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# Editorial

*Dominic Chilvers and Kathryn Hay*

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Field education is a critical component of social work education that has far-reaching effects on students, social workers, clients, agencies and tertiary institutions. Students identify their field education experience as the most significant single element of their studies and these experiences are crucial for their development as beginning practitioners. However, field education is often marginalised within tertiary education for not being sufficiently academic, and marginalised within social work practice for being a distraction from real client work. This, combined with its complexity as a teaching and learning environment, means that field education is often not afforded due academic or professional consideration. The opportunity to develop a special edition of *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work* focused on field education was therefore greeted with much delight by those of us working in the sector. Here we saw an opportunity to highlight some of the current issues and concerns facing this crucial aspect of social work practice by presenting recent research, critical reflections and developing knowledge.

We have been mindful throughout the process of creating this edition that there are several factors shaping the current field education environment. Firstly, we are conscious that increasing student numbers and the proliferation of education programmes around the country are creating significant challenges for academic institutions to identify sufficient quality practicum sites. The importance of creativity in the types of placements offered to students is therefore increasingly critical. Jane Maidment and colleagues provide an example of creativity, using a partnership between academic institutions and social service agencies to address a concern for increasing research literacy amongst students and field educators. The article by Doris Testa also discusses innovative placements in non-traditional locations, and even though the example, from an Australian context, is less unusual in a New Zealand one, it still helpfully reminds us of the importance of stretching our self-imposed boundaries. Kath Hay and Rob Teppett also remind us that innovation may involve returning to some tried and tested models of field education that have fallen out of favour. If we are to respond to the challenge of an increasing demand for placements, then we will certainly need to explore both charted and uncharted field education waters.

Methods of assessment and whether standardisation of field education assessment should be pursued are current debates amongst educators. More broadly, concern with the tools available to ensure quality learning and teaching is an important factor in field education. Jane Maidment, et al. refer to this concern in seeking to develop tools that can be used to improve learning and teaching about research in practicum settings. In her article, Jude Douglas introduces a specialised resource that she developed to make it easier for field educators to access tools suitable for use in supervision or during the process of working with students. Margaret Pack directs our attention to the critical tool of supervision and highlights some of the differences between how students and field educators think this tool should be used.

The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) has recently had an increasingly direct effect on field education processes and requirements. This has created some tensions for

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educators, students and agencies, as highlighted by Tiffany Apaitia-Vague and colleagues in their article focused on decisions about which students are fit and proper to undertake a placement. Trish Hanlen's article also discusses the process of selecting students for placements and explores the information that managers require. Those of us involved in field education need to consider how increasingly high standards, whether from the SWRB or social services agencies, can be implemented in ways that still allow for students to be well supported and given opportunities to change, grow and develop.

Field education is at the interface of academia and practice and is impacted by the policies, procedures, tools and personnel in both environments. The selection of articles contained in this edition of the journal highlight the complexity in this set of factors. Dominic Chilvers, in the final article, discusses this complexity and the challenge it presents for understanding and theorising field education, suggesting that cultural-historical activity theory may prove useful in this regard.

Amongst the 'busyness' of daily life, whether in the classroom or the community, it is helpful to pause and reflect on the ideas of others, thus increasing our own understandings. We hope you will find the articles selected for this edition on field education thought-provoking.

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