

**ADDRESSING PROFESSIONAL SUITABILITY IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION:  
THE EXPERIENCE AND APPROACH OF FIELD EDUCATION COORDINATORS**

by

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Educational Leadership & Policy)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(VANCOUVER)

March 2010

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research is to better understand the experience and approach of field education coordinators/directors in addressing student professional suitability in social work education so their insights can inform ongoing conversations within professional education programs on how to exercise ‘gatekeeping’ responsibilities. The study begins with a critical reflection of my five year experience as a coordinator, which leads into a comprehensive review of the literature, followed by an analysis and discussion of information collected from a focus group with eight coordinators from across Canada, and an extensive web-based survey questionnaire administered to all current, and some former social work field education coordinators in Canada.

In brief, the results of this study reinforce the perception found in social work literature that gatekeeping predominantly falls to the field component of social work education. Field education coordinators report regularly encountering cases in which student’ behaviours call into question their suitability for the profession. They perceive the field to hold the highest expectation of them to assess and address student professional suitability, followed by faculty, administration, the accreditation body, and students, and they assign a high level of importance to having an approach to addressing such concerns within their practice. They report employing a number of pre- and post-placement measures to addressing suitability concerns. However, current perceptions of gatekeeping as potentially oppressive and contrary to social work values creates tension in their experience that is exacerbated by workload pressures, and by the lack of clear criteria for determining suitability within school policies and accreditation standards.

Respondents emphasized that more opportunities for dialogue between coordinators, faculty, administration, and field educators is needed. Also, although the majority reported relative satisfaction with their skills and knowledge, they suggested that further training and education would be beneficial, and strongly recommended that faculty, field, and administration

participate in this education. Finally, a number of respondents also expressed the need for more support for their role and the field program in general within their school, and expressed concern for an apparent lack of institutional support for addressing professional suitability.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I have had the good fortune of working with an excellent supervisory committee throughout the process of completing this dissertation. Dr. Daniel Vokey played an instrumental role as my supervisor in providing ongoing insight and guidance towards the completion of this work from the preliminary stages of drafting the proposal, to the completion of the final product. His calm demeanour, reflective insights, and keen eye for detail contributed greatly to the refinement of the final submission. Dr. Tom Sork also provided valuable input and contributions to the depth of analysis undertaken, and the initial considerations of the study. Appreciation must also be expressed for the role Dr. Grant Larson played as a member of the committee for his ongoing support and encouragement, consistent assessment of my work, and input into planning the research process.

A sincere debt of gratitude is also owed to many of my friends and family whose support has been indispensable. Specifically my mother, Patricia Francis for her enduring support and encouragement; and my life partner, Ian Robertson for his patience, understanding and limitless interest and support throughout all the milestones towards completing this dissertation; and to my wonderful friend, Carla Guyon for her eternal optimism, good grace, and humour.



## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to field education coordinators/directors to explicitly acknowledge their invaluable contributions to this study, through their participation in the focus group, and in completing the pre-test for the online survey, and the resulting online survey questionnaire. Field education coordinators deserve special acknowledgement for their important contribution to the quality of social work education. Given their role in preparing students for practice, and facilitating valuable placement opportunities, they are instrumental to graduating competent social work professionals. Special mention and acknowledgement is also made of Mary Lou Karley, Coordinator of Field Work Education at King's University College, who passed away suddenly on March 21, 2009, for her ongoing commitment, and significant contributions to social work education.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Few program operations are viewed as more complex, troublesome, and emotionally charged than the gatekeeping component of the educational enterprise. And few program operations are imbued with more mystery and misunderstanding.*

Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 3

#### **Reflections on Gatekeeping in Field Coordination**

Results of the Memorial University lawsuit travelled like wild fire through schools of social work across Canada in 2006, including Thompson Rivers University (TRU) where, as the coordinator of field education in a bachelor of social work program, I received a broadly distributed email from the university lawyer outlining the results of the case. It was only natural that our university wanted to inform us of this case to avoid the plight of Memorial University in having to award over \$800,000 to a student after the Supreme Court of Canada had determined that a professor had not exercised a duty of care in responding to a student concern. In this particular case, a social work professor and dean reported a student (Wanda Young) to child protection authorities as a potential threat to children on the basis of an assignment submitted by the student, and subsequently the student was not admitted to the social work program (Armstrong, 2006). Newspaper headlines and other collegial hearsay stimulated much discussion between social work colleagues as to whether this was the right thing to do. Had our colleague acted in an appropriate manner? Would we have taken the same course of action? On what basis was the decision made to report the student, and what criteria were applied in declining the student's entry into the program?

This anxious dialogue occurred during a time when I was encountering a number of challenges in my role as field education coordinator. During this time I was responding to student behaviours that called into question their suitability for field placements and the social work profession. These incidents, combined with conversations about the Wanda Young case,

highlighted the role of gatekeeping in my practice. “Gatekeeping” is generally understood to mean “guarding the gate to prevent students who are not deemed suitable from entering the profession”. Somewhat paradoxically, gatekeeping is also seen by some as a process whereby students are nurtured through the educational experience “to ensure they successfully complete the program and are competent to practice when they graduate” (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p.3) regardless of their perceived suitability. Article 3.9.2 (bachelor level) and 5.9.2. (master level) of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) Educational Policy Statements state that “Schools shall also have published policies and procedures providing for the termination of those social work students found to be engaging in behaviour contrary to the relevant social work Code of Ethics, and therefore are judged to be unsuitable for the profession of social work” (October 2007, p. 6 & 8). Although there was such a policy in place at TRU, it alone was not sufficient to address many of the subtle and unique concerns that arose in field education, in part because no general policy will address all the unique circumstances that arise in practice. My recognition of the need for professional judgement notwithstanding, on many occasions I struggled to arrive at the most ethically sound approach to problematic or potentially problematic situations. Thus, as I will describe in more detail below, my interest in exploring how other field education coordinators experience the tension related to gatekeeping stems from my personal experience as a field education coordinator for five years, and as the Chair of a Bachelor of Social Work program.

“School leaders are enmeshed in complex, overlapping, and often conflicting webs of relationships from which they must make educational meaning” (Stack, Coulter, Grosjean, Mazawi, & Smith, 2006, p. 2). This quotation aptly reflects the nature of my experience of coordinating field placements in social work education. During my five years as field education coordinator I endeavoured to provide responsible educational leadership to both students and the profession of social work. In the process, making educational meaning of the embedded

gatekeeping aspect within the complex, overlapping and often conflicting webs of relationships between faculty members, university administration, the practice community, the profession, and students presented many challenges. I identified two particular concerns with the gatekeeper role. First, the assessment role was in tension with my support role. If students were to perceive that I was expected to assess their professional suitability, they might not be willing to ask for the support they needed, out of a concern for this being perceived as a weakness. The second concern was with fairness. I worried that exercising power as a gatekeeper without clear processes, criteria and measures of suitability could result in unfair and perhaps unethical practice with students. Clear processes and transparent criteria of assessment help protect individuals against those who would wittingly or unwittingly abuse the power of their position of authority. Individual judgment should complement, not replace, general principles, guidelines, rules, procedures, and so forth, which are open to public scrutiny. I was concerned that too much could be placed on the shoulders of any one individual asked to make assessments without these measures being in place.

### **The Context of Field Education and the Role of the Field Education Coordinator**

The social work literature emphasizes the ethical responsibility of educators to fulfill a gatekeeping role (Barlow & Coleman, 2004; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Gibbs, 1994a; Gibbs & Macy, 2000; Jenkins, Moore, & Dietz, 1996; Lafrance, Gray, & Herbert, 2004; Moore & Urwin, 1990; Morrow, 2000; Reynolds, 2004; Royce, 2000) particularly within the field component of social work education (Miller & Koerin, 2001; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Raymond, 2000; Tam, 2004).

The field placement is the component of the social work program at which suitability for the profession is most clearly demonstrated. The practicum is not just another work experience, but an educational learning experience as well. It should include specific learning objectives, structured supervision and the opportunity to apply theory to practice in an evaluative, disciplined and reflective manner. The practicum provides students opportunities to apply what

they have learned in other courses in the social work program to practice situations while providing a valuable service to social service consumers and agencies. The focus of the field placement is on the practice of social work, which operates in partnership with other disciplines, consumers, community groups and associations. The field placement experience is intended to build upon practice and work experience, and to provide opportunities to strengthen skills, knowledge, and understanding of current values and attitudes. In particular, placements for students are sought in agencies which offer a varied practice experience in terms of kinds of interventions and types of systems that students work with (e.g. individuals, groups, families, community involvement, and organizational change).

In addition to the field education coordinator and the student, there are two key players involved in the field placement process: the agency field instructor and the faculty liaison. The faculty liaison is the liaison between the agency, the student, and the program, is responsible for the academic component of the practicum, and submits the grade for the practicum. The liaison is available for consultation to the student and the agency field instructor and meets two to three times or more if needed with the agency field instructor and student to review the contract, midterm and final evaluations.

The agency field instructor is the individual in the setting where the student is placed who provides the day-to-day practicum guidance and support to the student, and establishes the tasks that are to be assigned to the student. He/she is the direct link for the student and the program with the agency, and the principle learning resource for the student. He or she also completes the practicum contract with the participation of the student and faculty liaison; ensures that practicum contract commitments are carried through and that appropriate service to clients occurs; and initiates changes in the contract if appropriate. He or she also maintains contact with the faculty liaison, and brings to their attention any questions, dissatisfactions, or suggestions with respect to the student or policies of the program.

The student carries responsibility for identifying their learning needs and professional development as a social worker. It is expected that the student will take an active part in defining his/her learning needs and assessing and prioritizing agencies at which these can best be met. The student is also expected to participate responsibly in the development of a practicum contract with the agency and the faculty liaison, and shares responsibility with the agency field instructor to ensure that adequate field support and guidance occurs. The student also maintains contact with the faculty liaison regarding developments in the practicum.

Although faculty liaisons and field instructors share in the responsibility to address professional suitability concerns once the practicum has commenced, field education coordinators play a pivotal role in providing students with initial access to the contexts of practice. By virtue of their location within the educational nexus, field education coordinators engage in informal assessment of personal characteristics and professional qualifications prior to and during the placement process in order to meet the particular needs of students, and to anticipate potential concerns in order to place the student appropriately, and safeguard clients served within the practicum process. They are also often called upon by field instructors and faculty liaisons during the practicum process to problem solve and mediate conflicts when students experience difficulties or are at risk of not completing the field placement. Furthermore, if a second placement is deemed to be appropriate, they are also charged with securing another placement following the termination of the initial placement. As a result, they often find themselves engaged in gatekeeping activities to address legitimate concerns, or they find themselves monitoring faculty and field gatekeepers in an attempt to buffer students from harsh or unfair processes, scrutiny or judgement.

In my case, gatekeeping was nowhere, explicitly noted as a task or responsibility of my position. The primary function of the position was to place students in educationally appropriate settings in a timely fashion. No one specifically stated that it was my responsibility as field

education coordinators to nurture students through the gates or prevent them from getting through when they are not considered professionally suitable. However, during my tenure as field education coordinator, tacit dimensions of both gatekeeping functions were embedded in my ongoing experience within pre-placement processes, and processes to address placement breakdowns resulting from student conduct and performance concerns. These dimensions manifested in the questions and comments put forth by faculty and administration, which included questions pertaining to where particular students would be placed, who would supervise them, what support or structure they would receive in the placement, whether they would be matched with a field instructor who would support or challenge them consistently, as well as questions alluding to why particular students were still in the program.

Over the years, in preparing social work students for their practicum experiences I mentored them throughout the pre-placement seminars and placement process in order to alleviate anxiety and assist them in making the most appropriate placement choice for their personal and educational needs and abilities. In preparing them for the practicum experience I mentored, provided guidance, and challenged them throughout the pre-placement seminars and placement process in order to alleviate anxiety and assist them in making the most appropriate placement choice for their personal and educational needs and abilities. Within this process, students often self disclosed details of their personal history or current issues and concerns. On the basis of information given during this intimate exchange, correspondence (practicum learning objectives) submitted by students and individual and group interactions, I recommended delaying practicum or selecting particular learning environments, opportunities, and field instructors who would adequately challenge and support them during their three month practicum experience. I also provided information about workplace culture and appropriate conduct and etiquette in order to ensure their success. Within the student referral process I exchanged student information with agencies and vice versa in order to ensure preparedness and

appropriate matches. Furthermore, I often engaged in specific matching processes to ensure students received needed field instructor and faculty liaison support and/or challenge.

I was also asked by faculty liaisons to provide leadership and facilitate processes to review student related issues and concerns to determine courses of action for addressing such matters. It is important to recognize that each case was unique and the approach and outcomes in one case differed from that of another, which may have resulted in perceived inequity. For example, some of the outcomes and courses of action resulting from in depth consultation with students, field instructors, faculty liaisons, the program chair or dean resulted in delaying placement, assigning a specific placement and field instructor or faculty liaison, requesting medical information, recommending students seek counselling, suspending a field placement for a specified period of time, either requiring the student to repeat all the hours or carry a portion of the hours previously completed in a current placement to a subsequent placement (i.e., carry 100 of 420 hours rather than having to complete the full 420 hours) extending the field placement duration, changing placements and field instructors, encouraging faculty and field instructors to assign a failing grade for the field course, or recommending suspension from the program when the situation clearly warranted this action. All of these aspects are a direct function of gatekeeping. Out of the 80 to 100 students I placed each year during my five year experience as field education coordinator, three to five concerns related to student professional suitability or readiness arose each year. Although the cases were few in number, processes for deliberating on them were very time consuming and complex.

In addition to supporting students, I worked closely with faculty liaisons and field instructors to prepare them to work with individual practicum students, sharing student information, expectations, concerns or special considerations which were required. I also co-facilitated certification courses for new and ongoing field instructors. Within these sessions my role, as well as those of field instructors, faculty liaisons, and students, was clarified, as were



expectations around student evaluation and performance. I also provided support to faculty liaisons and field instructors during the practicum when issues arose. During the last few years of my tenure, the level of support, preparation and consultation required by faculty liaisons was greater than usual due to increased student enrolment, the number of student issues, tri-semester program, and part-time or new faculty liaisons requiring additional support and assistance. This support consisted of taking the time to orient liaisons to general school and field education policies; clarifying the expectations of their role, and that of field instructors with respect to the evaluation of students' performance within the field placement; and providing ongoing opportunities for consultation during the term to discuss any concerns or to mediate processes involving students or field placements.

### ***What are we Guarding For and Against?***

Much of social work practice occurs without the direct observation of other professionals as the work often occurs privately between the social worker and client. Social workers and other helping professionals serve some of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society, and possess an enormous amount of power and influence over people's lives. For example, social workers are sanctioned by society to remove children from or leave children with their families, to monitor and support people on probation or those with profound mental health challenges, and to distribute, withhold or withdraw needed supports and financial resources. They also have a responsibility to safeguard clients against themselves if they are at risk of harming themselves, and a responsibility to safeguard society from their clients if they are deemed to pose a threat. Thus, it takes an ethically astute, highly skilled and knowledgeable person to fulfill this role, as well as someone with genuine concern and compassion for others who is capable of responding empathically and appropriately to peoples' needs. In my experience, these are the characteristics of the students who we are pleased to have enter the

profession, given the congruence of these qualities with the professional standards and codes of ethics, which are reinforced throughout the social work curriculum.

In contrast, there are other students we may need to close the gates to because their beliefs and values are in conflict with those of the profession, and they do not possess the intellectual abilities or professional judgement to practice social work responsibly. This would include students who do not possess the capacity for critical thinking and thus see themselves as arms of the state lacking any element of agency; students who lack awareness of or deny their own personal privilege; students who are clearly judgemental and are incapable of internalizing the core values of the social work profession (i.e., respect the intrinsic worth of the persons he or she serves) and locate blame in their clients, and students who are unable to move from a micro to a macro analysis of social issues; students whose actions clearly breach the professional Code of Ethics (refer to Appendix A); students who engage in oppressive actions against others; and students who lack personal self awareness and insight and are unable to see beyond their own needs. In such instances, what responsibility do faculty members, field instructors, and chairs or deans, and field education coordinators have to address concerns? Given the power and influence social workers exercise over people's lives, common sense would stress the ethical imperative for all the players in social work education to prevent students who are unsuitable for the profession from completing the degree. As noted in the introduction, such responsibility is emphasized within the Canadian Association for Social Work Education Standards for Accreditation and should be present in all helping professions.

### ***Partners in the Gatekeeping Role***

The field education coordinator shares in the gatekeeping role with the program chair, the dean, faculty members, field instructors and occasionally students. Within the university context, the field education coordinator also works closely with the program chair, dean and

Student Affairs when concerns related to the suitability and conduct of students arise. It is my understanding, based upon informal discussions with colleagues, that at most universities the dean is the only person with the authority to recommend the suspension of a student to the president of the university.

Considerable confusion exists between social work programs and the field with respect to which party holds the primary responsibility for gatekeeping. It appears that reluctant faculty members often rely on the field to fulfill the gatekeeping role (Gibbs & Macy, 2000) and the field assumes that educators hold the bulk of this responsibility. For example, I vividly recall being confronted while facilitating a field instructor seminar by a participant, who was also an Executive Director of an agency, who questioned whether we were aware of the ‘types’ of people we were ‘unleashing’ on society. I initially became quite defensive and explained that, if students were passing the courses, we had no legitimate right to withhold the degree or suspend them from the program. I stated that we rely on the astuteness of employers to ascertain whether certain graduates should or should not be hired as social workers to work in particular settings. I then regained my composure and emphasized to the group that we are partners in the role of educating social work students, and if they have concerns about the conduct of practicum students it is incumbent upon them to address these with the faculty liaison or myself as the field education coordinator, and we will take their concerns seriously.

I went on to emphasize to the field instructor that the faculty liaison assigns the grade in consultation with the field instructor, and that we respect the views brought forward by the field. Furthermore, the field is often the context in which the professional suitability of students is clearly revealed. Faculty may observe aspects of concern within the classroom, but they often do not have the same mechanisms for addressing these concerns, particularly when written work and exams are sufficient enough for students to receive a passing grade. Thus, a greater awareness of students’ practice strengths and areas of concern is revealed in the field and this

provides an opportunity for enriched learning to take place, as well as a place to legitimately undertake assessment of professional suitability, therefore placing a greater responsibility for gatekeeping on field instructors and faculty liaisons. However, there seems to be the impression on the part of some agency administrators and field instructors that schools hold the primary gatekeeping responsibility, and that students undergo a rigorous screening process through admissions procedures, including criminal record reviews to gain admittance to programs, when this is not the case. Moreover, it is assumed that practicum students are fully endorsed by schools by virtue of their status as registered social work students.

### ***Contradictions of the Gatekeeping Role***

The school of social work at Thompson Rivers University has adopted a progressive stance toward admissions through establishing equity policies. A review of their websites shows that this is true of schools of social work at many other Canadian universities as well, including Carlton University, the University of Manitoba, the University of Northern British Columbia, the University of Victoria, and the University of Windsor. Adopting progressive admissions policies is consistent with the emphasis within both the Canadian Association of Social Work's Code of Ethics and the Canadian Association for Social Work Education Accreditation Standards on provisions for students from equity-seeking groups. Furthermore, the gates to social work education may have opened wider in some contexts such as British Columbia undergraduate programs due to reductions in the numbers of applicants to many programs, and pressures to expand programs, which has sometimes resulted in a higher percentage of applicants being admitted to programs, and in the acceptance of some students who may otherwise not have been admitted. At Thompson Rivers University, although the occasional student self-selects or is counselled out of the program due to a lack of professional suitability or due to health and wellness concerns, the majority of students complete the degree once admitted (TRU BSW Self Study, 2008, p.39).

One of the primary philosophical challenges I encountered to fulfilling my gatekeeping responsibilities had its roots in the School's progressive and anti-oppressive philosophy outlined in its mission statement:

The Bachelor of Social Work program prepares competent generalist practitioners to provide service and leadership within regional, national, and global contexts to achieve social justice, respect for diversity, and social change. We facilitate the development of knowledge, skills, and values necessary to work in collaborative and anti-oppressive ways. We deliver social work education that identifies and eradicates barriers that prevent people from reaching their full potential. We are committed to social work education that integrates and incorporates Aboriginal perspectives. (Thompson Rivers University, BSW Field Education Manual, 2007-08)

On the one hand, it seemed to go without saying that it would be appropriate to address instances where student conduct, beliefs and values were in opposition to the mission. However, there was also something counterintuitive or paradoxical about committing to a gatekeeping role that could potentially replicate oppressive cycles or be perceived to be in conflict with the mission. That is, the power to close the gate to the profession could be construed as oppressive towards students, and one could be perceived as someone who did not respect diversity or who wished to impede the ability of students to reach their full potential.

The divergent perspectives on professional suitability and the nature of social work practice also further compounded these reservations. Thus, initially, I did not want to acknowledge engaging in an activity that could be perceived to, or actually contribute to discriminating against students. It is also my impression that there is often a tendency for strongly committed gatekeepers to become exclusive and elitist, vowing that only 'certain types' of people will make good social workers, when often we are not capable of making such predictions without empirical evidence to support such predictions. Furthermore, when I raised

the issue of gatekeeping responsibilities with someone in an administrative capacity, I received a response of “oh so you want to be a gatekeeper?” leaving me with the impression that I had a personal choice in this endeavour, as opposed to a duty. The underlying message was that, as educators, we did not need to take on this role, as this was the legitimate responsibility of employers. I was left wondering whether I was just to place students without regard for their suitability. Was the aspect of suitability irrelevant to my practice? Was I just to do my job and place the students without regard for their suitability? Was I completely off the hook? Could I resign myself to avoiding any gatekeeping responsibility?

However, this was contrary to the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) formerly the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) *Standards for the Field Education Component of Programmes of Social Work Education*, standard 3.5.3 which was in effect during my tenure. This article stated that:

Each programme of social work education will have a set of criteria regarding the lack of personal suitability for the profession of social work. If a student is unfit according to these criteria he/she will not be provided with a field placement, or will not be allowed to continue in a setting following identification of the lack of personal suitability. (Appendix F, 1992)

This statement seemed to place me square in the middle of the gatekeeping function. If professional suitability was to be assessed prior to a placement, then the field education coordinator would naturally share responsibility for assessment. Furthermore, this standard was reinforced by article 3.9.2 (bachelor level) and 5.9.2 (master level) of the CASWE Educational Policy Statements which stated that:

Schools shall also have published policies and procedures providing for the termination of those social work students found to be engaging in behaviour contrary to the relevant

social work code of ethics, and who are therefore judged to be unsuitable for the profession of social work. (2007)

Surely, if we were to have a policy, it would follow that we may eventually have to act on it, and by virtue of my position as field education coordinator I would have some implicit involvement in this regard.

It would seem that the answer to the question of whether or not schools should play a gatekeeping role would be rather straight forward. However, interestingly enough, CASWE explored changes to *Educational Policy Statements* regarding personal suitability for social work practice from 2001 to 2008. A national task group was established in 2001 to complete a policy review process related to personal suitability. A progress report (*Personal Suitability, Personal Unsuitability Report*) was given at the 2002 annual general meeting (AGM) which stated that schools should have a policy on personal suitability/personal unsuitability that should be published in order that it become transparent for all concerned, and that there should also be a clear appeal process. A number of comments and suggestions were provided by the Assembly at that time. Following this, the Educational Policy Committee submitted a final report at the 2003 AGM and the document included reports from three task groups (Distance Education, Transfer of College Credits and Personal Suitability). “After discussing the report (Task Group on Personal Suitability) and trying to make many amendments, the Assembly realized that it was impossible to approve the report at this point and decided to table the whole document” (CASWE Annual General Meeting Minutes, 2003, p.3). At the subsequent AGM, a motion was put forward and carried that the personal suitability issue be revisited by the Educational Policy Committee (CASWE Annual General Meeting Minutes, 2004). During this time, the *Standards for the Field Education Component of Programmes of Social Work Education* (Appendix F) were also revised and incorporated into the *CASWE Standards for Accreditation* in 2004. Following this, the Committee reported at the 2005 AGM of their continued focus on the

personal suitability policy issue, in addition to a few other issues that emerged from discussions with the board of accreditation and proceeding of CASWE Annual General Assembly.

Subsequently a proposal for changes to the educational policy was brought forward at the 2006 AGM. The proposed policy statement read as follows:

Schools of Social Work shall have in place a policy on professional suitability that encompasses the spectrum of the educational experience (CASWE Annual General Meeting Minutes, June 1, 2006).

According to the minutes of this meeting:

One member was concerned as to the lack of clarity regarding the term “spectrum.” It was determined that “spectrum” includes both classroom work and field experience. One member was concerned with the term “suitability” and suggested that it be replaced with “professional development as it pertains to the students’ capacity to perform social work.” One of the members in attendance suggested the following amendment; “Schools of Social Work develop an arm’s length appeals procedure to review the merits of terminating any social work student for professional suitability.” Concern was also raised that “student” was absent from the Suitability policy. In lieu, it was suggested that an outside body be formed to support students who would like to appeal the decision made by their institution. It was also put forward that students be involved in the process of writing the institutions’ suitability clause and that there is a need for a policy that links our policies with those to our ethics policies that would ensure that students ethically practice social work. (pp. 3-4)

Once again, a motion was put forward, and subsequently carried, to table the motion and the amendment of the policy statement.

It would appear that there is generally a strong desire on the part of some constituents to guard against providing institutions with too much power, and to ensure that students are included in drafting policy, and that they are provided with sufficient support, appeal



mechanisms and advocacy. Questions were also raised about what standard we can rightfully hold students accountable to, and one member suggested that we cannot legally hold them accountable to the Code of Ethics as they are not members of the professional association. Consequently, the Educational Policy Committee agreed to withdraw the proposed statement on suitability prior to the 2007 annual general meeting (CASWE Annual Report, 2006-2007) stating that:

After a review of the current policies and standards relevant to this topic and various proposals put forward, the committee agreed that the policy statements (July, 2000) 3.9 (5.90), 3.9.2 (5.9.2) and 3.9.3 (5.9.3) encompass the issues that the proposed statement on suitability was intended to address. (p. 11)

Thus, although accreditation standards would suggest by virtue of the policy statements noted above that there is an obligation to address concerns related to the personal suitability of students, there exists great confusion about this practice on the part of some faculty and students. Part of the context that makes gatekeeping challenging is a lack of consensus amongst social work educators (faculty and field instructors) on the procedures through which, and the criteria against which, students will be assessed for suitability. Likewise, an analysis of the distinction between *personal* suitability (1992 & 2004 standards) versus *professional* suitability (2006 proposed policy change) and consideration of the implications for the use of one term over the other is also warranted. Furthermore, questions appear to remain about how and where professional suitability will be assessed in the social work program.

Finally, although there was a professional suitability policy in place within the School at Thompson Rivers University (refer to Appendix B), it did not provide guidance on how to respond to concerns raised over a student's suitability, leaving me uncertain how to address a number of the concerns that emerged during the course of my tenure as field education coordinator. In addition, university policy often overrides school policy. Thus, one cannot be

assured that school policy will be operationalized and understood at the institutional level.

Schools have limited authority, as final word on the suspension of students lies with the President and/or University Senate. The general lack of understanding of professional schools within universities, combined with frequent legalistic and public relations concerns, also often impedes the support and acceptance of school policies and procedures at the institutional level (Gibbs & Macy, 2000).

Consequently, when I was confronted by issues that called for impeding students' progress through the program, I was especially challenged by the lack of consensus and procedures through which, and the criteria against which, students would be assessed for suitability. The lack of awareness of specific student related issues prior to placement due to the lack of clear monitoring and assessment guidelines for non-academic matters; the lack of consistent follow through and commitment on the part of field instructors and faculty liaisons to directly address specific concerns; the limited authority of the School to suspend or expel students when necessary; and the overall workload demands and time constraints of my position were also particularly challenging.

Thus, similar to what many of my colleagues have noted, I experienced confusion when I was called to address placement breakdowns and discovered there are very different perspectives in the field both on what constitutes professional suitability and on how and when to address concerns about a particular student. These situations involved a range of concerns including students' lack of social skills, intellectual abilities, personal characteristics, health and wellness concerns, and inappropriate or problematic behaviour or conduct which contravened the professional Code of Ethics. Consequently, field education coordinators must discern when it is incumbent upon them and others involved in field to support or prevent students who are not deemed suitable from passing or completing the field placement. In order to fulfill their obligation to address concerns related to professional suitability, field education coordinators

need to possess a firm grasp of relevant principles and clarity of their own commitments in order to arrive at defensible conclusions when faced with ethical dilemmas.

In light of the current situation, social work and other helping professions such as psychology and education who are also grappling with gatekeeping issues (Benson, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Goodwin & Oyler, 2006; Jackson-Cherry, 2006; Lumadue & Duffy, 1999; Vacha-Haase, Kerewsky & Davenport, 2004) and particularly, educators and administrators need to revisit the gatekeeping roles of faculty liaisons, field instructors and field education coordinators to develop a clearer understanding of the roles of each of the parties, and to consider policies and procedures to exercise their leadership responsibilities.

### ***Case Illustrations***

The nature of gatekeeping in the context of field is multidimensional. For example, on the one hand, it may involve safeguarding clients from the unprofessional or unethical practice of students by addressing student professional suitability concerns. On the other hand, it may also involve safeguarding students from unfair treatment, measures or restrictions placed on them during the practicum process. Three student field placement cases are outlined to illustrate the kinds of situations and ethical dilemmas I encountered and the frameworks I employed to guide decision making in my practice. These case illustrations are outlined within the introductory chapter to provide the reader with examples of professional suitability concerns that I encountered in my practice, and are not used throughout the study as case studies.

My approach to these cases and the resulting questions has been greatly influenced by exposure to the Doctor of Education Program (EdD) in the Department of Educational Studies of the University of British Columbia, Faculty of Education. The way I perceive my role as an educational leader has been enhanced by the program in many ways. Furthermore, at times I was overwhelmed by the exposure to new concepts and frameworks of analysis which created a heightened level of critical consciousness. The resulting reflection and rumination has led me to

think about my practice in more critical and compelling ways. Consequently I have developed a greater awareness of my contributions and ethical obligations to both students and the profession as an educational leader. Within this discussion I describe the issue of assessing student professional suitability and the context in which this was embedded at Thompson Rivers University. I also outline what I perceive to be the ethically relevant features of the issues.

The majority of the ethical dilemmas I faced were what Kidder refers to as *right-versus-right* cases (1995). These cases are “genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in one of our basic, core values” (p. 18). “The *really* tough choices, then, don’t center upon right versus wrong... they typically, are those that pit one ‘right’ value against another” (p. 16). Each side is firmly rooted in our basic, core values. For example, it is right to give students a second chance in another practice setting when errors in judgement or incidents occur, but it is also right to address concerns of the practice community when legitimate concerns related to professional suitability arise. The way issues were addressed in my practice illustrates an important point about solutions, which constitutes the middle way resolution between the two rights. In such cases, it was right to be merciful with students and right to enforce justice (Kidder, 1995). On the other hand, I also encountered what Kidder refers to as *right-versus-wrong* cases. In one specific case involving a student who was suspended from the program, the professional suitability policy clearly applied as the student’s actions were unmistakably in breach of the professional Code of Ethics. In this case it was right to recommend suspending the student because his/her conduct was clearly wrong. Thus, I did not perceive the case to constitute a moral dilemma or right-versus-right case (1995). However, the outcomes of this case were in the hands of the university administration as it was not in my authority to suspend the student from the program.

The first case under review constitutes a *right-versus-right* case. In this instance I received a request from a faculty liaison to attend a meeting with a field instructor at the

Ministry for Children and Family Development office with a Ministry administrator and the faculty liaison to discuss concerns regarding a practicum student who had voluntarily withdrawn from a child welfare field placement after reporting involvement in a physical altercation with her boyfriend in which the police were called to the home. Concerns were raised at this time about the appropriateness of the student remaining in the placement given the implications of her current circumstances on her performance in the practicum. This was further exacerbated by the fact that the boyfriend's 10 year old child was also present during the physical altercation. Thus, it was determined at the meeting that the practicum would be suspended until the student's judgment, circumstances and wellbeing could be adequately assessed. Following the meeting the liaison and I met with the student to inform her of the decision. During the meeting the student still appeared to be in shock, and expressed remorse and embarrassment for the circumstances that led to her voluntary withdrawal from the practicum placement. She agreed to the need to temporarily suspend her engagement in the field and expressed no reservations to taking a short hiatus to reflect on her experience and current circumstances. During the meeting I requested that she schedule an appointment with a counsellor on campus or elsewhere to gain further insight into the incident. The faculty liaison gave the student's file back to me and the student and I agreed to meet within the next few weeks to assess her situation.

During the subsequent meeting a month or so later, the student confirmed she had gone for counselling, developed new insights, and had since left the relationship. She demonstrated important awareness and learning from her experience. She indicated that she was ready to commence field again and was open to working in various settings. Following the meeting I began contacting other settings to secure a placement with the initial assumption that reconvening the child welfare placement would not be an option. However, the child welfare practicum contacted me a short time later to enquire whether the student would like to meet to assess the appropriateness of continuing her placement with child welfare. During an extensive

meeting with the student and two Ministry administrators in which we discussed the student's readiness to return to the placement, it was stressed that the student would need to possess the ability to recognize potential triggers in her practice, and to seek regular debriefing opportunities with the field instructor. After this meeting, it was determined that it would be feasible and appropriate for the student to reconvene the placement. The student retained most of the hours completed before the incident and successfully completed the field placement. In this case, one could clearly observe a gatekeeping role.

A second case, involving a student who was terminated from a field placement by the field instructors three quarters of the way through, was more challenging. In this case the field instructors terminated the student's field placement after an incident occurred which led them to lose trust in the student's ability to follow agency protocol and to report events truthfully. However, it was important to determine whether the student had been treated fairly. Did the student's behaviour warrant this response? After much analysis, and many meetings with the student, field instructors, program chair and dean, the faculty liaison and I came to the conclusion that it was necessary for the student to repeat the practicum in another setting on the basis of the incident, the student's lack of accountability, insight and response, and the relationship of this to the professional Code (refer to Appendix A). This was the first time during my tenure that a student had been assigned a "no credit granted" grade and was requested to repeat all 420 hours required for the final practicum. Although I knew this decision could be overturned through an appeal process, it was important as an educational leader to make a clear statement for the integrity of the program and the student's learning needs to recommend the student repeat the course. While the student's actions were troubling, my commitment to due process and to supporting the student did not impede my ability to ensure a fair process for the student seeking to redress the situation. However, it was important to allow the student every

opportunity to make amends, and to remain cognizant of how my perception of the student could influence how I would lead the process and eventually deliberate on the matter.

Addressing this specific case called for skills, knowledge and values related to the ethical obligation of the program to address concerns, but to avoid arbitrary interpretation of the professional suitability policy in an effort to punish the student. While the student's conduct was troubling, it was not problematic enough to invoke the professional suitability policy or to warrant recommending suspension from the program. Although the student's behaviour had implications for practice, it did not pose a direct or immediate threat to clients. Thus, it was necessary to pay attention to the particular to be discerning and distinguish the serious from the trivial when addressing suitability concerns.

This case clearly invoked the gatekeeping role in deliberating on the issue and outcomes and determining the process for securing a second placement. In this regard it was necessary to determine when the field placement would commence, as well as determine an appropriate field setting and field instructor who would adequately monitor, support and challenge the student to ensure that the concerns leading to the termination of the first placement were not an ongoing reflection of the student's conduct. I also needed to fully inform both the new field instructor and faculty liaison of the circumstances surrounding the termination of the first field placement, and notify the student of this exchange of information. Thus, it was necessary to recruit a field instructor and faculty liaison who would monitor the student's progress and provide the needed support that the student required and deserved.

In a third case involving a student who was suspended from the program, the need to "close the gate" to protect the interests of clients was clearly in order as the student's actions were unmistakably in breach of the professional Code of Ethics. This case reflected what Kidder (1995) refers to as a *right-versus-wrong* case. It was right to recommend the student be suspended from the program because his/her conduct was clearly unethical. My commitment to

social work values and ethics make it impossible for me to disregard the professional Code of social work when students' actions contravene the professional Code of Ethics. Therefore, on the basis of my concern for the safety of clients, I was compelled to draw an ethical line, close the gate and decline placing this student. In this case, ethics would overrule my professional obligation to place the student, and I informed the dean that I would not place this student if the University Senate overturned the suspension. Moreover, it was critical to maintain my integrity as the faculty member involved in the direct promotion and referral of students to the practice community.

These cases illustrate the range of gatekeeping responsibilities that arise in the coordination of field placements, which call for ethically-sensitive educational leadership. As has been made apparent, there is sometimes a patent need for guarding or closing the gate. The tasks and activities of this aspect of gatekeeping may include supporting students through the program by providing informal support or recommending formal counselling, clarifying expectations, requesting medical support documentation, altering timelines or days and duration of practica, suspending field participation for a specified period of time, assigning a specific field instructor, practice setting and faculty liaison, changing field settings and/or assigning a new field instructor, teaching specific skills and knowledge, providing special resources (i.e., taking extra time with the student or providing additional information), monitoring, contracting, evaluating, collaborating with or challenging other players in the field to support or confront students, counselling out of the program, or recommending suspension from the program. All of these aspects relate directly to exercising or encouraging others to exercise a gatekeeping role. However, suspension from a program does not necessarily mean suspension from the university. There is a natural tension between the right of a profession to decide who is admitted to practice and the right of a university to decide who can be a student, which often results in a tension between the school's obligation to the profession and to the university.



The ethic of the profession of social work and education are embedded within this context which has important implications for my practice, and my responsibility, along with field and faculty members. The professional suitability policy represents our expression of accountability to the CASWE standard. I perceive policy as a living breathing entity which is both product and process and without considering the adhocery, one risks losing sight of this complexity within the analysis. Thus, my understanding moves beyond the conventional perception of policy, as written directives that are uniformly implemented, to one that recognizes the messiness and diversity of implementation. Consequently, implementation occurs in varied ways across different educational settings or in a fragmented and multi-layered fashion as argued by Ozga (2000). As a result it is important for educational leaders to identify the various ethical dimensions of educational policies and practices in deliberating on particular cases.

### ***Beliefs and Principles of Gatekeeping***

My point of departure in conducting this research is strongly influenced by the beliefs and principles I hold in relation to gatekeeping. There is nothing more gratifying than contributing to and observing the personal and professional development of a social work student from those first anxious moments in the field preparation seminars to placing them in practica, to hearing of their success in securing their first long awaited position as a social worker. I believe that all students have a right to an education, but perhaps not necessarily to a social work education. Furthermore, I believe that the recipients of the service of social work students deserve professional care and to be protected from harm, both within the field education component of their education and in their practice as certified professionals. Thus, I believe it is necessary to address student suitability concerns as field education coordinators. However, as members of a profession that espouses a progressive approach to eliminating discrimination, our actions must be congruent with our espoused theory when addressing these

concerns. We have a duty of care to students to ensure that we are not engaging in practices that reinforce the dominant oppressive structures in society. Moreover, I am cognizant of the challenges experienced by students during their years of social work education. They often feel quite powerless and overwhelmed by the demands of the program and their personal lives. Thus, we are often not seeing them at their best. In some instances field instructors and faculty members are overly critical in their assessment of students, and treat them unfairly.

It is critical to clarify when a specific concern is related to a lack of readiness versus a lack of suitability. As noted, according to the CASWE Educational Policy Statements, students found to be engaging in behaviour contrary to the relevant social work Code of Ethics are judged to be unsuitable for the profession of social work (refer to Appendix A: British Columbia Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics). Whereas, in some instances, a student may not be ready for social work studies or practice due to a lack of maturity, life experience, or the existence of current issues or personal challenges affecting his or her wellness or performance. This may inhibit his or her ability to meet professional and academic expectations. However, this does not mean he or she is not suitable for the profession. This is where occasionally it is necessary to intervene on behalf of students. It is my conviction that, although not everyone should or can be a social worker, we must support all students who are admitted to our program to develop to the best of their abilities.

Nevertheless, since beginning my social work education in 1988 I have questioned whether everyone who is admitted to a social work program is worthy of the professional trust and respect that a bachelor's degree in social work implies. For instance I recall experiencing grave concerns about the professional suitability of some of my peers during my undergraduate education. For example, I was concerned about a peer who openly admitted to current drug use and was often very offensive, sexist, and disrespectful of spatial and professional boundaries. As an upcoming graduate of the program I was bewildered by the granting of the degree to this

student which left me somewhat disillusioned about the profession I was about to enter. Again it is my belief that field education coordinators, faculty members, administration, and field instructors have an obligation to address concerns related to student professional suitability, and such instances demand thoughtful, ethically-sensitive approaches.

Moreover, there are instances when it is necessary to close the gate when concerns related to students' conduct and wellbeing come to our attention. We should not knowingly refer students for placements who will impose an unfair burden on field instructors or present a risk to clients. I strongly believe it is important to address concerns when there is cause to do so. We cannot disregard blatant offences, such as when students breach the professional Code of Ethics and are not worthy of trust; are firmly rooted in beliefs and values that are contrary to social work and are resistant to learning or changing these values and beliefs; are unable to see past their own needs; and are experiencing current mental health concerns or addictions issues that will impede their ability to meet the needs of clients. This is where our role to provide ethical educational leadership and accountability to the profession is imperative. I would suggest that Rothenberg's four *C*'s considered to be possessed by superior educators which include: 1) concern for competence; 2) commitment; 3) command of content; and 4) courage are necessary qualities for gatekeepers to possess. Specifically, it is necessary to have concern for the competence of students; a commitment to education within the value framework of the profession; knowledge of the content to be taught; and courage or the willingness and ability to "sit in judgment on those whom (one) is teaching, realizing that this judgment may determine the future of those students within the profession" (Rothenburg, 1975 cited in Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 118-119). However, Moore and Urwin add that this requires self awareness on the part of all involved, as well as the recognition that the social work profession is extremely diverse and requires individuals with a wide range of strengths and abilities.

Furthermore, this needs to be tempered by having a firm grasp of the principles we hold, and the claims we make in the name of *right* and *wrong* in order to arrive at defensible conclusions when addressing concerns. There is no other aspect or virtue more critical to my practice as an educational leader than what Aristotle refers to as *phronesis*, doing the right thing, for the right reasons, at the right time. It is challenging for most to achieve this virtue. Although difficult, striving for greater awareness of the systemic and personal impediments to consistently achieving *phronesis* is critical nonetheless. I am distinctly aware that ethical closure is never truly possible, and I agree with Ralston Saul (2001) that a perpetual state of conscious uncertainty demands continual sustained questioning.

As I have observed above, out of the 80 to 100 students I placed each year during my five year experience as field education coordinator, three to five concerns related to student professional suitability or readiness arose each year. Although the cases were few in number, processes for deliberating on them were very time consuming and complex. If the number of concerns at TRU reflects that of all 34 undergraduate social work programs in Canada this translates into a modest estimation of approximately 90 to 150 students per year. There are potentially serious consequences of abdicating the gatekeeping responsibility. These concerns include the potential negative impact of unqualified social workers on individual communities and social service consumers; the individual reputation of schools and universities when inappropriate students are referred and placed in human service settings; the number of future available practica due to the decreased willingness of agencies and field instructors to provide subsequent field placements, and risks to the reputation and integrity of the profession as a whole. Thus, it is necessary to gain a greater understanding of the challenges encountered to exercising the gatekeeping role. In this dissertation, I examine the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability concerns through a critical review of my practice as a field education coordinator, and a focus group discussion with

eight field education coordinators, as well as a national survey administered to 77 current, and a number of former coordinators from 35 universities from across Canada.

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

The purpose of this research is to better understand how social work field education coordinators respond to gatekeeping issues. By investigating the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability I explore whether field education coordinators experience the same or similar tensions with respect to gatekeeping that I have experienced, and how they address such tensions. The study explores field education coordinators' perceptions of their role in relation to gatekeeping, and whether they have a framework to address gatekeeping responsibilities. Accordingly, it seeks to uncover what sources of moral authority they draw on to arrive at defensible conclusions when concerns related to suitability arise. Nash defines *moral authority* as "the most fundamental assumptions that guide our perceptions about the nature of reality and what we experience as good or bad, right or wrong, important or unimportant" (2002, p. 36). He believes these assumptions or background beliefs are the ultimate bases by which we make our ethical decisions.

The larger intent of better understanding how social work field education coordinators respond to gatekeeping issues is to stimulate dialogue within social work education and other professional programs such as nursing and education on how to respond to the current challenges and practice issues. By offering a richer understanding of the educational leadership provided by field education coordinators, such work will demystify the process of gatekeeping within field education to lead to a better understanding of how field education coordinators and others balance their responsibilities to students, their institutions, and the profession. Such insights and understanding has implications for all helping disciplines.

Chapter One of the dissertation has outlined the impetus for the study; an introduction to my experience as a field education coordinator and concerns regarding gatekeeping

responsibilities; Canadian Association for Social Work Education accreditation standards related to gatekeeping in social work education; the context of field education and the role of the field education coordinator; what we are guarding for and against; partners in the gatekeeping role; and the complexities of the gatekeeping role with respect to school mission statements and accreditation standards. Case illustrations from my practice are also outlined in order to provide insight into the practice context, and my beliefs and principles of gatekeeping are discussed to inform the reader of the point of departure for the research. Chapter Two summarizes the findings from my review of relevant bodies of literature, under the following headings and sub-headings, 1) Current Knowledge or Understanding of Gatekeeping in Social Work Education, sub-headings a) Gatekeeping Prior to the Field Component, b) Gatekeeping within Field Education, and c) Gatekeeping within Field Coordination; and heading 2) Methods Employed for Gatekeeping Research. Chapter Three describes the research question, as well as the methodology, and methods (focus group and web-based survey questionnaire) employed for the study; how the data were analyzed, and aspects of reliability, validity and generalizability. Chapter Four outlines the findings from the focus group and survey questionnaire data, and is followed by a discussion of the findings. Chapter Five provides a summary, reflections and recommendations arising from the study, and suggests future research which could be undertaken to extend this inquiry.

### **Summary**

Within this chapter, I have shared my reflections on gatekeeping in field coordination; explored the context of field education and the role of the field education coordinator; delineated what we are guarding for and against; noted partners in the gatekeeping role; explored the contradictions of the gatekeeping role; constructed case illustrations drawn from my professional experience in order to illustrate how I conceptualize and address the issue of the professional suitability of students in my practice, and how such measures were considered

appropriate resolutions; and I also outlined the beliefs and principles that provided a point of departure for this research. As previously noted, gatekeeping related to suitability often occurs during the field component of social work education when concerns arise after students have met the minimum academic requirements of program coursework.

Furthermore, CASWE Educational Policy Statements state that “Schools shall have published policies and procedures providing for the termination of those social work students found to be engaging in behaviour contrary to the relevant social work Code of Ethics, and therefore are judged to be unsuitable for the profession of social work” (October 2007).

Although such policies may be in place in most schools, this often does not provide the means to address many of the subtle and unique concerns that arise in field education. In order to determine the extent of current knowledge or understanding related to gatekeeping in social work education; and particularly to the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability, it was necessary to review relevant bodies of literature specific to this topic. The exploration of the literature was undertaken in conjunction with the development of the research question. This was also an important step in determining what others had already written about the topic before beginning to conduct the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

*The field coordinator working as a consultant and liaison must maintain allegiance both to the sponsoring educational program and to the professional practice, ethics, and services of the agencies and their clientele. In this unmistakably unique position, role strain can develop because traditional academic standards make little, if any, allowance for the demands and pressures of the multifaceted imperatives of good field coordination.*

Jones, 1984, p. 48

A comprehensive review of social work literature (journal and newspaper articles, texts, conference papers, minutes from Northwest (Canada/US) Field Coordinator Consortium, and Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) Field Education Coordinator meetings, and conference programs from CASWE and the US Council on Social Work Education conferences) has been undertaken as an important component of the research. It was essential to determine how other researchers approached the topic of gatekeeping and the experience of field education coordinators; that is, to become aware of the concepts they employed, the methods and conclusions they reached, and the gaps in their topics of study in order that my research would relate to and build on the current state of knowledge. I approached the literature review with the goal of learning what had been written and researched about the specific experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability.

The chapter presents the results of my literature review under the following headings and sub-headings, which I have formulated to organize my findings: 1) Current Knowledge or Understanding of Gatekeeping in Social Work Education, sub-headings a) Gatekeeping Prior to the Field Component, b) Gatekeeping within Field Education, and c) Gatekeeping within Field Coordination; and heading 2) Methods Employed for Gatekeeping Research. This is followed by a summary of the literature review, formulation of the research question, and a discussion of the contributions of this study to what has previously been published.



With respect to the topic of ‘gatekeeping’ generally, a preliminary review of the literature in psychology (Jackson-Cherry, 2006; Lumadue & Duffy, 1999; Vacha-Haase, Kerewsky & Davenport, 2004) and education (Benson, 1995; Goodwin & Oyler, 2006) indicates that allied professions are also grappling with gatekeeping issues. Examples from education in the US confirm that the issue of teacher quality is a critical concern of policy makers and educators (Cochran-Smith, 2004). In their paper *Keeping Incompetent Teachers Out of the Classroom: Gate-keeping Practices in Teacher Education Programs*, Goodwin and Oyler (2006) review gatekeeping practices teacher preparation programs employ to discern teacher quality, and they explore how teacher educators decide if candidates are ready for certification. There is broad acknowledgement across the literature that professional programs lack clear criteria for evaluation and have not devised specific and ongoing gatekeeping practices.

### **Current Knowledge or Understanding of Gatekeeping in Social Work Education**

The literature reviewed within this chapter indicates that extensive gatekeeping research has been conducted in the US, and a number of studies have also been conducted in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Although there are differences in some aspects of social work education between these countries, much can be gleaned from studies on social work elsewhere that is relevant to the Canadian context. One common feature of the studies is that, while the field is often emphasized as the site for gatekeeping to occur, the specific emphasis is on field instructors and faculty liaisons with very little consideration or mention of field education coordinators. It is puzzling to note the absence of field education coordinators within the discussion of gatekeeping in social work education, and more so within field education. If they are mentioned at all, it is often in a cursory manner or they are referenced as third parties. Perhaps they are not considered to have gatekeeping responsibilities. Alternatively, perhaps, it is assumed that field education coordinators are included in references made to “faculty” or “field faculty,” but the functions of this distinct role and the accompanying responsibilities are

not specifically addressed. However, pertinent information can be extrapolated from the general literature pertaining to the context in which field education coordinators practice.

As previously noted within the introduction, and discussion of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education accreditation standards, social work literature and accreditation standards emphasize the ethical responsibility of educators to fulfill a gatekeeping role (Barlow & Coleman, 2004; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Gibbs, 1994a; Gibbs & Blakely, 2000; Jenkins, Moore & Dietz, 1996; Lafrance, Gray & Herbert, 2004; Moore & Urwin, 1990; Morrow, 2000; Reynolds, 2004; Royse, 2000) particularly within the field component of social work education (Barlow & Coleman, 2004; Hartman & Wills, 1991; Miller & Koerin, 2001; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Raymond, 2000; Tam, 2004). Gatekeeping is presented by most authors as an ethical imperative and duty rather than as a choice. On this view, we have an obligation to protect the public from harm, and are made accountable through accreditation standards and Codes of social work practice.

Attention to gatekeeping in social work education is not a new phenomenon and has been a subject of concern since the late 1800s (Moore & Jenkins, 2000). However, as was previously noted “few program operations are viewed as more complex, troublesome, and emotionally charged than the gatekeeping component of the educational enterprise. And few program operations are imbued with more mystery and misunderstanding” (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 3). Moore and Urwin define gatekeeping as “that professional responsibility of social work educators, both university and agency based, to determine whether or not a student should enter the profession” (1990, p.113). Born and Carroll argue that “a more ethical approach to gatekeeping is a multi-tiered approach, which begins with the decision to admit or reject and continues through graduation and licensure” (1988, p. 82). “Social work educators are ‘gatekeepers’ in that they have a duty to ensure that only students with skills and values

necessary to serve clients are admitted to professional practice” (Redmond & Bright, 2007, p. 167).

Moreover, educational institutions are required to serve as first-line gatekeepers to the profession (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Cole & Lewis, 1993). Moore and Urwin (1990) stress the need for quality control in classroom instruction, field education, and student evaluation. “These groups include students, faculty, field instructors, academic administrators, quality assurance entities and the clientele” (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 8). As noted above, field education coordinators have not figured prominently in the discussion of gatekeeping. On the other hand, Gibbs and Macy stress the prominent role played by program directors in assisting faculty members to work through their resistance and move forward with sound gatekeeping policies and procedures. Based upon my experience, it would seem that field education coordinators play a similar role in their work with field instructors and faculty liaisons.

Furthermore, although the question of the proper role of social work service recipients in gatekeeping is outside the scope of this research, I am sympathetic to the proposal that they should also “be involved in deciding fitness for practice and in the managing of that practice, and that such involvement enhances the student experience and lays the foundation for partnership working in the professional arena” (Charles, Clarke & Evans, 2006, p.373).

Moreover, Moore and Urwin argue that:

Social work education is not an end in itself; but a means for entering the profession...

Unless a social work program is relevant to the growth and needs of its students and to the clients they will serve, it cannot realistically claim to be a gatekeeper. Social work education has a responsibility to affect values in the educational process. (p. 114) ... If educators do not guard the gate, they cannot raise higher the status of social work or retain the confidence of society in the profession’s ability to deliver service. As noted by

Towle (1954), the worth of any profession is based on its common practice. Social work educators and practitioners are responsible for the products they help to produce. (p. 126)

Hence, in light of the vexing but indispensable nature of the gatekeeping role, it is not surprising that much dialogue has taken place over the past few decades between educators, administrators, and field education coordinators during consortia, conference and other meetings about how best to meet our gatekeeping obligations. The topic of gatekeeping has been a standing item during many of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education conferences. Similarly, refereed papers for the November 2008 US Council on Social Work Education pre-annual program Field Education Track Sessions included titles such as 1) *Gatekeeping: Why Shouldn't We Be Ambivalent*; 2) *Using the NASW Code of Ethics to Promote Competency in Field Education*; 3) *Exploring the Tension: Ethical Issues Encountered During the Field Placement*; 4) *Complex Issues in Gatekeeping: Professional Behaviors and Relational Skills*; and 5) *Strategies for Developing Comprehensive Gatekeeping Policies from Admissions to Graduation* (North American Network of Field Educators and Directors, correspondence, September 18, 2008, pp. 2-3).

In addition, a continuum of gatekeeping methods from quality control in admissions procedures, classroom instruction, field education, and student evaluation have also been discussed in the literature. Consideration of the assessment processes that occur prior to students entering field, within admission and classroom assessment processes will be explored before enquiring into the experience and approach of field education coordinators to addressing professional suitability. How do others experience and approach gatekeeping obligations? What criteria, procedures and approaches do they employ? What issues impact, shape or obstruct their gatekeeping functions? Are these similar or dissimilar to field education coordinators experiences? What impact does this practice have on field education coordinators?

Researchers have approached the topic of gatekeeping from ethical, legal, analytical, administrative, collaborative, and pedagogical perspectives. From an ethical perspective, one is ethically obligated both to address concerns regarding student professional suitability, and to act ethically in doing so. Likewise, from a legal perspective one must exercise a duty of care for students (Armstrong, 2006; Redmond & Bright, 2007) and apply only those policies and procedures that comply with the principles of natural justice. It is assumed that, if one understands his or her legal obligations; and is informed about the law; one will avoid liability. Whereas from an analytical perspective, one engages in research that will enhance the ability to assess, predict, identify, and resolve issues. Furthermore, from an administrative perspective, one devises application packages, assessment tools, and interview processes to screen-out unsuitable applicants. From a collaborative perspective, university educators engage in team approaches to assessment for admissions and field education, and both university and field educators work together to address critical concerns. Some authors also approach the topic from a pedagogical perspective, placing emphasis on how educational practices or lack thereof influence the professional development and conduct of students.

### ***Gatekeeping Prior to the Field Component***

As noted, gatekeeping occurs at various points in the program, beginning with admission. Admissions decisions directly impact the experience of field education coordinators in very different ways to that of teaching and field liaison faculty. Namely, the field education coordinator engages in the direct promotion of students' knowledge, skills and abilities to the practice community in order to secure appropriate field placement experiences. This presents specific challenges when concerns regarding professional suitability arise. Indeed, this relationship shifts from the insular nature of the classroom to the public domain where the field education coordinator's integrity could be undermined. Consequently, much emphasis is placed on gatekeeping at 'the door' through admissions procedures. A number of authors have explored

gatekeeping prior to point of entry through a critical review of admissions screening processes (Chalmers & Twigg, 2007; Gibbs, 1994b; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002). Substantial effort has been devoted to the development of sound and effective gatekeeping mechanisms to assess, screen, predict, and evaluate student professional suitability prior to, and after admission to the program. Applicants are selected on the basis of both academic performance (grade point average), and non-academic criteria such as possessing values in consonance with the profession, ethical behaviour, sensitivity and acceptance of diversity, and interpersonal competence. These criteria are assessed through a range of mechanisms such as performance in group or individual interviews, personal/admissions statements, written exercises, volunteer, employment, and life experience.

There is considerable debate about the weight or importance assigned to either academic or non-academic criteria. According to Wahlberg and Lommen's study, most of the weighting in BSW programs in the US is placed on academic criteria (cited in Kropf, 2000). This is similar in Australia as Ryan, Habbis, and Craft's (1997) study also indicated that academic indicators formed the basis for admissions decisions. However, some question the merit and ethics of using "GPA as the primary definer of competence, and potential for professional success" (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 8) as academic ability does not always equate to professional suitability. "Social work educators have lamented the difficulty of changing students' attitudes and values and have expressed concern about graduating students who excel academically but nonetheless have values and attitudes that are inconsistent with the profession" (Bracy, 2000, p. 91).

Bracy also alerts us to the barriers that such criteria present to people of colour. In outlining the position of those who have a commitment to diversity in higher education she states "this group believes that the overreliance on GPA's and standardized test scores is an obstacle to full participation by diverse populations, so they call for more inclusive admissions

criteria” (pp. 74-75). Comprehensive data regarding the weighting of admissions criteria in Canadian schools has not been collected. However, anecdotal information and knowledge of the practice at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) and other Canadian universities leads me to believe that academic criteria are not weighted as heavily as in the US. For example, at TRU, selection criteria are weighted evenly between grade point average, personal statement (admissions statement), and employment or volunteer experience. Nevertheless, regardless of the measures used, “studies of the admission practices of social work programs suggest that admission screening does little in the way of gatekeeping” (Kropf, 2000, p. 64) and the predictive validity of current academic and non-academic admissions criteria is questionable.

One part of the debate over whether and if so how we can know who is and who is not suitable for the profession concerns how the ideal social work professional is properly characterized. Bloom (1990) uses the term ‘psychological equilibrium’ to describe the balanced kind of social worker the social work profession needs.

This point is difficult to express, but in some fashion, the social work profession needs workers who paradoxically are calm but compassionate, quiet but actively listening, stable but dynamic forces in social settings. In short, one must have oneself “together,” not necessarily free of doubts and worries, but capable of putting them into perspective and dealing with them appropriately in one’s own time, rather than letting personal concerns interfere with helping others. A professional helper should not come to social work or another clinical field seeking to understand his or her own problems. That is the work of therapy, not education. One will grow in self-insight as a result of thinking about the contents of social work, but it should be in the sense of promoting a more fulfilling life (partly through the service of others), not in putting mixed up pieces back together.

(p. 91)

However, there is a lack of agreement on the qualities that make a good social worker and specific criteria are still not precisely defined (Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Redmond & Bright, 2007). Gibbs and Macy (2000) suggest that we need to match the identification of various gatekeeping points with the setting of appropriate and effective standards. Coleman, Collins and Aikins argue that normative standards are needed (1995). Consequently, Tam (2008) has been committed to developing and validating a professional suitability scale for social work practice for the past few years. Within a recent article related to this ongoing study, Tam and Coleman state:

The objective of developing a reliable and valid measure on professional suitability was largely met in this study. The findings suggest that the professional suitability scale was multidimensional, which includes of the dimensions of overall suitability, analytical suitability, practice suitability, personal suitability, and ethical suitability. (2009, p. 60)

The authors state that this scale could have potential as a tool for the assessment of students' suitability. Nevertheless, we need to be clear as to when and what standards we are using to assess *potential* versus *actual* suitability for professional practice. Perhaps some students are *unready* rather than *unsuitable* when assessed at certain gatekeeping points in the program (LaFrance, Gray, & Herbert, 2004). The role of social work education in creating the right kind of social worker is also acknowledged.

At the same time “recent trends in gatekeeping apparently reveal that students may be entering the profession for reasons that are incongruent with the profession’s commitment to needy clients” (Moore & Urwin, 1991, p. 2). Cobb and Jordon assert that students “should be informed that in professional programs, academic performance includes classroom performance, class attendance, ethical behavior, and psychological well-being sufficient to interact positively and instructively with clients” (1989, p. 94).



Given the unlikelihood of screening-out all unsuitable candidates at admissions, what measures are taken to address suitability concerns once students are admitted to the program? As previously noted, screening students at various points throughout the professional program is necessary for effective gatekeeping. The various points include: before admission, during completion of introductory and core coursework, skills labs, within classroom assignments, before entry into the field placement, during the field experience, and at graduation (Gibbs, 2000; Moore & Urwin, 1990). Thus, passage into the field placement should be viewed as only one of the gatekeeping points. However, professional suitability concerns may not be brought to light or become clearly apparent within the classroom context through written assignments and scripted role play exercises, or we struggle with how to address concerns within this context. Crisp and Green Lister (2004) note the lack of literature regarding classroom-based assessment methods, whereas in their discussion of quality control in classroom instruction, Moore and Urwin explore the necessary qualities of instructors. It is also noted that some students self select out of social work programs if given the option and a safe space to do so. Some authors also acknowledge the practice of ‘counselling out’ while others view this practice as controversial. While one component of gatekeeping involves providing responsible education, a second component involves guarding the exit gate, thus clear policies on standards for graduation are needed (Moore & Urwin).

In recent years, a number of authors such as Cobb (1994) have stressed that “professional programs may and should use academic criteria for disciplining students who fail to meet the ethical standards or demands of the profession” (p.20). Gibbs clarifies that this framing is critical regardless of whether specific standards relate to professional performance expectations or scholastic matters (2000). However, as noted in the earlier discussion of admissions criteria, the terms *academic* and *non-academic* criteria continue to be used in mutually exclusive ways. In many cases, the latter is perceived to be much more subjective and

problematic, while the former is presented as more clear-cut and objective. “The profession of social work has difficulty terminating students for non-academic reasons because of an inability to define suitability for the profession and to formulate concrete criteria” (LaFrance et al, 2004, p. 325). Consequently, Raymond (2000) argues that we should avoid the dichotomy between academic and non-academic standards. He states that “in discussions about gatekeeping at national conferences, faculty and program directors report that fear of litigation causes them to shy away from applying professionally oriented standards that are hard to define and measure and are often erroneously referred to as ‘non-academic’ standards...” (2000, p. 112). Moore and Urwin also argue that “appropriate professional behavior is an academic requirement; it is not separate from the educational component” (1991, p. 5). As such, it should not be viewed as a misconduct issue (Moore & Urwin, 1990). Moreover, “courts have declared that a student’s behavior or conduct can be considered an *academic* matter” (Raymond, p. 123).

This has profound implications for student evaluation in field education. Thus, it is critical to develop professionally oriented standards (academic standards) to assess professional capacities. Although consideration as to the academic or professional criteria of Tam’s professional suitability scale requires further consideration, the scale may provide a valid measure for evaluating students’ professional suitability. Furthermore, Gibbs emphasizes the role of the *Code of Ethics* (National Association of Social Workers), accreditation standards, and curriculum policy statements (Council on Social Work Education) in shaping gatekeeping policies (2000). Raymond also notes the appropriateness of applying the Code in the evaluation of professional performance, and states it is acceptable to hold students accountable to the Code even if they are not members of the association (2000).

Notwithstanding, research indicates that, once admitted to social work programs most students complete the degree (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Coleman, Collins & Aikins, 1995; Ryan, McCormack & Cleak, 2006). Furthermore, according to Moore and

Urwin (1990) and many other authors, educators are unclear about translating the goals and strategies of gatekeeping into practice, while others consciously abdicate this responsibility, assuming it will be addressed by others within the school or practice community. In addition, some are very ambivalent or reluctant to consider themselves as gatekeepers, as they perceive this to be antithetical to the philosophy of the profession of social work. Others question whether:

gatekeeping mask(s) our difficulties in teaching students from various cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds; students with weak academic preparation (preparation often related to their economic status); students with English as a second language; or students with learning or other disabilities? In the name of gatekeeping, we can design admissions policies to screen out those students whom, regardless of their potential for social work, we do not know how to teach. (Greenhouse Gardella, 2000, pp.ix-x)

In addition, the question of whether gatekeeping masks our difficulties in teaching values; and our difficulties in conducting evaluative research of educational practice is also raised (Greenhouse Gardella, 2000). In many instances the topic is perceived as divisive and controversial, and met with reluctance and reservation amongst colleagues (Tam & Ming Kwok, 2007, p.195). Furthermore, exaggerated fears of litigation also impede many from acting on their concerns. Consequently “program faculties must come to terms with their abandonment of traditional gatekeeping functions relative to screening-out (or counseling out) unsuitable students...”(Gibbs, 2000, p. 150). Changing system contexts such as, ideological and legal shifts; changes in student enrolment and institutional resources; and shifts in faculty demographics and workload expectations also impact gatekeeping functions in social work education (Gibbs). In sum, I concur with Gibbs that the issues and questions raised thus far “form some of the disconcerting wrinkles in the tapestry of gatekeeping” (p.160).

### *Gatekeeping within Field Education*

While screening at the time of admission or prior to field is important, often it is in the field placement where issues of professional suitability become apparent. Field is noted as the most productive place to identify concerns (Tam, 2004). “Without careful monitoring and accurate evaluation of student field performance, the ‘field is an accident waiting to happen’”(Cole & Lewis, 1995, p. 258). Hartman and Wills (1991) agree that screening-out unsuitable candidates is clearly a function of field education. Ryan et al. also view field as the main arena in which a student’s competency for practice is assessed (2006). “The field is where gatekeeping takes on its most concrete function, and it is in field where the difficulties of gatekeeping are most clear” (Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 117). Thus, the gatekeeping role of the practicum places direct responsibility on all those involved in field education. However, failing a student in a practicum is a complicated task and can present many dilemmas. Cole and Lewis (1993) note that “studies have indicated that few students are terminated from undergraduate and graduate social work programs, a fact which might be due to fear of possible legal ramifications” (p. 150). Consideration of how roles are coordinated, including the field education coordinator role is integral to the discussion. Much of the earlier discussion also applies. For example, there is a need for normative standards; consideration of the timing of identification of a student-at-risk; and the evaluation methods to be employed. Moreover, the need to work together is also stressed.

Jenkins, Moore, and Dietz (1996) outline a team approach to the gatekeeping interview with BSW students; while Moore, Dietz, and Jenkins (1998) employ case examples in their work to assist educators (both university and agency-based) to develop and further refine approaches and strategies for gatekeeping. Moore and Urwin (1991) explored the experience of one university in applying an assessment model for screening students in field education. The assessment model included an evaluation conference or structured interview process with

faculty to assess academic performance, self-awareness, and a value system that is consistent with the profession. Out of 193 students screened through this process, 6 were denied admission, 5 had their field placement postponed, and another 11 chose not to enter field education, and one student was admitted to the field on probation. However, the role of the field education coordinator was absent from this discussion.

On the other hand, Furness and Gilligan (2004) emphasize the need for training; structured support and affirmation of practice teachers (field instructors) in particular. They consulted a number of field education coordinators and 70 field instructors to explore issues in field supervision and assessing student suitability. Furthermore, LaFrance et al (2004) engaged in research with a small group of field instructors to determine potential indicators that suggest a person may not be suitable for the practice of social work and to operationally define the concept of professional unsuitability.

Tam's study also specifically surveyed field instructors (n=254) who had supervised BSW students from divisions affiliated with University of Calgary throughout the province of Alberta (2004). The purpose of the study was to examine field instructors' experience of and attitudes towards gatekeeping, and to identify their perceptions of the evaluation criteria for suitable professional practice for social work. The findings of the study indicated that gatekeeping remains controversial in social work education, with some respondents expressing reluctance to fail inadequate students, others indicating the concept was new, and others disagreeing. Despite this, the professional suitability scale developed for the study achieved excellent reliability and modest construct validity. Exploratory factor analysis resulted in a five-factor solution of the professional suitability scale. As noted earlier in this chapter, "these five factors were overall suitability, analytical suitability, practice suitability, personal suitability, and ethical suitability" (Tam & Coleman, 2009, p. 57). The *analytical* suitability factor solution was categorized as *social* suitability in the original study (2004). Another factor analysis

identified a two-factor solution of the gatekeeping attitude index (Tam, 2004, cited in Hartman & Wills, 1991). The two factors were commitment to gatekeeping and upholding standards. Findings indicated that there was a strong correlation between higher professional suitability and gatekeeping attitude scores, and respondents who had received field instruction training. These scores were also higher for respondents who had given a failing grade to a fieldwork student. There were also important distinctions between respondents who were affiliated with urban and rural divisions, non-government and non-profit organizations and those who worked for government, with the former receiving significantly higher professional suitability scores in both regards. As noted by the author, these results have significant implications for recruitment, retention, and training for field instructors. Such findings have direct implications for field education coordinators' practice, given their involvement in these and other aspects of recruiting and preparing field instructors to work with students.

However, relying too heavily on the practicum as the primary gatekeeping point leads to the perception that gatekeeping is being “dumped” on field instructors (Kropf, 2000). “Field instructors complain that social work programs are placing more and more of the gatekeeping burden on them while the program simply calculates grade point averages” (Raymond, 2000, p. 112). Similarly, minutes of the May 1998 Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), Field Education Coordinators' meeting indicate concern for gatekeeping demands falling to the field as well. Item number nine of the minutes titled *Suitability for the Profession* read as follows:

There was considerable discussion about personal and professional unsuitability. A number of schools are in the process of developing guidelines. It was agreed that some measures are required and that it should not only fall to field to detect lack of suitability in students. It was agreed that these can be complex legal issues and that due process is very

important...Clear policies are needed in the field with regard to how many times students can fail placements as well as procedures to slow down students and even stop them. (p.3)

Likewise, agenda items from a June 1996 Northwest (Canada/US) Field Education Coordinator Consortium meeting emphasized field education coordinators' concerns regarding "gatekeeping, policies on termination due to inappropriate behavior, sensitive student issues, grading, ethics/sensitive issues, suitability of students for field, and ethical behavior" (p.2). Coordinators agreed to bring policies on termination, suitability, gatekeeping, and supervision, and to collect data from various schools on the above issues, and discussed engaging in joint research ventures related to field. Time was set aside during the meeting for a small group discussion guided by specific questions to review field policies on grading, evaluation and termination due to issues of inappropriate student behaviour.

Barlow and Coleman (2004) also undertook a policy development process at the University of Calgary to develop a professional suitability policy. Within this research they engaged in an extensive review of 'suitability for practice guidelines' from programmes from across Canada in order to develop an effective professional suitability policy. Kilpatrick, Turner, and Holland (1994) also conducted a national survey of field education coordinators concerning quality control in field education. In addition, Kilpatrick and Holland (1993) surveyed accredited schools in the US to determine current patterns of managing field activities.

Ligon and Ward (2005) also conducted a national study of the field liaison role in the US and Puerto Rico to investigate the field liaison role from the perspective of those serving in that capacity. The authors note a lack of support for field education, and that "addressing institutional concerns about the perceived devaluation of field education is an ongoing concern" (p. 242). Moore and Urwin emphasize that "unless schools recognize the value of the linkage role played by the liaison, gatekeeping can be undermined" (1990, p. 126). Similarly, I would argue that the value of the linkage role played by field education coordinators also requires

recognition. Moreover, Rhodes, Ward, Ligon, and Priddy (2000) note seven threats to field education in the US that include: 1) academization of schools; 2) loss of autonomy in larger academic systems; 3) the devaluation of field directors; 4) growth of programs; 5) gatekeeping; 6) changes in the student population; and 7) a lack of faculty commitment to field education. They also note that limited recognition, status, and relevance in university settings is given to field liaison and coordination roles within tenure, promotion, and salary decisions.

### ***Gatekeeping within Field Coordination***

“The maintenance of a quality field program is an extremely sensitive, difficult and time-consuming task” (Schutz Gordon, 1982, p.116). Consequently, there is a need to consider the critical role of field education coordinators. As previously noted, there is a paucity of literature pertaining to how field education coordinators experience their work generally, or specifically how they experience gatekeeping responsibilities. The practice experiences of field education coordinators with respect to student professional suitability have been lacking from the literature, with the exception of a few articles. The reasons for this are varied. Traditionally, research has not been an expectation of the position nor has it been encouraged or supported (Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991). However, four articles and minutes from the Northwest Field Coordinators Consortium, which included both Canadian and American field education coordinators, and minutes from a CASWE, Field Education Coordinators’ meeting were located that give specific consideration to the field education coordinator role. Within these articles aspects such as, how field education coordinators handle personal student information during the field placement process (Alperin, 1989); critical role dilemmas encountered by field education coordinators (Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991; Jones, 1984); and staffing patterns for the position (Morrow & Fogel, 2002) were explored. Each of these aspects provides insight into the location of field education within academia, and the context in which field coordinators practice, which



have implications for their experience and approach to addressing student professional suitability concerns.

For example, the first study (Alperin, 1989) conducted by a field education coordinator titled *Confidentiality and the BSW Field Work Placement Process* relates directly to the gatekeeping practices of individuals in this role although the aspect of gatekeeping is not specifically acknowledged in the article. Within this study, 347 field education coordinators were surveyed in regards to their information sharing practices during the field placement process. The findings indicated the majority of field education coordinators had no definite policy; rather, they treated each situation individually, attempting to balance the rights of the students, the liabilities of the agencies and responsibilities to the clients. A range of student health and wellness, disability, and addictions issues were also noted as challenging factors within the placement process. This research highlights the complexity of assessing professional suitability; deciding when, where and whether to place students in specific settings, and the complexities of knowing what, and when to share confidential student information with the practice community. Thirty-eight percent of respondents who were in favour of sharing information noted the place of the Code of Ethics as it applied to their relationships with agencies and the liability the agencies assumed by accepting students placed with them. One-third of the respondents indicated their programs shared personal information; two-thirds indicated their programs did not share such data. Alperin's research highlights the multiple roles and responsibilities of field education coordinators in attempting to mediate the relationships between the school, the student, and the agency, and emphasizes the need for ethically sensitive practice. However, with respect to Tam's suitability scale referenced earlier, Tam and Coleman suggest:

Potential usage [of the scale] might include a measure at the time students request field placements. At the interview preceding field placement, field education coordinators or

directors might ask students to provide names of referees, who could comment on the students' professional suitability by filling the professional suitability scale along with their letters of reference. Field education coordinators or directors might use such findings from the professional suitability scale to determine students' readiness for field placement or to use such information as a baseline for students to look into what areas they need to work on more during their field placement. (2009, p. 60)

Perhaps information gleaned from the professional suitability scale could remove some of the challenges in deciphering what student information to share or conceal from field placement agencies, and field instructors during the placement process. Likewise, it could remove some of the perceived subjectivity in making assessments of suitability. However, as acknowledged by the authors, this tool requires further strengthening and research before formal adoption is considered. On the other hand, in my judgement the scale should not be the sole measure of suitability.

In the second article, *Square Peg, Round Hole: The Dilemma of the Undergraduate Social Work Field Coordinator*, authored by a clinical social worker, Jones (1984) also addresses critical dilemmas faced by field coordinators in professional baccalaureate social work programs in the US. While this article is dated and relates to the US context in which the place of BSW programs is substantially different than that of the Canadian context, there are a number of applicable assertions made with respect to the positioning of field within academia, and the experience of field coordinators. Moreover, there are a number of interesting parallels to past and current issues within social work field education in Canada. For example, concern was expressed for the "lack of recognition by academic executives of the administrative-coordinative-educative performance expectations" (p. 45) of the field coordinator position which has often been a concern noted by many coordinators in Canada.

According to Jones, field coordinators are presented with a two-pronged dilemma consisting of identity confusion, and the different interpretations of the coordinator's role. The problem of role definition arising from the lack of role complementarity and the divergence of expectations between academic administrators and social work educators brings about conflict for field education coordinators. Factors contributing to this dilemma, according to Jones are the diversity of field instruction patterns (single university department with a relative small number of students, or multi-site distance placements with a large student body) which field coordinators perform, and the time allotment required and provided to each of these situations. Jones points to a direct role for the Council on Social Work Education to provide guidelines for specific organizational patterns for BSW programs within accreditation standards. Coincidentally Canadian field education coordinators have recently been lobbying for similar changes to accreditation standards in Canada regarding the role of field education coordinators (Canadian Association for Social Work Education, Annual Report, 2007-08). The struggle for sufficient recognition and resource allocation for field coordination has been a long standing concern of field coordinators in Canada and the US, and Jones' statement below applies just as much today as when it was written.

Many of the barriers to resolving the field coordinator's predicament stem from the traditions and organizational patterns of academia. Until such time as the profession can arrive at an acceptable definition of the educational functions of field coordination, there is little likelihood that the post will be viewed by academic administrators as anything beyond "another" faculty position. (1984, p. 46)

On the other hand, the literature reflects a generally uniform view of the field coordinator as both administrator and educator. They are also viewed as placement arrangers, consultants or liaisons to field agencies, and as public relations directors and trouble-shooters (Fellin, 1982), as well as having many other responsibilities of a coordinative and supportive

nature. “Obviously the field coordinator wears a robe of many colors, too often perceived by others as a monochromatic hue” (Jones, 1984, p. 48). While the role and experience of field coordinators in BSW programs in the US is directly impacted by the lack of recognition and legitimization of the BSW degree over the MSW degree, there are a number of similarities with the Canadian context that warrant consideration. For example, it has been my experience that given the high value of the PhD in academia, individuals without this credential, such as field education coordinators, are often not afforded equal respect or value within the academy in subtle and explicit ways. Rhodes, Ward, Ligon and Priddy (1999) have also noted that the devaluation of field directors is one of a list of threats to quality field education programs. Furthermore, it has often been my experience that colleagues perceive that field education coordinators do not teach, they just place the students, and this contributes to the devaluation of the role in the context of academia. This, in addition to demands on coordinators that prevent or curtail their research and publication efforts may place them in the ranks of intermediate administrators. As acknowledged by Jones, often, little importance has been attached to the multitude of activities required by field coordination, and evaluative criteria focusing on scholarly achievement and teaching may challenge their promotion and tenure success.

Role strain and dual role functions may create conflicts regarding delineation of functions, loyalties and the establishment of priorities (Jones, 1984).

For example, the field coordinator working as a consultant and liaison must maintain allegiance both to the sponsoring educational program and to the professional practice, ethics, and services of the agencies and their clientele. In this unmistakably unique position, role strain can develop because traditional academic standards make little, if any, allowance for the demands and pressures of the multifaceted imperatives of good field coordination. It is an excellent example of the absence of role complementarity and may

easily result in an increasingly ineffective field component and a lowering of the quality of the entire program. (Jones, p. 48)

Jones establishes a further relationship between the quality of graduates and the role played by the field coordinator in his statement that “ultimately, the resolution of the difficulties faced by the undergraduate field coordinator lies in the profession’s ability to make operative the reforms suggested here. Only then can we justly postulate that each and every BSW graduate is genuinely an entry-level professional” (p. 50). Jones recommends that the role definitions and responsibilities of field education coordinators set out by the Council on Social Work Education be clarified and broadly distributed to program directors, social work faculty, practitioners, and non-social work administrators.

This article provides important insights into the difficulties faced by undergraduate field education coordinators in the US. As noted, field education coordinators in Canada have and continue to experience many of the same difficulties. While accreditation standards related to field education have evolved both in the US and Canada, there continues to be confusion around the role and status of the field education coordinator position. It is important to consider how the perception of the role, and role strain and dual role functions outlined by Jones impacts the experience and approach of field education coordinators to addressing student professional suitability concerns.

Hawthorne and Holtzman, both previous field education coordinators, echo many of the same concerns as Jones in their article *Directors of Field Education: Critical Role Dilemmas* (1991). Their review of the literature highlights further aspects impacting the role. For example, some early literature pertaining to field education emphasized that the activities of the field education coordinator relate to the way a school defines and structures its own field program. For example, whether the field program is seen as a central and integral part of the curriculum or as an appendage requiring limited status and support is of important consideration

(Schutz Gordon, 1982). Jenkins and Sheafor's 1982 study reaffirmed the significance of this range of definitions and perceptions for the role, position and tasks of the field education coordinator. "Unquestionably one of the most taxing jobs in social work education is that of field director or coordinator" (Jenkins & Sheafor, p. 10). Hawthorne and Holtzman note that the "overriding quandary about the priority allocation and intermeshing of the administrative and educational functions" has been examined in a number of studies (p. 322). In addition, the 1984 Skolnik survey data reflected "an almost bewildering array regarding rank, title, tenure, background, and duration" (Hawthorne & Holtzman, p. 322). The 1984 Holtzman pilot study of New York field education coordinators also explored the implications of the preponderance of female field education coordinators for status and advancement.

It is acknowledged that field coordinators carry "responsibility for the interface between the school and social work agencies; this involves visibility, communication, interpretation and linkage" (Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991, p. 320). The educational and administrative responsibilities that coordinators carry for the field component of the student's learning experience are stressed, and the question of whether this is perceived as an educational or administrative position is raised. It is the authors' hypothesis that field education coordinators initially identify as educators, but this perception is challenged as the position becomes increasingly administrative. They outline four different areas where there are significant implications to this contradiction: the effect on status; effect on job satisfaction; the need for support systems; and the potential for turnover and burn-out. This situation is intensified by current educational pressures such as dealing with changing student and client needs, and administrative pressures to satisfy accountability demands (Hawthorne & Holtzman).

The authors emphasize the importance of the role and its pivotal position, both in the social work program and in the professional community, and they stress the need for more information, understanding and study of the role of field education coordinator. As part of

fulfilling this need they undertook a study to ascertain basic current data about the role, which included the following four major areas: 1) allocation of time and tasks; 2) kinds and degrees of satisfactions and dissatisfactions; 3) available and desired support systems; and 4) patterns and predictions for the future of the position. A limited survey of schools in two specific areas of the west and east coast of the US was undertaken. The research questionnaire was sent to the field education coordinators of 8 west coast and 9 east coast schools of social work, and responses were received from 15 of the schools. Although there were similarities and differences between the east and west coast schools within the findings, three special characteristics of the role were thought to merit serious attention: duality, centrality, and sensitivity.

The special characteristic of *duality* reflects the broad variety of tasks, functions and responsibilities of the field education coordinator, and the blend of education and administration involved in the spectrum of duties. “This unique education-administrative blend underscores the dual nature of the role and its inherent dilemma which, in turn, affects job image, job satisfaction and job security” (Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991, p. 326). The *centrality* characteristic reflects how the position is central in its interface with faculty, agencies, other educational or professional institutions, and with the community. The findings also reinforce the key role of the field education coordinator in facilitating the student’s professional education, particularly preparation for practice. “In effect, the field director may be likened to the hub of a wheel which interacts significantly with all the ‘spokes’ comprising the social work educational experience” (p. 326). The third characteristic of the position is its *sensitivity*. The role of the field education coordinator “is neither insulated, bounded, or static. On the contrary, it is particularly sensitive and vulnerable to changes in the school and professional environments, especially expectations and resources” (p.326). Indeed, the authors note that there seems to be an inverse correlation between these two in that the more limited the available

resources, the greater the expectation of field education. These three qualities are thought to be closely interrelated to one another as well as with assumptions about future needs.

Most of the respondents express strong commitment to the role as well as appreciation of its significance. At the same time, there is consensus and concern about the obstacles impeding the role fulfillment: 1) the need for more resources (e.g., financial, material, personnel, time); 2) the need for more support (e.g., from school administration, academic faculty, professional peers); and 3) the need for more recognition (e.g., status, rank, tenure, advancement opportunities). (p. 326)

Findings of the survey validate the authors' hypothesis regarding "the ambiguity and dynamic tension between the educational and administrative natures" of the field education coordinator's role (pp. 326-327) and also reinforce the importance of this study.

Minutes of the Northwest Field Coordinators Consortium, which consisted of field coordinators from the US and Canada, reflect some of the same concerns noted above regarding the status of field education (February 15, 1996). For example, during one particular meeting a field coordinator from the US gave a presentation on the latest developments of the CSWE (Council of Social Work Education) Field Commission that addressed the need for continued advocacy for recognition, status, and support of field educators and directors; and the need to review the status and position of field coordinators at various schools, which included issues related to tenure versus non-tenured, faculty versus staff, benefits, expectations of field coordinators, value of position by deans and directors, and potential for promotion. The recognition of field as a vital part of curriculum was also discussed and members stressed the need to support field as equal as or more important than academic aspects. Similarly minutes of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education, Field Education Coordinators' meeting reflects the same theme (May 1998). During this meeting Laurie Macdonald (field education



coordinator) reported on her research regarding the role and responsibilities of field coordinators and directors across the country.

Preliminary results indicate that the role and responsibilities of field coordinators vary dramatically across the country. Particularly concerns were raised with regard to increasing work demands placed on field coordinators and the lack of support and recognition within the university.

A number of themes emerged from the discussion which included the importance of field coordinators advocating for themselves; providing the Accreditation Board with guidelines regarding the kind of support they required; the need to advocate that the position be full-time and permanent (tenure equivalency); that an academic component continue to be part of the field; that they recast their role in educational terms (use language to reflect this, i.e., ‘teaching’ rather than ‘orienting’); and that they develop a generic ideal job description.

Likewise, the 2002 Morrow and Fogel national survey of 418 accredited undergraduate and graduate social work programs in the US appears to bear out many of the points, positions, and basic hypotheses of the previous authors. For example, findings of their survey research into staffing patterns for field education coordinator positions in social work education indicate that nearly half of the programs surveyed had experienced field education coordinator turnover within the past five years, and ten percent had field education coordinator vacancies in 1998-99. Data also indicated that the majority of field education coordinators held the Master of Social Work as their highest degree; the majority held tenure-track positions; and had significant professional practice experience. Other than the finding related to tenure-track status, all the remaining findings reinforce Jones and Hawthorne and Holtzman’s observations.

These four articles and the minutes outline many of the challenges encountered by field education coordinators including the lack of recognition and status for the position; identity confusion and different interpretations of the position resulting in a divergence of expectations;

diversity of field instruction patterns and time allotment required and provided; role strain and dual role activities resulting in the “overriding quandary about the priority allocation and intermeshing of the administrative and educational functions” (Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991, p. 322); the bewildering array of title, rank, tenure, background, and duration (Skolnik, 1985, cited in Hawthorne & Holtzman); the experience of the position as bringing about role confusion; the effect on status and job satisfaction; the need for support systems; and the potential for turnover and burn-out; changing student and client needs; the place of the *Code of Ethics* in information sharing practices; administrative pressures to satisfy accountability demands; and the three special characteristics of the role that include duality, centrality, and sensitivity.

### **Methods Employed for Gatekeeping Research**

Some of the research studies on gatekeeping are prescriptive, providing practical guidance on gatekeeping methods, while others are more exploratory in nature. A range of methods have been employed in gatekeeping research in social work education, including: survey methods administered to social work programs, field instructors, faculty liaisons, students, and field education coordinators (Alperin, 1989; Barlow & Coleman, 2004; Gibbs, 1994; Hartman & Wills, 1991; Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991; Kilpatrick & Holland, 1993; Kilpatrick, Turner & Holland, 1994; Ligon & Ward, 2005; Miller & Koerin, 1998; Morrow & Fogel, 2002; Tam, 2004); focus group and follow-up interviews with field instructors (LaFrance, Gray & Herbert, 2004); literature reviews (Chalmers & Twigg, 2007; Crisp & Green Lister, 2002; Mathews, Weinger & Wijnberg, 1997; Redmond & Bright, 2007; Taylor, 2000; Younes, 1998); analysis of direct gatekeeping practices in social work programs (Chalmers & Twigg, 2007; Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Jenkins, Moore & Dietz, 1996; Moore & Urwin, 1991); content analysis of personal statements (Regehr et al; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002); analysis of faculty admissions ratings and student performance (Fortune, 2003); analysis of admission assessment tools (GlenMaye & Oakes); case analysis (Moore, Dietz & Jenkins, 1998); study of screening

practices of BSW programs (Gibbs, 1994b); case examples for field assessment tool (Furman, Jackson, Downey, & Siez, 2004); analysis of gatekeeping interviews (Jenkins, Moore & Dietz, 1996); analysis of vignettes and Codes (Strom-Gottfried, 2006); study of longitudinal data (Reynolds, 2004; Ryan et al, 2006); analysis of proceedings from conference discussions and meetings with field instructors and field education coordinators (Wayne et al, 2006; Furness & Gilligan, 2004); and analysis of relevant court cases (Armstrong, 2006; Birnie-Lefcovitch, 2006; Cole, 1991; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Redmond & Bright, 2007).

### **Summary and Contributions of this Study**

The literature review provided the following valuable insights for this study. The duty of educators to be gatekeepers for the profession is reinforced as an ongoing seemingly simple, but complex issue. The predictive validity of current admissions criteria is questionable (Kropf, 2000); very few students are terminated; thus gatekeeping often falls to the field. Emphasis for gatekeeping was placed on field instructors in particular, as well as faculty liaisons. The literature provides background and context for the study; insights into how others struggle with the gatekeeping role; what has been effective and what has been problematic; the place of field within this context; the role and position of the field education coordinator in some universities; and demonstrates how and where field education coordinators provide leadership.

Given the questions left unanswered by previous studies, the role of the practicum in comprehensive gatekeeping efforts needs to be discussed and researched further.

Social work educators are anxious to address issues related to the student-at-risk of failing in the practicum. Unfortunately, both research and dissemination of information about the problem are sparse. This has led field instructors, field liaisons and field directors to conclude that they are working in isolation without the benefit of shared experience or research. (Coleman, Collins & Aikins, 1995, p. 256)

While the gatekeeping efforts of field instructors and faculty liaisons have been explored in the literature, the same cannot be said of field education coordinators. This suggests social work education will benefit from research into understanding the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability. Moreover, somewhat similar to the work of Tam (2004) which examined field instructors' experiences of and attitudes toward gatekeeping, it is important we understand how field education coordinators fulfill their obligation as gatekeepers; the role they play in assisting others to fulfill this obligation; and how they respond to the ethical issues they encounter in their practice as educational leaders. Royse argues "we need more research on ethical dilemmas and ethical decision making" (2000, p. 33).

Although much attention has been directed toward developing theories of ethical choice, surprisingly, little is known about how practitioners respond to moral and ethical issues, how they understand and cope with aspects of their work, and what resources are used or needed for improving performance in this area" (Holland & Kilpatrick, 1991, p. 138).

There is a need to clarify the nature and objectives of gatekeeping responsibilities, and the means by which those responsibilities are best addressed within social work education. Given the complexity of this task, it will require a collaborative effort by all those working in the field, and possibly their clients as well (Charles, et al, 2006). This collaborative effort is more likely to succeed if it is informed by a detailed appreciation of how those currently playing gatekeeping roles understand and fulfill those roles. In particular, we need to know what they are doing that they have reason to believe should be recognized as good practice and where they believe they need further support (i.e., education, legislation and resources). Furthermore, given the central role played by field education coordinators, and the relative lack of research pertaining to this, it makes sense to invite them to share their experiences and insights. Moreover, given that gatekeeping is an ethical responsibility, and the challenge of fulfilling that responsibility is to balance a variety of distinct considerations, it makes sense that one focus of

the inquiry is on how field education coordinators understand and respond to such considerations in their practice. This study addresses this lack of knowledge.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*The literature review has a crucial role in research. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995, p. 28) 'a thoughtful and insightful discussion of the literature builds a logical framework for the research that sets it within a tradition of inquiry and a context of related studies'. In other words, it provides a background and context of the study. It also assists the researcher in understanding the problem and its context.*

(Williamson, 2002, p. 62)

#### Research Design

The literature review was an important component of the research process because it provided a comprehensive account of gatekeeping research within social work education; highlighted the pivotal location of field education coordinators; and the lack of research and information pertaining to their experiences. This contributed to the refinement of the research question, *what is the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability?* The question relates directly to the description of the problem outlined in chapter one, and addresses many of the concerns and gaps noted in the literature. The process for arriving at the research question and the research design was *iterative* or non-linear, meaning that the various elements in the research were interwoven, with the development of one influencing decisions about the others (Williamson, 2002). For example, the process moved back and forth through the early stages of development from consideration of early reflections and experiences within field coordination; to writing about these experiences; to arrival at preliminary research questions; to completing a portfolio, guide, and presentation during comprehensive exams on the subject within the Doctor of Education program; to considering my practice in a new light; to further refinement of preliminary research questions, to further consideration of practice experience; to completing the literature review; to further reflections; to finalizing the development of the research question. At each stage, the cycle

resulted in a review of my practice in light of new knowledge and information with further refinement of the research question.

The study was guided by mixed methods research methodology, which is congruent with a pragmatic worldview (Creswell, 2009; Tashakkori & Teddle, 2003). As Creswell notes, pragmatism originates from the work of philosophers, Mead, Dewey, Peirce, James, and gives rise to a specific orientation to research. “There is concern with applications – what works – and solutions to problems (Patton, 1990). Instead of focusing on methods, researchers emphasize the research problem and use all approaches available to understand the problem” (Creswell, p.10).

Mixed methods research is an approach to inquiry that combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative forms. It involves philosophical assumptions, the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches, and the mixing of both approaches in a study. Thus, it is more than simply collecting and analyzing both kinds of data; it also involves the use of both approaches in tandem so that the overall strength of the study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative research. (Creswell & Plano Clark, cited in Creswell, 2009, p.4)

According to Creswell and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003), mixed methods research has gained legitimacy and popularity within the social and human sciences during the past few decades. There are also a number of journals actively supporting this form of inquiry, such as the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. The literature review also provided support for the use of both focus group and survey methods. For example, according to much of the literature, survey (Alperin, 1989; Barlow & Coleman, 2004; Gibbs, 1994; Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991; Kilpatrick & Holland, 1993; Kilpatrick, Turner & Holland, 1994; Ligon & Ward, 2005; Miller & Koerin, 1998; Morrow & Fogel, 2002; Tam, 2004) and focus group methods (LaFrance et al, 2004) have been employed in a number of gatekeeping studies. The literature also served to

inform the approach and design for both the focus group interview and survey questionnaire with respect to the inclusion and framing of specific questions to explore themes from the literature, and to address noted gaps and disparities.

While there is some disagreement and reservation expressed amongst researchers as to the merits of combining of these methods, and these disagreements largely center on the paradigmatic foundations or differing philosophical foundations of qualitative and quantitative research methodology (Sutton, 1993; Bradley & Sutton, 1993, cited in Williamson, 2002), I am more persuaded by the positions of authors such as Ford (1987) who believe that:

it is possible for researchers to use either quantitative or qualitative approaches, or both, according to the research problem or problems, under consideration. He argues a strong case for integration because the use of different kinds of thinking involved in positivist and interpretivist approaches make a full understanding of topics more likely. (cited in Williamson, p.34)

A mixed methods design was employed in order to utilize the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research. For example, the focus group method was chosen to provide a detailed understanding of the experience of field education coordinators, and the descriptive survey method was designed to complement this by providing a broader, large-scale picture of the phenomenon.

A social survey is a method of gathering information about a specified group of people (a 'population') by asking them questions... A social survey, therefore, can be defined as *a technique for gathering statistical information about the attributes, attitudes or actions of a population by administering standardized questions to some or all of its members.* (Buckingham & Saunders, 2004, pp. 12-13).

A descriptive survey is a powerful research tool used to try to discover 'facts' about a population. In this case, the questionnaire gathered both qualitative and quantitative data



pertaining to the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability. There is an important distinction between descriptive and analytical surveys, for it was not the intent of this study to find evidence about some of the likely 'causes' of respondent's behaviour or attitudes, as would be the aim of an analytical survey or explanatory research. Thus, the survey was primarily concerned with information gathering, with enumerating and describing, and did not provide a sophisticated statistical analysis or cross tabulation of data. The primary aim of the study was to explore the nature of the experiences of respondents to addressing student professional suitability, and the approaches they employ in addressing such concerns. This has been accomplished through the mixed methods approach, the facilitation of the focus group, and careful design and administration of the survey questionnaire, as well as the analysis of the data.

A sequential exploratory design was employed, with data collection occurring in two phases. "Sequential mixed methods procedures are those in which the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand on the findings of one method with another method" (Creswell, 2009, p. 234). In this case, the intent was to employ the survey questionnaire method to expand on the focus group findings. Phase one consisted of the facilitation of the focus group (qualitative method), followed by phase two, the administration of the survey questionnaire (quantitative and qualitative method). The intent of phase one was also to explore the topic in detail to expand my understanding of the perspectives of respondents, and to provide guidance for the development of the survey questionnaire. Equal weight or priority is given to both methods. The study is exploratory in nature, and seeks to explore, understand and describe the experiences of field education coordinators. "Exploratory research (sometimes termed formulative research) is aimed at formulating more precise questions that future research can answer. It is used in the theory-building stage of research..." (Shanks, Rouse, & Arnott, cited in Williamson, 2002, p.35). Thus, the study does not test any particular theory or perspective of professional suitability and

presents descriptive research within an inductive style of reasoning. Inductive reasoning “begins with intense investigation of a particular instance or instances, and concludes with general statements or principles” (Williamson, p. 332).

### **Role of the Researcher**

My past experiences have provided background data through which readers can better understand the topic, the respondents, the setting, and my interpretation of the data. Although I am not a participant in the study, I am also not an ‘objective’ outsider studying the phenomenon. Accordingly, it has been critical to remain reflexive about how my experiences, beliefs, and principles related to addressing professional suitability, as noted in chapter one, influence my interpretation of the findings. On the one hand, I believe that drawing upon my personal and professional experience has added value at every stage of the inquiry. On the other hand, as I will indicate below, my research design, procedures for making sense of the data, and attention to considerations of reliability and validity are intended to ensure that I do not simply find what I am looking for in the focus group and survey data.

### **Data Collection Methods**

#### ***Focus Group***

Inclusion of narratives of experience-near (Sherman & Reid, 1994) the study (i.e., narratives of the firsthand experiences of field education coordinators) provides *thick description* “capturing the meanings and experiences that have occurred in a problematic situation; reports meanings, intentions, history, biography, and relevant relational, interactional, and situational processes in a rich, dense, detailed manner; creates the conditions for interpretation and understanding; contrasted to thin description, which is factual” (p. 496).

Reflecting a shift away from the logical-experimental social science, which has become the accepted “normal” method of study, the human science perspective is founded on experience-near study of the presently remembered personal or social past, experienced

present, and anticipated future. Human science inquiry highlights study of personal and social life within the context of discourse between teller and listener (including oneself as listener), situated within a particular time and culture. (Cohler, 1994, p. 163)

Thus, the narrative accounts from the focus group interview with social work field education coordinators/directors from across Canada, provided a means of gaining insight and knowledge pertaining to the opinions, perceptions, and feelings of participants in their own terms and frameworks of understanding. According to Krueger (1994), “a focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment ... conducted with approximately 7 to 10 people by a skilled interviewer” (cited in Williamson, 2002, p. 251). This method was well suited to the needs of this study.

Given the vast geographical distance between participants it would normally be very difficult to bring field education coordinators together for a face-to-face focus group discussion. Fortunately, however, such a meeting was made possible by a national field education conference which many coordinators attended. Prior to the conference, notice of the upcoming focus group was posted on the national field education coordinator/directors’ list-serve inviting all coordinators attending the conference to participate. The posting informed potential participants that the focus group would explore the aspect of gatekeeping and educational leadership in field coordination. This was followed by a personalized recruitment and information letter sent to individuals who expressed an interest in participating in the focus group (refer to Appendix C). The focus group was one and a half hours long, and was held in a private room away from conference proceedings outside of the main conference schedule. Other than the requirement of being a field education coordinator, no specific criteria were established for participation. Eight current field education coordinators voluntarily agreed to participate in the focus group. Participants were from four provinces in Western, Central, and Atlantic

Canada. The majority of the participants were from undergraduate programs, although a few also had responsibilities for graduate programs. There was also representation from both large and small universities and programs with the number of placements ranging from 80 to more than 250 placements per year, as well as from distance and face-to-face programs. All the participants were female with field coordination experience ranging from 1 to more than 15 years.

The focus group interview had two purposes: (1) to explore notions of gatekeeping in social work field education; and (2) to explore the extent to which these notions impacted the experience of field education coordinators as educational leaders. It was semi-structured and utilized an interview guide with seven open-ended questions (refer to Appendix E). However, the conversation took on a life of its own, and it was not necessary to ask all the questions listed as the most important aspects of the guide naturally evolved within the discussion. Participants were asked to define what gatekeeping meant to them, and how they experienced and responded to such expectations in their practice. The semi-structured framework allowed me, as the moderator, to follow up on themes and specific comments provided by the participants during the discussion. My experience in interviewing and moderating previous focus groups for research enhanced my ability to facilitate the discussion and minimized influencing the group's reactions or creating bias. The discussion greatly aided in uncovering important aspects of the research question. Respondents were very passionate and candid about the subject, emphasizing its importance as a critical issue of concern to their practice. The responses affirmed the legitimacy of the study as all the respondents agreed that the issue of professional suitability in social work is a valid and crucial area of study. The focus group specifically provided an opportunity to learn how participants spoke about gatekeeping and their perceptions and beliefs about this role.

## *Survey Questionnaire*

The information and insights gleaned from both the literature review and the focus group discussion greatly enhanced the design of the descriptive survey. “The main purpose of a descriptive survey is to describe a particular phenomenon; its current situation, its properties and conditions, that is, to answer ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, and ‘where’ (rather than ‘how’ or ‘why’) questions about it” (Williamson, 2002, p.91). This method was well suited to the type of research question posed and the depth of information sought related to the question. Administration of a survey provided a logical next step in the research design given the small number of participants in the focus group, and the time, geographical, and financial constraints of interviewing all coordinators. The relative small number (n=82) of field education coordinators also made it feasible to administer a national web-based survey inviting all current and a number of former coordinators in the sample. A national survey provided a valuable means of gaining understanding and insight into what the experience and approach of field education coordinators from across Canada is in addressing student professional suitability and to build on the findings from the focus group. The comprehensive nature of the data obtained from the survey complemented the more detailed picture obtained from the focus group data. A web-based format for the survey was chosen for a number of reasons, including but not limited to the following considerations:

1. All field education coordinators have access to, and are proficient in the use of computers;
2. To provide for the ease in completing and returning the survey;
3. To minimize the chance of questionnaires being misplaced, lost or forgotten about, resulting in a higher return rate;
4. To minimize the need to decipher respondents’ handwriting, leading to less errors and omissions, resulting in greater reliability of the data, and;
5. To provide for greater ease of analysis.

The focus group data were carefully analyzed in order to incorporate the concerns, language, and opinions of participants within the survey design; as well as to avoid leading or triggering negative reactions resulting in response errors or low survey completion rates. For example, the term ‘gatekeeping’ was not referenced within the survey questionnaire in order to avoid negatively triggering or leading respondents. Further detail regarding the analysis of the focus group data will be provided in the next section of this chapter. The goal of the survey questionnaire was to uncover as much as possible about the research question. It was designed to gain insight into the following topics, which all have bearing on the experience and approach of field education coordinators to addressing professional suitability concerns:

1. Role of the field education coordinator - How do coordinators perceive their responsibility to address concerns, and how much of this perception reflects the expectations that others have of them?
2. Field education coordinators’ fulfillment of gatekeeping role - How well do they believe they are fulfilling their gatekeeping responsibilities? What measures are they employing? Do they experience particular challenges and pressures?
3. Knowledge and skills - What knowledge and skills do they draw on when addressing professional suitability concerns?
4. Further skills and knowledge required - What education and training requirements do they identify as being needed to assist them in this role?
5. Criteria for determining professional suitability – How do field education coordinators understand professional suitability? What behaviours or personal qualities qualify as indications that someone is not professionally suitable? How does this understanding impact their experience and approach?
6. Frequency, prevalence and types of concerns - How frequently do field education coordinators need to address concerns? What impact is this having on field education coordinators?
7. Program and professions’ fulfillment of the gatekeeping role - How well do they believe programs and the profession as a whole are fulfilling their gatekeeping responsibilities? How is this impacting their experience?
8. Changes required in institutional and professional context - What changes in their institutional and professional contexts would improve their ability to address concerns and what is the success of the academic program and the field in gatekeeping?

A decision was made to utilize Zoomerang Online Surveys to create and deploy the survey. I had received an introductory orientation to this tool during a recent NVivo workshop and had received positive feedback regarding this tool from colleagues who had utilized it for their research. The online and in real-time, professionally designed templates, tutorials, and intuitive survey wizard interface, survey logic (page skipping), cross-tabulation, filters, charting, scheduling, ability to customize the survey with images, logos and links, features such as online results analysis with options for exporting to Excel, PowerPoint, or as a pdf file, unlimited questions and respondents, option of sending the survey to respondents or posting it to a website, option for private and shared results, and the reasonable membership fee made it appealing to employ the Zoomerang Pro option.

Considerable time was spent developing the standardized questions, introductory screen, and learning the various features of the online survey tool (survey logic). After much examination, the decision was made to utilize two surveys (one for former, and one for current field education coordinators) due to the challenges of incorporating both present and past tense questions within one survey. Extensive work was undertaken completing the two surveys. For example, great consideration was directed to the visual layout and design of the self-administered web survey with the awareness of how this might affect respondents (Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2009). Visual design concepts of colour, contrast, location, and flow were considered with respect to the appeal for respondents. For example, the demographics questions were located at the end the survey, and questions were written in a manner that would result in receiving a reasonable response rate.

An amendment to the existing certificate of approval had been submitted to the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board while development of the survey was underway. Approval was subsequently received, with a request to revise the recruitment letter to inform potential respondents of the location of the servers in the United States, and of the possibility that their

response data could be subject to the US Patriot Act. It became apparent at this time that it was necessary to forego employing Zoomerang Online Surveys, and to locate a Canadian company to host the survey in order to remove this potential barrier to respondents completing the survey. Unfortunately, I neglected to consider the location of the company server, and the resulting implications for security of the data. Furthermore, upon seeking additional information from Zoomerang, I was informed that, even if I requested the data from the study be deleted once the research was complete, that the data would be retained on their server for an unspecified amount of time.

Consequently, after receiving this information I began searching for a Canadian company, and was referred to Nooro Online Research (<http://www.nooro.com/>). The company has been an independent privately-owned Ontario company for over 13 years and has handled more than 700 online projects of varying scopes for clients in Canada, the United States, and around the world. Their primary servers are in Toronto, Ontario, with backup servers in Barrie, an hour north of Toronto. Therefore, the data would not leave Canada. All survey response data, and all copies of regular backups would be removed from the Nooro server once the analysis of survey results had been completed. Only the four staff of Nooro Online Research, and a certified translator (for the French language surveys only) and I would have access to raw data. The knowledge I gained developing the surveys through Zoomerang Online Surveys proved to be valuable in working with the staff at Nooro Online Research to develop the new survey.

A tailored design method was employed in order to build trust, and incentive for respondents to complete the survey. Each step in the process was carefully designed to encourage these aspects within the process of inviting respondents to complete the survey.

Tailored design involves using multiple motivational features in compatible and mutually supportive ways to encourage high quantity and quality of response to the surveyor's



request. It is developed from a social exchange perspective on human behavior, which suggests that respondent behavior is motivated by the return that behavior is expected to bring, and in fact, usually does bring, from others. It assumes that the likelihood of responding to a self-administered questionnaire, and doing so accurately, is greater when the respondents trust that the expected rewards will outweigh the anticipated costs of responding. (Dillman, et al, 2009, p. 16)

My background and interest as a former field education coordinator, current faculty member, and researcher was made apparent through the recruitment letter. Although no monetary incentives were provided, communication of valuing respondents' feedback, the importance of the topic and interest in the study provided sufficient incentive for respondents to participate in the study. All contact (mailed recruitment letters, survey invitation, and reminder emails) were personalized using the first name of the respondent, emails were also individualized without carbon or blind copying the group, the focus of the survey (field coordinator study) was included in the subject line of all email communication, and a specific email address (fldstudy@interchange.ubc.ca) was used as the contact email, and a 'thank you' message was also included at the end of the survey to express appreciation for respondents participation in the study. Prior to completing the survey, respondents were notified of the forthcoming survey in writing (personalized recruitment letter) of the background and purpose of the research, as well as my background as a former field education coordinator for five years, my interest in the topic, the approximate time required to complete the survey, how the results would be used, where they would be disseminated, information about the survey host company, and how their confidentiality would be protected (refer to Appendix H).

Care was taken in developing the survey to minimize bias, and maximize the value of responses. It was also critical that the survey questionnaire be visually appealing and user-friendly, and that the questions not appear too long or difficult to complete, or look amateurish

as this would directly impact the response rate (Royse, 2004). The following section headings were used within the survey to introduce respondents to specific topic areas and signal when topics were changing: Purpose of the Study, Specific Examples, Specific Professional Suitability Concerns, Professional Suitability Policy, Prevalence of Concerns, Role Expectations, Measures for Addressing Concerns, Criminal Record Checks, CASWE Accreditation Standards, Professional Development, Final Recommendations, and Demographics. Detailed demographic information was sought in order to develop profiles of individual respondents.

The survey questionnaire was pre-tested with four field education coordinators, and minor changes were incorporated before administering (refer to appendices F & G). The English version of the survey was deployed in early March 2009, followed by the French version a few weeks later. A licensed translator from the Society of Translators and Interpreters of British Columbia was employed to translate the survey and subsequent French responses. All respondents were given three weeks in which to complete the survey. Personalized follow-up emails were sent one and two weeks after forwarding the survey and an additional opportunity was given to complete the survey questionnaire after the three week deadline.

Eighty-two (67 current and 15 former) field education coordinators from 35 universities from across Canada were invited to complete the survey. The most current national coordinators' list and all university websites in Canada were consulted to generate a list of all current coordinators in Canada to include in the study. Of these 35 universities, 11 were located in Western Canada (6 British Columbia, 1 Alberta, 2 Manitoba, 2 Saskatchewan), 20 in Central Canada (12 Ontario, 8 Quebec), and 4 in Atlantic Canada (2 New Brunswick, 1 Nova Scotia, 1 Newfoundland). Email messages with individual survey links were sent to the 82 coordinators (74 English and 8 French). Five email messages bounced back, of these, all five were current, bringing the total number received by coordinators to 77 surveys (62 current and 15 former). Given that all current field education coordinators and a number of former coordinators were

included in the sample, representativeness and generalizability of the results was not a concern. Former coordinators whose contact information was posted on university websites and previous field education coordinator' lists were invited to participate.

### **Making Sense of the Data**

Focus group and survey data were analyzed to seek patterns that would shed light on the research question. "Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data" (Rice-Lively cited in Williamson, 2002, p.293). Various steps were taken to bring order, structure, and meaning to the focus group data in order to gain further insight into the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability. According to Royse, "because this is 'interpretive' research, there is no single cookbook approach to how the data ought to be sorted or analyzed" (2004, p. 242). Royse further states "there is no single way to go about analyzing a data set" (p. 275). Miller and Crabtree (1999, cited in Engel & Schutt, 2009) describe the process of qualitative data analysis involving as much "art" as science – as a "dance."

Interpretation is a complex and dynamic craft, with as much creative artistry as technical exactitude, and it requires an abundance of patient plodding, fortitude, and discipline. There are many changing rhythms; multiple steps; moments of jubilation, revelation, and exasperation... The dance of interpretation is a dance for two, but those two are often multiple and frequently changing, and there is always an audience, even if it is not always visible. Two dancers are the interpreters and the texts. (Miller & Crabtree, cited in Engel & Schutt, p. 348)

The process of data analysis alternated between immersion in the text to identifying meanings and editing the text to create categories and codes. The process involved three different modes of reading the text: 1) reading the text *literally*, the focus was on its literal content and form, 2) reading the text *reflexively*, the focus was on how my orientation shaped my interpretations and

focus, and 3) reading the text *interpretively*, I then began to construct my own interpretation of the meaning of the text (Engel & Schutt, 2009). “In this way, analyzing text involves both inductive and deductive processes. The researcher generates concepts and linkages between them based on reading the text and also checks the text to see whether the concepts and interpretations are reflected in it” (Engel & Schutt, p. 349).

The process for organizing and preparing the focus group data for analysis proceeded in this fashion. The audio-recording was transcribed verbatim in order to honour the exact narrative of each of the respondents. I listened to the recording a few times in order to ensure that narratives were transcribed accurately. Each respondent was assigned a pseudonym to protect their anonymity and to track distinctions between respondents. At this stage, I read the transcript and listened to the recording a number of times, and wrote notes in the margins of the transcript and highlighted sections of text to begin to understand the underlying meaning. Specific consideration was given to respondents ‘notions’ of gatekeeping within the context of social work education, and the ‘impact’ of these notions on respondents’ practice as field education coordinators. With the research question in mind, specific consideration of the nature of the ‘experience’ and ‘approach’ to addressing student professional suitability were also given particular attention in analyzing the data. I considered the general ideas that respondents were sharing, the tone of the ideas, and the overall depth and credibility of the information. For example, with respect to notions of gatekeeping, word searches were undertaken to note the prevalence of recurring terms and concepts related to this aspect (such as responsibility, challenge, difficulty, frustration, dilemma and others) and a coding structure began to emerge.

To determine the level of consistency of coding and preliminary development of themes, I asked a peer to review the transcript (with all identifiers removed) to develop a list of preliminary codes and themes, without providing the codes and themes I had arrived at. This person’s coding structure closely resembled the one I had developed. Following this step, I

went back to the transcript and began to apply the coding structure in more detail using the computer to cut and paste sections of narrative that reflected the various codes. It was within this process that clear themes began to emerge. Once the analysis was complete, the findings were shared with focus group respondents and an opportunity was provided for them to comment and provide feedback as to the accuracy of the findings. Themes and general findings are presented in the next chapter.

Procedures for making sense of the survey data were somewhat different, given the presence of both text and numeric data (refer to Appendix J). Both forms of data were received in Excel format from Nooro Online Research. Respondents were assigned identification numbers within these data files. Text and numeric data were then copied into separate Excel spreadsheet files. The numeric Excel files were then cleaned and uploaded to MarketSight for analysis. MarketSight is a web-based research data analysis software application that provides a way to analyze survey results ([www.marketsight.com](http://www.marketsight.com)). Individual open and closed-ended text data were then copied into individual Excel files with corresponding identification numbers as file names. French text responses were translated to English and the same procedure as above was followed.

A similar process to that employed for the analysis of focus group data was followed with respect to the analysis of text data within the survey questionnaire. Once the numeric data were tabulated, this content was then entered into one file, along with the all text data within the framework of the questionnaire (refer to Appendix J). Survey findings are presented under the following five headings, 1) Gatekeeping Expectations of Coordinators and Approaches to Practices; 2) Frequency, Prevalence, and Types of Professional Suitability Concerns; 3) Criteria for Determining and Procedures for Addressing Professional Suitability; 4) Program and Professions' Fulfillment of Gatekeeping Role; and, 5) Changes Required in the Institutional and Professional Context. Each of these aspects is considered in terms of its relevance to the

experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability.

### **Reliability, Validity and Generalizability**

“Writers on mixed methods advocate for the use of validity procedures for both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998 cited in Creswell, 2009, p. 219). However, it is important to clarify that validity does not carry the same meaning in qualitative research as it does in quantitative research, nor is it a companion of reliability or generalizability. A number of authors note that establishing *trustworthiness* or *credibility* is analogous to establishing validity and reliability within qualitative research (Creswell, 2009; Royse, 2004; Sherman & Reid, 1994). The researcher employs certain procedures to check for accuracy to ensure *qualitative validity*, and employs an approach that is consistent across different researchers and projects to ensure *qualitative reliability* (Creswell). Likewise, within this study, various procedures were used throughout phase one (focus group method) of the data collection to check for the accuracy and credibility of the findings, and to maximize the trustworthiness or credibility of the findings.

A semi-structured interview guide was employed to allow respondents to articulate their specific concerns and needs, while also utilizing a short list of questions that would allow me, as the facilitator to follow up on leads provided by respondents. However, one must also be mindful of the potential pitfalls of the focus group method. For example the influence of group dynamics, facilitation, status of the facilitator and respondents, prior contact and relationships between the respondents and the facilitator, and between respondents could have influenced the content and communication patterns within the focus group discussion. For example, respondents may have been influenced by what others shared, and have been inhibited to share or may have acquiesced with others during the discussion. However, various strategies were employed to address these aspects. For example, careful facilitation of the discussion was

maintained to avoid influencing or injecting my own views within the process. It was important to maintain a neutral and unbiased demeanour, thus, the need to minimize my reactions to the discussion and maintain an awareness of my tone, affect, and body language. At the same time, I needed to direct the discussion in order to ensure the views of individual respondents were heard, and each respondent had an equal opportunity to speak.

The interview was also audio-taped for later transcription. As noted, the process for organizing and preparing the data for analysis proceeded in a thorough and careful fashion. *Intercoder agreement* was achieved, and *member checking* or checking for accuracy of the findings was conducted, as the findings were shared with respondents, and an opportunity was provided for respondents to comment on the findings (Creswell, 2009). The results of this stage of the research were also presented at a national conference, the conference abstract and Powerpoint presentation was shared with respondents, and a number of respondents attended the presentation (Robertson, 2007). Creswell also notes the *use of rich, thick description*, as is employed in the findings chapter, to convey the findings can also add to the validity of the findings.

On the other hand, it is necessary to consider other possible threats to the validity and reliability of the focus group method employed. For example, who participated and why? What were their impressions of the purpose of the interview? Were there particular motives for participating? Who did not participate and why? As noted, prior to the conference, notice of the upcoming focus group was posted on the national field education coordinator/directors' list-serve inviting all coordinators attending the conference to participate. The posting informed potential participants that the focus group would explore the aspect of gatekeeping and educational leadership in field coordination. This was followed by a personalized recruitment and information letter sent to individuals who expressed an interest in participating in the focus group (refer to Appendix C).

As for the sampling method, other than the requirement of being a field education coordinator, no specific criteria were established for participation. Subsequently, eight current field education coordinators voluntarily agreed to participate in the focus group. Participants were from four provinces in Western, Central, and Atlantic Canada. The majority of the participants were from undergraduate programs, although a few also had responsibilities for graduate programs. There was representation from both large and small universities and programs with the number of placements ranging from 80 to more than 250 placements per year, as well as from distance and face-to-face programs. All the participants were female with field coordination experience ranging from 1 to more than 15 years. Thus, while the questions regarding the motivation for participating in the focus group are worthy of consideration, reasonable geographical and program representativeness was achieved, which somewhat minimizes this concern.

Further adding to the validity of this study, is the comparison of the results of the use of more than one method of data collection which is referred to as *methods triangulation*. That is the “checking of the consistency of the findings by using different data-collection methods” (Williamson, 2002, p. 36). In other words, triangulation is “the use of two or more methods or techniques to investigate the same research question, or the collecting of ‘... information from several sources about the same event or behavior’ (Hittleman & Simon, 1992, cited in Williamson, p. 334). For example, different data sources (focus group and survey questionnaire) are examined to build a coherent justification for the findings. Generally the qualitative validity of the study was enhanced by employing these procedures to check for accuracy. Similarly, qualitative reliability was ensured by employing an approach that is consistent across different researchers and projects.

Equal attention was given to maximizing the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the survey questionnaire. With respect to the effect of sampling on the generalizability of the



study, all current and a number of former field education coordinators were invited to participate, therefore addressing the issue of *representativeness* as the sample reflects the population of field education coordinators. This also reduced the potential for nonresponse bias, which occurs when the people selected for surveys, who do not respond, are different from those who do respond.

Careful consideration was also given to the design of the survey questionnaire to minimize *measurement error* and increase the reliability and validity of the instrument (refer to Appendix I). “Reliability is achieved by using research instruments that produce the same results from the same conditions each time they are used” (Buckingham & Saunders, 2004, p. 72). Whereas, according to Williamson “validity in measurement refers to the extent to which a research instrument measures what it is designed to measure” (2002, p. 27). As noted, specific measures were taken in developing the content and sequencing of survey questions to minimize bias, and maximize the value of responses. The range and depth of questions was guided by the research question and influenced by my experience of the subject, and themes arising from the literature. Focus group findings also influenced the design of the survey questionnaire with respect to the content, range, and specific framing of questions.

An equal number of open and closed-ended questions were employed to elicit as much information as possible and avoid constraining the responses. The questions were designed to ensure they were clear and concise, and concepts and language were understood by respondents. They were also designed so as to avoid double-barrelled and leading questions, unavailable information, use of jargon and technical terms, and inflammatory or “loaded” terms. Royse (2004) notes that questions should be evaluated to avoid double-barrelled and leading questions, unavailable information, use of jargon and technical terms, insensitive language, inflammatory or “loaded” terms, mutually exclusive response choices, vague and ambiguous response terms, all-inclusive terms, negatively constructed items, and poor sequencing of questions.

Questions employing Likert scales were specifically constructed to ensure mutually exclusive response choices, and exhaustive response categories for particular questions. In this regard, the ‘other’ option was included in many of the questions to provide space to comment, as well as the ‘not applicable’ option to reduce the level of error, and ensure respondents were not limited by the structure of the questionnaire. Furthermore, the final question of the survey invited respondents to list and describe any considerations with respect to the topic of student professional suitability that had not been mentioned (refer to Appendix I). The survey was also pre-tested with four field education coordinators to ensure comprehensive testing of questions, and questions were revised accordingly (refer to Appendix G). Attention to such aspects was critical to reducing respondent and instrument errors, therefore increasing the reliability and validity of the instrument.

A coding book was also developed prior to deployment of the survey, to facilitate accuracy and uniformity in coding. The coding book included a name for each variable, a description of the variable, its location in the database, and the code assigned to it. The closed-ended responses were translated into numerical codes. For example, in the case of YES/NO questions, ‘Yes’ was assigned the code of 1, ‘No’ was assigned the code of 2, ‘Not Applicable’ was assigned the code of 998, and ‘Missing data’ was assigned the code of 999, and the same codes were used for all other YES/NO questions. “This is called pre-coding, the use of which can minimize the number of coding errors and increase reliability” (Williamson, 2002, p. 286).

Given the different categories (current, former, and new) of respondents, skip logic was implemented within the questionnaire to ensure that responses evolved logically. Given the different categories (current, former, and new) of respondents, conditional branching or “skip logic” was implemented within the questionnaire to ensure that responses evolved logically. Skip logic is a function used to skip survey respondents to other questions within a survey based on how they answer certain questions. This function allows respondents that respond differently

to questions to be routed to another sequence of questions. Respondents were given sufficient time and opportunity to complete the survey, and could contact myself or the survey designers with any questions related to the survey. The use of MarketSight to calculate the frequency distributions also decreased the possibility of calculation errors. Furthermore, similar to the focus group data, the unedited textual data provided by respondents in response to both closed and open-ended questions (presented in the findings chapter) adds to the validity of the findings.

A 70 percent response rate was achieved, with 54 of 77 respondents submitting survey responses. As illustrated in Table 1, current coordinators made up 72 percent (n=39) and former made up 28 percent (n=15) of all respondents, and responses were representative geographically. Although representation from Atlantic Canada appears low, given that there are fewer programs in this region, this level of participation is sufficient. The representation of French speaking coordinators is also noteworthy, and the gender demographic is consistent with the literature in that 91 percent of the 54 respondents identified as female.

**Table 1**

**Respondent Demographics of Submitted Surveys**

(n = 54)

<b><u>Status</u></b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Current	39	72
Former	15	28
<b><u>Region</u></b>		
Western Canada	25	46
Central Canada	24	44
Atlantic Canada	5	9
<b><u>Language Preference</u></b>		
English	48	89
French	6	11
<b><u>Gender</u></b>		
Male	5	9
Female	49	91

Table 2 provides a further breakdown of the survey response and completion rates. As illustrated below, 63 percent of all current coordinators, and 100 percent of all former coordinators responded to the survey. Furthermore, of the 70 percent who responded to the survey, 69 percent completed all questions, while the remainder completed to varying degrees. Of the 37 completed surveys, 26 were completed by *current* coordinators and 11 by *former* coordinators.

**Table 2**  
**Survey Response and Completion Rates**

(n = 77)

	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Responded</b>	<b>Completed</b>
Current	62	39 (63%)	26 (42% of total/67% of respondents)
Former	<u>15</u>	<u>15 (100%)</u>	<u>11</u> (73% of total/73% of respondents)
	77	54 (70 % response rate)	37 (48 % of total/69 % respondents)

Nevertheless, the number of partial completions merits consideration, as this brings into question how the remainder of respondents would have answered some of the questions, and could be considered to limit the generalizability of the study. As in this case, “it is possible, and quite likely, that the amount of nonresponse error within a single survey will differ across questions and question topics” (Groves cited in Dillman, et al, 2009, p. 63). On the other hand, the representativeness of the sample mitigates this somewhat. Measurement error or incidents when respondents’ answers are inaccurate or imprecise due to the wording of questions is also given consideration.

Furthermore, it is also important to acknowledge additional challenges to survey methods. According to Williamson (2002) there are several limitations of descriptive surveys. For example, one must consider *rival explanations* (threats to internal validity), it is difficult to

control for rival explanations and one must be very careful to qualify statements pertaining to findings. Another example involves the *accuracy of self-report data*; the honesty of reporting is sometimes questionable due to the tendency for people to present themselves in the most positive light. Lastly, a further limitation of the survey method could be attributed to the absence of a test-retest of the survey instrument, that is, the administering of the same survey with the same respondents. This was not feasible, given time constraints for conducting the research, as well as the length of the survey, and the extent of open-ended questions.

Findings from the focus group and survey data are outlined and summarized sequentially in the next chapter through the presentation of verbatim quotes related to particular themes, and through the presentation of frequency distributions associated with particular questions from the survey questionnaire.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

*In effect, the field director may be likened to the hub of a wheel which interacts significantly with all the “spokes” comprising the social work educational experience.*

Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991, p.326

The focus group and survey questionnaire findings reinforce the quote above and emphasize the central location of the field education coordinator position. Both sets of findings were analyzed with the research question in mind. The focus group specifically provided an opportunity to learn how respondents spoke about gatekeeping and their perceptions and beliefs about this role, in their own terms and frameworks of understanding, and provided a valuable means of gaining insight into their experiences, opinions, perceptions, and feelings regarding the topic. The information and insights gleaned from the focus group discussion greatly enhanced the design of the descriptive survey with respect to the content, language, and framing of particular survey questions. The survey data echoed and amplified many of the themes from the focus group, and both sources reinforce and extend themes from the literature. Much has been revealed regarding the research question by employing a mixed methods approach. The findings from both the focus group and survey questionnaire are outlined and summarized sequentially, and this is followed by a discussion of the findings.

#### **Focus Group Findings**

As noted, eight current field education coordinators voluntarily agreed to participate in the focus group (refer to Table 1). The semi-structured interview had two purposes: (1) to explore notions of gatekeeping in social work education; and, (2) to explore the extent to which these notions impact the experience of field education coordinators as educational leaders (refer to Focus Group Interview Guide, Appendix E).

Following a detailed analysis of the findings, as described in the methodology chapter, several themes emerged, and are reflected in the words of the focus group participants under the

following headings: 1) I see gatekeeping as our professional responsibility as a school of social work; 2) As social workers you hate to think of yourself as a gatekeeper; 3) Are we professionals or are we educators or are we academics?; 4) I think the context and the times make a difference too; 5) How do we decide who is appropriate and who is not?; 6) It is not ultimately just my responsibility; 7) Sometimes our institutions don't support us a lot; 8) I'm always in the meetings; 9) I do a pretty heavy duty orientation around getting ready for field; 10) I try to assign a faculty person who I think has some real expertise; 11) I have no idea how that would stand up legally; 12) It is a trained gut, this is not just a funny feeling; 13) I am a huge collaborator; and, 14) It's sort of a fun place to ride.

***I see gatekeeping as our professional responsibility as a school of social work***

Although respondents expressed reservations about the term 'gatekeeping' they clearly identified this as a necessary ethical obligation, emphasizing that gatekeeping is a 'school' responsibility, and should not be left up to the field. They spoke of the school's collective responsibility to safeguard clients and the profession from problematic practice.

In the words of one respondent:

*I see gatekeeping as our professional responsibility as a school of social work to clients that we do our damndest to ensure that the graduates that we produce are ethical and competent and self-reflective and that where we have a concern around the student being able to be that kind of graduate that we again do our damndest to figure out what we can do to support them to either become that positive social worker or divert them into another career. (Lila, focus group communication)*

Another respondent also emphasized the collective responsibility for gatekeeping:

*I agree and think it is a very complicated process and I think we are always in the process of learning and each case is very individual. I also think that although it often comes to the field I think there is, and I'm in a faculty position so I do take some responsibility in that way. But also I think whether someone's in a faculty role or in an administrative role it is something that needs to be shared more collectively and in a broader sense. (Barbara, focus group communication)*

All respondents expressed strong convictions about educators' responsibility to address concerns related to student professional suitability. However, this was countered by notions of

gatekeeping as potentially oppressive or contrary to values of the profession of social work, and particularly problematic for field education coordinators.

***As social workers you hate to think of yourself as a gatekeeper***

For example, in the words of one respondent:

*I also think gatekeeping is a terribly complex word and one that I don't like, it puts up all sorts of flags and I'm sure you did not choose it lightly, I'm sure you did it very purposefully, it has flags all over the place because as social workers you hate to think of yourself as a gatekeeper. It has a negative connotation, it's denying, it's excluding, it's using power against, there's a whole pile of phrases that we relate to that term, and I think in the field coordinator's role it's particularly problematic. (Nancy, focus group communication)*

Several respondents reinforced this concern noting the 'bad cop' connotation to the term gatekeeper, and the notion of 'playing God' that is also associated with the term. Thus, while respondents acknowledge the ethical obligation to engage in gatekeeping, the analysis identified conflicting notions and reservations to such practice. Social work values which espouse an acceptance of diversity and acknowledgement of the current context of practice reinforce their concerns related to the enterprise of gatekeeping.

Although respondents acknowledged the importance of gatekeeping practice, they are presented with a dilemma. On the one hand, gatekeeping is acknowledged as a professional responsibility. On the other hand, however, it is often seen as in opposition to social work values. Although the majority of respondents acknowledged engaging in practices to address professional suitability within their role, they also acknowledged the pressure that accompanies such responsibility. Respondents' perception of their role also appears to have a direct bearing on their understanding and commitment to gatekeeping practices.

***Are we professionals or are we educators or are we academics?***

In the words of one respondent:

*When you started out your point you used the word "professional", I think in the context you said "as professionals" and "responsibility" and I was going to tag on to that word because I really struggle with that, we do, around how we position ourselves in that*



*respect in the role of gatekeepers. Are we professionals or are we educators or are we academics?, and where the gap I think is in causing that dilemma in the eyes of myself and others that I share this with is that we don't have, there's nothing between the student graduating from the program and their practice. There's no middle organization or sort of in between body that bridges that gap such as the Bar Association or the Medical Licensing exams and there may be others, but these are the two that occur to me immediately. It's probably, I don't know if the word is easier, but it is easier to say "they are the gatekeepers" rather than to say the law school or medical school, as opposed to us where there is no middle organization professional body that bridges that gap, if you want to say it that way. So I think it puts, I don't know if the word is onus, but it places more emphasis on our struggles, it's fuel for your thesis, it poses more pressure and it poses more feelings of responsibility that we place on ourselves and perhaps rightfully so, that we are the gatekeepers. It's an enormous amount of responsibility, I mean anybody who is educating social work students be it the field educators, field instructors, or in the classroom, seminar or whatever, they're the educators, and they look at that person graduating and carry that thread through and think "should that person be practicing as a social worker?" How much can we take on? So it's all of that. (Sandra, focus group communication)*

A few respondents also identified as social workers, and invoked the ethical responsibilities associated with the professional Code of Ethics. This particular respondent emphasized:

*I just want to jump in and add on because I really do believe that we are social workers first and educators second. That's my bias. But I still identify as being a social worker. (Lila, focus group communication)*

Similarly, another respondent stated:

*I am of so many minds. There are moments I would like to be more "black and white" and I feel frustrated when I can't and this is one of those moments where I'd like to draw a nice line in the sand and I really struggle with professional obligation like you were talking about. I'm a social worker and I don't want someone out there who I wouldn't refer to, or who I wouldn't go to, or who I wouldn't send a dead horse to see because sometimes it feels like that, and I recognize the points about sometimes the people we think are the least effective become the best, and sometimes those who we think will excel don't. I really struggle with the differing roles between academe and the profession and having a Bar Association would remedy that in many ways. It would take the pressure off us and we could pretend it's not our responsibility anymore and it's sometimes nice to pretend, my fear about that is that we would pretend that it's not ours anymore. (Fran, focus group communication)*

While a commitment to addressing suitability concerns was shared unanimously, an intense discussion ensued regarding the difficulty in arriving at such assessments of suitability within the current practice context.

***I think the context and the times make a difference too***

In the words of one respondent:

*Adding to that is that I think the context and the times make a difference too, you know 25 years ago there would be people that we would say wouldn't be okay social workers because of their language, because of their culture, because of the way they express themselves, because of their sexual orientation, never mind 5 years ago because of their mental health difficulty. So I think it's really complicated when we try to determine who is going to work out as a social worker. (Nancy, focus group communication)*

The majority of respondents raised concerns about the associated power dynamics involved in gatekeeping and the highly complex and complicated nature of determining suitability, going as far as to question their right to determine who is not suitable.

***How do we decide who is appropriate and who is not?***

The uncertainty that focus group participants expressed about their qualifications to pass judgement was well summarized by the following respondent:

*I agree with what you're saying about, how do we decide who is appropriate and who is not? I mean you are so right. Twenty years ago what would we be saying? Who would we be determining couldn't be? How can we say somebody can't be something? How? I don't know I mean it has to be a very serious ethical breach in my view and I don't even know. (Colleen, focus group communication)*

Another respondent reinforced the difficulty and uncertainty of passing judgement, by observing that people's characters are open to change:

*I think that's a really huge issue and I think partly because in our profession we believe in change or we wouldn't be social workers, and so how do we judge a person's suitability in the context of their ability to change? (Lila, focus group communication)*

On this theme, another respondent noted the lack of tools or means to assess suitability, which reflects a lack of consensus on what counts as unprofessional behaviour:

*I have been wondering as I'm listening to our discussion today and I don't know if we're going to get to that in your questions is, if there is a consensus of things that are beyond the pale, there are a set of things that are clearly not negotiable, but if we could even get to that like I'm almost looking for solid ground, you know because it's hard for me to take a stand unless I have my feet on some solid ground, even if it's a square inch, so if there were things that we could just agree that are in terms of somebody's suitability to be turned loose on the field or turned loose on the profession, but there's certain things that are just not, they're so extreme whatever they are, but I haven't heard those articulated*

*and I would find that useful, if there was at least sort of a baseline, a consensus, a set of things that under no circumstances will someone go forward who has this, that or the other a little cluster of things would actually be useful, and that they were within the ethical guidelines of the profession, and they weren't prejudicial or stupid and ignorant in some way that they were throw backs to some earlier point in history or they weren't particularly someone's axe to grind, unfortunately sometimes because of the diversity of our student body, sometimes things can look that way it can look like somebody just doesn't like this student for some reason. (Lorna, focus group communication)*

In a similar vein, another respondent underlined the difficulty of predicting suitability on the basis simply of personal impressions:

*I don't have easy answers to it. I think it's a really complex kind of issue there's times that I'm going, "oh my goodness do I really want this person to come in contact with a person that might use the services of a social worker?" Other times I'm saying "well I don't know whether this person will or will not end up being an okay social worker, they haven't been in this business as long as I have." I see people that I remember thinking, "Oh my goodness, please don't put my name anywhere near them because they're going to be practicing" and they turn out to be just fine social workers, and other people who I would of said would have been wonderful and turned out to be horrible social workers. So I don't know that we have the tools completely yet, we do in certain circumstances I think we understand people who abuse their power as students and who abuse other people as outside their confidence and I say I don't feel comfortable with them being a social worker, but there's a whole pile of people that I don't think I have sufficient understanding of the complexities of the learning process and the socialization process of social work to say "No way, you can't be a social worker." (Nancy, focus group communication)*

There was also discussion regarding the implications for the use of the term 'personal' versus 'professional' suitability, with a preference for the later. In the words of one respondent:

*At the university we had lengthy discussions about this and actually ours (professional suitability policy) hasn't been approved at the larger university, but we had lengthy discussion about the difference between personal suitability and professional suitability and I think we need to keep that distinction clear. I think that we really get into some very, I think it's a thorny question to begin with but I think it's even thornier when you look at 'personal' suitability. I mean anyone of us in this room depending on who had been looking over our shoulder when we got admitted into school might have said, "Hey you're not personally suitable," although we might have been professionally suitable. So I think that is really very tough, I think the professional suitability is something that we can, we have some ideas of what is acceptable behaviour professionally. So I think we're on more solid ground. I think once we get into personal suitability then it becomes much thornier. ...I just think that we can't play, if we're playing God we can do that on a professional level, but we really can't do that on the personal level. Even at the professional level at our university our legal people did not want to go where we wanted to go at all. (Barbara, focus group communication)*

This concern, in addition to the lack of clarity on the part of accreditation standards was reinforced, as indicated in the following statement:

*Well even the CASSW can't sort out what professional suitability is, and we really struggle at the school with, do we put forward the policy? Yes, we are mandated to do so by standards of accreditation, but the accreditation body can't even sort out how the policy should go, so and that's a little hinkey [suspect, strange, unusual, not right] and what are those lines? And if you're working from a post-modernist perspective where is that line in the sand? (Fran, focus group communication)*

Likewise, the notion of gatekeeping as ethical obligation also creates tension and pressure for field education coordinators in larger or distance programs. Workload demands and proximity to students may impede their ability to assess suitability and to intervene in areas of concern.

***It is not ultimately just my responsibility***

One respondent was very clear in acknowledging professional boundaries and expectations of her role, noting:

*I think it's important for me, I recognize very clearly that it is not ultimately just my responsibility, I am not a faculty member, I am a management person, I teach but it's part-time, and so I really also share that responsibility with the faculty that are directly involved with students while they're on placement and my expectation of them, and I make that clear to them, that they play a significant role that they need to be very cognizant of those evaluations and what's going on and what's happening to students when they're in practicum and that it's not just up to me, and that there's a lot of us involved in this within the school, and I think that's important, but for me I refuse to take that responsibility totally on myself, and I'm very clear about the boundaries of my position and the boundaries of what I can and can't do. (Colleen, focus group communication)*

The same respondent went on to query:

*I'm just curious to know how big people's programs are because, I mean some of the things you people are talking about would literally be impossible in our program, it is so large... What do you mean talk about students in a meeting? Are you kidding? Are you kidding? ... In our program 65 percent of the teaching is done by part-time faculty, we basically have an arms length relationship with, so even within our full-time faculty it's difficult for people to sit around the table and identify that these six students seem to be having consistent problems because only one full-time faculty member has ever taught them. (Colleen, focus group communication)*

Respondents noted many factors that influence their gatekeeping practice. As noted, the size and delivery of programs and the criteria for assessing suitability directly influences practice. A few respondents also noted the concern for the lack of institutional support at the university administrative level.

***Sometimes our institutions don't support us a lot***

The following comments are indicative of one respondent's views in this regard:

*Sometimes our institutions don't support us a lot. We had a student a year ago and who, there were lots of concerns about his performance, it gets very complicated because of race and colour and all kinds of things, but bottom line was that his performance in the practicum was very problematic so we in fact terminated the practicum and the university as far as they were concerned they supported that, but they didn't think that we should terminate a course that he had to do concurrently with a practicum. They thought he should continue to do that and I said, "No it's not," well they thought that was being too punitive, so in the end I ended up having to give the student the bad news, "not only can you not do the practicum, you also can't do this course because of our regulations" and the university is on my case saying "Well you're being too punitive" and I'm saying "Well these are our regulations" and so they want to be...I just felt that we need to make these decisions, but we really need the support of our colleagues and the support of our larger university, and you know I'd much rather have that than have the community involved in terms of participation in these muddy issues. (Barbara, focus group communication)*

Another respondent echoed this sentiment, stating:

*We stewed around how we were going to approach this for a while, and I won't go into all the details about the angst we were going through, but certainly I will tell you that the lawyers of the institution told us that we had no right to block his admission. Basically we were told that we had to admit the student... They are saying it doesn't matter if you cannot deny this person this right to these social work courses. So when you're confronted with those kinds of realities it just really makes you shake your head. (Lila, focus group communication)*

However, although respondents acknowledge these and other challenges to gatekeeping, the majority noted their careful involvement in varying degrees of gatekeeping, stating they intervene wherever and whenever possible in order to safeguard practicum clients, agencies, and future employers. In addition to consulting with and supporting classroom faculty and field liaison faculty in their gatekeeping responsibilities, respondents also noted the following aspects of their gatekeeping practice: ensuring students are informed of suitability requirements within

the program orientation, course calendar descriptions, and field preparation seminars; spending more time with individual students when needed, meeting individually with students as permitted in order to assess difficulties; taking sufficient time during field preparation seminars and individual pre-placement processes to ensure adequate preparation and information is given; facilitating specific educational opportunities and counselling for students experiencing difficulties; ensuring specific students are appropriately matched with skilled liaisons, field instructors, and agencies who will challenge and support them adequately, and in some cases fulfilling this role themselves when needed; and advocating for individual students with field instructors and faculty liaisons; as well as advocating for programs and field agencies when warranted. Respondents also emphasized the following approaches to gatekeeping:

***I'm always in the meetings***

This respondent echoed the theme shared by many of the respondents with respect to collecting data at student review meetings to prepare for students entrance into the field program:

*I'm always in the meetings (student review meetings) because many of these students have not started their practicum, so I take notes of the students that have been flagged, and I keep that in mind for when I meet with the students the next semester and they're thinking about their practicum for the fall. (Barbara, focus group communication)*

***I do a pretty heavy duty orientation around getting ready for field***

Likewise, another respondent reflected the comments of many others when she spoke about how she prepares students for field, as in the following comment:

*The other thing that I've started doing is I do a pretty heavy duty orientation around getting ready for field. This year I think five students chose not to continue, they stayed in the program but they didn't continue after the field placement because I talk so much about readiness and personal readiness for being able to do the placement, and what that looked like and what self awareness they needed, and what supports they needed, and how they understood their social location, and what personal work they had done, and what other courses they were taking, and were they working as well, and do they have bigger responsibilities in terms of their own social caretaking responsibilities and to factor all those into their own personal readiness to succeed. And I'm delighted with those five students, and I wasn't targeting those students, it wasn't those particular*

*people, it's just I'm glad that people could reflect and said "I'm not ready" and I need to do some work before the placement. So I'm interested in other people's approaches, how do you help students understand and self monitor and reflect their own readiness?*  
(Nancy, focus group communication)

***I try to assign a faculty person who I think has some real expertise***

A few respondents also noted careful assignment of students to faculty liaisons, and field placements, as in the following comment:

*The other thing is mostly our students, when they go into the field, all of our students have a faculty liaison, every now and then it's myself, but for the most part it's my colleagues. If I know that there's a student who I'm concerned about, we use a lot of sessionals for faculty liaison, I try to assign a faculty person who I think has some real expertise to be the faculty liaison.* (Barbara, focus group communication)

Another respondent acknowledged the same practice in relation to the decisions of where to assign students in the field, and with respect to the faculty liaison:

*But the point that I wanted to make in addition is, I also do what you mentioned in terms of being careful who I assign students to in terms of being a liaison if I've got any kind of an issue and I have the power to do that and I use it. But another thing that I'll do is if I have a concern around a student I will also be careful in terms of where I assign them to the field.* (Lila, focus group communication)

As illustrated in the following quotes, a few respondents also spoke about making specific demands of students, and acknowledged that they were unsure of whether these practices would survive a legal challenge.

***I have no idea how that would stand up legally***

This particular respondent stated:

*But the trick there is that it does fall back into placement, but the trick is, if you can't secure a placement because of whatever those behaviours are, you can't pass that course, and therefore you can't continue on in the program, so you need to go into rehab, or you need to understand better how you exercise your power, or whatever, that can be part of a contract that you can go away and do that and show us that you have, so we can get ready for placement, now I have no idea how that would stand up legally.*  
(Nancy, focus group communication)

Lila referred to creative, but untested processes that schools sometimes employ:

*I don't think we've had a situation where a student has challenged that, so I think that the point that you're making if you know we kind of just do what we think we can get*

*away with and see what happens and I think probably we all sort of have our own ways of doing that and maybe that's using our power inappropriately, but certainly we've had situations that we've told students you've got to do this before you can come back and they believe us. (Lila, focus group communication)*

Others referenced similar examples, such as:

*We have some policy, and one of the things we've used is a reflective kind of paper so that is examined to look at, are they ready to come back, can the evidence change? But we also had students who had an addictions problem and failed the placement once and we said they could go away and do some work and once you've done that work you can show us that you have addressed this issue and we're prepared to offer you a second placement, and he came back and he had done some work, and he was able to suggest that he had done what he needed to do, but he then engaged back into the addictive behaviour while ..., but we were able to say, I mean I don't know legally, I don't think anybody checked with a lawyer to see if we could do it, we just did it, because he was drunk at placements, I mean what can you do? it was a pretty unusual circumstance, but in the extreme we did make a demand of him that he had to meet certain criteria before he could be placed. We also had a student who had a criminal charge, it was an assault charge and she had to be pardoned before she could be placed. So those kinds of extreme cases we have said unless this happens, you can't continue on. (Colleen, focus group communication)*

There was also considerable discussion pertaining to the role of instinct and intuition in their practice. A few of the respondents acknowledged listening to and trusting their intuition or gut reactions. Others reframed this, stating this is more than a hunch, it's a highly trained, sophisticated and well honed skill. It's a trained gut or advanced assessment skill. They also emphasized the importance of sorting through their own reactions through engagement in considerable reflection and consultation with others.

### ***It is a trained gut, this is not just a funny feeling***

The comments below reflect the dialogue which took place between respondents to further clarify the aspect of intuition:

*I had a funny feeling about a student..., I'm going to skip by sort of all the admissions piece which I've heard of but about a week into the program part, past the admissions piece, If I have an uncomfortable feeling about a student, it would be once they're already in the program and I'm looking at the placement plans which ..., I have a flag on the person, so a flag can go in two directions, one here's my intuitive flag, and the other is depending on where it's at in process will be the competency based flag, which is more tangible right? ... So there is some of the structure in place around uncomfortable feelings, if it's just an intuition on my part I just plant it back here and generally if I have an*



*intuition about someone, then chances are someone else has that same intuition, and it probably came from a Field Instructor at some point whether it's directly with the student. (Sandra, focus group communication)*

*When you talk about intuition when it comes down to something I always get a little uncomfortable when people talk about intuition, I know what we all mean, but we're all pretty sophisticated practitioners in any whether it's community or policy or direct practice, we know about practice, it is a trained gut, this is not just a funny feeling that you know you don't talk the way I talk therefore I don't like you, it's a very trained and sophisticated and well honed skill that doesn't mean that I don't sometimes just take a real dislike to somebody and I need somebody else to check this out with, I mean it's a lot of reflexive work, as well is this something in me that's creating this. But I think it's important for us to articulate that this is not just the, there's something very substantial...(Nancy, focus group communication)*

*It's not a hunch. (Lila, focus group communication)*

*It's assessment you talk about social work skills, we do assessments all the time (Fran) And how you approach that becomes a professional response and it is a well-honed response, and I mean you do it in a manner that is professional. (Colleen, focus group communication)*

*And advanced, you can say what it is... I just think Field Coordinators do not just go on funny feelings it is a well honed thing. (Nancy, focus group communication)*

Other respondents note holding their impressions in abeyance or spending more time with students in order to gain further understanding, as in the following comments:

*It's just my gut reaction, but also information that I've already collected and it may be very specific to that term the student having really struggled around something in their life and that's maybe gone by, but I just keep that in mind, there's usually about half a dozen names, and I just kind of flag them and I say well I'm just going to keep a bit of an extra eye out for whether or not these students are ready for placement. So that's one of the things I do. (Barbara, focus group communication)*

*If I personally have an uneasy feeling about a student, a very basic thing that I do is spend more time with them, that's actually my starting point and a very practical sense is to actually spend more time with that student. Sometimes that is the best way for me to get a clearer fix on it and I may have and the meter may move because I'm willing to invest more time in trying to figure out what's really going on. (Lorna, focus group communication)*

### ***I am a huge collaborator***

While the importance of intuition or professional judgement was acknowledged, respondents confirmed that this does not exclude consulting with others, as in the following comments:

*I am a huge collaborator, I don't do things lightly, I trust my instinct, but I have very good colleagues.* (Colleen, focus group communication)

*One of my strengths is my intuition and I trust that, and I have really grown over the years to really trust my instinct and I tend to give myself more permission to listen to it, but I do use other people to kind of just fortify myself because it's a big decision and the implications are huge, and I don't think any one of us wants to own the power of being able to make these decisions by ourselves, it's not ethical, it's not fair but I don't ignore that voice I will follow it up and I will act on it and I will do whatever I need to do to reassure myself.* (Lila, focus group communication)

Thus, all of the respondents spoke about the highly collaborative aspect of the field education coordinator role. They emphasized the consultative nature of the role which often involves extensive consultation with faculty, administrators (dean, director, chair, university lawyers), and student advocates through both formal and informal processes during field and student review meetings, and through individual exchanges. Generally, they stressed the need to go beyond themselves in their practice, noting that they do not make decisions on their own as this would be unethical nor do they want such responsibility. Consequently, they employ a collaborative team approach to decision making. A few of respondents also stressed the importance of developing policy that ensures a collaborative approach to decision making, so that they are not the one voice in addressing concerns.

A few respondents also acknowledged the complex, overlapping, and often conflicting relationships in which they are enmeshed between students, faculty, field, and university noting they are sitting in a difficult spot. The following comments reflect how the position is central in its interface with faculty, agencies, other educational or professional institutions, and with the

community. A few respondents spoke of an additional layer of complexity, given their involvement in admissions procedures and in chairing programs.

***It's sort of a fun place to ride***

*So I have the field in one ear and I have the rights of the student, and the academic world in my other ear, so it's a very...it's sort of a fun place to ride. But I have more questions than I do anything else, and I look at you and think okay you've been doing this for many years, but you have very similar questions. (Fran, focus group communication)*

*Which maybe says something about us sitting in a very difficult spot. (Sandra, focus group communication)*

Respondents discussed their commitment to agencies, and how this influences perceptions of students and others, as emphasized by the following respondents' comments:

*It's interesting because last year I was informed by one of our faculty ... we work as a team that's how we work together as a team, but apparently the students saw me as the advocate for the agency and, but this had never come up to me before in my mind or from elsewhere, and that the faculty field consultant is the advocate for the student, and I thought about that and at first I went "Eww, ouch," I didn't like that feeling that it was this role or the perception of this role.... But there's some realities that perhaps there is that sense of advocacy because I want to keep our field instructors, and so for example right now there's umm...I'm not sure I try to keep the students happy, that's not my goal to keep them happy, keep them appropriately placed is my role and helping build them for success is part of my role as well, but there's a current situation where one of our faculty field consultants is not happy about the agency, but I haven't got those issues with the agency from the work I've done with them for years, this person has been involved for a year and a half and I'm really struggling with what to do with this as we speak. So I feel like I want to advocate for the agency, this is a little different from the students, but it's another twist, so I'm in a place right now where I'm not quite sure of what to do with that, but the faculty, that's a little different spin. (Sandra, focus group communication)*

*And my notion of gatekeepers, I always think of my employers out there. Can I, in good faith and in good conscience say that this person is the kind of employee that you are looking for? I have felt on more than one occasion that I wouldn't hire that person in a million years and I'm thinking about my own graduates and I've said that about a few of them, and I don't like that, but it's the truth, and so I'm always looking at the employer side of the equation and I think we have a responsibility to them. (Joyce, focus group communication)*

**Summary**

The narrative accounts associated with the various themes provide a detailed account of the experience and approach of respondents in addressing student professional suitability

concerns; their notions of gatekeeping in social work education; the impact of these notions on their experience; and the factors that influence their approach. First and foremost, respondents emphasized the collective responsibility of schools of social work to fulfill their gatekeeping responsibilities. They stressed that this should not be left up to field. On the other hand, while the majority of respondents emphasized gatekeeping as an ‘ethical obligation,’ they expressed ambivalence to formally declaring themselves as ‘gatekeepers’ due to the negative connotation associated with the concept of gatekeeping. The perceived power dimensions and potential to misuse this power was highlighted. In addition to expressing this reservation, some respondents called attention to how the perception of their role as educators or social workers influences their declaration and engagement in gatekeeping activities.

Moreover, the current pluralist context of social work education and Canadian society, “a society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious and social groups maintain participation in and development of their traditions and special interests while cooperatively working toward the interdependence needed for a nation's unity”(England, 1992), and accompanying lack of criteria for assessing suitability was also underscored as having a substantial impact on their ability to address suitability concerns. A few respondents also highlighted the distinction between consideration of ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ suitability criteria, with a preference for the latter. Challenges aside, the majority of respondents acknowledged engaging in several measures to address professional suitability at various stages of the field placement process. However, this was more challenging and created pressure for respondents in distance or larger programs. Several respondents also acknowledged operating in legal uncertainty, in some cases through engaging in practices that had not been vetted through formal channels. More positively, the role of intuition (well honed assessment abilities) was noted as an asset, along with the value of collaborative and consultative approaches to problem solving. The central location of the field education coordinator position, and the accompanying

challenges were also underlined. It seemed that loyalties were unclear in some regards with the need to consider obligations to agencies, students, and faculty. Respondents also expressed concern for the lack of institutional support in the deliberation of a few disconcerting cases.

### **Survey Questionnaire Findings**

As noted in the previous chapter, a 70 percent response rate was achieved, with 54 coordinators submitting their survey responses. Table 3 reflects some of the demographics of the 37 respondents who completed all questions of the survey. Given the location of these questions at the end of the questionnaire, demographics were not provided by respondents who partially completed the survey. However, as Table 3 illustrates, the demographics of the 37 respondents who completed all survey questions is consistent with some of the themes from the literature, in that 11 percent of coordinators reported holding a PhD or EdD, as opposed to 76 percent holding a MSW degree as their highest degree. Similarly, the status of positions is also consistent with the literature in that 59 percent reported occupying non-faculty positions, with only 24 percent reporting having responsibility for scholarship within their role. The majority of coordinators (76 percent) identified as between the ages of 45 years and 64, with a range of experience in the position. Almost half (43 percent) of coordinators reported having less than five years experience, which could reflect turnover concerns noted in the literature, whereas 16 percent reported having 14 years of experience or greater. There was also a relatively equal number of coordinators employed in BSW only, and BSW/MSW program settings, with a small number of MSW only respondents.

**Table 3**  
**Respondent Demographics of Completed Surveys**

(n = 37)

<b><u>Age</u></b>	Frequency	Percent
25-34	2	5
35-44	7	19
45-54	13	35
55-64	15	41
65 +	0	0
<b><u>Years of Experience</u></b>		
Less than 5 years	16	43
Greater than 5 and less than 10 years	10	27
Greater than 10 and less than 14 years	5	14
Greater than 14	6	16
<b><u>Highest Degree Held</u></b>		
BSW	4	11
MSW	28	76
PhD/EdD	4	11
Other	1	3
<b><u>Status of Position</u></b>		
Faculty	15	41
Non-faculty	22	59
<b><u>Scholarship responsibility</u></b>		
Yes	9	24
No	28	76
<b><u>Program Level</u></b>		
BSW	20	54
MSW	3	8
Both	14	38

As noted in the previous chapter, the number of partial completions merits consideration, as this brings into question how the remaining respondents would have answered the questions, and could be considered to limit the generalizability of the study. However, the overall responses provide a considerable amount of textual (11,059 words) and numerical data which shed light on the research question (refer to Appendix J). The amount of input and time respondents devoted to responding to the survey questions speaks to the importance of the topic. Data were analyzed with the research question in mind; however, it is evident from the depth and volume of data, that the topic of gatekeeping in social work education is multi-layered and complex. Therefore, the potential for extending the analysis beyond considerations of the research question is possible, although for the purposes of this study, the analysis is confined to the research question.

Survey findings are presented under the following five headings 1) Gatekeeping Expectations of Coordinators and Approaches to Practice; 2) Frequency, Prevalence, and Types of Professional Suitability Concerns; 3) Criteria for Determining and Procedures for Addressing Professional Suitability; 4) Program and Professions' Fulfillment of Gatekeeping Role; and, 5) Changes Required in the Institutional and Professional Context. Each of these aspects is considered in terms of its relevance to the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability. Frequency distributions have been calculated excluding the missing responses in order to identify the responses of those who answered individual questions to illustrate themes and distinctions across the data.

#### ***Gatekeeping Expectations of Coordinators and Approaches to Practice***

Survey respondents indicated that they perceive the field to hold the highest expectation for them to assess and address student professional suitability, followed by faculty, administration, the accreditation body, and students. Of the 38 respondents who answered this question, 92 percent answered that the expectation of *field* is moderate to high (68 high and 24

moderate). One survey respondent noted that “expectations are high in the field that we do not let students graduate who they would not want to hire. The others do not expect quite so much as they seem to be aware of the obstacles to screening for suitability, student rights, etc” (survey respondent 68). However, 87 percent indicated that *faculty* have a moderate to high expectation of them (39 high and 47 moderate). Furthermore, 73 percent indicated that *administration* has a moderate to high expectation of them (39 high and 34 moderate) as well. On the other hand, this number decreased to 66 percent when asked about the expectations of *students* and the *accreditation body* (29 high and 37 moderate).

Likewise, another respondent noted “the ‘school’ saw the field as the gatekeeper. Students didn't really engage, and accreditation involvement was minimal” (survey respondent 28). On the other hand, another respondent noted the “field really looks to the practicum office for a lot of guidance, as does the faculty and admin. Students do not seem to appreciate the position of the practicum office in terms of professional suitability” (survey respondent 32). Moreover, one respondent noted “I think that most people expected I would know the boundaries of professional suitability better than anyone else because I had dealt with it since year #####” (survey respondent 11). Another respondent echoed this comment, noting “since I have been here a long time, people generally do rely on me for my input and involvement” (survey respondent 13). In addition, another respondent noted the “BSW field coordinator is the person who is responsible for bringing forward the claim of unsuitability (upon recommendation of the field instructor)” (survey respondent 29). Similarly, another respondent notes “when problems arise, I believe the expectation of the person in my position is to gather the facts, develop a plan, mediate if necessary and inform the director” (survey respondent 38). Another respondent highlighted the “nature of the expectations is to provide input on considerations, relay feedback; worth mentioning also that we are often asked to comment by employers when hiring our graduates...key role for field coordinators!” (survey respondent 36).



Similarly, the majority (89 percent) of the 38 respondents who answered the question regarding their level of involvement in field matters when concerns regarding professional suitability arise, indicated having a moderate to high level of involvement (74 percent high and 16 percent moderate). One survey respondent noted that his/her level of involvement “was highly dependent on the willingness and ability of the faculty liaison to deal with the situation” (survey respondent 9). Moreover, of the 53 survey respondents who answered the question of the level of importance they assign to having an approach to addressing student professional suitability within their practice, 87 percent answered ‘very important,’ while 13 percent noted this as ‘moderately important.’ Thus, when asked whether they take an active leadership role within individual processes related to professional suitability concerns after the commencement of field placements, 79 percent of the 38 survey respondents who answered this question stated they take an active leadership role within individual processes.

Accordingly, respondents confirmed their involvement in a number of specific pre- and post-placement measures noted in Table 4 and 5 below. Of the 38 survey respondents who answered the question regarding the level of responsibility field education coordinators have for addressing concerns related to professional suitability *during* the pre-placement process, 53 percent answered ‘high’ while 34 percent answered ‘moderate,’ and 13 percent answered ‘low.’ The response was slightly higher with respect to *after* the commencement of the field placement, 58 percent answered ‘high’ while 29 percent answered ‘moderate,’ and 13 percent answered ‘low.’ It is interesting to note the more commonly employed *pre-placement* measures outlined in Table 4, some of which are discussed in chapter one (such as, students submitting an application for field placement, resume, and learning objective forms; field education coordinators facilitating pre-placement field seminars, and meeting individually with students if needed; consulting faculty regarding specific students prior to placement; sharing potential student/agency/field instructor matches with faculty; and sharing specific student information

with faculty and field with students' permission; matching students with specific field instructors; placing students in particular field settings; and inclusion of the Code of Ethics in the Field Education Manual) compared to the less commonly employed measures (such as, discussing the professional suitability policy with students prior to placement; students signing an oath of confidentiality or a conduct agreement; coordinators assigning themselves as the faculty liaison; and providing faculty liaisons with student practicum files from third year). Similarly, within the *post-placement* measures outlined in Table 5, facilitation of field review meetings at midpoint with faculty liaisons was employed by less than 40 percent of respondents.

**Table 4**  
**Pre-placement Measures**

(n = 38)

<u>Specific Measures</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Meet individually with students if needed	95
Consult faculty regarding specific students prior to placement	87
Students submit resumes	87
Place students in particular field settings	87
The Code of Ethics is outlined in Field Education Manual	84
Match students with specific field instructors	79
Students submit an application for field placement	79
Facilitate pre-placement field preparation seminars	79
Share potential student/agency/field instructor matches with faculty	74
Share specific student information with faculty and field with student's permission	71
Discuss professional suitability requirements with field instructors	71
Review third year student field correspondence to facilitate fourth year placements	68
Students submit learning objective forms	63
Match students with specific faculty liaisons	61
Professional suitability policy is outlined in the Field Education Manual	55
Involved in admissions processes	55
The Code of Ethics is discussed within the pre-placement process	53
Assign myself as the faculty liaison	45
Professional suitability policy is discussed with students prior to placement	34
Students sign an oath of confidentiality	32
Provide faculty liaisons with student practicum files from third year	24
Students sign a conduct agreement	16

**Table 5**  
**Post-placement Measures**

(n = 38)

<u>Specific Measure</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Take an active leadership role with faculty, field and students	79
Meet individually with faculty when requested	74
Facilitate concurrent field instructor sessions during the field placement process	50
Facilitate field review meetings at midterm with faculty liaisons	37

***Frequency, Prevalence, and Types of Professional Suitability Concerns***

Of the 39 survey respondents who answered whether the prevalence of concerns had changed during the past 2-5 years, 54 percent indicated it had ‘remained constant,’ 5 percent indicated the prevalence of concerns had ‘decreased,’ 18 percent indicated that the prevalence had ‘increased,’ and 23 percent responded ‘not applicable’ as they were new to the position. On the other hand, 67 percent answered ‘yes’ to the question of whether they had placed students whose professional suitability was questionable during the past two to five years. Furthermore, of the 53 survey respondents who answered the question of how often in the past two years they had been confronted by concerns related to student professional suitability, 23 percent indicated they had been confronted ‘more than 5 times,’ while 34 percent answered ‘4-5 times,’ and another 28 percent answered ‘1-3 times.’

When asked to outline specific examples where concerns were raised about a student’s lack of suitability, survey respondents shared a range of examples from blatant and disturbing to minor and questionable examples. These concerns ranged from issues related the following:

- viewing pornographic material on a computer during practicum
- dating a client
- mental health and addictions issues that impeded students’ ability to engage in effective and appropriate practice with clients
- accountability to agency clients and staff

- blatant disrespect for agency clients and staff
- lack of professional and personal boundaries
- lack of interpersonal skills
- inability to cooperate with field instructor and agency
- concealment of conflicting values and beliefs
- lack of knowledge, inexperience, immaturity
- attitude problems
- aggressive behaviour
- sexist or controlling
- lack of engagement
- inability to monitor one's professional judgement and behaviour
- inability to grasp professional role
- questioning the practice and process of social work
- untrustworthy
- unethical potential
- excessive absenteeism
- professional suitability for international placements
- an inability to write clear English

Many of these examples reflect behaviours which contravene the Code of Ethics, while others, such as inexperience, absenteeism, and lack of English writing ability may be related more to the state of readiness of the student rather than to suitability.

### ***Criteria for Determining and Procedures for Addressing Professional Suitability***

When asked about the existence of professional suitability policies within individual schools, the majority of current coordinators (52%) reported the existence of policies, while some (19%) indicated policies were currently under development, and the remainder (26%) did not have policies. When asked whether further policies and procedures were needed to assist them in responding appropriately to professional suitability concerns, 47 percent of both former and current field education coordinators answered 'yes,' 24 percent answered 'no,' and 29

percent indicated they were not sure. With respect to the framing of the policy, one survey respondent noted the following:

*We actually changed this language in our “professional suitability” policy on the advice of university lawyers to professional conduct, as conduct is behavioural and really the only way to measure the manifestation of suitability.* (survey respondent 37)

On the other hand, with respect to the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) accreditation standards, of the 38 survey respondents who answered whether they were aware of the CASWE accreditation standards related to student professional suitability, 70 percent of current (n=19) and 45 percent of former (n=5) field education coordinators answered ‘yes.’ When asked, however, whether the standards provide *clear guidance* for their practice, only 26 percent indicated that clear guidance is provided. Furthermore, when asked about whether the standards provide *clear criteria* for determining professional suitability, only 16 percent answered that this was the case. Although 30 percent (n=8) of current and 55 percent (n=6) of former field education coordinators indicate a lack of awareness of standards, it is apparent that some respondents were confused as to what CASWE represented, as they were not aware of the recent name change of the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work to CASWE. This may have been particularly relevant to the former field education coordinators who in some cases have been in the position for a year or two. Therefore, a few of the responses may have been more complete, had the name change been noted within the question. While there are potential implications for respondents not being aware of the standards, findings from both the focus group and survey questionnaire responses provide substantial support for the argument that field education coordinators acknowledge their roles and responsibilities with respect to gatekeeping. It is also important to note that the CASWE educational policy statements are not prescriptive in nature and primarily emphasis the need for schools to “have published policies and procedures” (October 2007, p. 6 & 8).

On another note, when respondents were asked how they define professional suitability, and when someone is considered professionally unsuitable, more than half of respondents evoked the Code of Ethics and its relationship to students' conduct. Respondents also noted a few additional elements of professional suitability such as insight, ability to reflect on one's practice, ability to receive constructive criticism, ability to meet agency mandates, and critical analysis and theoretical skills. A few of the examples are as follows:

*Complying with the code of ethics and relevant practice guidelines – somewhat amorphous term (professional suitability) – sometimes hard to pin down. (survey respondent 92)*

*I define it as an awareness, being insightful as to why one has chosen this profession, plus the ability to critically reflect on one's practice continuously, plus being able to adhere to our Code of Ethics/Professional Standards in a social service agency. (survey respondent 80)*

*When personal situations, characteristics, behaviour are detrimental to work with clients. (survey respondent 38)*

### ***Program and Professions' Fulfillment of Gatekeeping Role***

While respondents expressed a general appreciation for the work of faculty liaisons, field instructors, and chairs, deans/directors within the domain of field education, they also noted areas of concern. For example, one respondent noted professional suitability issues coming to his/her attention "when instructors from other classes point out concerns and say 'you are going to have some challenges in field with this one' but still pass such students in their courses and they therefore qualify for practicum" (survey respondent 68). Similarly, another respondent noted "some faculty do not identify potential issues as early as they could" (survey respondent 38). Furthermore, according to another respondent "more latitude and less fear is needed on the part of faculty that the student will take legal action" (survey respondent 43).

Several respondents also noted the influence of deans/directors and programs chairs' leadership styles and program involvement on their practice and approach to issues. While most indicated they were supported by administration, some did not share such sentiment. When

asked whether the level of support received from administration was sufficient, one respondent replied “absolutely - the Director met with the student and reinforced the School’s position, the faculty consultant was key in supporting the field instructor” (survey respondent 38). While another respondent echoed that he/she received “excellent support via one to one discussions” (survey respondent 81). Another stated “the chair was very supportive in a consultative role, however, decisions related to the situation were left to me” (survey respondent 9). Furthermore, another stated “support was good, because the issue continues, it remains whether it was sufficient” (survey respondent 49). Similarly, another respondent noted “the Dean was involved. Overall good support for faculty, but not enough support to push the issue for the student to be discontinued from the program” (respondent 46). In addition, another respondent confirmed “the faculty and the departmental administration were involved. My colleagues supported me. My dean/director did not” (survey respondent 11).

When addressing the role of field educators (field instructors), and the aspects that would be of assistance to their practice, a few respondents noted the need for education and involvement of field in addressing issues of professional suitability. For instance, one respondent noted the need for “education for the field on this issue. For some reason the field does not seem clear or aware about the importance of professional suitability and have a difficult time articulating that on evaluations. How do we educate the field?” (survey respondent 32). The same respondent suggested the need for “more training and education to assess how best to respond to professional suitability concerns. More buy-in from the field” (survey respondent 32). This is an interesting contrast to the convictions expressed within the focus group, which emphasized that the field should not be placed in the gatekeeper role.

On the other hand, many respondents also stressed the need for training and education for themselves and faculty. For example, one respondent noted “some additional training would have been helpful. There is also the need for all faculty to understand the importance of this, and



not have it dumped on the Field Education role late in the student's time in the program" (survey respondent 5). A second respondent noted that "faculty/staff training is needed as everyone deals with students in the environment of the School" (survey respondent 67). Furthermore, a general theme of the need for more support and consultation at the program level was also raised when asked about what was needed at this level to enhance their practice. For instance, one respondent noted the need for "a sense of being supported by colleagues" (survey respondent 9). Another noted "this is an issue that requires the attention of the Field Educator as well as the Faculty. Field Education Coordinators need the consistent support of the faculty to address these concerns even though they (field education coordinators) may not be present in the classroom" (survey respondent 42). Another emphasized the need for "support of faculty for field education and the complexities" (survey respondent 49). Likewise, another respondent stressed the need for "consultation between the field office and the faculty" (survey respondent 32).

However, when asked whether there was particular training/education that would enhance their approach to assessing and addressing suitability concerns (i.e., mediation, conflict resolution, assessment skills, legal and accreditation information, ethical practice frameworks, etc) as noted in the following statements, several respondents suggested that all of the above would be helpful for both themselves and their faculty colleagues. In particular, many of the respondents noted the need for information and training related to legal, practice ethics, accreditation, conflict resolution, mediation, assessment skills, and assertiveness training, as in the following comments:

*Legal information, confidentiality issues, sharing information between faculty and the field, ongoing conflict resolution training.* (survey respondent 32)

*I would have liked to have had a greater understanding of the legal rights of students with regards to screening for suitability.* (survey respondent 9)

Indeed, a few others indicated the importance of discussing ethical practice frameworks, and the limits of confidentiality as noted in the following statements:

*I would have liked to have had the ethical practice framework discussions before these instances occurred, instead of at the time and after.* (survey respondent 57)

*Legal, ethical practice frameworks and meaningful collaboration with chairs of program committees.* (survey respondent 40)

*Possibly - more information, framework, etc. Confidentiality. How much do you share? With whom?* (survey respondent 49)

Whereas, a few respondents indicated they did not require further training or education to adequately address concerns, as in the following comments:

*Some, but often it is based on a professional awareness that is built through intuition and experience.* (survey respondent 5)

*I feel qualified to adequately deal with the problems I faced in field and am authorized for psychosocial interventions.* (survey respondent 74)

In addition to training and education for faculty, field educators, administration and themselves; the need for more support to the field program from faculty and field instructors, such as administrative support, and the need for supervision opportunities for themselves; respondents noted the following: the need for inclusion of field education coordinators in admissions processes; stability and continuity of the coordinator position; early screening of suitability procedures; more consistent information sharing and general discussion within the school; receiving more accurate information regarding students; more direction and implementation trials; employing standard evaluative patterns; development of effective and clear professional suitability policies (as was previously noted, only 40 percent of survey respondents reported having a suitability policy in place at the time the survey was conducted); ensuring students are informed of policies and procedures, for example, inclusion of policies and procedures within field education manuals and course outlines; having clearer procedures and criteria for assessing professional suitability; addressing the topic of disabilities and suitability

for the profession, while others emphasized the role of interpretation and the need for willingness on the part of faculty to follow through on policies; and one respondent stressed the general lack of time to research such matters, as in the following comment:

*Time. There isn't time for each School to work on this (an endless discussion). Has this work been completed and successfully implemented somewhere? On behalf of Schools across Canada, could someone pull this together and provide it nationwide? (survey respondent 48)*

### ***Changes Required in the Institutional and Professional Context***

Several changes were noted as being required at both the institutional and professional level in order to better fulfill the gatekeeping role. For example, a few respondents expressed frustration at the lack of institutional support, and went as far as to argue that improving their skills would not help within the current institutional context, as in the following comment:

*I think all of this (training and education) would be useful, but in a vacuum of institutional avoidance, it doesn't help to enhance my skills if they won't address these issues. (survey respondent 13)*

This criticism is reflected in the following comment by the same respondent:

*I found it very frustrating to know that we had a student who potentially could do harm, and we did not have the policies, process or the institutional support to deal with it effectively. I felt ethically challenged. My personal sense was that I was being unethical in participating in his/her ability to complete her/ his program just by being employed by this university. As I said earlier, we contacted the lawyers in hopes that they would back us up in our attempt to fail her/him, but they would not support this decision. We were instructed to place her/him in an agency where he/she would be successful in completing his/her placement. (survey respondent 13)*

Similarly, another respondent remarked that he/she would appreciate “a less legalistic worry on the part of administration” and added:

*The university's reluctance to face up to the evidence and their fear of a negative outcome is challenging. The student would continually find someone to be his/her advocate, and they would present an appeal for her/him to be reinstated or given another chance. The university would grant this. The student got back into the program on appeal, and graduated (Much to my personal angst). (survey respondent 28)*

The same respondent added the following statement:

*We need a better understanding of the university's definition of "professional suitability" so that there could be some commonality of definition when difficulties arose, .i.e., would you be supported?* (survey respondent 28)

While another respondent noted the need to clarify expectations, as illustrated in the comment below:

*The expectations of the universities, of the field placement and of the social work professional associations need to be better clarified.* (survey respondent 73)

This respondent agreed emphasizing the need for:

*A clear professional suitability policy approved for all human service professions within the university.* (survey respondent 78)

Another respondent also spoke of the emotional investment involved in engaging in such matters, as in the following comment:

*The significant amount of time including the emotional investment in this by everyone associated with this case. We consulted with the university lawyer and were advised not to proceed with the case due to the fact that it had taken so long to develop a suitability procedure.* (survey respondent 29)

Moreover, this respondent underlines the central and vulnerable location of field, as in the following comment:

*We are gatekeepers and when things go wrong all eyes turn in our direction. Amazing that universities scrimp on resources to field programs when these are their greatest points of vulnerability.* (survey respondent 81)

In contrast, a number of changes were also noted as being required at the professional level in order to better fulfill the gatekeeping role. These included the need for a specific, valid, and reliable instrument for assessing suitability, tools to help students assess their own suitability, clearer standards, guidelines, policies that are actionable, procedures, and criteria for assessing professional suitability within accreditation standards and university policy, specific training and education such as legal training, and more dialogue and discussion on the topic. As with measures needed at the program level, the majority of respondents stressed the need for

clearer standards, guidelines, policies, procedures, and criteria for assessing professional suitability within accreditation standards and university policy.

However, similar to the focus group respondents, the majority of survey respondents acknowledged the inherent complexity in addressing such matters, and noted the need for flexibility and professional judgement, as illustrated in the following comments:

*There is much uniqueness to situations, including regional and perhaps cultural contexts, and administrative contexts. (survey respondent 36)*

*Situations tend to be complex and messy at times - the policy is helpful to have a consistent approach, but still with some flexibility to adapt to each situation. (survey respondent 38)*

*Even the best policies cannot anticipate everything; one must really be open minded and determined in order to deal with difficult situations. One must remain open and available. (survey respondent 72)*

There were also two respondents who either did not see a need for more policies or suggested revisiting the aspect of professionalism and suitability. The latter emphatically stated “No more policies, please!” (survey respondent 67). Whereas, the former stated, “Not sure - I think a rethinking of professionalism and suitability would be a good start” (survey respondent 44). Furthermore, a third respondent emphasized the need to clarify gatekeeping expectations stating, “It would be better to clarify these expectations for everyone. I think clarifying the expectations of the different schools would be sufficient” (survey respondent 73). Likewise, a few other respondents stressed the need to provide opportunities for further dialogue and discussion, as in the following comments:

*To have funds available to meet more often with field education coordinators to share information. Usually any such meeting was tacked onto a larger meeting and we got very little time to talk together. (survey respondent 11)*

*A forum for discussion and consultation with other field education coordinators, perhaps enhanced training in this area. (survey respondent 71)*

## Summary

The survey findings have provided valuable insights into the research question. In sum, respondents report that they perceive the field to hold the highest expectation for them to assess and address student professional suitability, followed by faculty, administration, the accreditation body, and students. Consequently, they assign a high level of importance to having an approach to addressing student professional suitability concerns within their practice. When asked about the level of responsibility they have for addressing concerns prior to and after the commencement of field placements, the majority of respondents assigned a high to moderate level of responsibility for both, whereas, this was slightly higher after the commencement of field placements. Thus, they report having a high level of involvement in field matters when concerns regarding student professional suitability arise. Hence, they report taking an active leadership role with faculty, field and students when requested to address specific concerns. Moreover, they report employing a number of pre- and post-placement measures for addressing suitability concerns.

Nonetheless, more than half of respondents report that the number of concerns has remained constant for the past two to five years. More than half report being confronted by concerns related to student professional suitability four to five times (34%) and more than five times (23%) within the past one to two years. Furthermore, the majority of respondents (67%) indicated they had placed students whose professional suitability was questionable. Likewise, within Tam's study "approximately one quarter of the respondents [field instructors] had one or more students whom they considered unsuitable to practice social work. Moreover, slightly over one quarter of respondents had supervised students who had not internalized social work values" (2004, p.173). On the other hand, when asked to outline specific examples where concerns were raised about a student's lack of suitability, respondents listed a range of examples from blatant and disturbing to minor and questionable. Still, when asked how they define

professional suitability, and when someone is considered professionally unsuitable, more than half of respondents evoked the Code of Ethics and its relationship to students' suitability.

Nevertheless, when asked about the formal criteria for determining suitability within school policies and accreditation standards, the majority reported not having professional suitability policies in place within their school, and many expressed the view that further articulation of standards is required at the accreditation level. However, less than half (47%) indicated a need for further policies and procedures to assist them in responding appropriately to concerns, and 29 percent indicated they were not sure. Notwithstanding, many respondents indicated areas of apprehension with respect to program fulfillment of the gatekeeping role, and noted that concerns are often deferred to the field, and are not shared with them prior to the placement process. Similarly, the role and involvement of field instructors in addressing concerns was also emphasized by a few respondents. Furthermore, several respondents expressed the need for more support for their role and the field program in general within their school, and expressed concern for an apparent lack of institutional support for addressing professional suitability. Consequently, the influence of school and university administration was noted as important to respondents' experiences. For example, respondents noted how the leadership styles of deans/directors and program chairs influences their approach and deliberation of particular concerns.

Although the majority of respondents reported relative satisfaction with their skills and knowledge for addressing concerns, the majority suggested that further training and education would be beneficial, and strongly recommended that faculty, field, and administration be included in this education. The aspect of training was also emphasized by field instructors in Tam's study, as "a total of 43 % of respondents believed that the Faculty needed to provide more field instruction training" (2004, p. 175). However, many respondents expressed concern for the workload pressures, and the need for more time, support, and resources to field

programs. Moreover, they also emphasized that further opportunities for dialogue and consultation between field education coordinators, as well as with faculty, administration, and field educators is needed. Specifically, they stress a collaborative approach to addressing student professional suitability concerns. Findings from Tam's study also indicated a need for constructive dialogue with field instructors who disagreed with the idea of gatekeeping (2004, p.192).

Survey results greatly enhanced the focus group findings. The quantitative data and results from the survey, reinforce the interpretation of the qualitative findings from both the focus group and survey questionnaire, and provide a sense of the proportion of respondents with similar and different experiences. Furthermore, the narrative accounts associated with the various themes from the focus group provided a detailed account of the experience and approach of respondents in addressing student professional suitability concerns; their notions of gatekeeping in social work education; the impact of these notions on their experience; and the factors that influence their approach. In sum, both focus group and survey respondents supported the assertion that gatekeeping predominantly falls to the field. Focus group respondents indicated that, other than accreditation standards, there are no formal or explicit gatekeeping expectations placed on them by others. However, survey respondents indicated they perceive the field to hold the highest expectation of them to assess and address student professional suitability, followed by faculty, administration, the accreditation body, and students. Yet, focus group respondents emphasized that current notions of gatekeeping as potentially oppressive and contrary to social work values, creates tension in their experience. Moreover, all respondents emphasized the collective responsibility of schools of social work to fulfill gatekeeping responsibilities, and stressed that this should not fall to the field alone.

On the other hand, both groups of respondents acknowledged how the lack of clear criteria for assessing suitability impacts their ability to address suitability concerns. Similarly, in



Tam's study, "34.5 % of respondents [field instructors] in this study reported the lack of clearly defined standardized criteria, and another 25.0 % reported the lack of policies for failing a student, were difficulties they encountered in the process of evaluating students' fieldwork performance" (2004, p. 175). A few focus group respondents within this study also highlighted the distinction between consideration of 'personal' and 'professional' suitability criteria, with a preference for the latter. Similarly, one survey respondent emphasized the framing of their professional suitability policy as a professional 'conduct' policy. Challenges aside, the majority of focus group and survey respondents acknowledged engaging in several measures to address professional suitability at various stages of the field placement process. However, a few acknowledged how workload pressures and program size and formats create an unreasonable burden of responsibility.

Several respondents also acknowledged operating in legal uncertainty, in some cases through engaging in practices that had not been vetted through formal channels, as noted in the focus group. Likewise, survey respondents also noted a need for further legal knowledge. On another note, the role of intuition was highlighted as an asset by the majority of focus group participants, and a few survey respondents also implied this. On the other hand, the Code of Ethics also figured prominently in guiding many respondents' approach to practice and assessment of professional suitability. Ethical suitability was also the most reported criteria for professional suitability indicated by field instructors within Tam's study (2004, p. 195). However, respondents in this study emphasize the need for professional judgement in their work, as well as a collaborative and collective approach to practice. Hence, all respondents emphasized the critical importance of strongly collaborative and cohesive field teams to their practice. The central location of the field education coordinator position, and the accompanying challenges were also underlined. Finally, both groups also expressed concern for the lack of institutional support in matters related to addressing student professional suitability.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The findings reinforce several concerns pertaining to gatekeeping and field education that have previously been noted in the literature. For example, Born and Carroll argue that, from an ethical perspective, gatekeeping should be a “multi-tiered approach, which begins with the decision to admit or reject and continues through graduation and licensure” (1988, p. 82). “Social work educators are ‘gatekeepers’ in that they have a duty to ensure that only students with skills and values necessary to serve clients are admitted to professional practice” (Redmond & Bright, 2007, p. 167). Similarly, the majority of respondents emphasized that gatekeeping is a ‘school responsibility’ and field instructors or agencies should not be expected to take on this role. However, coordinators acknowledged both within the focus group and the survey responses that field often becomes the gatekeeping mechanism given that the majority of suitability issues are not apparent or are not addressed prior to students entering field, which is consistent with the literature (Moore & Urwin, 1990, 1991; Hartman & Wills, 1991; Ryan et al, 2006). Furthermore, a few focus group respondents expressed concern for the limited number of full-time faculty acting as field liaisons, and noted the increasing number of part-time and sessional faculty fulfilling this role. They stressed the implications for field coordination and for programs placing gatekeeping expectations on part-time and sessional faculty.

Consequently, respondents expressed acceptance of the need for gatekeeping within field education, and noted their careful involvement in varying degrees of gatekeeping, stating they intervene wherever and whenever possible in order to safeguard practicum clients, agencies, and future employers. However, as noted by focus group respondents, this commitment is countered by notions of gatekeeping as oppressive or contrary to values of the profession of social work. The notion of gatekeeping as “power over” or as exclusive is considered antithetical to the philosophy of social work. Similarly, within Tam’s study of field instructors “descriptive results on the respondents’ [field instructors’] attitudes toward gatekeeping revealed that gatekeeping in

social work education remains a controversial topic” (2004, p. 189). Furthermore, according to Moore and Urwin (1990) and many other authors, educators are unclear about translating the goals and strategies of gatekeeping into practice, while others consciously abdicate this responsibility, assuming it will be addressed by others within the school or practice community. In addition, some are very ambivalent or reluctant to consider themselves as gatekeepers, as they perceive this to be incongruent with the philosophy of the profession of social work.

Moreover, respondents echoed themes from the literature regarding the highly complex and complicated nature of determining suitability (Gibbs & Macy, 2000), going so far as to question their right to determine who is not suitable. However, this is not surprising given the lack of agreement on the qualities that make a good social worker and specific criteria are still not precisely defined (Furness & Gilligan, 2004).

Redmond and Bright (2007, p. 169) further state that:

While educators’ concerns regarding students’ professional aptness, preparedness, and behavioural appropriateness are not novel, considering the importance of the topic, it is surprising that comprehensive, well supported outlines of professional suitability and gatekeeping are difficult to locate within social work literature (Younes, 1998), particularly at the BSW level. (Gibbs, 1994)

Coleman, Collins and Aikins argue that normative standards are needed (1995). Consequently, Tam’s research with field instructors has been devoted to the task of developing a reliable and valid measure on professional suitability for social work practice. The author suggests that the resulting professional suitability scale could be useful for social work educators in evaluating students’ suitability for social work. This research examined the criteria used by field instructors to define professional suitability for social work practice, and a professional suitability scale was developed from these criteria. Findings from this research suggest there may be some agreement, at least amongst some field instructors, as to some of the criteria for defining

professional suitability. “Ranking of these categories in descending order by frequency distributions is as follows: ethical suitability, practical suitability, personal suitability, interpersonal suitability, and social suitability” (2004, p. 195).

On the other hand, “in recent years, one of the clearest and most important messages to emerge from the literature on gatekeeping in social work education has been that *all* criteria, standards and performance expectations must be framed as *academic* standards if they are to hold up in court” (Cobb, 1994; Cobb & Jordan, 1989; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Madden, 1993 cited in Gibbs, Blakely & Contributors, 2000, p.259). It is not clear whether Tam’s professional suitability scale would address this issue. Gibbs clarifies that this framing is critical regardless of whether specific standards relate to professional performance expectations or scholastic matters. Furthermore, social work programs struggle with an inability to terminate students for non-academic reasons because of an inability to define suitability for the profession and the absence of concrete criteria (Ryan et al, cited in LaFrance et al, 2004).

Consequently, Raymond argues that we should avoid the dichotomy between academic and non-academic standards. Moore and Urwin also argue that “appropriate professional behavior is an academic requirement; it is not separate from the educational component” (1991, p. 5). As such, it should not be viewed as a misconduct issue (Moore & Urwin, 1990). Moreover, “courts have declared that a student’s behavior or conduct can be considered an *academic* matter” (Raymond, p. 123). Similarly, Gibbs emphasizes the role of the *Code of Ethics* (National Association of Social Workers), accreditation standards, and curriculum policy statements (Council on Social Work Education) in shaping gatekeeping policies (2000). Raymond also notes the appropriateness of applying the Code in the evaluation of professional performance, and states it is acceptable to hold students accountable to the Code, even if they are not members of the association (2000). Although these assertions are made in reference to

the U.S. context, it is worth noting again that the CASWE Educational Policy Statements (article 3.9.2 [bachelor level] and 5.9.2 [master level]) states that:

Schools shall also have published policies and procedures providing for the termination of those social work students found to be engaging in behaviour contrary to the relevant social work code of ethics, and who are therefore judged to be unsuitable for the profession of social work. (2007)

Thus, there is a relationship between professional suitability and the relevant social work Code of ethics noted within accreditation standards.

In addition to the complexity of determining professional suitability, respondents also acknowledged the complex, overlapping, and often conflicting relationships in which they are enmeshed between students, faculty, field, and university noting they are sitting in a difficult location. Consequently, this discussion echoes my experience and highlights one of the three special characteristics of the field education coordinator role of ‘centrality’ emphasized by Hawthorne and Holtzman (1991). The *centrality* characteristic reflects how the position is central in its interface with faculty, agencies, other educational or professional institutions, and with the community. It is acknowledged that field coordinators carry “responsibility for the interface between the school and social work agencies; this involves visibility, communication, interpretation and linkage” (p. 320).

Similarly, one respondent evokes another characteristic of the position of *sensitivity* as illustrated by the following statement, “We are gatekeepers and when things go wrong all eyes turn in our direction. Amazing that universities scrimp on resources to field programs when these are their greatest points of vulnerability” (survey respondent 81). Thus, the role of the field education coordinator “is neither insulated, bounded, or static. On the contrary, it is particularly sensitive and vulnerable to changes in the school and professional environments, especially expectations and resources” (Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991, p. 326). Indeed, the

authors note that there seems to be an inverse correlation between these two, in that the more limited the available resources, the greater the expectation of field education.

It is also important to consider how the perception of the role and role strain and dual role functions outlined by Jones (1984) impacts the experience and approach of field education coordinators to addressing student professional suitability concerns. Hawthorne and Holtzman (1991) note that the “overriding quandary about the priority allocation and intermeshing of the administrative and educational functions” has been examined in a number of studies (p. 322). Jenkins and Sheafor’s 1982 study reaffirmed the significance of this range of definitions and perceptions for the role, position, and tasks of the field education coordinator (Hawthorne & Holtzman). Moreover, respondents’ perception of their role has implications for their gatekeeping practices. However, as noted earlier, how they perceive their role as field education coordinator (social worker, administrator, manager, and educator) in addition to the size of their program, and type of delivery has a direct bearing on their engagement in aspects of gatekeeping. Furthermore, the particular challenges encountered by field education coordinators resulting from the diversity of field instruction patterns; the divergence of performance expectations and accompanied role strain; the challenge of the administrative demands of the role; the need for support systems, and the potential for burnout and turnover are well documented in the literature (Jones, 1984; Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991; Morrow & Fogel, 2002). It is clearly apparent that “the maintenance of a quality field program is an extremely sensitive, difficult and time consuming task” (Shutz Gordon, 1982, p.116).

The findings from the study represent a broad range of respondents from across Canada, from both undergraduate and graduate programs, with current, new, and former experience as field education coordinators. Focus group respondents were very passionate and candid about the subject, emphasizing its importance as a critical issue of concern to their practice. This sentiment is also reflected in the depth and extent of the survey data. The responses affirmed the

importance of the study as all the respondents agreed or implied (survey respondents) that the issue of professional suitability in social work education is a valid and crucial area of study. Indeed, 62 percent (n=23) of survey respondents expressed an interest in participating in an interview to expand and clarify their responses, if interviews were conducted following the survey. However, a rich and detailed account of the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability has been achieved through the use of focus group and survey methods. As the first study to investigate the experience of field education coordinators, these findings provide important information about this aspect of social work education. Given what has been learned from the focus group and survey questionnaire, it is now necessary to consider the recommendations that emerge from the findings.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### SUMMARY, REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*Social work education is not an end in itself; but a means for entering the profession... Unless a social work program is relevant to the growth and needs of its students and to the clients they will serve, it cannot realistically claim to be a gatekeeper. Social work education has a responsibility to affect values in the educational process.*

Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 114

#### Summary

This study was inspired by my five year experience as a field education coordinator. While I found the work of field coordination very gratifying, I also encountered challenges in arriving at an understanding of my role and responsibilities for addressing student professional suitability concerns. Although the number of concerns were modest in comparison to the number of students I placed each year, these instances were very demanding, intense, and time consuming. This was compounded by notions of gatekeeping as oppressive and contrary to the values of social work, and as optional versus a duty. On the other hand, accreditation standards required that programs have a means for addressing suitability concerns, and I felt responsible to play my part in fulfilling the school's obligation to the accreditation standard, and to the consumers of students' current and future service.

Although faculty colleagues were generally supportive, the solitary work of field coordination was sometimes very bewildering without the ongoing insights and consistent dialogue with colleagues engaged in field coordination work. Over the years, I worked diligently with faculty and field instructors, and various deans and program chairs to ensure due process, and a fair and effective approach to addressing suitability concerns. Despite the existence of a professional suitability policy within the school, there were many complexities to addressing suitability concerns. Furthermore, the lack of clear criteria with which to assess professional suitability added to the challenge. As referenced in chapter one, I was also concerned about the deliberations of my university's Senate on one case that had gone to appeal,



and was planning to decline placing the student, had the appeal been overturned and the student required another field placement. In this particular case, the student had clearly breached the Code of Ethics. My desire to know if others faced similar challenges motivated this inquiry into the question, “What is the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability?”

Within this study, the nature of gatekeeping in field coordination, partners in the gatekeeping role, challenges to fulfilling the gatekeeping role, formulation of the problem, purpose and significance of the research, and the methodology for the study were outlined. Much insight into the research question was gleaned from the literature review, and engagement of the community of field education coordinators in focus group dialogue and participation in the web-based survey questionnaire. As noted in the findings chapter, field education coordinators experience many of the challenges I have encountered. The analysis of the findings reinforces the assertion that gatekeepers should possess what Rothenberg refers to as *the four C's* considered to be possessed by superior educators which include: 1) concern for competence; 2) commitment; 3) command of content; and 4) courage. Specifically, it is necessary to have concern for the competence of students; a commitment to education within the value framework of the profession; knowledge of the content to be taught; and courage or the willingness and ability to “sit in judgment on those whom (one) is teaching, realizing that this judgment may determine the future of those students within the profession” (cited in Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 119). Furthermore, Moore and Urwin add that this requires self awareness on the part of all involved, as well as the recognition that the social work profession is extremely diverse and requires individuals with a wide range of strengths and abilities.

This study highlights the location and expectations of field education coordinators, current challenges and practice approaches, and stimulates needed dialogue within education in social work and other helping disciplines. Inevitably such research provides a richer

understanding of educational leadership provided by field education coordinators, and may influence future policy, planning, procedures, and practice decisions with respect to addressing concerns of professional suitability in social work education. Ultimately, such work also demystifies the process of gatekeeping within field education and provides a better understanding of how field education coordinators and others balance their responsibilities to both students and the profession.

### **Reflections**

This study raises a number of critical questions in relation to the gatekeeping enterprise. It speaks to how we are meeting our obligations; how we are addressing concerns; what we need to do; and the important role field education coordinators play in addressing, and encouraging others to address suitability concerns. Consequently, further consideration and support of this role is warranted. Coordinators, while at the center of the issue, are not alone, but act in concert with others involved in the field education component. The strengths and limitations of accreditation standards, school policies and procedures, and current practices amongst field education coordinators, faculty and field instructors, and administration at the school and institutional level require consideration. This study has assembled a number of important observations, insights, and considerations which shed light on how we might reconcile our responsibilities for affording and for restricting access to the profession.

Findings of the study provide insight into the location of field education within academia, and the context in which field coordinators practice, which have implications for their experience and approach to addressing student professional suitability concerns. Given the questions left unanswered by previous studies, the role of the practicum in comprehensive gatekeeping efforts needs to be discussed and researched further. Moreover, this is the first study of this nature undertaken in Canada that specifically considers the experience of field education coordinators, and included all current (all current coordinators in Canada were invited

to complete the survey) and a number of former field education coordinators in Canada in the study. In addition, eight field education coordinators from four different provinces participated in the focus group, and 54 (63 percent of current and 15 former) responded to the national online survey, resulting in a 70 percent response rate. My five year experience as field education coordinator and a comprehensive review of the literature also provided a solid foundation for the study. Furthermore, this work responds to the dearth of literature pertaining to field education coordinators, and begins an important conversation from the unique vantage point of field education coordinators, and captures and presents their voice in a new light.

However, one must also be mindful of the potential pitfalls of the focus group method. For example, the influence of group dynamics, facilitation, status of the facilitator and respondents, prior contact and relationships between the facilitator and respondents, and between respondents, and how these aspects influence the content and communication patterns within the focus group discussion requires consideration. It is also necessary to acknowledge some of the challenges to survey methods, and the threats to generalizability of the data. According to Williamson (2002), there are several limitations of descriptive surveys. For example, one must consider *rival explanations* (threats to internal validity), it is difficult to control for rival explanations and one must be very careful to qualify statements pertaining to findings. Another example involves the *accuracy of self-report data*; the honesty of reporting is sometimes questionable due to the tendency for people to present themselves in the most positive light. It is also important to consider whether the questions were understood in the manner in which they were intended. In addition, the number of open-ended and mandatory questions, and the inability to skip questions or to view the entire survey before completing could also have contributed to respondents not completing some of the questions. Although a 70 percent response rate was achieved, the number of partial completions warrants consideration. The length of the survey may have been a factor in the completion rate.

As noted, the generalizability of the study is also of important consideration, given the number of partial survey completions (17 of 54). However, these 17 completed to varying degrees, and the implications of this have been noted in the methodology chapter, and within the discussion of the findings. It is acknowledged that time and finances permitting, the findings of this study would be further validated or strengthened by conducting in depth interviews with survey respondents, but this was beyond the parameters of this study.

Despite these potential misgivings, this mixed methods approach to the research contributed to providing a rich and detailed understanding into the research question. Each method complemented the other and provided for a comprehensive account of the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability concerns, that may not otherwise have been achieved through the use of other methods.

### **Recommendations**

Adopting a pragmatic orientation to this research underlines the importance of connecting the results of the focus group and survey methods to the practical challenges/problems faced by field education coordinators. Although this research is exploratory and does not provide a basis for definitive answers, various recommendations arise from this study. Specific to field education coordinators, opportunities for professional development regarding the ethical dimensions of their role, legal implications of various approaches to addressing professional suitability concerns, as well as further dialogue needs to occur between coordinators and amongst faculty and field instructors, particularly for those who are new to the role. Thus, it is necessary to provide social work faculty members in general, and field education coordinators in particular, with the institutional support (legal frameworks, resources, policies, and reward structures) they require to fulfill their multi-faceted responsibilities. Furthermore, it is necessary to formalize a collective, collaborative responsibility for addressing professional suitability concerns.

On the other hand, in a pluralistic society, from an ethical perspective, there are no short cuts to policies and practices for addressing professional suitability that would be widely acceptable; that is, no substitutes for informed conversations among those affected. Respondents have emphasized their leadership role, while stressing their collaborative approach to working with faculty, field instructors and administration, and have expressed a strong desire for further dialogue regarding gatekeeping issues amongst those involved in social work education. With respect to policy, less than half of respondents indicated further policies are needed. The remainder indicated further policies are not needed or they were not sure as to whether this would provide assistance in responding appropriately to professional suitability concerns. A number of respondent stressed that determining professional suitability is a complicated process and must be dealt with effectively through many interrelated processes. They have also expressed the need for further education which would include others in engaging in knowledge development regarding ethical practice frameworks, and other related topics of concern. Such findings support a neo-Aristotelian focus on cultivating judgment, versus purely procedural ethics or some form of technical rationality, and this reinforces the importance of some measure of agreement on substantive moral norms within a community (Dunne, 2005).

Conversely, there is a natural tension between the right of a profession to decide who is admitted to practice and the right of a university to decide who can be a student, which often results in a tension between the school's obligation to the profession and to the university. In order to address this tension, it is critical that schools in consultation with the profession begin to clearly articulate the professional suitability requirements of students, and their obligation to address such concerns to university administration. Undoubtedly, such a process will enhance the level of support provided by university administration when actions are required. Likewise, this support may be further enhanced by the framing of all criteria, standards and performance expectations as *academic* standards (Cobb, 1994; Cobb & Jordan, 1989; Cole & Lewis, 1993;

Madden, 1993 cited in Gibbs, Blakely & Contributors, 2000, p.259). Moreover, the reframing of criteria may create more of a common language between schools and university administration. Gibbs clarifies that the framing of standards as academic is critical regardless of whether specific standards relate to professional performance expectations or scholastic matters.

However, as noted in the earlier discussion of admissions criteria, the terms *academic* and *non-academic* criteria continue to be used in mutually exclusive ways. Furthermore, Moore and Urwin also argue that “appropriate professional behavior is an academic requirement; it is not separate from the educational component” (1991, p. 5). As such, it should not be viewed as a misconduct issue (Moore & Urwin, 1990). Moreover, “courts have declared that a student’s behavior or conduct can be considered an *academic* matter” (Raymond, p. 123). Such reframing of expectations has profound implications for student evaluation in field education, and for increasing the level of support for addressing professional suitability concerns within university contexts. Thus, it is critical to develop professionally oriented standards (academic standards) to assess professional capacities. Furthermore, Tam’s professional suitability scale is worthy of further consideration as a potential measure of evaluating professional suitability for social work practice.

Likewise, the Canadian Association for Social Work Education could posit what kind of policies, procedures, and practices balance the need for consistent guidelines with the flexibility required within today’s pluralistic social context. Furthermore, Gibbs emphasizes the role of the Code of Ethics, accreditation standards, and curriculum policy statements in shaping gatekeeping policies (2000). Raymond also notes the appropriateness of applying the Code in the evaluation of professional performance, and states it is acceptable to hold students accountable to the Code, even if they are not members of the association. The role of the Code in the evaluation of professional performance requires further consideration, given the ascribed role of the Code within CASWE standards. While provincial licensing bodies would provide

additional safeguards for ensuring professional suitability, in my view this should not absolve educators of their responsibility to ensure graduates are suited to the profession. The final recommendation applies to students in social work programs. Specifically, it is necessary for students to be informed of the professional suitability expectations that they are required to fulfill. Cobb and Jordon assert that students “should be informed that in professional programs, academic performance includes classroom performance, class attendance, ethical behavior, and psychological well-being sufficient to interact positively and instructively with clients” (1989, p. 94).

Results of this study highlight the need for further research in this area. Given the dimensions of power associated with activities of gatekeeping, it would be useful to look at this topic through an anti-oppressive practice framework or other relevant practice approaches, such as feminist, anti-racist, structural, critical, and liberatory frameworks (Dominelli, 1988; Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Fook, 2002; Leonard, 2001; Moreau, 1993; Roche, Dewees, Trailweaver, Alexander, Cuddy & Handy, 1999). ‘Anti-oppressive social work’ represents the current nomenclature for a range of theories and practices that embrace a social justice perspective. This approach may provide a deeper understanding of the stance or perspective toward practice that influences individual approaches to addressing professional suitability.

Likewise, research into how perceptions of the field education coordinator role influence gatekeeping practices would be beneficial. Furthermore, given the growing literature on the role of various forms of intuition, including “gut feelings” (Gigerenzer, 2007) and judgement, a natural topic for further research would be the discussion pertaining to the role of educated intuition in practice. A few of the respondents acknowledged listening and trusting their instinct or gut reactions. Others reframed this, stating this is more than a hunch, it is a highly trained, sophisticated, and well honed skill. It is a trained gut or advanced assessment skill. They also

emphasized the importance of sorting through their own reactions through engagement in considerable reflection and consultation with others.

On the other hand, research specifically devoted to examination of the policy context of program delivery would also be very useful. Comparative research could be conducted in teacher or nursing field education. In addition to conducting in depth interviews within this study, inclusion of different respondent groups (i.e., university faculty liaisons, course and field instructors, university and school administrators, students, etc.) and additional qualitative and quantitative methods could be employed within social work and other helping disciplines. Research into the effectiveness of specific pre- and post-placement screening measures, and Tam's professional suitability scale could also be conducted, in order to determine the effectiveness of particular methods, and what improvements are needed. Instances of student professional suitability concerns could also be documented in detail, including the nature of the professional suitability concerns, and the processes employed for deliberating on such matters. It is important to engage in further research regarding how social work and other allied professional programs respond to professional suitability issues. A number of methods such as case study, interview, survey, or focus group methods, as well as others could be employed. Further research into the experience of those responding to student suitability concerns and the meaning assigned to this would be a valuable contribution to knowledge within professional education.

The world of social work and other professional disciplines, and the education of future students are greatly influenced by the changing nature of the world in which we live. As changes occur, we must stay alert and lay claim to those aspects which we consider integral to graduating social work students who will maintain an anti-oppressive approach to practice, and contribute to enhancing the lives of the people they serve.



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## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A: British Columbia Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics**

Ethical behaviour is at the core of every profession. The BCASW Code of Ethics was jointly adopted by BCASW and BRSW in January 2003 and consists of eleven principles:

1. A social worker shall maintain the best interest of the client as the primary professional obligation.
2. A social worker shall respect the intrinsic worth of the persons she or he serves in her or his professional relationship with them.
3. A social worker shall carry out her or his professional duties and obligations with integrity and objectivity.
4. A social worker shall have and maintain competence in the provision of a social work service to a client.
5. A social worker shall not exploit the relationship with a client for personal benefit, gain or gratification.
6. A social worker shall protect the confidentiality of all professionally acquired information. She or he shall disclose such information only when required or allowed by law to do so, or when clients have consented to disclosure.
7. A social worker who engages in another profession, occupation, affiliation or calling shall not allow these outside interests to affect the social work relationship with the client, professional judgment, independence and/or competence.
8. A social worker shall not provide social work services or otherwise behave in a manner that discredits the profession of social work or diminishes the public's trust in the profession.
9. A social worker shall promote service, program and agency practices and policies that are consistent with this Code of Ethics and the Standards of Practice of the Board of Registration for Social Workers in British Columbia.
10. A social worker shall promote excellence in her or his profession.
11. A social worker shall advocate change in the best interests of the client, and for the overall benefit of society.

Retrieved from <http://www.bcasw.org/Content/About%20BCASW/Code%20of%20Ethics.asp>, July, 20, 2008.

## APPENDIX B: TRU Policy on Professional Suitability

### Purpose:

To provide a review mechanism to assess concerns regarding the professional suitability of a student for the practice of social work.

### Introduction:

The School of Social Work and Human Service of Thompson Rivers University provides a university education in social work at the baccalaureate level. The School's mission is to prepare competent generalist practitioners to work with diverse cultural groups especially in small urban centres and rural communities. The school is committed to the principles of social justice, equality, dignity and worth of all people, respect for diversity, and a belief in the capacity for change.

As part of this mission, the School has a duty to maximize student learning, promote social work values, and ensure that clients, the public, and other partners in student learning are protected from harm in the education process. In addition, the School has a duty to ensure that students graduating from the program are: (1) worthy of the professional trust and respect that a bachelor's degree in social work implies, and (2) do not reduce the public trust in social work and social workers by their behaviour.

(BCASW Code of Ethics) <http://www.brsw.bc.ca/>

The Field Education Coordinator, a faculty member, Chair and/or Dean may recommend removal of a student from field placement and/or their suspension from the program when there is reason to conclude that the student has:

- a) behaved or performed in a manner which endangers students, clients, faculty, staff or volunteers; or
- b) harassed or abused a student, client, faculty, staff, agency staff or volunteers; or
- c) been convicted of, or charged with a criminal offence that would:
  - reduce the public's trust in the person as a professional social worker or
  - present an unacceptable risk of harm to clients, members of the TRU community, or other professionals.

### Procedures:

1. A faculty liaison or faculty member, acting on his/her own judgment with reference to the BCASW Code of Ethics or following consultation with the Agency Field Instructor and the Field Education Coordinator, may recommend to the Chair and Dean of Social Work and Human Service the removal of the student from field placement and/or their suspension from the Program. Such recommendation must be made in writing stating the circumstances that the recommendation is based upon. A copy must be provided to the student. If necessary, the field instructor or faculty liaison may terminate the student's participation in the field placement or in class immediately.
2. Within three working days of the recommendation, the Dean of School of Social Work and Human Service (or designate) will meet with the student to review the situation, and to allow the student an opportunity to explain his/her conduct. The Dean of School of Social Work and Human Service (or designate) will then make a decision regarding the student's status in the program. The Dean of School of Social Work and Human Service (or designate) must determine either:
  - a) that the student continue in the program with no restrictions; or
  - b) that the student continue in the program under appropriate conditions/restrictions (e.g., harassment advisor/police investigation, temporary suspension of practicum); or
  - c) that a recommendation be made to the President of TRU to suspend the student from the program.
3. Within five working days of that meeting, written notification of the Dean of School of Social Work and Human Service (or designate's) decision will be forwarded to the student and the Faculty member(s) involved and, if necessary, to the Agency Field Instructor.

4. A student governed under this policy is entitled to an appeal through the TRU Appeals process (Ed-4-0). TRU's Appeal Procedure Policy is available at:  
[http://www.tru.bc.ca/policy/brd\\_ed/BRD\\_ED\(25\)%2004-0.pdf](http://www.tru.bc.ca/policy/brd_ed/BRD_ED(25)%2004-0.pdf)

## APPENDIX C: Focus Group Recruitment Letter

### THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



#### Department of Educational Studies

Mailing address:  
2125 Main Mall  
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: 604-822-5374  
Fax: 604-822-4244  
<http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca>

### Exploring Notions of Gatekeeping in Social Work Field Coordination

#### Principal Investigator

Dr. Daniel Vokey, Associate Professor  
Department of Educational Studies  
Telephone: (604) 822-2085

#### Co-Investigator

Jeanette Robertson, EdD Candidate  
Department of Educational Studies  
Telephone: (250) 371-5598

Dear University Social Work Field Education Coordinators:

I am writing to invite your participation in a focus group that will be held on ? date. The focus group will have two purposes: (1) to describe the current notions of gatekeeping in social work field education; and (2) to explore the extent to which these notions impact the experience of Field Education Coordinators as educational leaders. The focus group will be 1.5 to 2 hours long, and will be facilitated by myself.

This research will address the tensions and ethical challenges experienced within the role of Field Education Coordinator, which sometimes involves assessing the professional/personal suitability of social work students, along with a number of other dimensions that call for ethical decision making. I plan to draw upon the results of the focus group in designing a national survey to gather information on how Field Education Coordinators think about the gatekeeping aspects of their role and the conceptual or theoretical resources they bring to bear on the ethical dimensions of such aspects.

This research will form part of my doctoral thesis required for completion of the Doctor of Education (EdD) degree.

There will be no remuneration or compensation for participating in this study. However, participants will receive copies of the focus group summary once completed. Those who express interest in participating in the focus group will be asked to sign a consent form.

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Dr. Daniel Vokey at (604) 822-2085.

Sincerely,

*J. Robertson*

Jeanette Robertson, BSW, MSW

## APPENDIX D: Focus Group Participant Consent Form

### THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



#### Department of Educational Studies

Mailing address:

2125 Main Mall

Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: 604-822-5374

Fax: 604-822-4244

<http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca>

### Informed Consent Form

### Exploring Notions of Gatekeeping in Social Work Field Coordination

#### Principal Investigator

Dr. Daniel Vokey, Associate Professor

Department of Educational Studies

Telephone: (604) 822-2085

#### Co-Investigator

Jeanette Robertson, EdD Candidate

Department of Educational Studies

Telephone: (250) 371-5598

#### Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of current notions of gatekeeping held by university Field Education Coordinators in social work programs, and how these notions impact their experience as educational leaders.

University Field Education Coordinators in social work from across Canada will be asked to participate in a focus group that will have two purposes: (1) to describe notions of gatekeeping in social work field education; and (2) to explore the extent to which these notions impact the experience of social work Field Education Coordinators. This research will form part of Jeanette Robertson's doctoral thesis required for completion of the Doctor of Education (EdD) degree.

#### Procedure:

A 1.5 to 2 hour long focus group will be held at a mutually agreed upon time. The focus group will be audio-taped in order to transcribe content and themes for later analysis.

#### Confidentiality:

Personal information collected in this research study will be kept strictly confidential by the researchers. Participants and/or university affiliation will not be disclosed in future publications or presentations. Only the researchers will have access to the audio-tape and other data. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained by coding the data, and storing the audio-tape and transcripts in a locked filing cabinet. Data records will also be stored on a password protected computer. The audio-tape will be destroyed once the analysis is complete. Participants in the focus group will be asked by Jeanette Robertson not to discuss information shared in the group with persons outside the group. She will also advise participants that confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed.



**Remuneration/Compensation:**

There will be no remuneration or compensation for participating in this study. Participants will receive copies of the focus group summary once completed.

**Contact for information about the study:**

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Dr. Daniel Vokey at (604) 822-2085. If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

**Consent:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Your signature below indicates that you received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you agree to participate in this study by being interviewed during the focus group, and that you consent to allowing the focus group to be audio-taped.

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

---

Printed Name of Participant

## **APPENDIX E: Focus Group Interview Guide**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Focus Group**

#### **Exploring Notions of Gatekeeping In Social Work Field Coordination**

Note: It is expected that responses to questions by participants will build on one another and that the facilitator will ask follow-up questions of participants to clarify the meaning of what is said.

1. Describe the current notions of gatekeeping in social work education.
2. How do these notions impact your experience as field education coordinator?
3. To what extent do you engage in gatekeeping practices?
4. What guides your practice in this regard?
5. What gatekeeping expectations are placed on you by administration, faculty, field instructors and students and how do you respond to these expectations?
6. Do you experience tension related to these expectations? If so, please describe.
7. What factors bear on your ability to address concerns?

## APPENDIX F: Recruitment Letter for Survey Pre-Test

### THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



#### Department of Educational Studies

Mailing address:

2125 Main Mall

Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

February 9, 2009

Tel: 604-822-5374

Fax: 604-822-4244

Jeanette Robertson

Co-Investigator

Department of Educational Studies

Telephone: (604) 521-8588

Email: fldstudy@interchange.ubc.ca

Dr. Daniel Vokey, Associate Professor

Principal Investigator

Department of Educational Studies

(604) 822-2085

daniel.vokey@ubc.ca

Dear Current or Former Field Education Coordinator [NAME]:

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey on the experience of Field Education Coordinators/ Directors in responding to student professional suitability concerns within their role. As we discussed, the purpose of such pre-tests is to determine the effectiveness of data collection instruments under realistic conditions. Your responses will not be included in the study. The field test should indicate whether the survey questionnaire collects the data it is intended to collect and whether the directions and language are clear.

The survey link will be emailed to you in the next few days. Please answer the survey as completely as possible. Following completion of the survey, please complete the feedback questions sent to you by email to comment as to the time required to complete the survey; the clarity of the directions and/or language and whether you experienced any difficulty in understanding the questions as posed.

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or Dr. Daniel Vokey at the contact information above.

Once again, thank you for your assistance in pre-testing this survey.

Sincerely,

*J. Robertson*

Jeanette Robertson, BSW, MSW, EdD (Candidate)

## APPENDIX G: Pre-Test Feedback Questions

1. How long did it take you to complete this survey?

2. Were the instructions/directions clear?

\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_ No

If not, please comment

3. Were the questions clear?

\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_ No

Please indicate which questions (if any) were problematic. Please explain the nature of the lack of clarity.

4. Did you experience any problems in understanding what kind of answers were expected, or in providing answers to the questions as posed?

\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_ No

Please indicate which questions (if any), presented problems for you.

5. Please feel free to provide any additional thoughts and comments on the overall quality of the survey questionnaire that will refine it before it is administered to Field Education Coordinators.

## **APPENDIX H: Recruitment Letter for Survey**

### **THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**



#### **Department of Educational Studies**

Mailing address:

2125 Main Mall

Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: 604-822-5374

Fax: 604-822-4244

February 2009

Jeanette Robertson

Co-Investigator

Department of Educational Studies

Telephone: (604) 521-8588

Email: fldstudy@interchange.ubc.ca

Dr. Daniel Vokey, Associate Professor

Principal Investigator

Department of Educational Studies

(604) 822-2085

daniel.vokey@ubc.ca

Dear Current or Former Field Education Coordinator [NAME]:

I'm writing in advance of sending you a link to an online survey to ask for your assistance in completing a survey devoted to exploring the experience of Field Education Coordinators/Directors in responding to student professional suitability concerns within their role.

French and English versions of the survey will be available to all current and former Field Education Coordinators/Directors in Canada. If you are aware of former or current Field Coordinators/Directors who would be interested in completing the survey please feel free to send me their email address or provide them with my email address noted above. The survey link will be emailed to you during the next few weeks, and you will be invited to complete it within three weeks of receipt. It will take no longer than one hour to complete, and you will be provided with the option of completing it in more than one session.

Your participation is, of course, voluntary. You can refuse to participate by simply not completing the survey. If you are willing and able to participate, please answer the survey as completely as possible. Completion of the survey will be taken as your consent to participate in the study. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. The findings will be presented in aggregate form and not attributed to any one person. No data will be linked to any participant by name or institution in any published report or account of the research. There will be no remuneration or compensation for participating in this study. However, participants will receive the results of the survey if they so request.

Nooro Online Research (<http://www.nooro.com/>) is the online survey company hosting the survey. The company has been an independent privately-owned Ontario company for over 13 years and has handled more than 700 online projects of varying scopes for clients in Canada, the United States, and around the world. Their primary servers are in Toronto, Ontario, with backup servers in Barrie, an hour north of Toronto. The data never leaves Canada. All survey response data, and all copies of regular backups will be removed from the Nooro server once the analysis of survey results has been completed. Only the co-investigator, Jeanette Robertson and the four staff of Nooro Online Research, and a certified translator (for the French language surveys only) who have signed confidentiality agreements will have access to raw data.

As a former Field Education Coordinator, I am very interested in learning about the experiences of others in this role. This research will form part of my doctoral dissertation required for completion of the Doctor of Education (EdD) degree. If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or Dr. Daniel Vokey at the above contact information.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to complete this survey, your input is integral to the study.

Sincerely,

*J. Robertson*

Jeanette Robertson, BSW, MSW, EdD (Candidate)

## APPENDIX I: Survey Questionnaire

### English Version of Online Survey Questionnaire

*Please note this survey was administered to current and former social work field education coordinators/directors with questions written in past and present tense. There was also a French version of the survey administered to current social work field education coordinators/directors.*

1. Are you a current or former field education coordinator?

Current

Former

#### PURPOSE OF SURVEY

Field is often the component of social work education during which students' suitability for the profession is most clearly revealed. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience and approach of field education coordinators/directors to addressing student professional suitability either before or during the field placement.

2. How important is having an approach to addressing student professional suitability to your practice?

Not important

Moderately important

Very important

3. How often in the past one to two years have you been confronted by concerns related to student professional suitability?

Never

1-3 times

4-5 times

More than 5 times

N/A new to position

4. What knowledge and skills WILL you draw on in responding to a student suitability concern when one arises?

5. How do you define professional suitability? When is someone considered not professionally suitable?

## SPECIFIC EXAMPLE

This section is devoted to consideration of a specific example from your practice where a student's professional suitability was in question.

6. Please outline a specific example where concerns were raised about a student's lack of suitability?
7. What steps did you take to assess and address the concern?
8. What knowledge and skills did you draw on in this situation?
9. What were the outcomes of your deliberations?
10. Did you encounter any particular challenges during the process of deliberation or in arriving at a final outcome in this situation?

1 yes            2 no            3 not applicable

Please describe:

11. What was the greatest challenge in addressing this specific case?
12. Were there any legal concerns regarding the process or outcomes of the matter?

Please comment:

13. Was school, faculty or departmental administration (Chair, Dean/Director) involved in this case?

Was the level of support received sufficient?

14. Was there involvement of university administration in this case (President, Senate)?

Were school or faculty decisions supported?



## SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL SUITABILITY CONCERNS

15. PLEASE RESPOND TO ALL OF THE CATEGORIES BELOW. How frequently have you encountered the following professional suitability concerns?

Lack of critical professional judgement

1 never      2 rarely      3 sometimes      4 frequently

Lack of ability to monitor and evaluate one's behaviour in relation to the relevant Code of Ethics

1 never      2 rarely      3 sometimes      4 frequently

Unable to treat clients with respect

1 never      2 rarely      3 sometimes      4 frequently

Unable to demonstrate awareness of personal and professional boundaries

1 never      2 rarely      3 sometimes      4 frequently

Unable to communicate effectively with clients

1 never      2 rarely      3 sometimes      4 frequently

Unable to communicate effectively with agency staff

1 never      2 rarely      3 sometimes      4 frequently

Exhibited current addictions issues which impeded ability to serve clients

1 never      2 rarely      3 sometimes      4 frequently

Exhibited current mental health issues which impeded ability to serve clients

1 never      2 rarely      3 sometimes      4 frequently

Exhibited behaviour that was in breach of the relevant social work Code of Ethics

1 never      2 rarely      3 sometimes      4 frequently

16. Are there professional suitability concerns that have not been noted above?

Yes

No

17. If so, please describe the nature and frequency of these concerns.

**Nature and frequency of concern 1**

1 rarely          2 sometimes          3 frequently

Please comment on the nature of the concern:

**Nature and frequency of concern 2**

1 rarely          2 sometimes          3 frequently

Please comment on the nature of the concern:

**Nature and frequency of concern 3**

1 rarely          2 sometimes          3 frequently

Please comment on the nature of the concern:

**PROFESSIONAL SUITABILITY POLICY**

18. Does your program currently have a professional suitability policy?

Yes          No          Currently under development          Not sure

19. What is the name of your school's suitability policy?

\_\_\_\_ Professional Suitability Policy

\_\_\_\_ Personal Suitability Policy

\_\_\_\_ Not applicable

\_\_\_\_ Not sure

\_\_\_\_ Other, please specify

20. Have you consulted your school's policy when addressing professional suitability concerns?

Yes          No          Not applicable          N/A, new to position

21. Are you satisfied with the level of guidance that the policy provides when you are addressing concerns about a student's professional suitability?

Yes          No          Not applicable          N/A, new to position

Please comment:

## PREVALENCE OF CONCERNS

22. Choose one of the following that best describes the prevalence of concerns during the past 2-5 years in the position:

- ☐ Decreased
- ☐ Remained constant
- ☐ Increased
- ☐ N/A, new to position

23. Have you placed students whose professional suitability was questionable?

Yes                      No                      N/A, new to position

24. If so, approximately how many per year and what were the suitability concerns?

25. When do professional suitability issues come to your attention MOST OFTEN?  
If 'other' please specify.

- ☐ At the point of admissions
- ☐ During the field placement process
- ☐ After placements have commenced
- ☐ A combination of the above
- ☐ N/A, new to position
- ☐ Other, please specify

26. Have you experienced specific challenges in assessing and addressing professional suitability in your practice either before or during the field placement?

Yes                      No                      N/A, new to position

27. What do you find most challenging when addressing concerns raised about a student's professional suitability before or during the field placement?

28. What level of involvement do you have in field matters when concerns regarding student professional suitability arise?

None                      Low                      Moderate                      High                      N/A, new to position

29. What factors contribute to your level of involvement in these matters?

## ROLE EXPECTATIONS

30. What level of expectations do others place on you for assessing and addressing student professional suitability? PLEASE RESPOND TO EACH OF THE CATEGORIES. 'N/A' TO ALL IF UNSURE OR NEW TO POSITION.

### Field

None          Low          Moderate          High          N/A

### Faculty

None          Low          Moderate          High          N/A

### Administration

None          Low          Moderate          High          N/A

### Students

None          Low          Moderate          High          N/A

### Accreditation body

None          Low          Moderate          High          N/A

31. Please comment on the nature of these expectations (field, faculty, administration, students, and accreditation bodies). N/A, IF NEW TO POSITION.

32. Do you inform faculty and field instructors that they have a shared responsibility to address concerns related to students' professional suitability?

Yes          No          N/A, new to position

33. What level of responsibility do field education coordinators/directors have for addressing concerns related to professional suitability DURING THE PRE-PLACEMENT process?

Low          Moderate          High

## MEASURES FOR ADDRESSING CONCERNS

34. What specific measures do you take to address concerns related to professional suitability DURING THE PRE-PLACEMENT process? CHOOSE MULTIPLE RESPONSES TO THIS QUESTION. IF 'OTHER' PLEASE SPECIFY.

- ☐ I am involved in admissions processes
- ☐ Students submit an application for field placement
- ☐ Students submit learning objective forms
- ☐ Students submit resumes
- ☐ I facilitate pre-placement field preparation seminars
- ☐ The Code of Ethics is outlined in the field manual
- ☐ The Code of Ethics is discussed within the pre-placement process
- ☐ There is a professional suitability policy outlined in the field manual
- ☐ The professional suitability policy is discussed with students prior to placement
- ☐ Students sign an oath of confidentiality
- ☐ Students sign a student conduct agreement
- ☐ I meet individually with students when needed
- ☐ I consult faculty regarding specific students prior to placement
- ☐ I share potential student/agency/field instructor matches with faculty prior to finalizing
- ☐ I assign myself as the faculty liaison
- ☐ I share specific student information with faculty and field with the student's permission
- ☐ I match students with specific field instructors
- ☐ I match students with specific faculty liaisons
- ☐ I place students in particular placement settings
- ☐ I discuss professional suitability requirements with field instructors
- ☐ I review third year student practicum correspondence to facilitate fourth year placements
- ☐ I provide faculty liaisons with student practicum files which include all pre-placement and third year practicum correspondence
- ☐ N/A, new to position
- ☐ Other, please specify

35. What level of responsibility do field education coordinators/directors have for addressing concerns related to professional suitability AFTER THE COMMENCEMENT of the field placement?

Low                      Moderate                      High

36. What specific measures do you take to address concerns related to professional suitability AFTER COMMENCEMENT of the field placement? CHOOSE MULTIPLE RESPONSES TO THIS QUESTION. IF 'OTHER' PLEASE SPECIFY.

- ☐ I conduct field review meetings at midterm with faculty liaisons
- ☐ I provide field instructor sessions during the field placement process
- ☐ I meet with faculty when requested
- ☐ I take an active leadership role with faculty, field and students when requested to address specific concerns
- ☐ N/A, new to position
- ☐ Other, please specify

37. Has your opinion changed regarding the level of responsibility that field education coordinators/directors should have for addressing professional suitability? Please indicate if or when it changed.

- ☐ Yes, within the last two years
- ☐ Yes, within the last three to five years
- ☐ Yes, over five years ago
- ☐ No, opinion has not changed
- ☐ N/A, new to position

38. What factors influenced this change?

#### **CRIMINAL RECORD CHECKS**

39. Does your program require criminal record checks of all students?

Yes                      No

Other, please specify:

40. Are you responsible for receiving and making decisions about criminal record checks?

Yes                      No                      Not applicable

41. Do you believe it is appropriate for Field Education Coordinators/Directors to receive and make decisions about criminal record checks?

Yes                      No                      Undecided

Please comment:

## **CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION (CASWE) ACCREDITATION STANDARDS**

42. Are you aware of the CASWE accreditation standards related to student professional suitability?

Yes                      No

43. Do CASWE accreditation standards provide clear guidance for your practice?

Yes                      No                      Not sure

Please comment:

44. Do CASWE accreditation standards provide clear criteria for determining professional suitability?

Yes                      No                      Not sure

Please comment:

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

45. How satisfied are you with your current knowledge and skills for responding to professional suitability concerns?

Unsatisfied              Somewhat satisfied              Satisfied              Very satisfied              N/A

46. How often do you find that your skills and knowledge enable you to respond to professional suitability concerns to your satisfaction?

Never                      Occasionally                      Always                      N/A

47. What are or will you do well in preventing and/or responding to professional suitability concerns?

48. What would enhance your ability to respond effectively to professional suitability concerns?

49. Are further policies and procedures needed to assist you in responding appropriately to professional suitability concerns?

Yes

No

Not sure

Please comment:

50. Is there particular training/education that would assist you in enhancing your approach to assessing and addressing suitability concerns (i.e., mediation, conflict resolution, assessment skills, legal and accreditation information, ethical practice frameworks, etc)? Please list and describe.

51. What other aspects would be of assistance? Please list and describe.

## **FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

52. This is the last question of the survey. Please list and describe any considerations with respect to the topic of student professional suitability that have not been mentioned that you would like noted. You will now be asked to provide demographic information.

THANK YOU!

## **DEMOGRAPHICS**

53. Please indicate your gender

Male

Female



54. Please indicate your position title. If 'other' please specify.

- ☐ Field Education Coordinator
- ☐ Field Education Director
- ☐ Other, please specify

55. Please indicate whether you work in a bachelor or master level program

- ☐ Bachelor level
- ☐ Master level
- ☐ Both levels

56. University:

\_\_\_\_\_

57. Please indicate your age category:

- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65 or over

58. Please indicate which of the following applies to your highest degree held. If 'other' please specify.

- ☐ BSW
- ☐ MSW
- ☐ PhD or EdD
- ☐ Other, please specify

59. How long have you been in your position?

- ☐ 2 to 4 years
- ☐ 5 to 9 years
- ☐ 10 to 14 years
- ☐ 15 to 19 years
- ☐ more than 20 years

60. Please indicate the status of your position. If 'other' please specify.

- ☐ Faculty
- ☐ Administration
- ☐ Professional staff
- ☐ Other, please specify

61. Please indicate which of the following you have responsibilities for in your position. MORE THAN ONE SELECTION IS POSSIBLE. If 'other' please specify.

- ☐ BSW field coordination
- ☐ MSW field coordination
- ☐ Distance education
- ☐ International field placements
- ☐ National field placements
- ☐ Fulfilling the role of faculty field liaison
- ☐ Teaching concurrent field seminars
- ☐ Teaching credited courses
- ☐ Program Chair
- ☐ Scholarship
- ☐ Service
- ☐ Other, please specify

62. How many students do you place each year?

- ☐ Less than 49
- ☐ 50 to 89
- ☐ 90 to 129
- ☐ 130 to 149
- ☐ 150 to 199
- ☐ 200 to 299
- ☐ More than 300

63. How many field education coordinators/directors are there in your school or department? If 'other' please specify.

- ☐ I am the only field education coordinator/director
- ☐ There is one other person in the role
- ☐ There are two other people in the role
- ☐ There are more than two other people in the role
- ☐ Other, please specify

64. How many field education assistants are there in your school or department? If 'other' please specify.

\_\_\_\_ There is one field assistant

\_\_\_\_ There are two field assistants

\_\_\_\_ There are more than two field assistants

\_\_\_\_ Other, please specify

65. Are you interested in participating in an interview to expand and clarify your responses, if interviews are conducted following the survey?

Yes

No

## APPENDIX J: Survey Questionnaire Results

In addition to the following quantitative data, extensive qualitative data in response to open-ended questions (11,059 words) was also received.

VALUE	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
<b>1. Are you a current or former field education coordinator?</b>		
Current	39	72
Former	<u>15</u>	<u>28</u>
TOTAL	54	100
<b>2. How important is having an approach to addressing student professional suitability to your practice?</b>		
Not important	0	0
Moderately important	7	13
Very important	46	85
Missing	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>
TOTAL	54	100
<b>3. How often in the past one to two years have you been confronted by concerns related to student professional suitability?</b>		
Never	5	9
1-3 times	15	28
4-5 times	18	33
More than 5 times	12	22
N/A new to position	3	6
Missing	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### SPECIFIC EXAMPLE

<b>10. Did you encounter any particular challenges during the process of deliberation or in arriving at a final outcome in this situation?</b>		
Yes	28	52
No	10	19
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>11</u>	<u>20</u>
TOTAL	54	100
<b>12. Were there any legal concerns regarding the process or outcomes of the matter?</b>		
Yes	13	24
No	24	44
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**13. Was school, faculty or departmental administration (Chair, Dean/Director) involved in this case?**

Yes	25	46
No	12	22
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**14. Was there involvement of university administration in this case (President, Senate)?**

Yes	3	6
No	34	63
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL SUITABILITY CONCERNS**

**15. PLEASE RESPOND TO ALL OF THE CATEGORIES BELOW. How frequently have you encountered the following professional suitability concerns?**

**Lack of critical professional judgement**

Never	0	0
Rarely	9	17
Sometimes	28	52
Frequently	0	0
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Lack of ability to monitor and evaluate one's behaviour in relation to the relevant Code of Ethics**

Never	1	2
Rarely	14	26
Sometimes	20	37
Frequently	2	4
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Unable to treat clients with respect**

Never	6	11
Rarely	24	44
Sometimes	7	13
Frequently	0	0
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Unable to demonstrate awareness of personal and professional boundaries**

Never	1	2
Rarely	6	11
Sometimes	27	50
Frequently	3	6
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Unable to communicate effectively with clients**

Never	3	6
Rarely	12	22
Sometimes	19	35
Frequently	3	6
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Unable to communicate effectively with agency staff**

Never	1	2
Rarely	14	26
Sometimes	19	35
Frequently	3	6
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Exhibited current addictions issues which impeded ability to serve clients**

Never	17	31
Rarely	18	33
Sometimes	2	4
Frequently	0	0
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Exhibited current mental health issues which impeded ability to serve client**

Never	6	11
Rarely	17	31
Sometimes	13	24
Frequently	1	2
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Exhibited behaviour that was in breach of the relevant social work Code of Ethics**

Never	11	20
Rarely	17	31
Sometimes	9	17
Frequently	0	0
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**16. Are there professional suitability concerns that have not been noted above?**

Yes	15	28
No	22	41
Not applicable	5	9
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**17. If so, please describe the nature and frequency of these concerns.**

**Nature and frequency of concern 1**

Rarely	5	9
Sometimes	6	11
Frequently	4	7
Not applicable	27	50
Missing	<u>12</u>	<u>22</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Nature and frequency of concern 2**

Rarely	1	2
Sometimes	1	2
Frequently	2	4
Not applicable	27	50
Missing	<u>23</u>	<u>43</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Nature and frequency of concern 3**

Rarely	0	0
Sometimes	0	0
Frequently	0	0
Not applicable	27	50
Missing	<u>27</u>	<u>50</u>
TOTAL	54	100

## PROFESSIONAL SUITABILITY POLICY

### 18. Does your program currently have a professional suitability policy?

Yes	16	30
No	12	22
Currently under development	7	13
Not sure	5	9
Missing	<u>14</u>	<u>26</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### 19. What is the name of your school's suitability policy?

Professional Suitability Policy	6	11
Personal Suitability Policy	0	0
Not applicable	20	37
Not sure	4	7
Other, please specify	10	19
Missing	<u>14</u>	<u>26</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### 20. Have you consulted your school's policy when addressing professional suitability concerns?

Yes	18	33
No	0	0
Not applicable	22	41
N/A, new to position	0	0
Missing	<u>14</u>	<u>26</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### 21. Are you satisfied with the level of guidance that the policy provides when you are addressing concerns about a student's professional suitability?

Yes	15	28
No	4	7
Not applicable	21	39
N/A, new to position	0	0
Missing	<u>14</u>	<u>26</u>
TOTAL	54	100

## PREVALENCE OF CONCERNS

### 22. Choose one of the following that best describes the prevalence of concerns during the past 2-5 years in the position:

Decreased	2	4
Remained constant	21	39
Increased	7	13
N/A, new to position	9	17
Missing	<u>15</u>	<u>28</u>
TOTAL	54	100



**23. Have you placed students whose professional suitability was questionable?**

Yes	26	48
No	4	7
N/A, new to position	9	17
Missing	<u>15</u>	<u>28</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**25. When do professional suitability issues come to your attention MOST OFTEN? If 'other' please specify.**

**At the point of admissions**

Yes	11	20
No	24	44
Missing	<u>19</u>	<u>35</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**During the field placement process**

Yes	22	41
No	13	24
Missing	<u>19</u>	<u>35</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**After placements have commenced**

Yes	23	43
No	12	22
Missing	<u>19</u>	<u>35</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**A combination of the above**

Yes	0	0
No	35	65
Missing	<u>19</u>	<u>35</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**N/A, new to position**

Yes	1	2
No	34	63
Missing	<u>19</u>	<u>35</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Other, please specify**

Yes	10	19
No	25	46
Missing	<u>19</u>	<u>35</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**26. Have you experienced specific challenges in assessing and addressing professional suitability in your practice either before or during the field placement?**

Yes	28	52
No	9	17
N/A, new to position	2	4
Missing	<u>15</u>	<u>28</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**28. What level of involvement do you have in field matters when concerns regarding student professional suitability arise?**

None	0	0
Low	2	4
Moderate	6	11
High	28	52
N/A, new to position	2	4
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**ROLE EXPECTATIONS**

**30. What level of expectations do others place on you for assessing and addressing student professional suitability? PLEASE RESPOND TO EACH OF THE CATEGORIES. 'N/A' TO ALL IF UNSURE OR NEW TO POSITION.**

<b>Field</b>		
None	1	2
Low	1	2
Moderate	9	17
High	26	48
N/A	1	2
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

<b>Faculty</b>		
None	1	2
Low	3	6
Moderate	18	33
High	15	28
N/A	1	2
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Administration**

None	2	4
Low	5	9
Moderate	13	24
High	15	28
N/A	3	6
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Students**

None	2	4
Low	9	17
Moderate	14	26
High	11	20
N/A	2	4
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Accreditation body**

None	2	4
Low	6	11
Moderate	14	26
High	11	20
N/A	5	9
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**32. Do you inform faculty and field instructors that they have a shared responsibility to address concerns related to students' professional suitability?**

Yes	35	65
No	1	2
N/A, new to position	2	4
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**33. What level of responsibility do field education coordinators/directors have for addressing concerns related to professional suitability DURING THE PRE-PLACEMENT process?**

Low	5	9
Moderate	13	24
High	20	37
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

## MEASURES FOR ADDRESSING CONCERNS

**34. What specific measures do you take to address concerns related to professional suitability DURING THE PRE-PLACEMENT process? CHOOSE MULTIPLE RESPONSES TO THIS QUESTION. IF 'OTHER' PLEASE SPECIFY.**

### **I am involved in admissions processes**

Yes	21	39
No	17	31
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### **Students submit an application for field placement**

Yes	30	56
No	8	15
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### **Students submit learning objective forms**

Yes	24	44
No	14	26
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### **Students submit resumes**

Yes	33	61
No	5	9
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### **I facilitate pre-placement field preparation seminars**

Yes	30	56
No	8	15
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### **The Code of Ethics is outlined in the field manual**

Yes	32	59
No	6	11
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

### **The Code of Ethics is discussed within the pre-placement process**

Yes	20	37
No	18	33
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**There is a professional suitability policy outlined in the field manual**

Yes	21	39
No	17	31
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**The professional suitability policy is discussed with students prior to placement**

Yes	13	24
No	25	46
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Students sign an oath of confidentiality**

Yes	12	22
No	26	48
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Students sign a student conduct agreement**

Yes	6	11
No	32	59
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I meet individually with students when needed**

Yes	36	67
No	2	4
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I consult faculty regarding specific students prior to placement**

Yes	33	61
No	5	9
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I share potential student/agency/field instructor matches with faculty prior to finalizing**

Yes	28	52
No	10	19
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I assign myself as the faculty liaison**

Yes	17	31
No	21	39
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I share specific student information with faculty and field with the student's permission**

Yes	27	50
No	11	20
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I match students with specific field instructors**

Yes	30	56
No	8	15
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I match students with specific faculty liaisons**

Yes	23	43
No	15	28
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I place students in particular placement settings**

Yes	33	61
No	5	9
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I discuss professional suitability requirements with field instructors**

Yes	27	50
No	11	20
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I review third year student practicum correspondence to facilitate fourth year placements**

Yes	26	48
No	12	22
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I provide faculty liaisons with student practicum files which include all pre-placement and third year practicum correspondence**

Yes	9	17
No	29	54
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**N/A, new to position**

Yes	1	2
No	37	69
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Other, please specify**

Yes	9	17
No	29	54
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**35. What level of responsibility do field education coordinators/directors have for addressing concerns related to professional suitability AFTER THE COMMENCEMENT of the field placement?**

Low	5	9
Moderate	11	20
High	22	41
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**36. What specific measures do you take to address concerns related to professional suitability AFTER COMMENCEMENT of the field placement? CHOOSE MULTIPLE RESPONSES TO THIS QUESTION. IF 'OTHER' PLEASE SPECIFY.**

**I conduct field review meetings at midterm with faculty liaisons**

Yes	14	26
No	24	44
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I provide field instructor sessions during the field placement process**

Yes	19	35
No	19	35
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I meet with faculty when requested**

Yes	28	52
No	10	19
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**I take an active leadership role with faculty, field and students when requested to address specific concerns**

Yes	30	56
No	8	15
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**N/A, new to position**

Yes	4	7
No	34	63
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Other, please specify**

Yes	11	20
No	27	50
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**37. Has your opinion changed regarding the level of responsibility that field education coordinators/directors should have for addressing professional suitability? Please indicate if or when it changed.**

Yes, within the last two years	4	7
Yes, within the last three to five years	3	6
Yes, over five years ago	2	4
No, opinion has not changed	24	44
N/A, new to position	5	9
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**CRIMINAL RECORD CHECKS**

**39. Does your program require criminal record checks of all students?**

Yes	14	26
No	19	35
Other	5	9
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**40. Are you responsible for receiving and making decisions about criminal record checks?**

Yes	7	13
No	7	13
Missing	<u>40</u>	<u>74</u>
TOTAL	54	100



**41. Do you believe it is appropriate for Field Education Coordinators/Directors to receive and make decisions about criminal record checks?**

Yes	16	30
No	12	22
Undecided	10	19
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION (CASWE)  
ACCREDITATION STANDARDS**

**42. Are you aware of the CASWE accreditation standards related to student professional suitability?**

Yes	24	44
No	14	26
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**43. Do CASWE accreditation standards provide clear guidance for your practice?**

Yes	10	19
No	8	15
Not sure	20	37
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**44. Do CASWE accreditation standards provide clear criteria for determining professional suitability?**

Yes	6	11
No	12	22
Not sure	20	37
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**45. How satisfied are you with your current knowledge and skills for responding to professional suitability concerns?**

Unsatisfied	4	7
Somewhat satisfied	9	17
Satisfied	14	26
Very satisfied	10	19
N/A	1	2
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**46. How often do you find that your skills and knowledge enable you to respond to professional suitability concerns to your satisfaction?**

Never	0	0
Occasionally	18	33
Always	17	31
N/A	3	6
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**49. Are further policies and procedures needed to assist you in responding appropriately to professional suitability concerns?**

Yes	18	33
No	9	17
Not sure	11	20
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

## DEMOGRAPHICS

**53. Please indicate your gender**

Male	5	9
Female	<u>49</u>	<u>91</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**54. Please indicate your position title. If 'other' please specify.**

Field Education Coordinator	29	54
Field Education Director	3	6
Other, please specify	6	11
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**55. Please indicate whether you work in a bachelor or master level program**

Bachelor level	20	37
Master level	4	7
Both levels	14	26
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**56. University**

<b>Region</b>		
Western Canada	25	46
Central Canada	24	44
Atlantic Canada	<u>5</u>	<u>9</u>
TOTAL	54	100

One respondent did not identify his/her university, however in order to identify the 'region only' Nooro Online Research provided the list of emails of all respondents without associating individual responses to the email addresses.

**57. Please indicate your age category:**

25-34	2	4
35-44	7	13
45-54	14	26
55-64	15	28
65 or over	0	0
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**58. Please indicate which of the following applies to your highest degree held.**

BSW	4	7
MSW	29	54
PhD or EdD	4	7
Other, please specify	1	2
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**59. How long have you been in your position?**

Less than 2 years	10	19
2 to 4	7	13
5 to 9	10	19
10 to 14	5	9
15 to 19	4	7
More than 20	2	4
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**60. Please indicate the status of your position.**

Faculty	15	28
Administration	6	11
Professional staff	12	22
Other, please specify	5	9
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**61. Please indicate which of the following you have responsibilities for in your position. MORE THAN ONE SELECTION IS POSSIBLE. If 'other' please specify.**

**BSW field coordination**

Yes	34	63
No	4	7
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**MSW field coordination**

Yes	17	31
No	21	39
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Distance education**

Yes	13	24
No	25	46
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**International field placements**

Yes	23	43
No	15	28
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**National field placements**

Yes	23	43
No	15	28
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Fulfilling the role of faculty field liaison**

Yes	21	39
No	17	31
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Teaching concurrent field seminars**

Yes	24	44
No	14	26
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Teaching credited courses**

Yes	22	41
No	16	30
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Program Chair**

Yes	9	17
No	29	54
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**Scholarship**

Yes	9	17
No	29	54
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

<b>Service</b>		
Yes	18	33
No	20	37
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

<b>Other</b>		
Yes	15	28
No	23	43
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**62. How many students do you place each year?**

Less than 49	6	11
50 to 89	16	30
90 to 129	6	11
130 to 149	2	4
150 to 199	3	6
200 to 299	2	4
More than 300	3	6
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**63. How many field education coordinators/directors are there in your school or department?**

I am the only field education coordinator/director	17	31
There is one other person in the role	9	17
There are two other people in the role	2	4
There are more than two other people in the role	2	4
Other, please specify	8	15
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**64. How many field education assistants are there in your school or department?**

There is one field assistant	10	19
There are two field assistants	2	4
There are more than two field assistants	1	2
Other, please specify	25	46
Missing	<u>16</u>	<u>30</u>
TOTAL	54	100

**65. Are you interested in participating in an interview to expand and clarify your responses, if interviews are conducted following the survey?**

Yes	23	43
No	14	26
Missing	<u>17</u>	<u>31</u>
TOTAL	54	100

## APPENDIX K: Certificate of Approval



The University of British Columbia  
Office of Research Services  
**Behavioural Research Ethics Board**  
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,  
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

### CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL- MINIMAL RISK RENEWAL

<b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</b> Daniel Vokey	<b>DEPARTMENT:</b> UBC/Education/Educational Studies	<b>UBC BREB NUMBER:</b> H06-80791
<b>INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:</b>		
<b>Institution</b> UBC Other locations where the research will be conducted: N/A		<b>Site</b> Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)
<b>CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):</b> Jeanette Robertson		
<b>SPONSORING AGENCIES:</b> Unfunded Research - "Exploring Notions of Gatekeeping in Social Work Field Education"		
<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b> Exploring Notions of Gatekeeping in Social Work Field Education		

**EXPIRY DATE OF THIS APPROVAL:** August 19, 2009

**APPROVAL DATE:** August 19, 2008

The Annual Renewal for Study have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

*Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board*

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair  
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair  
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair  
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair  
Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair  
Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair