understanding of their motivation to enter social work and were cautious of students who had unresolved trauma and intended to use the placement experience as a means of therapy or healing.

Similar to the viewpoints presented by experts in the field of experiential education, were the participants' views on assessing readiness for practice. Each response possessed many similarities with the others but had minor nuanced differences. All of the participants alluded to the idea of 'gatekeeping' without using the language of it and expressed a tension in reconciling their role as instructors with the expectations of them as gatekeepers. Urwin and Moore (1991) emphasized the responsibility of field instructors to be gatekeepers of the profession. I do not think that the field instructors saw themselves in such an authoritative light, however they did assume the responsibility of being assessors of readiness and felt that the implications for them as professionals were greater if they were to pass a student who did not demonstrate readiness for practice. Bogo et al. (2004) discussed the complex nature of assessing readiness for practice, which the participants highlighted as well. What is unknown is whether all field instructors are operating from the same definition or understanding of readiness as the literature and the participants.

Barlow and Coleman (2003) who have written extensively on the subject state:

> "Because social workers serve vulnerable populations who have the right to receive competent and ethical practice, gatekeeping is an essential mechanism for maintaining public trust and for protecting clients from unethical and incompetent service" (p.152).

What these authors present is a viewpoint that gatekeeping is the priority of social work educators. Regher et al. (2001) also discuss the conflict that social work academics experience when assessing the suitability of students wanting to enter the field. They believe that both faculty members and field instructors have the responsibility to:

> "…protect future clients from those who may see themselves as competent social workers, but who may have ethical or cultural attitudes and/or psychological or interpersonal difficulties which result in harm to clients. Despite the desire to support and encourage students who present with difficulties, ultimately, faculty members and field supervisors are jointly charged with the responsibility of being gatekeepers of the profession" (p. 128)

This idea illuminates the continuous tension that exists in the field of social work between advocates of the gatekeeping role who believe in guarding the gates of the profession and those who view the purpose of field instruction as an avenue for nurturing, learning and growth. Participant 4 recalled experiencing this very same conflict, but felt that the responsibility of protecting clients from harm was paramount. Can there be reconciliation between gatekeeping expectations and the mentoring nature of field instruction? Participant 2 believed that their role as a field instructor was to ensure student's had the opportunity to learn and develop the necessary competencies but also that they had an obligation to the field to preserve the integrity of it by sending out skilled and able practitioners. Perhaps the debate between the two sides may never end but both the literature and the participants unequivocally believe that navigating the dynamics of field instructor and gatekeeper are challenging and sometimes feel contradictory to social work values.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

One of the most apparent limitations of the study is the sample size and the time constraints. Although I secured a significant number of participants and even had to turn interested candidates away, I cannot help but feel that this body of work is only the tip of

the iceberg and that I would have benefited from being able to interview more participants; however I understand that is beyond the scope of an MSW thesis. As with any research project, an increased sample size can only enhance the analysis that one can provide as a result. I am thankful that I did not encounter many challenges in recruiting and conducting my research and have to thank my participants for their willingness to participate and their generosity in giving up their time to contribute to this body of work.

5.4 Implications for Field Instructors and Social Work Educators

The most enjoyable part of this study for me, was having the opportunity to hear about the participants' rich experiences, relating to field instruction and the reasons that they continue to remain passionate about mentoring and giving back to BSW students and the social work community. Much like any research project, there is always a hope that changes and recommendations can arise from the data and perhaps even new approaches. The themes that emerged from these discussions were fascinating and based on the input and feedback provided by the five participants, it is apparent that there is room for growth and enhancement of the field education experience.

I recall having a conversation with a colleague a few years ago, who had also worked as a field instructor for several years. She had proposed the idea of BSW students being required to attend a pre-placement course (separate from the one that students have to attend while in placement). This would look different than the seminar classes that BSW students are currently required to attend. It would consist of education and role-

playing. These scenarios would reflect situations that occur in placements, which may have an impact on professional skills and values. A majority of the participants identified that students struggled with behaviours relating to professionalism, such as inappropriate boundaries, poor writing skills, struggling with judgmental attitudes and not being open to the work (Participant 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). These are some of the examples of behaviours that students have demonstrated in the past. A way to preempt some of those struggles at placement is to have students engage in the pre-placement course that would provide them with a clear understanding and expectation of what field settings want from practicum students. It also serves as a way for these individuals to develop that innate skill set which would serve as an asset to them as they further their clinical skills. This would translate into students having a clearer understanding of what professionalism is and consequently enlighten them by developing an understanding of what expectations are important; particularly those pertaining to dress code, punctuality, time management, protocol for sick time and vacation, students balancing placement and school work. Hopefully, this will convey the message and understanding that although placement is a learning environment, people's lives are impacted by their work in that environment and as a result they need to be vigilant, invested and cognizant of the impact that their actions may have on their clients, and colleagues. Most participants articulated that they were prepared to teach students the clinical skills they needed, as a placements focus is often clinical learning; however they struggled a majority of the time, with students that demonstrated poor inter-personal (Participant 3) and personal skills, i.e. time management, respectful communication, the ability to prioritize, healthy boundaries.

As a field instructor, I have witnessed students demonstrating some of these behaviours, which have been highlighted by the participants as well and believe they need to be addressed in a constructive manner. I echo the sentiments of my colleague and propose the following. The pre-placement course would begin a few weeks prior to the start of the practicum and would entail a faculty liaison and a field instructor facilitating conversations about the expectation of students in placement. These conversations would focus on areas such as dress code, punctuality, the balance between schoolwork and placement hours, and some of the more practical skills, such as what to do if you are not able to attend an appointment. How do you address conflict with a field instructor or a colleague on the team? To professionals working in the field these skills may appear to be basic and innate; however the findings demonstrate that students are not always equipped with these skills and many placement breakdowns result from interpersonal issues, and ethical challenges (Participant 3 and 4).

It is also important for Schools of Social Work to look at how they can address the recurring theme of unaddressed, personal trauma (Participant 1, 2 and 3). The literature discusses the idea of the "wounded healer"- students wanting to enter social work as a result of a strong connection to a personal trauma or a personal issue that a family member has experienced (Regher et al., 2011). These authors also address this concept and argue that, "the motivation to pursue social work as a career frequently stems from personal experiences of hardship, a view which is supported by considerable empirical evidence" (2001, p. 129). Many of the researchers in this specific area of study discuss the tension that exists for academic institutions attempting to engage in fair and non-

discriminatory admission practices, but also stress the importance of ensuring the safety of future clients from students who may demonstrate glaring ethical or interpersonal behaviours that may cause harm to the clients (Regher et al. 2011):

> "On one hand, faculty and field instructors are committed to the social work principles of acceptance of others, of validating worth and right to self-determination of all individuals, of identifying strengths in people, and of recognizing the ability of all human beings to grow and change. On the other hand, they have the responsibility to protect future clients from those who may see themselves as competent social workers, but who may have ethical or cultural attitudes, and/or psychological or interpersonal difficulties which result in harm to clients" (p. 128).

What the findings and research highlighted is that unaddressed trauma, people's ambivalence to addressing trauma or even hoping that placement will serve as a therapeutic tool to addressing trauma, are inappropriate and need to be brought to the forefront in some manner. This obviously poses a challenge for Schools of Social Work that practice from an anti-oppressive framework, seeking to create an environment that is equitable, anti-discriminatory and fair. This puts greater ownership on schools to think critically about how they can assess for readiness in students, in order to ensure that students are prepared and able to address challenging issues with clients, such as mental health, domestic violence, addictions, child abuse and marginalization. This is of particular importance when students themselves are presenting as unprepared to deal with the impact of the trauma on their own lives, which may manifest in the form of trigger or vicarious trauma, which they may experience as survivors, or family members of survivors.

Many Schools of Social Work are weary of competency tools that have been suggested by researchers and educators in the field. I am not advocating that a

competency tool is the solution to supporting students in assessing readiness; however perhaps schools need to look at how we ensure that students are prepared for the demands that placement requires of them. Social work is a professional program and upon graduating, one is awarded the freedom and ability to practice as a social worker, which is significant in a field that deals so closely with the lives of people, their stories and struggles. It is our responsibility as practitioners to ensure that we are able to offer 100% to our clients so that they are able to experience their recovery, and their journey in a supportive and holistic manner. One of the suggestions to supporting students' mental health while in placement is perhaps establishing a collaborative program between educational student resource centers and the School of Social Work. Although many field instructors are clinical practitioners and have the skills necessary to support the emotional needs of a student who is experiencing vicarious trauma during their placement, it is beyond the responsibility of the field instructor and in fact even inappropriate for the field instructor to engage in a counseling relationship with the student.

With the increasing demands on faculty liaisons and field instructors, it may be beneficial for students to be able to access a counsellor during the duration of their field placement. It could be set up as a mandatory part of the practicum experience, requiring students to meet with the counsellor once a month for the duration of the placement to explore any difficulties, challenges or emotional distress that they may be experiencing as a result of their work or the stories they hear at placement. This provides students with a neutral person to talk to, who does not sit in a position of power in relation to the student and also gives the student the space to unearth and work through some of their triggering

experiences in a safe space. Counsellors will have the responsibility of reporting glaring issues that may put the student and clients at further risk, such as inappropriate relationships, ethical issues, the use of violence etc., but beyond those parameters students' conversations with the counsellors will be confidential.

Urwin and Moore (1991) suggest a model for assessing readiness for field placement. This model involves an evaluation conference in which a student's academic, volunteer and work experience are discussed, along with conversations about any extenuating circumstances that may affect their performance in the field placement such as family problems, illness, job responsibilities etc. (Urwin and Moore, 1991). This approach may feel intrusive and in violation of students right to privacy and dignity, so schools may want to look at ways that they can adopt the strengths of this process while adapting the method to marry with the philosophy of the school. Urwin and Moore (1991) do highlight one piece in the academic process that I think can be very helpful for students in assessing readiness for practice, and that is having conversations with students prior to the start of the placement about how they feel their personal experiences have impacted them both positively and negatively and how that might affect their professional practice in field placement. These conversations will occur with faculty in a private and confidential manner, and can be utilized to highlight the strengths of students in dealing with these difficult situations, which can be an asset in the field. These preemptive conversations may allow students to engage in more reflective practice at an earlier stage and provide the faculty with an opportunity to create strategies for support if needed.

The final recommendation stems from the feedback of three of the participants, who had mentioned that it would be helpful to have additional resources and support from the academic institutions by way of trainings and forums focused on addressing challenges in field instruction (Participant 2, 3, and 5). Some Schools of Social Work offer training for field instructors on issues that are emerging in the community and the field of social work; however with competing demands and increased workloads, field instructors often do not always find the time to attend these forums. Some participants also felt that the topics were not as relevant to their roles as field instructors (Participant 3 and 5) and wanted to have more meaningful discussions about issues that arose at placement and ways to deal with it. Although many Schools of Social Work have field education committees comprising of faculty and field instructors (to look at ways of enhancing field education), a large majority of the field instructors' voices are missing from these conversations.

It may be more beneficial to have a field forum/training opportunity where field instructors and the academic institutions come together and discuss what is working well in placements, what is not working, what are some of the problematic behaviours that they are seeing and what are the supports that they need. This can then lead to developing a strategic plan for how to support BSW placement students and to increase understandings relating to assessing readiness. A follow up meeting could be held a few months later to discuss the findings of the forum and to develop a plan for rolling out the new strategies. With many local agencies not providing any additional support for taking on placement students, field instructors are often putting in extra time, beyond the

responsibilities of their job because of the passion that they have for the field of social work education. Participants 3 and 5 felt that they would be more likely to attend a forum that discussed matters pertinent to the field instruction role, rather than generalized social work topics. I believe that this could be a really good opportunity to increase the connectivity between the academic institutions and field instructors, who sometimes feel that they are working in isolation and can enhance the field of social work education.

The challenge again arises for anti-oppressive Schools of Social Work to identify ways in which they can address issues relating to problematic behaviours and lack of readiness demonstrated by students, in a way that does not lie in contravention to the philosophy of the program. It is also important for the academic institutions to look at the effectiveness of the evaluation tools that they utilize and to illicit feedback from field instructors regarding its perceived effectiveness. Participant 2 recommended using a more narrative evaluation form that allows field instructors the opportunity to comment on the learning goals and achievements, rather than rating the student's performance on a scale.

5.5 Implications for Future Research

Readiness for practice is an abstract concept, illustrated by the literature reviewed in this study as well as participants responses to the questions pertaining to assessing readiness. Despite the abstract nature of this concept, there still appear to be some common themes and elements that continue to be highlighted (through the existing literature and this study) as important to consider, when assessing readiness with a BSW

student. This study focused specifically on the experiences of field instructors and not students who experienced challenges in the placement setting. As the researcher I was very intentional in wanting to elicit responses from field instructors as they ultimately are assigned the responsibility of engaging in this critical process. The excitement and investment displayed by the participants of this study coupled with the emerging literature demonstrates that this is a very important field of work to continue engaging in research. A larger study with more participants may provide the opportunity for a richer understanding of some of the more nuanced pieces that contribute towards assessing readiness for practice and the ways in which field instructors enact it.

5.6 Conclusion

This study provided me the opportunity to explore and understand how field instructors assess readiness for practice with BSW students who have experienced a placement breakdown or failure. As an insider to the field instructor community, this project was close to my heart and developed into a true labour of love. The study intended to ascertain the meanings assigned by field instructors to concepts such as 'readiness for practice' and to understand the process by which field instructors evaluate and determine the components necessary to measure competency/readiness. What resulted from the conversations with participants was a deeper appreciation for the intentionality, specificity and integrity with which field instructors approach their responsibility (as assessors of readiness) and their love for social work and field instruction. The data

demonstrated that field instructors experience similar challenges when working with a student who is presenting with problematic behaviours or an inability to meet the placement goals. Unresolved trauma, inappropriate boundaries, a lack of core skills (tangible and intangible) and values were amongst the main reasons that participants identified students as being unsuccessful in their placement. The concern that arose from considering the implication of an unprepared social worker in the field, were far too great for the participants to ignore as they strived to balance the delicate relationship between instructing, encouraging learning and being gatekeepers of the field.

What the study also demonstrated was that field instructors define 'readiness for practice' in different ways; however amongst those varying descriptions, there is continuity in the way in which field instructors understand and approach the notion of assessing readiness. The participants also highlighted the need for academic institutions to review the usefulness of the formalized tools that they provide for assessment and to work towards bridging the gap between field instructor and the institution to develop a more holistic and collegial relationship, that will further enhance the support provided to the student's learning experience.

This conversation pertaining to 'readiness for practice' has reiterated the importance of continuing to engage and support professionals in the field who dedicate their time and expertise to enhancing the cultivation and development of future social workers. It is imperative that Schools of Social Work consider the themes that have emerged from the data and the critiques provided by field instructors. "Its purpose is to assess potential for the profession, and readiness to enter the field, the cornerstone of

social work education" (Moore and Urwin, 1991, p. 10). It is also important and a hope of mine, that Schools of Social Work will look at ways to resolve the conversation regarding 'readiness for practice' and gatekeeping so that they can address some of the problematic issues that arise and develop new strategies and more specific criteria to measure and address issues of readiness while maintaining the integrity and values of the profession.

6. Coda- A Tribute to Field Instructors

As mentioned earlier, this project is very dear to my heart, and would not have been made possible without the commitment, honesty, vulnerability and time that the participants offered, coupled with their willingness to share their stories, experiences, knowledge and passion. I would like to thank my participants and the community of field instructors for their continued investment in the support and development of students' learning and growth, as they embark on becoming professional social workers. Having such dedicated and skilled professionals, who are willing to give back to the Schools of Social Work and to the field, by mentoring students, is a tremendous asset to social work education.

As a final thought, I had asked all my participants why they continued to be field instructors. My passion for social work education and field instruction developed through the wonderful experiences that I was provided as a BSW student and was further enhanced by my professional tenure at an organization that fostered a "student friendly" teaching environment. I was inquisitive about the reasons that prompted my esteemed colleagues to engage in field instruction. The most common theme that resonated with all the participants was their desire to want to mentor and teach future social workers. The following are quotes from the five participants expressing the reasons that they still remain committed to being field instructors:

Participant 1 stated:

> "I believe in the importance of the hands-on educational aspect of the BSW. I had two placements as a student, one good and one difficult. I learned a lot from both of those placements and am grateful to both of my supervisors in those

> placements. I think I would have been lost going into the field without having had some experience and I know the sacrifice those individuals made to help introduce me to what a social worker does. I am a firm believer in "pay it forward". I am somewhat selfish as well and do appreciate having more up to date information that comes from having a student."

Similar to Participant 1, Participant 3 identified their own practicum experience as a motivating factor and shared this:

> "You know I think that I still have PTSD from my past practicum in 1997. But I think you know what doesn't kill you makes you stronger and I have been motivated to be the best field instructor so that I could help as many students as I could. Like I'm one of the only managers that has direct students and people make a joke that I always have a plethora of people following me places but you know I think I like the idea that I can support new ways of thinking about things- new ways of learning. Plus it challenges me and makes me think about things differently" (Participant 3).

The aspiration to create more positive experiences for their students was evident in the sentiments shared by Participants 1 and 3.

Participant 2 and 4 spoke about the importance of cultivating capacity and learning. The love for the field of social work and the commitment to enhancing practicum experiences for BSW students were two key components highlighted by Participant 2:

> "I absolutely adore being a field instructor because you get to see someone experience the field of social work for the first time and to see all the things that you're excited about and how they're learning it, how they question it, how they wonder about it. They're seeing fresh new perspective. You're seeing eagerness and excitement. You're seeing someone who wants to learn, when it's going well I should say. You get to instill your love of social work in someone else and get to continue that tradition. So there are lots of things I love about it and why I would even do it, because I love field supervision and I want to see it thrive instead of struggle, which I've really seen it do" (Participant 2).

Participant 4 stated:

> "I continue to be a field instructor because I think it is very important to prepare and build capacity amongst new social workers. These are the future of this field and I believe in being able to foster development to ensure high standard of practice for individuals and their families accessing support. Also—it is an opportunity for myself to be aware of the type innovative and upcoming evidence based practices that are being taught within the academic world, so I feel it keeps myself as a practitioner up to date. It is a mutual learning experience in my opinion."

The last participant spoke about the intellectual challenge that having a student provides to field instructors and the professional duty that they believed field instructors possess to support learning and growth in future social workers. Participant 5 expressed their continued reasons for being a field instructor below:

> "I enjoy it…I feel like I sometimes lose sense of my social justice, anti-oppressive self in this role, and I think that it tweaks it for me. Just having that dialogue, it gets my brain moving and motivated again, and I just think it's your duty… to teach others who want growth or entrance into the field. It's that opportunity to see what it's like through another person's eye – how academia theory intersects with, you know, real life. People bring me such rich information and I learn from that. I've learned something about myself. So I do it because I want to learn and I want to teach. I think a part of teaching is learning and learning is teaching" (Participant 5).

Through these words articulated by the participants, the consistent theme of a renewed desire to foster learning and growth resonates. Much like my colleagues, as a member of the community, I too share many of their sentiments and believe in the philosophy of giving back to the field of social work and doing my part to contribute towards the development of future social workers. Although the conversations pertaining to readiness may have proved difficult at times, it is undeniable that these participants and likely many other field instructors feel passionately about the work that they do, and approach it with tremendous fervor and constructive criticism in the hopes of continuing to develop and

enhancing the quality of field education. I believe it is important that the academy recognize the need to sustain the passion of field instructors and keep it alive, by building on the collaborative relationship that exists and seeking ways to advance it. This will enable these skilled individuals (field instructors) to continue fostering mentorship relationships with students and sharing their knowledge and expertise in the field placement setting. Once again I would like to thank my participants for their willingness to share their valuable insights and hope that this will inspire social workers to see the beauty and necessity in field education.

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Appendix A: Ethics Approval

MREB Clearance Certificate https://ethics.mcmaster.ca/mreb/print_approval_davidPI.cfm?ID=3846

McMaster University
Inspiring Innovation and Discovery

McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)

c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support, MREB Secretariat, GH-305/H, e-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Application Status: ☐ **New** ☐ **Addendum | Project Number:** 2016 100

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:

Assessing students 'readiness for practice': Field Instructors' experiences and perspectives

Faculty Investigator(s)/ Supervisor(s)	Dept./Address	Phone	E-Mail
S. Baker-Collins	Social Work	23779	sbcollins@mcmaster.ca

Co-Investigator(s):

Student Investigator(s)	Dept./Address	Phone	E-Mail
D. Lazarus	Social Work		lazarudm@mcmaster.ca

Co-Investigator(s):

The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB:

☐ The application protocol is cleared as presented without questions or requests for modification.

☑ The application protocol is cleared as revised without questions or requests for modification.

☐ The application protocol is cleared subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:

COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS: Ongoing clearance is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and cleared before any alterations are made to the research.

Reporting Frequency:	Annual: Jun-28-2017	Other:

Date: Jun-28-2016 **Chair, Dr. D. Young**

1 of 1 6/28/2016 9:00 AM

Appendix B: Email Recruitment Script

Subject: FW: STUDY Assessing students' 'readiness for practice': Field Instructors' experiences and perspectives

Dear McMaster BSW Field Instructors,

Donna Lazarus, a McMaster MSW student, has contacted the McMaster School of Social Work asking us to inform our field instructors about a study she is doing. This study pertains to how field instructors assess BSW placement students' readiness for practice. **She is specifically interested in situations where there has been a placement breakdown, or a failure, with students you've supervised from any BSW program in Ontario.** Donna has been a McMaster field instructor for the past 4 years and is a member of the Hamilton social work community. This research is part of her Master of Social Work program at McMaster University.

If you are interested in getting more information about participating in Donna's study, please read the brief description below and/or **CONTACT DONNA LAZARUS DIRECTLY** by using her McMaster email address: **lazarudm@mcmaster.ca**. Donna will not disclose to anyone at the McMaster School of Social Work about who has chosen to participate or not. Taking part or not taking part in this study will not affect your status or any services you receive here at McMaster University, especially in relation to the School of Social Work. The following is a brief description of her study.

Donna is inviting you to take part in a 45-60 minute face-to-face interview, which will be held at a time and place convenient for you as participants. She will work out those details with you directly. She hopes to learn about how field instructors assess lack of readiness for practice in BSW students and what tools (formal and informal) are utilized in this process. She is looking at highlighting the experiences and perspectives of field instructors within this capacity.

Donna has explained that you can choose to terminate participation in the study at any point prior to August 10, 2016. She has asked us to attach a copy of her Letter of Information/Consent Form and Interview Guide to this email. The letter provides you with full details about the study and the interview guide informs you of the questions that you can expect to be asked, if you choose to participate in this study.

In addition, this study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
Gilmour Hall – Room 305 (ROADS)
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Sincerely,
Janice Chaplin
Faculty Field Co-ordinator & Assistant Professor
School of Social Work
McMaster University

Appendix C: Letter of Information and Consent Form

Assessing students 'readiness for practice': Field Instructors' experiences and perspectives

Principal Investigator:
Stephanie Baker Collins
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23779
E-mail: sbcollins@mcmaster.ca

Student Investigator:
Donna Lazarus
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

E-mail: lazarudm@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study:
It is the purpose of this study to gain insight into the experiences of Field Instructors attached to McMasters' School of Social Work Program, as they assess and evaluate placement students' readiness for practice. I hope to learn how Field Instructors who have supervised a BSW student who has experienced a failed practicum or a placement breakdown assess and qualify readiness and consequently lack of readiness. I want to learn what tools and experience they utilize to determine when a student is not meeting the requirements of their practicum and furthermore not ready to enter the workforce. This research is being completed for my MSW thesis under the supervision of Stephanie Baker Collins of the McMaster School of Social Work.

Procedures involved in the Research:
Should you choose to participate in this research study, you will be asked to respond to questions being asked by the researcher in an in-person interview format, which will take approximately an hour to complete. The questions will be structured in a manner that explores:

- *Experiences of field instructors as they evaluate lack of readiness in students preparing to enter the workforce;*
- *Reasons that a lack of readiness is determined;*
- *What tools are utilized to assess lack of readiness in students who are struggling.*

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:

It is not likely that there will be any harms or discomforts associated with completing the in-person interviews that you may not already encounter in your every day practice. Should there be aspects of the interview process that you are uncomfortable with, or questions that you may not be comfortable answering, you are more than welcome to omit these questions. However there may be some social risks associated with sharing stories of placement breakdowns since the Social Work community is small, others may be able to identify you on the basis of references you make and the uniqueness of stories, which may lead to student identification. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me. In order to address this potential risk, I will not be sharing any personal stories in my findings but rather utilizing the data that is shared to discuss generalized themes that emerge.

Potential Benefits
The research may not benefit you directly, however as current and continuing Field Instructors, I am optimistic that the knowledge gained from this research project will lend itself well to future practice and collaborative work that you will continue to do, in conjunction with the McMaster School of Social Work. I thank you for the active role you have played in contributing to this process.

Confidentiality
You are participating in this study confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. No one but the research supervisor and I will know whether you were in the study unless you choose to share this information. The information/data you provide will be kept in a locked desk/cabinet where only I will have access to it. Information kept on a computer will be protected by a password. Once the study has been completed, an anonymous and confidential compilation of the data will be maintained for the duration of my research on this topic. As mentioned above, the community is small and others may be able to identify you based on what you share please keep this in mind as you decide information to disclose to me.

Participation and Withdrawal:
Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is absolutely your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop (withdraw), from the interview for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study or up until approximately ***July 10, 2016.*** If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

Information about the Study Results
I expect to have this study completed by December 2016. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

Questions about the Study
If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

lazarudm@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Donna Lazarus of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until approximately ***July 10, 2016.***
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name of Participant (Printed) _____

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.
… Yes.
… No.

2. …Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.
Please send them to me at this email address _____
Or to this mailing address: _____
_____
_____

… No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

3. I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request.
... Yes. Please contact me at: _____
... No.

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Information about these interview questions: This gives you an idea what I would like to learn about field instructors experiences in assessing readiness for practice with BSW students who have experienced either a placement breakdown or placement failure. Interviews will be conducted one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just "yes or no" answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: "*So, you are saying that …?*), to get more information ("*Please tell me more?"),* or to learn what you think or feel about something ("*Why do you think that is…?").*

1) Information about you: What area of social work do you practice in? How long have you been a field instructor?

2) What values do you feel are necessary for BSW students to possess in order to demonstrate readiness for direct entry practice?

3) What skills do you feel are necessary for BSW students to possess?

4) What are some of the behaviours that you believe are attached to issues of lack of readiness for practice? To what extent do you observe these behaviours in the students you supervise?

5) What are some of the reasons that have contributed to placement breakdowns/failures with students?

6) How do you determine lack of readiness for practice? What is your process in making this determination? What were your fears/concerns if a student you determined was not ready, were to pass their placement?

7) How do you document lack of readiness? Was the evaluation form helpful in capturing this?

8) Did you use tools outside of the formal evaluation to support you in assessing lack of readiness?

9) Would you do anything differently?

10) Is there something important we forgot? Is there anything else you think is important for me to know before we end?

END