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## Help or Hindrance – the Value of Field Trips as a Form of Experiential Learning for Social Work Students

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# Help or Hindrance – the Value of Field Trips as a Form of Experiential Learning for Social Work Students

## **Abstract**

Field trips to augment in class learning hold valuable learning opportunities and can be transformative when observing context is important to understanding complex issues such as mental health and addiction. However, student reflections papers written after participating in the field trip were reviewed over a five-year period and identified that this form of experiential learning also resulted in harm to some social work students. Using a phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990) to secondary data analysis, 53 papers identified four clusters of meanings related to discomfort, appreciation/ambivalence/regret, personal experiences of trauma and power. These individual experiences collectively raised larger questions around social work pedagogy and how educators should prepare students when confronted with distressing situations. We wondered to what degree witnessing such conditions became either a transformative experience as described by Rone (2008) or re-enacted individual experiences of past trauma. With field experience a pedagogical cornerstone to a career in Social Work, we advocate for ethically balancing between safeguarding students from feeling acute distress or re-experiencing trauma as a result of field trips, while ensuring they are professionally prepared to enter the profession upon graduation.

Les sorties éducatives organisées pour renforcer l'apprentissage en classe présentent de précieuses opportunités d'apprentissage et peuvent être transformatrices lorsque l'observation du contexte est importante pour comprendre des questions complexes telles que la santé mentale et l'addiction. Toutefois, les travaux de réflexion rédigés après la participation à de telles sorties organisées ont été examinés sur une période de cinq ans et ont permis d'identifier que cette forme d'apprentissage par l'expérience avait également porté préjudice à certains étudiants et à certaines étudiantes en travail social. Grâce à l'utilisation d'une approche phénoménologique (van Manen, 1990) pour l'analyse des données secondaires, 53 travaux ont permis d'identifier quatre groupes de significations liés à l'inconfort, à l'appréciation/à l'ambivalence/au regret, à l'expérience personnelle d'un traumatisme et au pouvoir. Ces expériences individuelles ont soulevé collectivement des questions plus vastes sur la pédagogie du travail social et sur la manière dont les éducateurs devraient préparer les étudiants et les étudiantes lorsque ceux-ci sont confrontés à des situations pénibles. Nous nous sommes demandé jusqu'à quel degré le fait d'être témoin de telles conditions était devenu soit une expérience transformatrice tel que décrit par Rone (2008), soit des expériences individuelles reconstituées de traumatismes passés. Avec l'expérience sur le terrain comme pierre angulaire pédagogique à une carrière en travail social, nous préconisons d'en arriver à un équilibre éthique entre le fait d'éviter que les étudiants et les étudiantes ressentent une détresse aiguë ou qu'ils revivent l'expérience d'un traumatisme suite à une sortie éducative, tout en assurant qu'ils sont professionnellement préparés à entrer sur le marché du travail dans leur profession après la fin de leurs études.

## **Keywords**

field trips, experiential learning, risks, benefits; sorties éducatives, apprentissage basé sur l'expérience, risques, avantages

Scarce (1997) states that “for all their comfort and familiarity, classrooms and textbooks are only representations of the social world, a world awaiting exploration and construction by students and instructors” (p. 223). As educators and practitioners, we were motivated by Scarce’s quote and as such arranged for field trips for our Bachelor of Social Work students to augment classroom learning in the field of mental health and addiction. Between 2014 and 2019, the authors took six undergraduate cohorts on field trips to one of two mental health locations: a regional mental health or diversion court and a regional health care center, both of which included mental health and addictions services. The purpose of these trips was to teach students about institutional responses to addictions and mental health, a topic that we felt was best taught experientially. We acknowledge that during the current Covid pandemic no field trips are possible but used this teaching suspension as an opportunity to reflect upon the merits and drawbacks of such endeavors. Ironically because of the pandemic, time became available to explore the value of this experiential teaching approach to augment in-class learning.

As social work educators with clinical experience in the fields of addiction and mental health, we desired an opportunity to not only learn about representations of institutional services, but to have an opportunity to experience and explore, and in so doing, begin to construct a more complete or holistic understanding of these services. To this end, following the field trip, students were required to write an in-depth reflection paper based on their experiences. They were asked to write the paper guided by the following questions;

- 1) What did you hear, observe, feel?
- 2) Was anything comfortable or uncomfortable for you to experience? Why?
- 3) What, if anything, shifted for you as a result from going on this field trip?
- 4) Were any a priori assumptions challenged by what you heard or saw?

Our decision to use a hermeneutic phenomenological approach meant asking questions that focused on the meaning of the experience—both in terms of *what* was experienced and *how* it was experienced during the field trip (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Similarly, using a phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990) to secondary data analysis, we identified recurring themes over the five years when field trips were offered, and the meanings students attached to their experience of witnessing the provision of mental health and addiction services in a diversion mental health court and hospital setting. Several themes emerged from the student reflection papers that called into question the role of field trips as an approach to experiential learning in post-secondary education.

The nature of the field experiences shared by the students resulted in us taking pause as to the benefit and harm this form of experiential learning entails and prompted us as educators to self-reflect on several questions; does this type of teaching approach justify the outcome? Are we enhancing learning or causing harm? In other words, are field trips worth it? In the case of these undergraduate social work cohorts, was the learning obtained by students worth the feelings of discomfort and even experiences of re-traumatization? Did the shifts in thinking that occurred justify the regret experienced? The purpose of this paper is to therefore describe the experiences of undergraduate students going on field trips, and in so doing critically reflect as educators upon field trips as a pedagogical approach to experiential learning in the context of mental health and addictions.

## Review of the Literature

One of the core elements of effective teaching is “learning experiences that connect course material to prior knowledge” (Rone, 2008, p. 237) commonly occurring in higher education through experiential learning (Bogo, 2006). Hawtrey suggests, “in its purest form, experiential learning occurs whenever the student is roused from the role of passive listening to that of active respondent” (2007, p. 144). Pedagogical approaches meant to rouse students through experimental learning are employed throughout higher education including social work education and include; observational learning (Carey & McCardle, 2011; Le Riche, 2006), volunteer experience (Versen, 1985), virtual placements (O’Connor, Cecil, & Boudini, 2009), and field education (Bogo, 2006).

Described as “an underused pedagogical technique,” (Scarce, 1997, p. 219), the field trip is often associated with elementary and secondary education (Rone, 2008; Versen, 1985). Defined as “a group trip that affords lived social experiences in a social context for the purpose of firsthand observation and learning” (Rone, 2008, p. 238), field trips have been found to be effective across all levels of education (Samarawickrema & Raponi, 2020) and in numerous professions including sociology (Jakubowski, 2003; Scarce, 1997), teacher education (Ateşkan & Lane, 2016), environmental science (Rone, 2008), legal studies (Samarawickrema & Raponi, 2020), and social work (Versen, 1985).

Descriptions found throughout the literature suggest that despite their logistical complexities (Kisiel, 2006; Samarawickrema & Raponi, 2020; Scarce, 1997), field trips are a rich and potentially incredibly rewarding pedagogical approach. For example, Rone (2008) suggests “field trips have the potential to be intensely engaging, integrative, and transformative experiences affording opportunities for students to question power, access, privilege, and positionality” (p. 238). Scarce (1997) likewise describes field trips as holding a great deal of potential for adding to student experience:

field trips engage and even entertain students, helping to make the educational experience more enjoyable and – judging from what students have told me months or years later – more memorable and more sociologically meaningful as well. Students are motivated to learn when they concretely experience social phenomena through the everyday settings of field trips; such experiences are impossible in the classroom. (p. 220)

Versen (1985) succinctly added, “the field trip, then, provides certain valuable supplements to the educational experience” (p. 46).

In addition to those already mentioned, several other benefits of field trips have been identified throughout the literature. For example, Krepel and Duvall (1981) suggest that a field trip “bridges the gap between the classroom and the outside world. It provides accurate, first-hand information...It not only increases knowledge of a particular subject, but also may increase the desire for knowledge. It adds realism to the unit of study” (as cited in Versen, 1985, p. 46). Other benefits include providing opportunity for and encouraging the development of reflective practices (Le Riche, 2006; O’Connor, Cecil, & Boudioni, 2009; Trowell & Miles, 1991); challenging preconceived beliefs and stereotypes (Scarce, 1997); being able to view different role behaviours approaches to practice (Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001); connecting theory and practice (Samarawickrema & Raponi, 2020) and becoming acutely aware of the complexity of human relationships (Trowell & Miles, 1991). Scarce (1997) suggests that field trips help engage student learning, making it more memorable and meaningful, and “can be among the most intensive, in-

depth, integrative, and rewarding of educational experiences for students and instructors alike” (p. 226). Suffice to say, though field trips may be underused, for those in education who elect to use this pedagogical approach, there can be many potential benefits.

Aside from the benefits however, there are also several challenges associated with field trips: administrative roadblocks, such as the need to have certain trips approved by various ethics review boards; logistical concerns, including dealing with unforeseen circumstances or emergencies; managing schedules and large groups or class sizes; geographic barriers in terms of proximity to appropriate sites; issues surrounding confidentiality, and factors related to time, such as how a field trip can take away from in-class time or impede on out-of-class time if the trip cannot occur during class hours (Scarce, 1997). Other potential challenges may include dealing with insurance policies (Jakubowski, 2003), securing funding and arranging transportation (Ateşkan & Lane, 2016), and developing alternative plans when students are unable to attend (Samarawickrema & Raponi, 2020). One final significant problem with field trips, as with many forms of experiential learning, is the inherent power inequality between observer and observed (Le Riche, 2006).

As noted by Le Riche (2006), “Observing is an uncomfortable experience and if the complexities of power relations are not recognized and worked with, then it can be oppressive to the least powerful participants” (p. 773). Rentmeester and O’Brien (2006) provide a poignant example of this dynamic in the case study of “JC,” a thirty-five-year-old woman who was admitted to hospital with a variety of symptoms including pain, fatigue, and “unusual skin lesions” (p. 13). JC awakens to find a medical team comprised of a physician, residents, and medical students standing around her bed observing her. Feeling uncomfortable by this situation, JC speaks with the hospital’s ethics consultation service, saying, “It just can’t be right that all these people get to crowd in here and observe me like I’m a guinea pig” (p. 13). The story of JC reveals the acute power imbalance and issue of consent often found in experiential approaches to learning including field trips.

## Methodology

To understand the experience of undergraduate students going on field trips, the authors used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990, 2017) to secondary data analysis. As noted by van Manen (1990), descriptions of lived experience can be found in various expressions including written reflections. In order to uncover “the meaning of the experience” (p. 88) and thereby better understand the experience itself, each paper was reviewed using what van Manen (1990) calls “the selective or highlighting approach” (p. 93). This approach is described as a process in which “we listen to or read a text several times and ask, *what statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?*” (p. 93). Through this process, key statements and phrases were identified, and underlined, circled, and/or highlighted. Upon completion of this initial stage, papers were exchanged between the authors for a second reading and coding as a form of inter-rater reliability to increase rigor related to the data. We found initial themes remained consistent with the second reading of the papers. In the case of the differences, the authors returned to their separate coding books as a way to trace the process of word clusters to early formation of meanings (Creswell, 2013).

Thematic patterns emerged within the reflection papers and were explored and clustered to form “units of relevant meaning” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 50). Through multiple reiterations of this process, the authors began to construct an initial understanding of the experience, engaged in

reflective verbal and written processes, and then re-engaged with the texts with what Neubauer et al. (2019) call “revised understandings” (p. 95).

Throughout the process of reading and rereading the papers (van Manen, 2017), the authors entered the “hermeneutic circle” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This was described as occurring when one is,

moving between the parts and the whole. We see a part of something and then it shapes our story of the whole. And, as we expand our understanding of the whole, it changes how we see the parts. We see the parts differently. And as I’m on the journey to see the whole, the parts look different. The parts look a little bit more like the whole thing. And it makes the parts more beautiful. And when I do that, it changes my understanding of the whole (McBride, 2019, 38:08).

We sought to understand the experiences described in each individual text “by reference to the individual parts along with the researcher’s understanding of each individual part, by further reference to the whole document” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 10). More accurately, in this specific case, individual parts of each paper were understood in reference to that paper, and each individual paper was understood in reference to the collection of papers as a whole, and vice versa. As noted by Schmidt (1996), “one can understand the whole only from an understanding of the parts” and “one can understand the part only from an understanding of the whole” (p. 263). Through such continuous and circular movement, the authors were slowly able to see what Schmidt calls “the unity of parts and whole” (p. 266) or between specific, individual experiences and the overall context of experiential learning through field trips. An example we encountered that reflected Schmidt’s (1996) theory is the following. Both authors independently identified discrete student descriptions of appreciation, ambivalence and regret as a result of the field trip. When such emotions were viewed together, as on a spectrum, they held deeper and more fulsome meaning as lying on a spectrum of experience, as compared to when these descriptions were viewed as discrete. Also, returning to the literature by van Manen (2017) and Schmidt (1996) as a form of theoretical sensitivity (Javadi-Pashaki & Darvishpour, 2020) supported our decision to include all three emotions under one theme.

Participants on the field trips were comprised of undergraduate social work students in the final term of their one-year post degree program. Of approximately 160 students who attended these field trips, a total of 53 gave permission for the authors to review their reflection papers for this study. Students attended one of two field trips, each three hours in length, to augment the classroom learning. One field trip was to a mental health diversion court in a municipal courtroom and the other to an outpatient mental health clinic and in-patient psychiatric ward at a local hospital. Each field location was thoroughly explained during class time to prepare the student learner of what they might observe during the outing (physical layout of building, programs, screening protocol and processes). The issue of confidentiality was emphasized as some of the students had placements at the sites visited. Students represented a variety of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, all genders identities and between the ages of 21 and 49 years of age. All participants had successfully completed and been assigned final grades for the course in question before being asked to participate in the study. Research ethics was received from the University of Waterloo.

## Findings

Within a hermeneutic phenomenological framework, the “grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of “seeing” meaning” (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). Elsewhere, van Manen (2017) argues, “true insights are not “technically derived” or “methodically produced” but rather phenomenological insights are “encountered,” “discovered,” “given,” “found,” or sometimes even “stumbled upon”” (p. 820). This description matches our experience as initially these papers were read not to gain phenomenological insights about the experience of BSW students participating in field trips, but rather to assess student learning and assign grades accordingly. The authors were therefore surprised to stumble upon experiences that hinted at something greater than individual reflections specific to a community outing. We became increasingly sensitized when marking the reflection papers that clusters of meanings were embedded in the content and held overarching themes or meta-narratives. Identifying individual parts in the papers were then collectively grouped according to clusters of meanings relating to discomfort, appreciation/ambivalence/regret, personal experiences of trauma and power.

### Discomfort

The first cluster of meanings related to the experience of discomfort, regardless of what field trip the student attended. Descriptions of discomfort centered mostly on the feeling of intrusion and viewing human suffering of another without permission as in, “I felt uneasy with the feeling of being a spectator – an individual peering into the painful moments of someone else’s life” [P 1]. A variation of the feeling of intrusion was related to feeling selfish and how their presence impacted the sanctity of healing, “it felt almost selfish to be there – to intrude in the space of safety and healing for these marginalized individuals” [P 12]. The theme of intrusion was a common one and was often simply noted by statements including, “I had this feeling like I was intruding on the clients lives” [P 2]. Intrusion through student presence was compared to that of visiting a zoo by many students. The following statement is representative of the cluster on discomfort:

I felt like we were a group of individuals at a zoo...a lot of individuals just want to improve and get out of the hospital, and now they have a bunch of students looking in at them as though they are animals [P 4].

The experience of intrusion was linked to the act of surveillance within the diversion court setting, when police officers searched student knapsacks and purses prior to entering the courthouse. The discomfort of implicitly being associated with criminality was noted in the statement,

the process of having someone search my bags almost made me feel like I was a criminal. I think the security search is related to our society’s attitude towards people who engage in criminal behaviour, have mental health issues, are part of minority groups, or are impoverished [P 13].

In the hospital setting, attempts to intentionally look away from clients was stated as a mechanism to cope with feelings of personal discomfort, explained by this student in this way,

I did not want to look around. I felt uncomfortable looking in at individuals lying in beds in what could be their most vulnerable moment... [P 11].

### **Appreciation, Ambivalence, and Regret**

Another cluster of meanings fell on a spectrum with the feeling of appreciation anchoring some experiences and regret anchoring others. Ambivalence bridged the feeling of appreciation and regret, perhaps suggesting what was seen and heard from the field trip was still being processed at the time of writing the reflection paper. Appreciation was expressed for the opportunity to do experimental learning through a field trip, as in the following excerpts: “I appreciated the opportunity” [P 6] or “I am beyond thankful for this opportunity” [P 5]. Another example was the statement, “although this was a challenge for me, I was very appreciative to learn the process of how mental health and addictions works through the hospital” [P 18]. Along the lines of appreciation, there was acknowledgment of how prior assumptions shifted as a result of attending the diversion court field trip, described this way,

I came into the courthouse with the assumption was that most of the defendants would be individuals of colour. However, based on my experience that was challenged and majority of the individuals at the courthouse were white. This experience was also alarming in the sense that minorities might not know the resources they have access to. This is something I will use as a social work student with my clients [P 17].

The middle of the spectrum held expressions of ambivalence, meaning statements contained elements of both appreciation and regret as seen in following quote, “I began to question if it was more hurtful to be on this tour than helpful. I might come away with some insights and new knowledge but at what expense? At who’s expense?” [P 26]. A student expressed the feeling of ambivalence this way,

It was a real struggle for me. It was a battle of ethics. I didn’t want to hurt an individual receiving care by my stares as they are used as an example. Yet, I questioned whether I was hindering my learning opportunity with this struggle to observe or not [P 9].

Similarly, the space between finding the field trip a learning opportunity bookmarked by a feeling of uncertainly can be seen in this statement, “I learned a lot, but at times I felt as though I was an intruder” [P 2]. Similarly, a feeling of negativity is tempered by greater potential insight for future use, as seen in this statement,

my perspective on the court process shifted in a negative way since it was apparent that defendants had to go through the same process multiple times which seemed time consuming, inconvenient and inefficient. On the other hand, I gained a lot of knowledge in the process of attending court. Although there may be gaps in the judicial system, justice is also served for many people and I now see what can be done differently [P 7].

Lastly, at the other end of the spectrum was the feeling of regret, an outcome after experiencing acute discomfort described by [P 12] as “in the middle of our discussion, a woman walked out of



the group room and froze upon seeing us. At that moment, I wished that we were not on the tour.” Other statements were more succinct regarding experiencing regret such as “I wished that we were not on the tour” [P 41].

### **Triggering Past Trauma**

What was totally unexpected and came as a surprise was the number of students who wrote of feeling re-traumatized due to past unresolved issues in their personal lives. The reflection papers of these students spoke to re-experiencing moments of panic and acute anxiety during the field trip, reminiscent of experiences related to such situations as immigration, living in war, abuse and partner or family violence. As one example, entering the diversion mental health court required going through a metal detector and security check not unlike that found at an airport. One student paralleled the experience to earlier acts of discrimination and racism described through this story;

I walked into the courthouse and was immediately faced with a security checkpoint that seemed very similar to an airport setup. Instantly, my mind began to wonder off and I felt guilty for being a woman of colour based on past airport experiences. As a woman of colour I was feeling very anxious going through the security checkpoint [P 22].

Another statement identified low grade discomfort and anxiety accompanied her throughout the entire field trip, “when I entered the main area of the building I felt overwhelmed. I felt uncomfortable and confined the entire time I was in the courtroom and anxious, although I had not done anything wrong” [P19].

Likewise, the act of going through police security at the diversion court resulted in this student re-living a traumatic event,

My immediate reaction to the security search was mechanical. I was suddenly desensitized, numb, and/or found myself normalizing the security procedures. I left home when I was 15 years old and I have traveled to many different countries by myself. I have been strip searched at (name of airport) twice in the past [P 8].

Likewise, the visit to the mental health outpatient clinic that included walking through the detoxification center triggered past personal or familial experiences in the context of addiction. One student shared,

“I felt uneasy with the feeling of being a spectator – an individual peering into the painful moments of someone else’s life. This was too personal for me to see and experience again” [P 31].

### **Power**

The concept of power was experienced by some students as alternatively being nuanced or acute. The influence of power was experienced through a variety of senses including visual, tactile, auditory and the physical awareness of holding privilege. Starting with the visual, the courthouse was both aesthetically revered while labelled as fiscally irresponsible; revered for its “refined”

physical design that featured polished wood interiors and natural lighting while labelled as irresponsible for squandering fiscal resources as seen in the sentence,

“I felt a sense of frustration knowing the amount of money that must be spent to build and maintain such a mega structure” [P 32]. Another student described her visual response this way, “I found the space to be unfriendly, unapproachable, metallic, edgy, impersonal and cold; the space did not evoke any aspects of personhood” [P 8]. Tactile sensations included the temperature of the room as *in*, “I observed a room that was cold, with no natural light and had a hierarchical structure. This made me feel uncomfortable. I also feel cold rooms are unwelcoming” [P 19]. Likewise, the hardness of the wooden benches in the courtroom, placed in close proximity and reserved for those not part of the legal system, was noted by another student “the benches were hard and unforgiving – I can’t imagine what it must be like to be sitting on them for hours” [P 14].

Discourses around auditory messages and power within the diversion court ranged from the silencing of client voice to attempts to flatten the power hierarchy by those in power through language choice. For example, a common observation by students on the courtroom field trip was that, “clients had to stand behind the lawyer’s desk and did not speak directly to the judge unless summoned to do so” [P 2]. Similarly, this lack of voice was stated as, “yet another show of injustice by those in power” [P 11]. Conversely, a few students felt that language was carefully chosen to reduce the power inequity as highlighted by the statement:

the judge was attentive to the language he used when speaking to the accused to ensure their understanding. His genuine words of encouragement when speaking to these individuals presented as empowering to me as he shared with them that he believed they were on the right track with their present actions and that they were to 'keep up the good work ' [P 35].

Lastly, the dynamic of power was spoken about from the sense of body awareness. The sensation of holding privilege, and possessing personal rights while on the hospital field trip, was noted by this student in the following way, “it feels that once you enter that unit from the other side you are stripped of all your credentials, your education, your experience, and all you are left with is your disorder, your behaviours, and your psychosis” [P 13]. Similarity, the power to depersonalize individuals is inferred by the statement, “they took away patients’ belongings...the nurses were able to control functions in each of the rooms...it made me feel as though they were taking away the patients’ autonomy and destroying their dignity” [P 24].

Regardless of whether the student attended the diversion court or hospital field trip, clusters of meanings related to a “us versus them” mentality was noted by several students. For example, meanings relating to privilege and power are noted in this statement,

I found the process of going through the security search to be a little invasive and oppressive. I thought it was interesting that judges and lawyers do not have to go through the security but that all other people had to pass through security before entering the building...I think this sends the message that individuals who are facing charges are not trustworthy or even dangerous [P 15].

The seating arrangement within the courtroom was used as another example:

The power dynamics within the courtroom are very clear. The judge sits in a sectioned off podium that sits higher than the rest of the courtroom. The police officer has his own podium, as well as the judge's assistants. The lawyers have their own desks facing the judge and, the audience sits on benches behind everyone [P 33].

Lastly, performances of power within the courtroom was noted by this student:

When people entered the courtroom they bowed to the judge. As an observer, it was clear to me that the judge held the most power, followed by other professionals such as police officers, lawyers, and social workers. The clients did not have a voice in the court process and were extremely vulnerable [P 42].

### **Discussion**

Student experiences described in a reflection paper from participating in field trips to a diversion course and out-patient mental health site at a local hospital prompted the two instructors to take pause and explore in depth the merit of continuing this type of experiential learning. Chronologically reviewing the reflection papers over a five-year period identified themes that made us ask whether we should continue this practice of taking students into the field to augment classroom learning. The interruption of Covid-19 provided an unintentional space to reflect upon this experiential learning practice and to decide, once in class learning resumes, if we would continue field trips as an experiential leaning approach.

Our initial impression of the themes supported Rone's (2008) suggestion that field trips can help achieve multiple goals including: introducing students to the various conceptual and theoretical foundations of social work practice, including that of power and privilege, increasing awareness about specific topics, in this case mental health and addiction and helping students better understand the relationships between theory, practice, and policy (p. 244). Student statements that reflected appreciation for the learning opportunity and of gaining a deeper appreciation for one's personal and professional social identity and accompanying power highlights a foundational value specific to social work.

However, using van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the findings we soon realized that individual student experiences and the meanings attached to their experiences held deeper and global and more significant revelations specific to social work pedagogy. For example, social work practice is intertwined with the human condition, underwritten by situations and scenarios involving pain, emotional injury and anguish. Discussing distressing conditions in a classroom facilitated by an instructor insulates the student from being confronted with the rawness of suffering witnessed in the field. We wondered to what degree witnessing such conditions became either a transformative experience as described by Rone (2008) or re-enacted individual experiences of past trauma. This last realization pushed us to question to what degree should discomfort be tolerated in the process of professional growth in becoming a social worker and the ethics surrounding this question. It is known that students who enter Schools of Social Work possess higher scores on measures of adverse childhood experiences compared to the general student population (Negrete, 2020). While higher ACE scores may initially appear to be a practice liability, Zerubavel and Wright (2012) suggest that past adverse experiences could potentially be

advantageous to the social worker; possessing a greater ability to empathize with clients and have confidence in the therapeutic process, as well as a greater understanding of painful experiences and the difficulty of engaging in therapy (p. 486).

How should social work curriculums respond to these mixed results? To continue experimental learning through the use of field trips risk retraumatizing students, yet exposure to uncomfortable and distressing situations can result in practitioner resiliency and post traumatic growth. We questioned the juxtaposition between our responsibility to ensure safety within learning environments and our role pertaining to adequate career preparation. Engaging in active reflection and deep dialogue of our own pedagogical journey, we came to the tentative conclusion of the importance of context and locating the elusive line between experiential learning and providing sufficient preparation and safety prior to the field outing. Educators should bookend field trips by thoroughly preparing students on possible scenarios and visceral responses and providing a space to debrief the outing, while at the same time not withdrawing the component of what makes experiential learning so valuable, the transformative element of retrieving, engaging, conceptualizing and incorporating new or unexpected information into a form of knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

Field trips as a form of experiential learning have traditionally been used by social work educators to augment in-class teaching. Community outings hold the ability to make explicit the complexity of topics such as mental health and addiction for students. This hermeneutic phenomenologically framed study focused on analyzing individual student assignments over a period of five years to better understand the benefits versus harms associated with field trips to community sites of a diversional court and hospital outpatient mental health clinic held. As social work educators and practitioners, we wanted to know if this type of experiential teaching approach justifies the outcome, meaning do such experiential trips enhance learning or cause harm? Specifically, is the learning obtained by students worth the feelings of discomfort and even experiences of re-traumatization? Do the shifts in thinking that occur justify the regret experienced? The purpose of this study was to therefore describe the experiences of undergraduate students going on field trips, and in so doing critically reflect as Social Work educators upon field trips as a pedagogical approach to experiential learning in the context of mental health and addictions.

While some student reflection papers spoke to the field trips as being transformative, others identified heightened feelings of acute discomfort and distress prompting the question of ethics. This liminal space existing between confirmation of benefits while acknowledging harms is open to reader interpretation. As study authors we suggest the need to locate the line loosely separating the two and proceed with caution while not abandoning the powerful potential such outings offer to students. Discomfort is a form of learning, and can prompt deeper reflection into how such experiences can be helpful when entering such a profession as Social Work.

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