The Effectiveness of Field Education in Social Work Education: A Student Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The importance of field education and practice in student learning has been documented and investigated by educational scientists and scholars. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of field placement and its contribution to training in social work from a student's perspective. Students from a social work program at Qatar University participated after their placements at various agencies and settings in Qatar.

The study utilised a phenomenological approach; data were collected using five focus groups of students. The coding of the student responses to the focus group questions yielded three major themes, classifying the field placements' effectiveness in supporting their learning in terms of: (1) opportunities to link theory to practice; (2) supervision and assessment; and (3) courses that helped them better prepare for the field placement. Challenges specific to each sub-theme are also outlined.

Keywords: *Social work; Field education; Placement; Qatar; Culture; Challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Scholars (Fox, 2017; Bogo, 2015; Sunirose, 2013) have investigated and demonstrated the importance of field education in student learning. Providing student learners with opportunities to practise and apply skills and knowledge learned in classrooms has been associated with higher learning, active engagement reflective practice, and experiential learning (Gray, 2013). Field education provides students with chances to test their learning by bridging the gap between theory and practice and applying learned concepts and theories in real situations.

As a discipline focusing on skills and competency, social work places a major emphasis on whether graduates have learned the skills, concepts and knowledge to be competent in the field. The global standards from the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) stipulate, at standard 3.7, that "field education should be sufficient in duration and complexity of tasks and learning opportunities to ensure that students are prepared for professional practice" (IASSW, 2004, p. 5).

Scholars and practitioners have recognised and studied the important contribution that field education or placement makes to social work graduates' competencies (Bogo, 2015; Wiebe, 2010; Sunirose, 2013). Field education provides not only an opportunity for students to integrate all learning they have received, but also a place that can help them foster reflective skills.

The prominent role of field placement in social work education has generated scholarly interest in investigating its part in ensuring program quality (Bogo, 2015); its connection with, and contribution to, classroom teaching and learning (Wiebe, 2010); and its capacity to foster reflective skills (Gursansky, Quinn, & Le Sueur, 2010). However, less has been written about the benefits of field placement from a student perspective.

The purpose of this study was to examine students' assessment of the effectiveness of field placement and its contribution to their training in social work at Qatar University, after their placements at various agencies and settings in Qatar.

This study aimed to explore the impact of field education on student learning. More specifically, it investigated the ways in which the field placement supported and enhanced students' learning and the role of supervision in supporting that learning; the challenges students faced; and the courses they perceived as being most helpful during their field placement. Additionally, knowledge about interns' experiences in various settings is important particularly considering the increase in global students' exchange encouraged by international social work schools (Fox, 2017; Thampi, 2017). Scholars (Bell & Anscombe, 2013;Pawar, 2017) have emphasised how international field experience can enhance students' learning and understanding of core values, and recognised the need for social work to address inequalities and societal challenges globally. It is hoped that these findings would contribute to enhancing field education and student exchange in the globalised world. Furthermore, by contextualising social work education in Qatar, this article provides potential student exchange candidates with opportunities to know more about the context of social work education in Qatar, and therefore be better prepared to address global challenges.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Qatar is part of the gulf region of Doha, with Saudi Arabia to the south and the rest of its territory surrounded by the Persian Gulf. The social work program in Qatar University began in the 1970s, was stopped for 10 years, and then was reinstated in 2010. After the reinstatement of the program, the first placement was in 2013 with 21 students, placed in various agencies. The second placement happened in 2014 with 35. This study covers the first two placements of the program after its reinstatement. The language of instruction is mainly Arabic. Students undertake a variety of specialised courses. Some of the subjects are related to interpersonal skills, working with individuals, groups, and families. Other courses are in human rights, mental health, health, schools, research, and social policy.

The practicum course of 400 hours is undertaken within one semester – over 14 weeks, approximately. To prepare for the placement, the students attended three training workshops. These workshops covered issues related to expectations, the placement as a culminating learning experience, aspects of their assessment, and the roles of students and supervisors. Supervisors were also provided with a series of workshops in their expected roles to enhance the relationship with the students and to maximize the benefit for all involved. Additionally, the supervisors' workshops covered issues related to field education learning outcomes and assessment methods.

The researchers both worked at the same university as the participants. The first author has experience as a social work faculty member, was the field education supervisor in the social work program. The second author was the assessment coordinator in the college where the social work program is housed. As such, he used to work collaboratively with the program coordinator to undertake student learning assessment activities. Both researchers have experience in Qatar and in the West.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilised a phenomenological approach. As indicated by Romdenh-Romluc (2011), the focal aim of phenomenology is to understand experiences as lived and narrated by the subjects. Phenomenology can, therefore, provide a thorough description of the students' lived experiences to inform scholars. Understanding students' conscious experiences and interpretations of field placements can provide valuable insights to academicians and professionals into ways of making field placement more meaningful to students.

Data-collection methods and tools

Consistent with the principles of phenomenology, data were collected using a focus group (see focus group semi-structured interview questionnaire in Appendix A). The focus group was judged to be an appropriate tool for collecting information on the ways students, as a group, experience the phenomenon of field placement, based on their lived experiences, opinions and points of view.

Participants

Senior students in a social work undergraduate program were the participants in this study. Graduating senior students from a bachelor program were emailed and asked for their interest in a focus group to further explore their responses to the survey.

Thirty-two students agreed to participate in the focus groups. Five focus groups were conducted, two in Fall, 2013 and three in Fall, 2014, each of five to eight students. All were female, average age 20, with no prior working experience. Most students were of Arabic origin and most of them being Qatari nationals. All students spoke Arabic and are Muslims.

Each focus group lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Participants were asked about: their learning experiences associated with the placement; whether the placement contributed to the achievement of the program's learning outcomes; challenges faced; courses they considered helped them succeed in the placement; and how the future placements could be improved. The research adhered to the ethical standards of Qatar University. Participation was voluntary and students gave consent for interviews. They were informed that they could decline or withdraw from the research at any time with no consequences. Participants were also informed that any report from the study will be completely anonymous. Table 1 sets out the number of students in each focus group.

Table 1. Summary of Number of Participants Per Focus Group

FOCUS GROUP NUMBER	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Focus group 1	8 students
Focus group 2	6 students
Focus group 3	6 students
Focus group 4	7 students
Focus group 5	5 students

Data analysis

The focus group was led by a research team member who had research assistants. The research assistants helped organise the focus groups logistically. Data collected from the focus groups were firstly transcribed by research assistants, then cross-checked by a member of the research team. Research assistants also did the initial emerging coding. The initially coded data were then cross-checked and discussed by the research team to improve validity. Themes were identified based on participants' responses relative to the benefits of the placement and to its perceived contribution to their training. Identified themes were also cross-checked and verified by the research team. Additionally, hierarchical coding was used to identify sub-themes within each major category.

Throughout the research process, bracketing was used to ensure result validity. According to Pienkos (2014), phenomenology "asks that researchers bracket any a priori assumptions, judgments, or theories about a phenomenon to try to understand the essential forms and features of experience" (p. 263). Bracketing was applied by researchers to ensure assumptions, beliefs and values were set aside, The bracketing techniques used included having the research assistants do the initial emerging coding, to allow a free and flexible flow of information free of preconceived ideas, assumptions or leading questions from the researchers. Themes that emerged now follow.

FINDINGS

The coding of the student responses to the focus group questions regarding the effectiveness of the placement yielded three major themes: (1) opportunities to link theory to practice; (2) supervision and assessment; and (3) courses that helped them better prepare for the field placement. Challenges specific to each sub-theme are also outlined.

I: Opportunities to link theory to practice

When asked about the ways in which the field placement supported their learning, students referred to the provided opportunities of linking theory to practice, including: a chance to apply general knowledge from the theoretical frameworks learned in class; exposure to culture; development of skills; exposure to cases that involve ethical decision making; and so forth. Examples of those sub-themes are provided next.

1.1 Applying knowledge from the theoretical frameworks

All students indicated that the field placement deepened their learning by providing opportunities to link theory to practice allowing them to learn about application of theoretical frameworks at an agency. An explanation of the conceptual framework served as a guide for students about the ways field practices related to classroom theories and concepts.; one student commented: "I had the opportunity to apply what I had learned in lectures."

Theory–practice linkage is also achieved through the collaborative nature of the field placement. Students indicated that the placement allowed the application of theory through the available discussion and interaction with peers, with professionals, and with clients: "It was a very positive experience as I learned a lot while working with colleagues and interacting with [clients]" ; "It was great to be able to apply 'solution focused therapy' with clients." These comments suggest that the placement enhances student learning by allowing more collaborative learning opportunities. Practices from agency workers that encourage students to observe professionals and think critically about which plans from their theoretical knowledge could be applicable also allowed students to develop stronger linkages between theory and practice, as reflected in this comment:

"Students were encouraged to observe social workers and to interact with patients. Cases were discussed with students, and the students were encouraged to think about the plan of care, which would include deciding which theory applied. Casework included domestic violence, discharge against medical advice, new natal intensive care unit casework, and financial casework."

Challenges related to applying theoretical frameworks

While students reported the beneficial aspects of the field placement for linking theory to practice, such linkage did not go without challenges. For example, the benefits of applying a theoretical framework could be hindered by unclear explanation and definition of such a framework or a failure by supervisors to clarify the theoretical framework. Consequently, students must rely on themselves, with inherent risks of confusion and misinterpretation. The students had to locate theories and work within a framework. This is reflected here:

I asked my supervisor about what frameworks they apply at the agency when working with clients in child protection and she replied that there is no clear theoretical framework … [but] when I was observing their work, I noticed they probably [were] using the "client focused approach."

Another student similarly commented:

We applied many theories but without structure. It was spontaneous and without the [supervisor's support]. I used to observe the workers' actions and try to analyze … to compare it to what we studied at university. I [noticed the use] of strength based approaches.

Another type of practice–theory challenge involves the availability of information and/or legal documents that can guide in applying theory during the field placement:

It was hard to work while I did not have enough knowledge about some legislation related to divorce, or parental care.

1.2 The exposure to culture

Another sub-theme relating to the theory–practice link is exposure to culture. All students indicated that, through opportunities to work with different cultures, the field placement allowed them to see different applications related to culture and social work. For example, students could identify the relationship between factors such as clients' background and culture, and their professional practice through interacting with various cultures, nationalities and religions. This is reflected here:

At women's hospital we [worked] with different nationalities. Women's hospital's services are offered to all nationalities. … in the Mother's group … we interacted with many different mothers during arts and crafts group time.

Another student took this further, reporting that the field placement reinforced their ability to better integrate aspects of culture and religion into their practice:

For me, the link between religion and professional practice was clear because, early on and during my studies, I was able to identify religious and spiritual elements in practice and I was able to incorporate these aspects into my interaction with others … placement at hospital provided me with that, [I] was working with people from different religious backgrounds.

When asked to elaborate, students indicated that exposure to different cultural backgrounds allowed them to explore the concept of diversity in practice as it is important for social workers to be culturally competent. The women's group provided them with an

opportunity to apply some values of cultural competency in real practice situations – this is one of the main principles in social work principles of practice according to the IASSW.

Challenges relating to exposure to culture

Challenges in this area mainly relate to the lack of clarity on how to integrate or incorporate religion with practice. This was not easy for students – there were no clear methods of incorporating religion into practice:

I found that it depends [on students'] individual efforts. Social work is western based, so how can I make sure that what I was using was applicable to the culture and the religious beliefs of clients? Sometimes, I was using some interventions and then I would say to myself, this may be more of a religious teaching rather than [social work practice].

Another student confirmed this:

There was a lack of training in relation to incorporating religion into professional practice. The agency did not have a strong role in emphasizing the role of culture or religion in the practice.

An additional aspect of the challenges related to exposure to culture involves what students referred to as an opposition to, or lack of clear guidelines about, including religion in the practice of Social Work – as reported by this student:

There is resistance among some supervisors at agencies, academics and practitioners to talking about religion when working with clients. This made it hard to learn about this important area.

II: Development of skills

According to students, the field placement also complemented the curriculum – it allowed them to develop skills that are not specifically taught in a formal program. Such skills include recording notes, answering calls from clients and handling crises. Although it could be argued that the program taught students about interpersonal skills and communication, students do not usually get a chance to apply such specific skills in real-life settings. By allowing students to apply and develop these skills, the field placement gives students a chance to translate principles of interpersonal communications skills into reality, as detailed in this student's comment:

We had the chance to build on so many skills . . . I was able to communicate within a multidisciplinary team and to take the initiative [planning] interventions [for] hospital patients.

Other students commented on skills development, for example:

I had the chance to learn how to record notes on the data base, how to communicate with clients over the phone, and most importantly, how to respond professionally to angry and unsatisfied clients. This is especially in relation to court cases. I learned some skills related to mediation and conflict resolution.

Skills such as making a client feel comfortable or being flexible and accommodating to different groups and nationalities were also reported by students:

The placement in schools provided me with social skills to interact with students and their families. I learned how to be flexible and to work with different type of personalities … to avoid being too formal and to be more approachable … being too formal would make clients [uncomfortable].

These skills not only allowed students to better evaluate and understand clients' background, develop comfortable working rapports with clients, but they also gave them opportunities to assess problems in order to provide appropriate and effective support: "I was able to assess the problems and the difficulties of clients and families."

Working across gender groups was also valuable:

I developed skills in working professionally with male patients. I learned a lot . . . I developed more confidence as I had the chance to work with male patients.

This is important because interacting with males outside the family was not a familiar experience for these students, who came from a conservative and gender-segregated culture. This was very important as they realised that being a social worker will require them to work effectively with both genders. Since the social environment did not allow this cross-gender opportunity, but the placement did.

Challenges in skills development

Regardless of the benefits reported earlier, some students discussed a lack of opportunities to learn skills. One said that she is still lacking skills in working with clients with special needs or disabilities, as she did not have the chance to learn about the nature of their difficulties and ways to interact with them. She said:

I am still feeling anxious about working with clients [with] disabilities, because I didn't learn enough about interviewing techniques [or] their needs.

Constraints due to agency schedules and time commitments were also reported as challenges. According to some, the limited amount of time they were required to spend with clients did not allow them to develop and practise necessary skills:

… the supervisor [asked] me not to [interview clients for] more than 15 minutes. This made it hard to develop skills in assessment and intervention.

III: Applying ethics and responding to ethical problems

Students indicated that field placement allowed them to see real-life application and enforcement of ethical principles and rules. One student commented: *I was able to apply ethics in my practice. We learned a lot about confidentiality and I was able to read the policies related to that and respect it.* Another said: *I learned how to confront a colleague if they are not respectful of clients [or the] privacy of patients.* Additionally, the field placement raised students' awareness of, and sensitivity to, ethics-related issues: *I learned to respect everyone regardless of their backgrounds … to reflect on my feelings and reactions to make sure that I was truly accepting of everyone.* These are important learning opportunities since they

help students develop the necessary attitudes and behavior conducive to a more inclusive practice of social work beneficial to all clients regardless of demographics or individual characteristics.

Challenges related to ethics

Students reported facing challenges when applying ethical decision-making. Some found it difficult and needed to know more about this area. The challenges stemmed, in some cases, from inconsistency between observed practices during the field placement and theoretical principles learned in class. One commented: *I noticed that some professionals exchange information about patients and about their medical history which made me think about the ethicality of that.* Such challenges of inconsistency between theoretical knowledge and observed practice are also reflected when agencies do not follow proper procedures, according to students:

The biggest challenge … was related to ethics. This is in comparison to knowledge and skills. It was a shock to see that what we learned in school was very different to what we encountered [in] practice. For example, the agency would not follow procedures that ensure privacy for clients and confidentiality . . . dealing with very sensitive issues.

Personally held beliefs and conceptions can also create ethically challenges:

In illegitimate pregnancy cases, the social worker may be against premarital relations. However, the social worker has the obligation to be professional and provide as much support as possible to the patient regardless of their personal opinion.

Lack of a code of ethics that students could reference was also another challenge they reported: "There was no code of ethics at the agency. What we studied at university was not available in codified organized ways. This caused some difficulties sometimes in following up cases within a context of ethical policies." Encountering or dealing with cases involving acquaintances or people one is familiar with was another challenge reported: "I knew the patient. I never saw him but I knew that he is the brother of my friend. It was difficult to know that he is in hospital."

Ethical issues were a recurring theme during placement. Therefore having something to reference or go back to for guidance when faced with ethical dilemmas could make the placement more effective.

IV: Supervision

Students were asked to talk about the role of the supervision and assessment and how these two processes helped support their learning during the field placement. According to respondents, the supervision played a major role in clarifying concepts and reinforcing learning. For example, when supervisors shared their experiences and helped reflect on and support the learning process: "Things related to placement were clarified during the visits. The supervisor shared her experience with me and it was helpful" ; "It was extremely beneficial. She was encouraging and supportive." Other students highlighted the instructions provided by the supervisors during the visits as not only strongly reinforcing and supporting

their learning, but also helped them deal with clients, policies and procedures: "Supervision was effective. We received instructions from our supervisor on the program and legal procedures and how to work with patients and also about the policies."

Challenges related to supervision

According to students, the main challenges faced with respect to supervision are related to agency workers' skills and provision of adequate and appropriate supervision. Students reported that: *Sometimes … workers at the agencies are not familiar with the concept of supervision. They are not clear about the role of students and the supervision. This [limited our learning].*

V: Courses and learning experiences that assisted in placement

Students were also asked to indicate the courses that they viewed as being helpful in supporting their learning during the field placement. According to students, courses with a practical component were the most helpful:

The courses [with] a practical approach … were more helpful in the placement. These courses helped in remembering this knowledge … we learned how to interview clients, how to work with groups in practical ways. I felt when I started my placement that I was ready.

Similar benefits were reported from courses dealing with diversity: "We worked with diverse populations at the hospital, so the course in diversity was … very important."

Courses that dealt with mental health and practice in medical contexts were also very helpful:

Courses such as mental health and social work in medical contexts are very important. I found them very helpful in my practice in child protection, as they give knowledge related to [clients'] health and mental health … They should be compulsory for social work students.

Few students talked about the importance of the course on Human Biology. One student said:

I found the Human Biology course to be useful. I know that many students do not see its relevance, but I found that most of the terminology I learned in the course helped me to understand the medical terms and health problems. It made things easier.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

When asked to provide recommendations on how to improve their experiences during the practicum, students made the following suggestions:

Increase the number of hours of placement; the time allocated to the practicum is not enough: *The placement was not enough to respond to learning needs of students.*

Other comments relate to challenges inherent to having the field placement at the same time as they study other courses: *It was a difficult period, especially as we needed to take some other courses which made it overwhelming for us to try to balance placement and other courses.*

According to students, time constraints could be minimised and managed more efficiently through more structured placement. This could be achieved by providing students with a

clear structured schedule, detailing specific tasks and time allocated to each: *I suggest having a more structured schedule for students' placement.*

Placement in different settings. Another recommendation that could improve the effectiveness of the practicum was to provide them with the opportunity to be placed in different settings.

This would expose them to different and varied issues and practices, as opposed to being placed within one agency only. It would allow the application of knowledge, skills and values in different contexts, to support the development of a stronger framework for practice. As students commented: *I am still not sure if I can do the work if I am employed in a different agency. Maybe it would be better to … get experience in more than one agency to gain more confidence,; placement in one place is not enough to be a competent practitioner. We need to learn how to apply the knowledge in more than one setting."*

Focus on teaching ethics: Participants in this study reported that a course dedicated to ethics could be very valuable preparation for the field.

This point was frequently mentioned and appeared to be one of the highlighted issues to be taken into account in the curriculum and in the placement: *We need more focus on working with ethical problems. Right now it is not discussed in depth.; Not sure we were well equipped to respond to ethical issues. We needed more focus on that.* Students recommended more attention to studying ethical issues, to prevent possibly unethical actions: *I think some of my colleagues were still not clear about ethical and professional boundaries of practice. Some were talking among themselves about confidential issues and this made me uncomfortable"; There is a need to study that in more detail.*

Students suggested ethical decision making could be addressed in the curriculum through using case studies: *There should be a focus on applying ethics in case studies. I feel we learn more and it helps [in] placement ; I benefited from practical case study examples … this will help in relating applying religion to practice.*

Focus on integrating religion into practice. Students indicated that more focus on integrating religion would be helpful.

As reported earlier, religiosity and faith were strong determinants of the nature of the rapport students would have with clients during their placement: *We need a course to assist us to understand intervention that is based on religion.*

Students believed that they also need training in incorporating religion and spirituality into their practice, through coordinated efforts by both the program and the agency: *Agency should have more role in fostering … religion and spirituality. We did not see that happening during placement.* Other students commented on the importance of including religion into social work practice: *more on how to [develop] an intervention plan based on religion; Agency supervisors need to be competent in helping students … apply religion in practice.* For other students, this need has to put emphasis on practice: *I am aware incorporating religion is*

important but did not know how in practice. [The] agency has an important role [in that]; or *We need curriculum to focus on links between religion and professional practice. This was not very clear during our study[in class]*

Assessing the field practicum: Students raised concerns and made recommendations about field practicum assessment.

According to students, assigning a grade mark on a report is not a fair reflection of their efforts and experiences. They recommended more conversation between the student and the supervisor in the form of debriefing sessions or reflection about what happened during placement: *Assessment should not be based on grades and marks. I saw a lot of suffering at the hospital. I saw a child dying. How can you put marks on that?.* Alternatively, students could meet with the university supervisor to talk about the portfolio and have an opportunity to summarise the placement experience: *The portfolio will not be a fair reflection on the work… undergone during placement. I would have liked to be given … a debriefing and closure for the placement.*

DISCUSSION

Overall, the placement was very beneficial to students. The experience was positive in the sense that it provided students with opportunities to practise skills they have learned in class and reflect on them. Our findings indicate that the practicum reinforced and enhanced student learning through linking theory and practice. Additionally, the practicum is an important part of the program because it exposes students to different cultures and practices in the field and develops their skills.

From the results of this study, it appears that the practicum also helps students to reflect on their learning. It provides opportunities to develop better linkages between what they have learned in class and field application. This relates to the findings of Gursansky et al. (2010) that one of the benefits of the practicum is that it strengthens student learning by developing reflective skills. Reflection and reflective practices have long been associated with higher learning gains and performance (Gray, 2013). More specifically, respondents indicated how the placement has allowed to reflect on their beliefs and values system to ensure those values do not create biases in their professional practice. Most of the reflection was triggered or supported through discussion and exchanges with peer students. Therefore social work programs might consider structured collaborative learning opportunities for discussion and exchanges among students to make the placement more effective.

The practicum could be a major learning opportunity if students are provided with diverse opportunities. Social work programs should ensure that students experience similar learning opportunities and have the chance to apply a wide range of skills in diverse placement sites in order to give all students similar chances of benefiting from practicums. Birkenmaier, Curley, and Rowan (2012) indicated the benefits of rotating students, so that they are exposed to diverse field practicum sites while they all go through similar experiences.

The benefits of the practicum could also be enhanced by providing students with opportunities to see specific linkages between what is happening in the field placement and how it could relate to what was learned in the classrooms. This could be accomplished through stronger connection and collaboration between the university supervisor and field placement supervisor. Such collaboration could involve further training for supervisors in undertaking the supervisory role, to allow a variety of training and more opportunities for student learning. This is supported by Sunirose (2013). Having the opportunity to debrief at the end of the placement was also something that students thought could be helpful to them, allowing them to develop stronger connections between theoretical and practical knowledge. According to students, multiple experiences in the field practicum cannot be fully accounted for in a report. Having a chance to talk about these experiences with supervisors, in the form of debriefing sessions, would enable programs to incorporate deeper understandings of the learning during the field practicum. Scholars (Bogo, 2015; Sunirose , 2013) have emphasised the importance of social work educators' understanding how students learn in the field education component, to better address students' educational needs but also to improve the social environment through which such learning is happening, and better theory–practice integration. Discussing reviewing with students through observation and debriefing, Bogo (2015) indicated that "such review can assist students to gain insight into the concept of use of self and see the intricate and nuanced links between theory and practice" (p. 319).

While students indicated that the practicum was an effective learning opportunity since it allowed them to apply knowledge and skills, one of the main challenges they faced related to ethics and values. Students in this study highlighted the challenges of reconciling personally held beliefs and professional practice as well as clear integration of religion in their training. Programs in social work could strengthen students' ethical decision modeling through case studies before the practicum. Scholars (Eltaiba, 2015; Reamer, 2012) have stressed the importance of ethics and ethical decision-making models in social work education.

In addition to the benefits and challenges reported by students, these findings can also contribute to the success of international field education and student exchange practices in social work. For example, study participants recommended a stronger focus on issues related to religion or family. This recommendation emphasising the role of religion in social work education may relate to the cultural background of participants. In other words, areas such as religion and family may not be as emphasised in a western context. As Crisp (2011) contended, "In Australia, where there is no state church, social workers sometimes call on notions such as the separation of church and state as justification for not discussing issues of religion with service users, particularly if their positions are government funded" (p. 665). Even though Crisp refers to practitioners, it may be safe to assume that social work education in Australia will face the same dilemma.

Similarly, Oxhandler, Parrish, Torres, and Achenbaum reported that, while practitioners in the USA (a survey of 442 social practitioners) agreed to integrating religion into their practice, fewer are doing so. Furthermore, only about half of their respondents (53%) indicated feeling "adequately trained to integrate religion" (p. 231). Therefore, social work practitioners, especially from a western context, will benefit from these findings since

they will allow them to understand different cultural practices – there may be limited opportunities to address these in formal training.

Findings reported here could help practitioners better understand cultural context surrounding social work education globally.

Current globalisation trends associated with migrations, as well as whether populations displaced either voluntarily or involuntarily, will more likely require all social work practitioners to engage with clients from different cultural backgrounds. Educating practitioners to work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds by integrating all these values (and aspects like religion and family) will help promote a holistic approach to social work (Crisp, 2011).

Another contribution of this study is in the possible support for student exchange programs. More specifically, these findings can help student exchange candidates interested in the Qatari context as well as their social work programs to be better prepared and have a clearer understanding of what to expect in this context.

SUMMARY

Evidence from this study confirmed previous findings that the field practicum is a positive learning experience for social work students. Our findings also indicated that the effectiveness of the field practicum can be enhanced by factors such as increasing the diversity of field placement sites and placing more focus on ethics. A number of benefits are reported, especially in the ways in which the field practicum helps support student learning; but there remain some challenges, including insufficient skills to deal with sensitive cases and language barriers that might hinder the effectiveness of the experience. Results from this study can help social work programs better understand the factors and issues enhancing or hindering students' field practicum experiences, especially in international contexts.

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Appendix A
Focus group questionnaire

How do you view the placement experience in general?

What are your views about agency supervision?

What went well during the placement?

What are the challenges you encountered?

Was there any thing missing that you needed or wished to know before the placement?

Was the preparation for placement (e.g., workshops) you received prior to placement helpful?

Did you have enough learning experiences during placement in relation to social work practice?