



Online Field Education during the Pandemic: Voicing Student Experiences and Reflections

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ABSTRACT: Although COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns have substantially affected field education, they activated novel strategies. This paper expounds on a qualitative study on the field education experiences of undergraduate social work students amidst the pandemic, which explores the field learning experiences and the benefits and limitations of online field education. The undergraduate social work students at Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, India, constituted the study population. Employing a phenomenological research design and choosing a sample of 20 students, the study extracted the primary data through in-depth interviews maintaining ethical compliance; and secondary data comprised the fieldwork summary reports and reflective papers of the students. The study outcome outlined the trajectory of student field learning experience during the pandemic and highlighted the challenges they faced and their learning gains and loss due to the sudden shift to virtual mode from traditional field training. The themes explicate a unique learning experience that explored the possibilities of online social work practice despite the challenges. Notwithstanding the importance of face-to-face interactions and relationships, the study recommends a balanced blend of virtual models and traditional field education paradigms for realizing the desired outcome of social work field education.

Keywords: virtual fieldwork, online social work engagement, supervisory relationship, virtual teams, reflective practices, hybrid model



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Field education is the signature pedagogy of social work, as stated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008, 2015). It facilitates integrating students' theoretical learning with practice in actual social work settings, thus preparing them for professional practice. Training for professional practice, as emphasized in the field education curriculum, gained an illuminated focus with the introduction of competence building which reiterated the practice education in actual life circumstances under the supervision of competent practitioners. The curriculum further underscored the practice skills, knowledge, and values to be developed through field education.

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COVID 19 disruption in Field Education

In India, a national lockdown was declared by the end of March 2020, which lasted for months. Since then, regional and State-wide lockdowns have been established to contain the virus spread. The COVID-19 pandemic has set an unprecedented disruption in field education, leading to a fix on account of the closure of social work agencies and schools, ceasing all face-to-face learning contexts. The challenge brought an existential crisis to field education as the crux of field learning rests on face-to-face contact (De Fries et al., 2021).

Getting field placement in an agency or arranging adequate field experience became arduous due to COVID protocols and restrictions (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020). Fieldwork agencies involved in COVID prevention and control activities were open, but that was online primarily. Another significant challenge in arranging field placements was the risk of Covid-19 infection for the student interns. Ensuring safety and educating the students and their parents about safety were other hitches.

Institutional responses in Field Education

Institutions responded to COVID-19 challenges in several ways, ranging from shifting to remote practice learning, shortening placements, increasing virtual assignments and involving in COVID-related projects (Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020; Mclaughlin et al., 2020). However, the changes in field education methods and platforms were sudden, and unpreparedness and inexperience challenged students and supervisors equally (Azman et al., 2020). Educational institutions identified alternatives in response to the COVID-induced emergency needs and emerging needs. The alternative practices were mainly online interventions with different target groups. Students and supervisors designed the novel interventions on an experimental basis addressing the immediate needs of people identified during the lockdown. The pandemic-specific field education model that emerged amidst the chaos rests squarely within competency-based social work education (CSWE, 2015). Cognizant of the nine competencies and their five dimensions, knowledge, skill, values, cognitive and affective processes, the faculty supervisors adopted a competency-based assessment paradigm regardless of the shift of practice medium to the virtual platforms. However, students' experiences who got introduced to a new learning model without any tactile support call for a scientific study. This research aimed to capture the student experiences of going through this volatile situation of rearrangements and delving into the unknown. The research questions were; A) How did students adapt to field education's sudden shift to remote learning? B) What were their learning experiences?

Methods and Measures

The study adopted a phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to explore the field learning experiences of social work students introduced to a new field learning model and environment due to the constraints on the traditional model induced by the pandemic. The second and third-year undergraduate social work students in Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, India, who completed two field training modules during the period March 2020 to March 2021, constituted the sample frame. For the study, the researchers selected 20 students employing the purposive sampling method considering their online and blended field placements.

The mean age of the participants was 19.3+ 0.67. There were six male and 14 female students. Out of the 20 participants, thirteen students had completed a fully online field education, and they were under the remote guidance of the faculty supervisors. The remaining seven students had a blended mode of field placement that they were working with agencies, but most of their activities were online.

The research procedure commenced with gaining ethical clearance. After obtaining the informed consent for participation, data recording, and result publication signed online, the research assistant extracted primary data by interviewing the participants in detail. The fieldwork summary reports and reflective papers of the participants provided secondary data for triangulation.

The research assistant transcribed the audio-taped interviews in Malayalam language, and translated them into English. A bilingual expert ensured the accuracy of translation using the back-translation method. Investigators independently developed codes with computer software support, then combined and eliminated the repeated ones and grouped the refined codes into themes.

Findings

The codes and themes that emerged from the data illustrated the trajectory of students' development from a confused phase to a unique learning phase through activities in response to the pandemic situation. They further portrayed the perceived gains, losses and challenges of pandemic-specific field learning. Table I shows the code and themes that emerged from data analysis.

Table 1: Themes and codes

Table 1: List of themes and codes		
<i>Themes</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Excerpts</i>
From chaos to an Enriching Learning experience	<p>The confused stage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfamiliar online mode • Isolated at home • Tensed <p>Game-changing supervisory meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible faculties • Quick responses • Emotional support • ICT training <p>Student group meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing affect • Reciprocal problem-solving • Peer learning <p>Experimenting novel ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing immediate needs • Reaching out to target groups • Devising novel interventions • Finding new platforms to stage interventions <p>Unique learning experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explored new areas • Learned new methods 	<p>What could I possibly do? Where can I find clients? I had no idea...I was blank. I was ignorant about using online platforms. I felt I am all alone... I was too tensed.</p> <p>My supervisor was very supportive. She was prompt in responding to my queries, suggesting other choices on which I could rely. Supervisors were accessible online through WhatsApp, telegram or mail.</p> <p>We started meeting regularly...shared our worries and hopes... helped each other solve problems...my friends taught me to design posters for the awareness program.</p> <p>Stranded people were desperately in need of food...I worked with a community kitchen run by my agency... Provided online training for mask and hand wash making... I conducted an online awareness program on Covid-19.</p> <p>I associated with a Covid center...I worked at a Covid -19 help desk...telecounselling...Online engagement</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improved creativity• Developed and implemented new ideas	<p>with children...webinar for parents with special kids... online literacy for elderly... Developed online teaching materials for Anganwadi.</p>
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<p>Perceived gains</p>	<p>Getting engaged and engaging others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upskilling self • Indoor engagement training • Livelihood training <p>Effective use of virtual space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved social confidence • Hassle-free mobilization of resources • Fast and inexpensive • Easy networking • Broader social work opportunities <p>Virtual teams</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer support • Skill sharing • Experience sharing <p>Online engagement skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding out the needy • Organising groups • Conducting programs <p>Changes in perceptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective thinking • Problem solving skills <p>Enhanced supervisory support</p>	<p>I attended 24 webinars and earned certificates ...conducted online sessions on indoor gardening, cooking, painting, etc... provided sessions on sanitizer making, mask sewing and kitchen gardening...</p> <p>I am basically a timid one, and I found it is easier to interact online... I could find resources by searching online... at a single click without any travelling expense... experts and officials were available online... the flexible objectives made me think on a wider perspective for activities.</p> <p>I was so tense about conducting sessions online for kids. My team members positively intervened whenever I got stuck... they helped me in creating flyers and videos... their experiences inspired me to go ahead with sessions...</p> <p>Sitting at the agency office, I could locate the needy... searching databases, telephoning and texting replaced field visits...</p> <p>I learned to face a difficult situation... to find opportunities in crisis... to reflect on every activity, and find a better solution.</p> <p>Supervisors supported me incredibly through the field training...they were so empathic and encouraging...</p>
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<p>Perceived loss</p>	<p>'Missed' being with people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical presence of people • Connectedness • Agency setting <p>Absence of clinical training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Therapeutic interventions 	<p>Although I spent many hours online with them, I really missed their physical presence...virtual presence is not comparable to physical presence... I missed the interactions with agency staff... My aim is to become a medical social worker... there was no exposure to any clinical settings or therapeutic interventions.</p>
<p>Perceived challenges</p>	<p>Inadequate devices</p> <p>Technical problems</p> <p>Poor internet connectivity</p> <p>Adaptation lag</p> <p>Team management issues</p>	<p>Many clients didn't have an android phone for using social networking Apps...some of the team members did not have laptops...I faced many issues with my old laptop... I missed a number of sessions due to a poor internet connection...</p> <p>The elderly and kids took much time to get used to the online platform for attending live sessions...</p> <p>Some of the team members were new, and it took time for us to familiarise with sharing roles appropriately...</p>

From chaos to a unique learning experience

Students used a progressive range of expressions to describe their field learning experiences during the pandemic, with an initial reaction to the sudden changes in the field education arrangements that demonstrated more insecurity. Most of the students used the expression

'confused' to describe the initial stage. Though they mentioned an online orientation on virtual field education, the students were skeptical about the possibilities. What to do and with whom to practice. The absence of pre-structured guidance, along with the lack of a physical setting, made the situation worse. A sudden shift from traditional offline fieldwork to an online mode was quite stressful for students. The unfamiliarity with the online platforms for meeting target groups and delivering services made them panic. Locked up in the lockdown left them with a feeling of loneliness which exaggerated their tension.

The students interpreted the weekly online supervisory meetings as a game-changing factor. Supervisory meetings set them a platform to open up about their issues seeking solutions. Resolving the unfamiliarity with online field practice, the department arranged webinars on conducting Google Meet, making videos and conducting online surveys. Another prominent code that evolved from data was the emotional support extended by the faculty supervisors. The continued interactions between the supervisor and student through WhatsApp enhanced the supervisory relationship. Some of the students felt relieved talking to the supervisor, and they reported the supervisor's online presence, support, and facilitation as motivating factors. Apart from the supervisory meetings, the group meetings of students organized regularly facilitated students to share their worries, difficulties as well as ideas. Although virtually, the team members supported mutually, which improved their confidence.

The supervisory meetings gave clear ideas on the pandemic-induced immediate needs in society, and the group meetings produced novel ideas for interventions for meeting the newfound needs. The confidence that the students gained from the supervisory as well as the group meetings resulted in a change in their perceptions, and they started working towards meeting the immediate needs in society through permitted platforms that were predominantly online. Since the pandemic affected the general public disproportionately, students made meticulous efforts to devise tailor-made programs, and they teamed up based on their interests and convenience in specific areas of intervention.

The Covid-19 specific field practicum gradually extended to all groups in society by organizing them online and creating the 'WhatsApp' groups for clients categorized by their needs. The fieldwork experimented with new interventions addressing the immediate needs identified. School students locked up in their homes, deprived of all platforms for enjoyment with their friends, organized a virtual camp for ten days. Another program was mobile literacy for the elderly to capacitate them with the skill to manage online purchasing, medical consultations and

transactions. A team of students developed an online teaching module for 'Anganwadis' (India's rural child care centers). Another team conducted skill training sessions online to capacitate people sitting at home to engage themselves in interesting indoor activities. Moreover, online training for mask and sanitizer making, poster making and awareness creation on Covid-19, tele counselling, community kitchen, service gap identification surveys and supply of provisions became parts of field training.

Students perceived the progressive stage of fieldwork as interesting, with a unique way of learning and being responsive to an unprecedented situation. On the one hand, the students enjoyed organizing programs and meeting people online, and on the other, the pandemic-specific field engagement engaged the social work students themselves while engaging the target groups, as the entire population was fighting the challenges of lockdown apart from the virus. By searching on the web and attending webinars, the students acquired the apposite skills to handle the new situation. A responsive field engagement improved the creativity of students, and the wide range of needs identified during the pandemic enhanced their creative thinking. For engaging target groups, particularly children, the students gained ideas for crafting, gaming, and video and poster making.

The student descriptions of their pandemic-specific field education show the successful emergence of a unique learning experience from a chaotic situation. Some of them described it as an adaptive learning experience, while others termed it as a progressive learning experience.

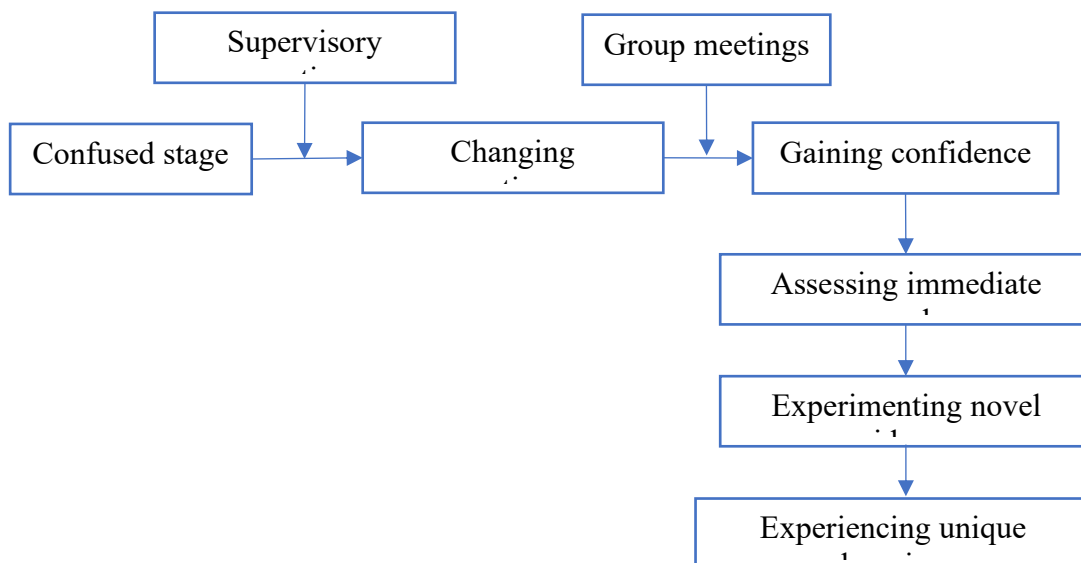


Figure 1: Trajectory of student field learning

Perceived Gains

The students were able to achieve the field training objectives, although redefined, amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic. The exploration of new possibilities made the field of learning in the new normal different. Students equipped themselves with apposite skills and knowledge to manage the situation by attending webinars by national and international agencies and universities. Student engagements were not limited to the clients of a particular agency, but they covered the entire population affected by Covid-19 and the measures to contain the virus spread. Engagement with different population segments online widened the reach of social work programs. Training for the youth on indoor engagement skills during the lockdown was weighed as equally beneficial for clients and students. The entire population, including students in lockdown, needed refreshing activities to cope with the psychological disturbances caused by staying at home for months. The pandemic-driven financial crunch necessitated situation-suiting income-generating activities, and, therefore, not only the attendee households but the students' households also benefitted from online training on kitchen gardening, sanitizer making and mask sewing.

The participants elucidated that the new normal paved the way for exploring virtual space social work practices. The field practicum principally used the online platform for needs assessment and service delivery. Although the activities covered only the preventive and promotive aspects of social work, they could reach a broader community online. Meeting the target group on screen was a different experience for students. Some of the participants, particularly the less outgoing ones, found the virtual space comfortable for interacting with people, sitting in the safety of their homes. As they conversed with more people online, their social confidence improved, they reported. Apart from that, students interpreted virtual space as a facile platform for mobilizing resources. The process of linking resources to needs was hassle-free online. The pandemic hampered the in-person inquiry and invite for resource persons, so the students contacted them via telephone or e-mail, and they viewed it as effortless and free of cost. As the proclamation of lockdown caused the closure of all offices and educational institutions, many professionals/experts were free of their official duties in the initial phase, which made them easily available for the interdisciplinary interventions that the social work students finessed. Additionally, the virtual space facilitated students' meetings with a significant number of experts and officials, which expedited networking. The progressive online engagement provided students with an insight into a broader scope of social work practices online.

Even if the students had adequate experience in working in teams in traditional field placements, teaming online was entirely new for them. Virtual teams helped balance their skills and knowledge among the members, though unfamiliarity with few members posed a lag for establishing friendships among them. However, team meetings became a platform for students to get familiarized with the virtual space, which instilled confidence to move ahead with the new form of field training. Group meeting, the online meeting with team members was a lifeline for the students in lockdown. It became a platform for them to belong, get engaged, work together and feel a sense of accomplishment. The fieldwork teams frequently met online, tested the logistics of online meetings and tried out different roles. They used these meetings to test virtual tools, discuss ideas, share experiences, and review progress in the professional aspect, and in the personal aspect, they took it as a platform for entertainment and to have fun with friends. Thus, these virtual interactions made students feel good about being helpful to each other in carrying out fieldwork as a team.

The virtual fieldwork facilitated students to acquire online engagement skills, ranging from skills to managing online platforms to using online tools for engaging the target group. The leading online engagement skills they developed are,

- Need assessment and planning of a program online
- Preparation of flyers, creating online registration forms and posting them on social media.
- Contacting the potential participants and ensuring their participation
- Creating WhatsApp or Telegram groups for participants
- Giving proper instructions, including online etiquette
- Creation of a meeting link and posting it in the group
- Management of sessions, including sharing of presentations/videos
- Division of work and virtual coordination with team members
- Use of online tools for client engagement
- Facilitating online discussions and group activities
- Follow up on clients through social media
- Creating and posting online feedback forms
- Creating participant certificates.

The field training during the pandemic demonstrated the practical wisdom of students to convert challenges into opportunities. In the absence of a well-written program schedule, students developed ideas on appropriate interventions through reflective practices. Responding to the

pandemic-induced immediate needs of people, students and supervisors structured activities and refined them, reflecting on every action and the results expected and achieved. This strategy for fieldwork changed student perceptions capacitating them for problem-solving. The pandemic-drawn restrictions made students think outside of the box to reach the people in need transcending limits. Reflective writing was the tool they used to refresh their knowledge and practice for every other day of field practice, which eventually made them more productive during the lockdown.

While referring to all the perceived gains from the online fieldwork, the participants highlighted two supportive factors that were instrumental in benefiting from the online practice. Those were the support received from the supervisor, faculty supervisor or field supervisor, and the support they received from their team members. All the participants mentioned the supervisory support in terms of informational, instructional, and emotional support they received from faculty supervisors, and those who had blended modes of fieldwork appreciated the tangible support they got from their field supervisors. The continual interactions between supervisors and students enhanced the supervisory relationship, which promoted the effectiveness of field practicum in terms of client satisfaction and student growth.

Perceived Loss

Although students could successfully relate themselves to the pandemic situation and find spaces to respond to the challenges proactively, the data also demonstrated some limitations for online field education, as perceived by the students. One of the dominant codes that emerged from data was the lack of physical presence of clients or colleagues, and students termed it as 'missed being with people. Although they were meeting the clients, supervisors and friends virtually, the feeling of a 'missing' element was prominent in their descriptions. The 'virtual face-to-face' interaction seemed insufficient for students to address the needs of clients. Moreover, establishing a connectedness with clients is found to be hard online.

In traditional field training, the presence of an agency and its physical setting with staff provides opportunities for students to interact directly with the staff. Apart from the interactions with the agency supervisor, communications with experienced staff in the agency facilitate effective field learning of students. The pandemic hampered all such chances for making the learning process more comprehensive. Students had to rely primarily on faculty support in the absence of any other

field experts in the virtual fieldwork. As the online fieldwork was reaching out to clients mainly through residential groups in different localities without any agency support, professional guidance by practitioners was lacking in many virtual interventions.

The field practice had to sacrifice its curative dimension to the pandemic without physical settings and face-to-face interactions with clients. Since the field practice focused on satisfying the immediate needs of people, students identified clients performing triage on the pandemic-induced issues. Due to the pandemic-specific mandates for field training, medical and psychiatric social work that remains the specialization with greater demand in higher studies lost competence-building opportunities to the community development stream. Similarly, the therapeutic social work interventions gave way to preventive and protective aspects.

Perceived challenges

Devices compatible with online applications are mandatory for running a live intervention, but many clients lack devices for attending online sessions. The requisite of a device itself marginalized a set of needy in the virtual fieldwork. Moreover, students who were availing of computer lab facilities at college faced difficulties not only in conducting online sessions but also in preparing reports due to the closure of the college and the absence of personal laptops. Mobile phones and personal computers ran out of storage space because of multiple applications and large data. The pandemic-driven financial crunch prevented students from buying new devices even if their existing ones stopped functioning. Software updates and hardware incompatibility paused activities sometimes.

The prime challenge was the poor internet connection. The lack of Wi-Fi connections at home and fluctuating mobile data services made the sessions hectic. Both students and clients had to rejoin the sessions after losing the connection. Rainy days made the situation worse with failed power supply and internet connections. It affected the rigour of intervention and effectiveness of team meetings, hindering the continuity of communication. Moreover, adaption lag slowed down the reach of virtual fieldwork. Although students acquired online skills fast, clients who were with no online literacy posed another challenge to online fieldwork. Students had to train clients on attending sessions online repeatedly. Despite the training videos shared online, many failed to attend live sessions due to incompetence. Every live session had to spend the initial 10-15 minutes aligning participants, and the students had to provide extra technical support to clients resolving their queries through the sessions. Due to poor internet connections and adaptation lag, a number

of live sessions planned changed to recorded sessions which were later shared through WhatsApp or Telegram groups of clients.

Another challenge reported was the difficulty in remotely managing varied skill levels and perceptions of the team members. Team management was not a problem for some teams since the members were friends before teaming up for fieldwork. However, teams with unfamiliar members found it difficult to coordinate since they were unaware of each other's competencies. The supervisory meetings and frequent virtual interactions made some of them get through it better, but still, they felt that if it were offline teamwork, they could better communicate and understand each other.

Discussion

The study captured the student experiences of field engagement during the pandemic, especially in a context where field education was shifted to an online mode without any background experience to cling. Corroborating a reflection from Malaysia, the students were eager to respond constructively to the pandemic, but they were anxious about the virtual mode of interaction and service delivery (Azman et al., 2021). The findings highlighted the trajectory of the rough journey of students from a chaotic beginning to a stabilized state of learning where they became comfortable in online client engagement, though they primarily engaged in preventive, developmental, and promotive interventions.

Although the pandemic has transformed social work field education and supervision significantly, the student performances were evaluated against the social work competencies ensuring their development as competent practitioners. Field practicum during the pandemic explored strange ways for engagement and intervention with individuals, families, and communities, upholding social work values and applying practice-informed knowledge. This study's results reconfirmed the view that a trusting and supportive supervisory relationship is crucial for practice innovations and critical reflections (Egan et al., 2017). This study portrays the weekly supervisory meeting as the potential game-changer that provided instructional and emotional support to students in realizing a novel and enriching field learning amidst the pandemic. Accordingly, it confirms the importance of supporting students emotionally during an unprecedented paradigm shift for achieving the desired learning outcomes (Davis & Mirick, 2021). Another point it highlights is the mutual support among the students in confronting a challenging situation.

Phelan (2015) recommends e-learning as an evolutionary social work pedagogy in a blended

learning system rather than a stand-alone solution. Nevertheless, social work field education harnessed technology to overcome the challenges induced by the pandemic (Singh et al., 2021). However, reflections on online field education resonate with the importance of direct field observation under the guidance of an agency supervisor (Sarbu & Unwin, 2021). Guidance by a social work practitioner is mandatory in field training as it primarily focuses on producing competent practitioners.

This research acknowledges the importance of face-to-face interaction in creating a meaningful relationship with clients in social work practice. The virtual mode hampers it despite its feasibility, low cost, and broader reach to the community (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014). However, deviating from the scientific emphasis of social work, habituated thoughts, and codified knowledge, the pandemic-specific virtual field engagement relied on tacit and contextual knowledge that fostered inventiveness and creativity among the students (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita, 2007).

Conclusion

The study analyzed the sudden shift of field education to online platforms and subsequent outcomes, as perceived by the students. The significant outcomes of this alternative field education model highlighted in this paper are virtual teamwork, extensive community outreach with low-cost interventions, independent online engagement skills, openness in approaching a problem, and innovations in practice. An unprepared entry into a crisis facilitated critical thinking, and competency-based student assessment ensured the making of competent practitioners capable of contingency planning and reflective practices. Furthermore, this research stresses that a positive and supportive supervisory relationship is vital in finding possibilities from challenges in social work field learning. Informational and emotional support by supervisors empowers students to experiment with novel ideas to meet the immediate needs of people in crisis. Given the current global circumstances, online engagement will be an inevitable part of social work practice. Notwithstanding the importance of face-to-face interactions and human relationships, the study recommends a hybrid model for field learning, blending online strategies with the traditional field education paradigms.

Declaration

The authors declare that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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Competing interests

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