Research on Social Work Practice
21(3) 363-372

DOI: 10.1177/1049731510392061
http://rsw.sagepub.com

The Signature Pedagogy of Social Work? An Investigation of the Evidence

Gary Holden[1], Kathleen Barker[2], Gary Rosenberg[3], Sofie Kuppens[4], and Laura W. Ferrell[1]

Abstract

Objective: Many professions use some form of internship in professional education. Social work has utilized field instruction throughout much of its history. Recently, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) designated field instruction as social work's signature pedagogy. A systematic review was undertaken to examine evidence related to this designation. **Method:** Twenty-five primary databases, three grey literature sources, a research university library (for monographs and collections) were searched in addition to a survey of the invisible colleges and hand searching of journals. The goal was to uncover quantitative studies of social work field instruction in the United States. **Results:** None of the studies that passed the initial review and were acquired for full examination met the inclusion criteria, precluding a meta-analytic integration. **Conclusion:** The assertion that field instruction is the signature pedagogy of social work would be more credible if supported by stronger evidence.

Keywords

systematic review, meta-analysis, CSWE, EPAS, social work, field, fieldwork, field work, field education, field placement, field instructor, field instruction, field learning, intern, internship, practica, practicum, signature pedagogy

Recently, Stoesz and Karger (2009a) reviewed the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) activities associated with its role in social work education. Of all the components of social work education that were addressed within their article, and in the responses to it (Feldman, 2009; Felkner, 2009; Midgley, 2009; Mohan, 2009; Sowers & Dulmus, 2009; Stoesz & Karger, 2009b; Thyer, 2009; Watkins, 2009; cf. Stoesz, Karger, & Carrilio, 2010), one component, field instruction, was only briefly discussed, despite its historic role in the profession.

Historical Comments: Importance of Field Instruction

Over a significant period of time during which the profession was developing, the importance of field instruction in social work has been noted. For instance:

- "its importance is accepted by all of us" (Abbott, 1931/1942, p. 57)
- "field work in the philosophy of the New York School is the foundation of professional education for social work" (Lee et al., 1931, p. 184)
- "however divergent their professional thinking in many matters, teachers and supervisors throughout American social work are united in one realization distilled from their varied endeavors: it is the knowledge that there is an almost magical stimulus to professional growth in the moment when the student's class room learning becomes one with his practise in field work" (Faith, 1953, p. 97)
- "I begin with two assumptions. First, the indispensability of field learning in the Master's Degree program has been fully documented in the professional literature (Bloom, 1963, p. 3)
- "the importance of field instruction is axiomatic" (Shatz, 1989, p. xxv)
- "there is a general consensus that field instruction is the most significant, most productive, most memorable component of social work education" (Kadushin, 1991, p. 1)
- "quality in social work education depends, in large part, on quality field education" (Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar, & Strom, 1997, p. 43)
- "students of social work at both the BSW and MSW levels usually describe their practicum as the single most useful, significant, and powerful learning experience of their formal social work education" (Garthwait, 2005, p. 2)

[1] Silver School of Social Work, New York University, New York, NY, USA
[2] The City University of New York, Medgar Evers College, Brooklyn, NY, USA
[3] Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY, USA
[4] Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Corresponding Author:
Gary Holden, Room 409, New York University, Silver School of Social Work, 1 Washington Square North, New York, NY 10003, USA
Email: gary.holden@nyu.edu

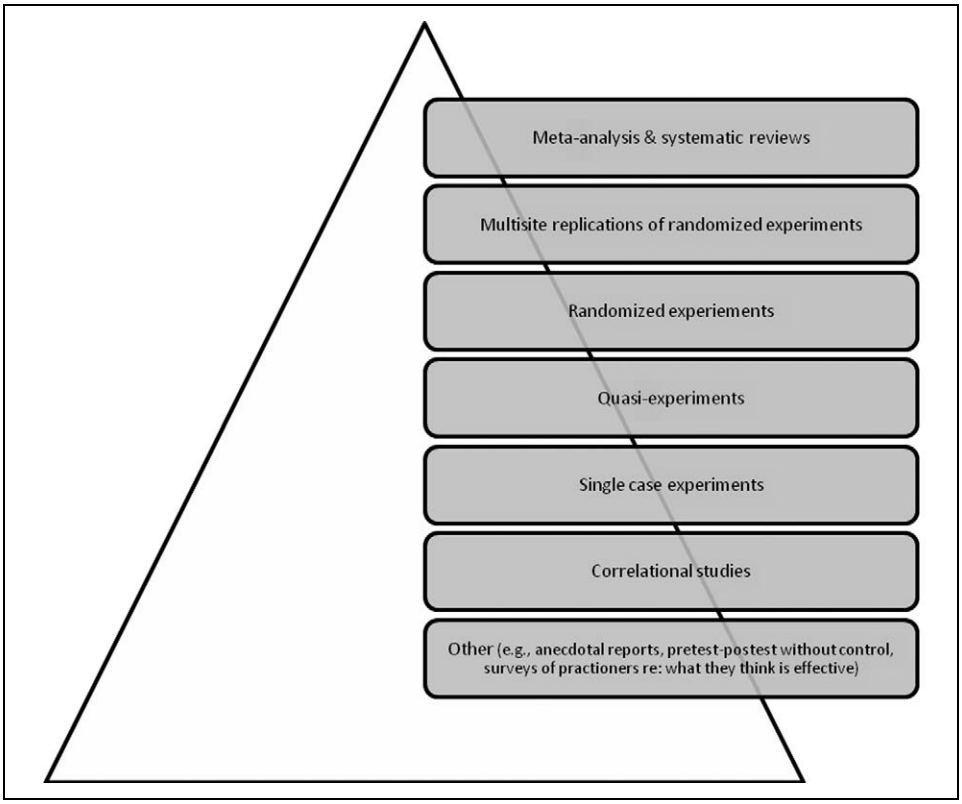

Figure 1. Hierarchy of evidence from higher to lower.
(Reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. from Rubin, 2008)

- "field education has always been an integral component of social work education, recognized as having a major impact on graduates' preparation for professional practice" (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006, p. 161).

Rubin (2008) has noted different research questions may be associated with different evidentiary hierarchies. The prevalence of field instruction in graduate social work education and the assertions by social work scholars are examples of evidence. That said, evidence such as this does not approach the peak of evidence hierarchies such as the one in Figure 1 (which is intended for answering questions regarding effectiveness).

A Current View of Field Instruction

Claims about field instruction such as those above have been followed by the CSWE's statement in its 2008 Educational Policies and Standards (EPAS), that field was social work's "signature pedagogy" (CSWE, 2008a; cf. Homonoff, 2008; Robbins, Robbins, Jacob, & Alpert, 2009). The purpose of this study was to investigate evidence relevant to CSWE's assertion.

The actual EPAS document (CSWE, 2008b) notes that a "[s]ignature pedagogy represents *the central* form of instruction and learning in which a profession socializes its students to perform the role of practitioner" (p. 8, emphasis added). The 2008 EPAS document then goes on to state that "[i]t is a basic precept of social work education that the two interrelated components of curriculum—classroom and field—are of equal importance within the curriculum" (p. 8). CSWE (Pierce, 2008) appears to base this major shift on Shulman's 2005 essay in *Daedulus*, the *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Shulman (2005) asserts that:

> signature pedagogies are important precisely because they are pervasive. They implicitly define what counts as knowledge in a field and how things become known. They define how knowledge is analyzed, criticized, accepted or discarded. They define the functions of expertise in a field, the locus of authority, and the privileges of rank and standing. (p. 54)

It is not clear to us how an educational component can be *the central* aspect of a profession's education, yet be equal to some peripheral aspect (the classroom) as the EPAS authors assert. Moreover, are the authors of the EPAS, in their embrace of the signature pedagogy concept, arguing that the definition of:

- knowledge creation processes
- functions of expertise
- the location of authority
- privileges of rank and standing

should be determined by field instructors? By agencies? As Jenkins and Sheafor noted long ago:

> social work education has been unable or unwilling to submit the field instruction process to disciplined evaluation and,

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Include	Exclude
Topic	Overall effect of typical field placement (not subcomponents of it such as supervision, agency based training, etc.) on social work students	All else
Time frame	Earliest available date for database—2009	2010
Location	United States only	All else
Language	English	All else
Study type	Quantitative or mixed methods if meets specified quantitative requirements	Qualitative
Control/ contrast condition	Compared field placement with a no intervention/wait list/placebo control group or with some previously established alternative intervention	All else (e.g., no control/contrast condition or compared to alternative that has not been previously supported empirically)
Study design	Quasi experimental (2 group, pre–post); RCCT; SSD/SSD series of experimental designs (ABA or stronger)-designs that would allow a tentative inference re: causality	All else (e.g., posttest only with or without control; pre–post single group; time-series single group; nonexperimental SSDs)
Statistics	Must report a statistical analysis of outcomes with sufficient detail to enable the calculation of an effect size for differences between groups or conditions	All else

Note: RCCT = randomized controlled clinical trial; SSD = single system design

> therefore, it has not generated an adequate literature to become an appropriately creditable part of higher education. *One result has been great variation in field instruction, with much of it embarrassingly low in quality*. (1982, p. 3–4, emphasis added)

Subsequently, Raskin (1989) asserted that "[d]espite great strides made in providing learning experiences for students, relatively little is *empirically* known about placement models, learning outcomes, and the nature of the relationship among school, agency, student, field instructor, field liaison, community and clients" (p. 1; cf. Spencer & McDonald, 1998). Raskin goes on to note the lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of training programs for field instructors. Eight years later, Caspi asserted that "to the knowledge of this author, there is no field instruction model which has been refined through the rigors of developmental research" (1997, p. 12).

In the early days of the 21st century, social work professionals continued to signal distress warnings. Wayne et al. (2006) observed that social work schools were having difficulty developing and maintaining high-quality placements for a variety of a reasons (c.f. Clare, 2001; Reisch & Jarman-Rode, 2000). Wayne and colleagues further argued that this situation was foreseen in the late 1970s. These authors provide a comprehensive view of the difficulties in achieving high-quality field instruction, as well as a set of "radical" alternatives. Glassman and Robbins (2007) took exception with Wayne et al.'s observations and claimed that their view was too negative. Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin responded to this criticism that:

> historically, scientific and professional fields have advanced by challenging the status quo, carrying out rigorous research, and critically evaluating results. All aspects of social work education must be prepared to undergo such scrutiny—including field education. (2007, p. 164)

Wayne and colleagues appear to be advocating moving beyond argument by consensus.

The general theme in the literature reviewed is that field instruction is important enough to be named the profession's signature pedagogy, yet there is insufficient research on it. In an effort to move the discussion forward, the current study sought to clarify what the existing research on field instruction reveals. Our team undertook a systematic review to begin to explore the answers to four specific questions of interest.

- Is field instruction superior to a no treatment control condition?
- Is field instruction superior to established alternatives?
- Does the effect of field instruction vary across studies?
- Does the effect of field instruction vary as a function of certain moderators?

Throughout this document (other than in direct quotes), we will use the terms field work or field placement or field instruction, as it is not clear to us that this activity is appropriately termed field *education*. This is not an original idea. Abbott (1931/1942) noted, "[o]ur great problem has been, and still is, to make field work truly educational" (p. 57).

Method

The PICO framework (Populations, Interventions, Comparisons, Outcomes) was used to clarify the topic of this review (e.g., Campbell Collaboration, 2001; Hannes, Claes, & the Belgian Campbell Group, 2007; Littell, Corcoran, & Pillai, 2008). The inclusion and exclusion criteria derived from the PICO process for the current study are detailed in Table 1. A study must have quantitatively examined the overall effect of field in a U.S. setting; been reported in English prior to the end of

2009; compared field placement to a no treatment control or a previously established alternative educational intervention utilizing a moderately rigorous design; and reported a statistical test of the comparison in sufficient detail to be included.

Based on discussion with one of our colleagues (C. Silver, personal communication, September 9, 2009), we focused on the effectiveness of field for students as opposed to other stakeholders (e.g., schools and field instructors). In that we undertook this review in response to the CSWE declaration of field placement as the signature pedagogy of the profession, we thought it appropriate to restrict the population of potential studies to those studies examining field instruction in the United States (cf. Raskin, Skolnick, & Wayne, 1991). Field instruction may or may not be effective in the ways that it is implemented in other geographic settings. Given the language and translation capabilities of our team, we restricted the population of studies to English language studies only. The outcomes of interest were left open-ended to maximize the yield. Because of the focus on overall effectiveness, studies that focused on subcomponents of field instruction in isolation were excluded. While solely qualitative studies and some specific types of quantitative studies were excluded from the population of studies to be aggregated, they were considered for inclusion in the introduction and the discussion sections of this article to provide context.

The initial PICO derived search strategy was then revised through a series of pretests and revisions using a number of databases that would be used in the actual search. Social workers with expertise in field instruction were consulted regarding terminology. The terminology was also checked against the Social Work Abstracts Plus index (National Association of Social Work [NASW], 2006). Technical support for the major database providers (e.g., CSA Illumina [CSA], Ovid Technologies OvidSP [OVID]) and reference librarians were consulted throughout the process. The general form of the final search was:

> (“social work*” OR “social welfare”)—[for non-social work specific databases] AND (fieldwork OR “field-work” OR “field work” OR “field educat*” OR “field placement*” OR “field instruct*” OR “field learning” OR “field base*” OR “field supervis*” OR intern OR interns OR internship OR interning OR interned)

This was combined with the following set of methodological search terms adapted from Rothstein, Turner, and Lavenberg (2004):

> (outcome* OR effect* OR evaluat* OR research* OR compar* OR contrast* OR “quasi experiment*” OR “quasi-experiment*” OR experiment* OR trial OR RCT OR RCCT OR random* OR study OR studies)

This general form was tailored to the particular database being searched to increase sensitivity and precision (cf. Taylor, Wylie, Dempster, & Donnelly, 2007). In addition, where available, database search filters (e.g., English language) were employed. Although at least one set of authors (Jarman-Rohde & Tropman, 1993) have asserted that field instruction is an exemplar of service learning, this review does not include any studies that might have focused on service learning (rather than field instruction specifically).

A total of 25 social work-specific and more general databases were used. The databases (and the dates searched) were:

- CSA (November 13, 2009): Ageline; ASSIA: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts; Criminal Justice Abstracts; Criminology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection; Education: A SAGE Full-Text Collection; ERIC; Health Sciences: A SAGE Full-Text Collection; PAIS International; Psychology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection; PsycInfo; Sociological Abstracts; Sociology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection; Urban Studies & Planning: A SAGE Full-Text Collection; Social Services Abstracts
- OvidSP: EMBASE Classic + EMBASE (November 3, 2009); Medline (November 13, 2009); Social Work Abstracts (November 11, 2009)
- Web of Science (November 13, 2009)
- Campbell Collaboration (C2) Library of Systematic Reviews (November 13, 2009)
- Cochrane Library (November 13, 2009): Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews; Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects; Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials; Cochrane Methodology Register; Health Technology Assessment Database; NHS Economic Evaluation Database

The CSA database provider allowed searching of multiple databases and performed some deduplication. After the search and this initial deduplication process were performed for the CSA databases, the remaining 2,453 records were downloaded to Refworks where two additional deduplication steps were performed. Removal of 266 exact matches and 428 close matches left a total of 1,759 records.

Two team members (G.H. and L.F.) independently reviewed the 1,759 records. During this review, an additional 79 duplicates were uncovered and removed from the active file. The proportion of agreement regarding decisions for the remaining 1,680 records was 95.5%. Yet, the kappa for this analysis was only .22. This is an example of a problem with the kappa statistic called a kappa paradox (e.g., Feinstein & Cicchetti, 1990; Kuppens, Holden, Barker, & Rosenberg, in press). Next, the full article was acquired and reviewed if the two reviewers could not agree ($n = 75$) or if both reviewers agreed the full article should be examined ($n = 12$). Therefore, of the 1,759 records reviewed, 87 were selected for full text review.

Two team members (G.H. and K.B.) then applied the inclusion/exclusion criteria to the full text article. In the course of the full text review, 9 additional duplicates were uncovered leaving a sample of 78 unique documents. The proportion of agreement was 96.2%. Kappa could not be computed here because one reviewer excluded all 78 documents. The three instances of disagreement were resolved in a subsequent

discussion by the two reviewers. The criteria that the reviewers rated "exclude" most frequently were *control/contrast condition* (87.2%, 92.3% for the two reviewers) and *study design* (88.5% and 87.2%).

Hand Searching

Concurrently, hand searches modeled on the Campbell and Cochrane approaches (Cochrane Collaboration, 2002; Rothstein et al., 2004) were done of the following social work education journals and newsletters for their entire publication run from volume 1, issue 1 to the most recent issue by a single team member (L.F.). The one exception was the *Social Work Education Reporter* for which we could not access volumes 1–12. The number of articles retrieved from our hand searches that were included in the sample for full review is indicated in parentheses:

- *Journal of Education for Social Work* 1980–1984, volumes 1–20 (0); then after name change, *Journal of Social Work Education* 1985–2009, volumes 21–45 (1)
- *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 1987–2009, volumes 1–30 (0)
- *Social Work Education* 1981–2009, volumes 1–29 (0)
- *Social Work Education Reporter* 1965–May 1984, volumes 13–32 (0)
- *The Clinical Supervisor*, volumes 1-28 (0)

This was an important step for two reasons. First, the inadequacies of the profession's main database, *Social Work Abstracts* have been well documented (e.g., Holden, Barker, Covert-Vail, Rosenberg, & Cohen, 2008; Holden, Barker, Covert-Vail, Rosenberg, & Cohen, 2009; Shek, 2008). Second, investigators have suggested that either simple database searching or hand searching alone, is likely insufficient (e.g., Hopewell, Clarke, Lefebvre, & Westby, 2002).

Monographs and Collections

Next, a single team member (G.H.) examined a total of 21 books in a search for additional studies (Abbott, 1931/1942; Arkava & Brennen, 1976; Baird, 2008; Bogo & Vayda, 1987, 1998; Caspi & Reid, 2002; CSWE, 1963; Garthwait, 2005; Haffey & Starr, 1988; Jones, 1969; Levy, 1981; Lowenberg, 1972; Manis, 1979; Raskin, 1989; Rehr & Caroff, 1986; Rosenblatt, Welter, & Wojciechowski, 1976; Schneck, Grossman, & Glassman, 1991; Sheafor & Jenkins, 1982; Shulman, 1992; Thomlison & Corcoran, 2008; Wessel & Faith, 1953). No studies meeting the inclusion criteria were found.

Grey Literature

A single team member (G.H.) searched the following sources of grey literature: Dissertation Abstracts; Docuticker and PsychEXTRA. No studies meeting the inclusion criteria were uncovered.

Search Error

At this stage of the search, we uncovered an error. This is a situation where we agree with others advocating for greater transparency in social work (Gambrill, 2007) and therefore will explain what happened. Two relevant search terms (practica and practicum), which had been included in the search file earlier, were absent from the final search. Our best guess is that when they were added to the search document, the file was not saved. When the document was retrieved, no one noticed their absence. Rather than simply meld the results of the separate searches done on these terms, we are presenting them in this manner to be more transparent about our process. The search for practica and practicum on the 25 databases yielded 592 hits from which 339 were duplicates (within this search and with prior searches), and these duplicates were removed. Two team members (G.H. and K.B.) independently coded abstracts for inclusion/exclusion and achieved 97.6% agreement (kappa = .49). As previously, if either rater ruled a study in, it was retrieved for full review. Again two raters (G.H. and K.B.) reviewed the nine records retrieved for full review. A single team member (G.H.) repeated the search of books and of the grey literature. Another team member (L.W.F.) redid the hand searching. No studies meeting the inclusion criteria were uncovered.

Invisible Colleges

While the extra error related searches were being completed, requests were sent to the invisible colleges. We consulted with what Cooper (2010) refers to as the "*electronic invisible college*" by sending messages to two social work education related listservs (MSW-EDUCATION, BPD-L). The number of subscribers at the time of our inquiry was 401 for MSW-EDUCATION (M. Smith, personal communication, July 30, 2010) and 1,362 for BPD-L (R. Vernon, personal communication, July 30, 2010). For the traditional invisible college, we compiled a mailing list of researchers in the area that we knew or had read as well as the members of the CSWE Council on Field Education ($n = 32$). These requests explained our study, provided the inclusion and exclusion criteria, described our process and results to date, and asked if the respondent had conducted relevant research or knew of studies of field instruction that would meet our inclusion criteria. Thirty nine individuals responded and no studies were added to the sample.

Ancestry Approach

Finally, while the ancestry approach could not be used as is typically done where the reference lists of all studies included in the final sample are reviewed, we did track down promising publications that were referenced in reports that were reviewed during the course of the review steps above, but none met the inclusion criteria. Figure 2 provides a summary of this process.

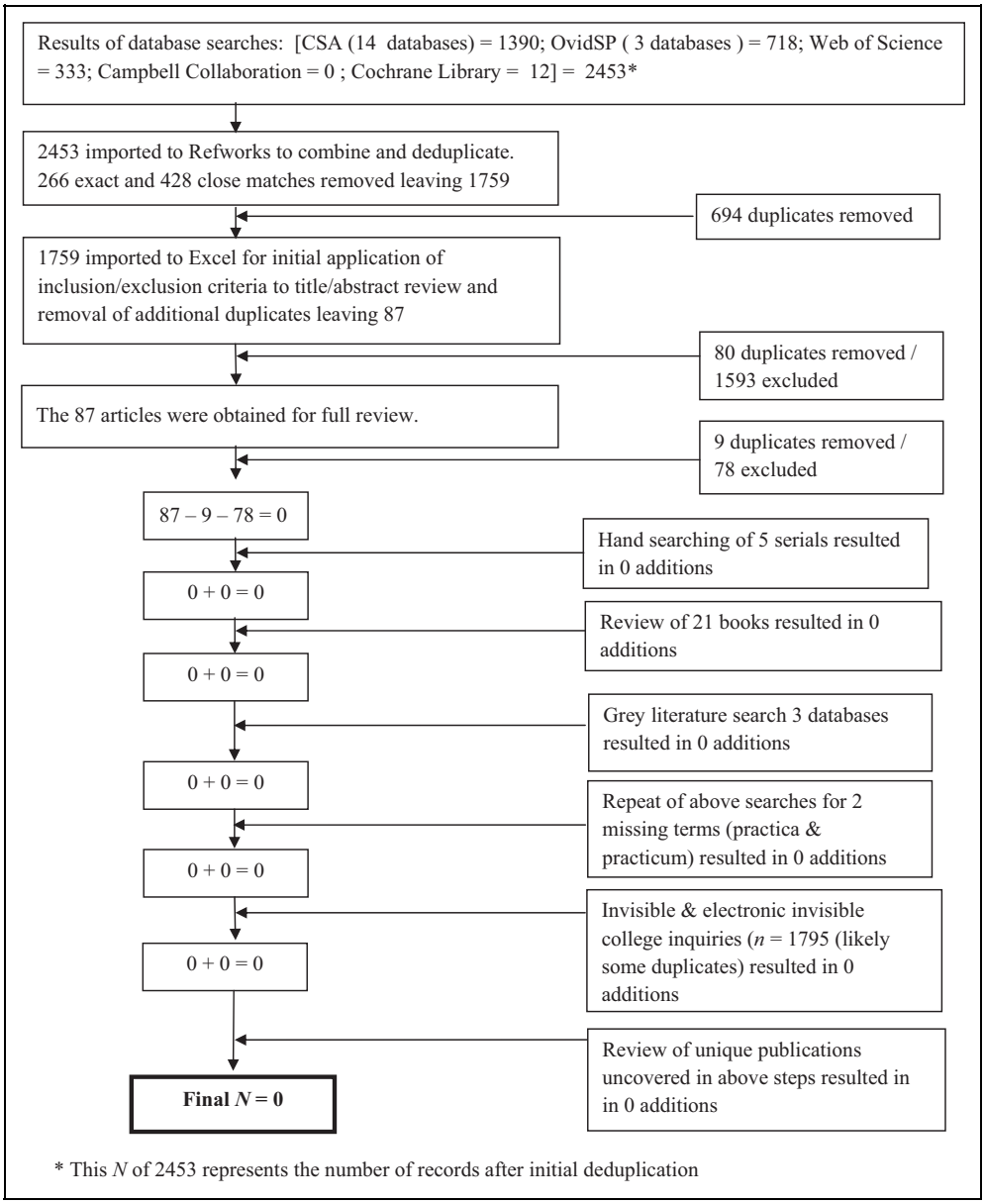

Figure 2. Selection of studies.

Results

None of the studies that passed the initial review and were acquired for full examination met the inclusion criteria, precluding a meta-analytic integration. In other words, this is an empty review, where no eligible studies were found (cf. Lang, Edwards, & Fleiszer, 2007).

Discussion

After searching 25 primary databases, 3 grey literature data sources, a research university library for monographs and collections, hand searching 5 journals/newsletters, making inquiries of the traditional and electronic invisible colleges, and utilizing the ancestral approach, the current study found no studies meeting the stated inclusion criteria. Therefore, we can provide no evidence regarding our four research questions:

- Is field instruction superior to a no treatment control condition?
- Is field instruction superior to established alternatives?
- Does the effect of field instruction vary across studies?
- Does the effect of field instruction vary as a function of certain moderators?

Is an empty review such as this a surprising result? While a small number or no studies were anticipated in the current study, the question of how common such an occurrence is remains. Lang and colleagues (2007) examined a random sample of 100 reviews from the Cochrane database and identified

12 empty reviews. Jamtvedt and colleagues (2007) reported that 14% of the 3,009 reviews they examined in the Cochrane database were empty reviews. P. Montgomery (personal communication, October 15, 2010) indicated that an ongoing study of the Cochrane database places the estimate slightly lower at 8.7% (cf. Montgomery, Hopewell, Shepard, & Yaffe, 2010). While perhaps not extremely uncommon, do empty reviews have any utility? Green, Higgins, Schunemann, and Becker (2007) noted that empty reviews:

> play a key role in highlighting areas requiring further research to inform researchers, policy makers, and the commissioners of research. They also inform clinicians, patients, and other decision makers in health care when there is lack of robust evidence in favor of (or against) a health care intervention. (p. 598; cf. Lang & Edwards, 2005).

In support of this view, Schlosser and Sigafoos (2009) offer suggestions when confronted with an empty review. One suggestion (which they attribute to the Cochrane Collaboration) is to not "confuse 'no evidence of an effect' with 'evidence of no effect'" (p. 2). The results of the current study only show that we found no evidence (at a prespecified level) of effectiveness of field instruction in social work in the United States.

Obviously, there has been some interesting research on field instruction over the years. So why did so much work fail to be included? Schlosser and Sigafoos (2009) also recommended examining the excluded studies, yet to remain very cautious not to overreach in one's conclusions based on that examination. As we noted above, the categories that were most frequently coded "exclude" in the full text review of the final set of 87 articles were *control/contrast condition* and *study design*. Were there studies that came close to inclusion in the final sample of this systematic review? Yes. The following are examples of excluded studies that explored the use of rotations in field. Edith Abbott discussed the idea of rotation in field instruction in the 1930s. Dalgleish, Kane, and McNamara (1976) profiled a University of Utah field work rotation model where students had three different assignments of 2.5 months each (with different primary field instructors) on different medical center services during an academic year. Student, field instructor, and faculty coordinator postintervention impressions (posttest only study) of the approach were mixed.

In the mid-1990s, the rotation idea was revisited in two small quasi-experimental studies (Cuzzi, Holden, Chernack, Rutter, & Rosenberg, 1997; Cuzzi, Holden, Rutter, Rosenberg, & Chernack, 1996). Despite using a contrast group and paying particular attention to the measurement of outcomes, these were exploratory studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria for this meta-analysis. These studies did not compare typical field instruction to either a no treatment control group or a previously established field instruction approach. So despite the fact that the experimental rotation approach appeared to do as well as typical field, one was still comparing two types of field instruction that had not been previously established.

Ivry, Lawrence, Damon-Rodriguez, and Robbins (2005) also reported a study of rotation in field, the Practicum Partnership Program (PPP). "The operational principle of rotation in the PPP was the planned and systematic movement of students across two or more programs or agencies. Rotation designs were similar but not identical among the demonstration sites" (pp. 414–415). A total of 160 students across sites completed satisfaction surveys and in general were very positive about the PPP experience. That said, the rotation approaches varied across sites and this was a posttest only design with no control group. Therefore, it could not have been included in the current study. To our knowledge, no specific model of field work rotations has been established. More generally, while many studies met more than 50% of our inclusion criteria, none met all of them. While there are likely many factors contributing to this outcome, the lack of funding for social work educational research, the difficulties with doing research in multiple settings, and the low regard with which educational research seems to be held in the academy, are likely possibilities (cf. Bogo, 2005; Reisch & Jarman-Rode, 2000).

Caveats

There are caveats regarding any conclusions one might draw from the current study. Despite attempts to achieve a high level of sensitivity in the search process, this systematic review may have failed to uncover one or more studies that would have met the inclusion/exclusion criteria. In addition, our team might have uncovered studies and incorrectly excluded them at that stage of the study. We look forward to any reader who can send us studies meeting the inclusion criteria. There may be non-U.S. and non-English language studies that otherwise fit the inclusion criteria. New studies covering our questions and meeting inclusion criteria may have been published after December 31, 2009.

We had expected to retrieve more articles than the one that we found in our hand searches. This may have happened because our primary searches included 25 databases (which overlap journals to a degree) and our tediously developed search terms. One result that was somewhat of a surprise was that the deduplication process for one of the database providers (CSA) and for Refworks did not remove all duplicates. We can empathize with these companies because we missed duplicates at earlier stages of our review as well. While this issue does not affect the conclusion of this systematic review, readers should be aware of its possible presence in other systematic reviews. Systematic review process results may be less precise than they appear.

A more serious caveat is that as one reads the meta-analytic and systematic review literature, one gets the impression that database searching is an activity that takes thoughtful planning and skill. One implication seems to be if you do it well—everything will proceed in a valid and reliable manner. Clearly, as one can see from the search mistake that we noted above, investigator error is a possibility.

Beyond investigator error, concern about the performance of the databases used in literature searches seems justified (e.g., Holden & Barker, 1990; Holden et al., 2008, 2009; Kemp & Brustman, 1997; Mendelsohn, 1984, 1986; Taylor, Dempster, & Donnelly, 2003; Taylor, McCaughern, Dempster, & Donnelly, 2006; Taylor et al., 2007). The current study leads us to wonder if the reliability and validity of database performance has increased along with the increasing capabilities of databases. We did not document every database glitch here in a methodical manner. But our anecdotal impression is that research synthesists are faced with a problem that has no apparent solution. Databases seem to operate in some idiosyncratic ways. For instance, database performance can vary from one search to the next; some databases offer precise phrase searching while others do not; support from database vendors is variable; some searches written in Microsoft Word cannot be pasted directly into some database search windows; some databases clearly note a search results total, while others require additional searching for that information; and adding other software to the mix (e.g., downloading results to Refworks for processing) can exacerbate problems. When we discuss these kinds of issues with reference librarians, they typically empathize and agree—they know the problems well. Yet, we have not yet seen extended discussion of these issues that call into question one of the fundamental aspects of a systematic review—a comprehensive and precise search of the literature. Given these observations, all we can say is that we made a strong attempt in the current study to uncover all of the relevant reports, but (as with all studies in the current search environment) there will always be a shred of doubt that some studies were missed.

The inclusion criteria for the current study admittedly set a high bar. Clearly, the difficulties in carrying out an RCCT or even a two group pretest–posttest, quasi-experimental design in educational settings are well known. These difficulties seem to be what led Ralph Tyler to reconceptualize educational evaluation as an examination of the degree to which the actual outcomes of education match the intended outcomes (Madaus & Stufflebeam, 2000). The results of the current study aside, the authors agree with Bogo's (2005) claim, based on her review of 40 studies of field instruction, that "[d]espite methodological limitations, these studies are building towards evidence-based field education practices" (p. 163). Yet, our failure to uncover a single study meeting the inclusion criteria clearly calls into question CSWE's designation of field instruction as the profession's signature pedagogy. Findings reported in this study could, and should, provide an impetus to accelerate the field instruction-related evidence building process identified by Bogo.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

External funding for this project was provided by the NYUSSW/Federal Work Study Program which partially supported Ms. Ferrell's role. The program also funded the tireless and skilled library work by Sarah Kiperman who merits our deepest gratitude. Sofie Kuppens is a Postdoctoral Fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders, Belgium.

References

Abbott, E. (1942). *Social welfare and professional education.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (1931 section reprinted in 1942 volume).

Arkava, M. L., & Brennen, E. C. (1976). *Competency-based education: Evaluation and curriculum issues*. New York, NY: Council on Social Work Education.

Baird, B. N. (2008). *The internship, practicum and field placement handbook: A guide for the helping professions* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

Bloom, T. (1963). First presentation. In Council on Social Work Education (Ed.), *The future of field instruction: Agency-school commitment and communication* (pp. 1–9). New York, NY: Council on Social Work Education.

Bogo, M. (2005). Field instruction in social work: A review of the research literature. *The Clinical Supervisor, 25,* 3–19.

Bogo, M., & Vayda, E. (1987). *The practice of field instruction in social work: Theory and process.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Bogo, M., & Vayda, E. (1998). *The practice of field instruction in social work: Theory and process* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Campbell Collaboration. (2001). *Campbell systematic reviews: Guidelines for the preparation of review protocols* (Version 1.0). Retrieved from Campbell Collaboration Website: http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/resources/guidelines/review_protocol_guidelines.php

Caspi, J. (1997). *The task centered model for field instruction* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from UMI Dissertation Publishing/ProQuest (Order Number: 9728782).

Caspi, J., & Reid, W. J. (2002). *Educational supervision in social work.* New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Clare, M. (2001). Thinking systemically about fieldwork education—A third way. *Australian Social Work, 54,* 53–66.

Cochrane Collaboration. (2002). *The handsearcher training manual*. Retrieved from http://apps1.jhsph.edu/cochrane/NSresourceshandsearch.htm

Cooper, H. (2010). *Research synthesis and meta-analysis: A step by step approach* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Council on Social Work Education. (1963). *The future for field instruction: Agency-school commitment and communication.* New York, NY: Council on Social Work Education.

Council on Social Work Education. (2008a). *Strengthening the profession of social work: Leadership in research, career advancement, and education.* Retrieved from http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=14136

Council on Social Work Education. (2008b). *Educational policy and accreditation standards.* Retrieved from http://www.cswe.org/NR/rdonlyres/2A81732E-1776-4175-AC42-65974E96BE66/0/2008EducationalPolicyandAccreditationStandards.pdf

Cuzzi, L. C., Holden, G., Chernack, P., Rutter, S., & Rosenberg, G. (1997). Evaluating social work field instruction: Rotations versus

year-long placements. *Research on Social Work Practice, 7,* 402–414.

Cuzzi, L. C., Holden, G., Rutter, S., Rosenberg, G., & Chernack, P. (1996). A pilot study of fieldwork rotations vs. year long placements for social work students in a public hospital. *Social Work in Health Care, 24,* 73–91.

Dalgleish, K. B., Kane, R. A., & McNamara, J. J. (1976). Rotating social work students within a medical center. *Health & Social Work, 1,* 166–171.

Faith, G. B. (1953). The professional school and the social agency. In R. Wessel & G. Faith (Eds.), *Professional education based in practice* (pp. 97–170). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work.

Feinstein, A. R., & Cicchetti, D. V. (1990). High agreement but low kappa: I. The problems of two paradoxes. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, 43,* 543–549.

Feldman, R. A. (2009). Reinventing social work accreditation: Write on! *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 124–126.

Felkner, W. J. (2009). Poor rigor and political obduracy: Which is the horse and which is the cart in social work education? *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 121–123.

Gambrill, E. (2007). Transparency as the route to evidence-informed professional education, *Research on Social Work Practice, 17,* 553–560.

Garthwait, C. L. (2005). The social work practicum: A guidebook and workbook for students (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.

Glassman, U., & Robbins, V. C. (2007). To the editor. *Journal of Social Work Education, 43,* 161–163.

Green, S., Higgins, J. P. T., Schunemann, H. J., & Becker, L. (2007). Response to paper by Lang A, Edwards N, and Fleiszer A. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, 60,* 598–599.

Haffey, M., & Starr, R. (1988). *Designing a work-study program: Where social service employment meets professional education*. New York, NY: The Lois and Samuel Silberman Fund.

Hannes, K, Claes, L., & the Belgian Campbell Group. (2007). Learn to read and write systematic reviews: The Belgian Campbell Group. *Research on Social Work Practice, 17,* 748–753.

Holden, G., & Barker, K. M. (1990). Potential for technological dependency: An example. *Social Work Research and Abstracts, 26,* 35–36.

Holden, G., Barker, K., Covert-Vail, L., Rosenberg, G., & Cohen, S. A. (2008). Does social work abstracts work? *Research on Social Work Practice, 18,* 487–499.

Holden, G., Barker, K., Covert-Vail, L., Rosenberg, G., & Cohen S. A. (2009). Social work abstracts fails again. *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 715–721.

Homonoff, E. (2008). The heart of social work: Best practitioners rise to challenges in field instruction. *The Clinical Supervisor, 27,* 135–169.

Hopewell, S., Clarke, M., Lefebvre, C., & Westby, M. (2002). A comparison of handsearching versus MEDLINE searching to identify reports of randomized controlled trials. *Statistics in Medicine*, *21*, 1625–1634.

Ivry, J., Lawrence, F. P., Damon-Rodriguez, J., & Robbins, V. C. (2005). Fieldwork rotation: A model for educating social work students for geriatric social work practice. *Journal of Social Work Education, 4,* 407–425.

Jamtvedt, G., Johansen, M., Vist, G., Reinar, L. M., von Mehren, S., & Nordheim, L. (2007). *Empty reviews in Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews—How long do they stay empty?* Paper presented at the XV Cochrane Colloquium; 2007 Oct 23-27. Abstract retrieved from http://cmr.cochrane.org/?CRGReportID=11315&printable=1

Jarman-Rohde, L., McFall, J., Kolar, P., & Strom, G. (1997). The changing context of social work practice: Implications and recommendations for social work educators. *Journal of Social Work Education, 33,* 29–46.

Jarman-Rohde, L., & Tropman, J. E. (1993). The social work practicum as service learning. In J. Galura & J. Howard (Eds.), *Praxis I: A faculty casebook on community service learning* (pp. 173–180). Ann Arbor, MI: OCSL Press.

Jenkins, L. E., & Sheafor, B. W. (1982). An overview of social work field instruction. In B. W. Sheafor & L. E. Jenkins (Eds.), *Quality field instruction in social work: Program development and maintenance* (pp. 3–19). New York, NY: Longman.

Jones, B. L. (1969). *Current patterns in field instruction in graduate social work education.* New York, NY: Council on Social Work Education.

Kadushin, A. E. (1991). Introduction. In D. Schneck, B. Grossman, & U. Glassman (Eds.), *Field education in social work: Contemporary issues and trends* (pp. 11–12). Dubuque, IO: Kendall Hunt.

Kemp, B. E., & Brustman, M. J. (1997). Social policy research: Comparison and analysis of CD-ROM resources. *Social Work Research, 21,* 111–120.

Kuppens, S., Holden, G., Barker, K., & Rosenberg, G. (IN PRESS). A Kappa related decision: *K, Y, G* or AC_1. *Social Work Research*.

Lang, A., & Edwards, N. (2005). Perils of systematic reviews. *Canadian Medical Association Journal, 172,* 855.

Lang, A., Edwards, N., & Fleiszer, A. (2007). Empty systematic reviews: Hidden perils and lessons learned. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, 60,* 595–597.

Lee, P. R., Kenworthy, M. E., Ivins, S., Neustaedter, E., Honsberger, J., & Regensburg, J. (1931). *Mental hygiene and social work.* New York, NY: The Commonwealth Fund.

Levy, C. S. (1981). *Social work education 1898-1955.* Washington, DC: NASW.

Littell, J. H., Corcoran, J., & Pillai, V. (2008). *Systematic reviews and meta-analysis.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Lowenberg, F. (1972). *Time and quality in graduate social work education*. New York, NY: Council on Social Work Education.

Madaus, G. F., & Stufflebeam, D. L. (2000). Program evaluation: A historical overview. In D. L. Stufflebeam, G. F. Madaus, & T. Kellaghan (Eds.), *Evaluation models: Viewpoints on educational and human services evaluation* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic.

Manis, F. (1979). *Openness in social work field instruction: Stance and form guidelines*. Goleta, CA: Kimberly Press.

Mendelsohn, H. N. (1984). Social work online. *Database, 7*, 36–49.

Mendelsohn, H. N. (1986). Searching social work abstracts: A review. *Database, 9*, 22–27.

Midgley, J. (2009). Comments on "Reinventing social work education." *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 119–120.

Mohan, B. (2009). Rejoinder to "Reinventing social work education." *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 116–118.

Montgomery, P., Hopewell, S., Shepard, L., & Yaffe, J. (2010). *How empty are empty reviews? Developing guidelines for the discussion of excluded studies.* Retrieved from Campbell Collaboration website: http://www.cochrane.org/intranet/awards-scholarships-funding-initiatives/funding-initiatives/opportunities-fund/opportunitie

National Association of Social Work. (2006). *Social Work Abstracts PLUS* (NASW Vol. Id: SWAB0004, SP-0113-0040). Washington, DC: NASW.

Pierce, D. (2008). *Field education in the 2008 EPAS: Implications for the field director's role*. Richmond, VA: Council on Social Work Education.

Raskin, M. S. (1989). *Empirical studies in field instruction*. New York: Haworth Press.

Raskin, M., Skolnick, L., & Wayne, J. (1991). An international perspective of field instruction. *Journal of Social Work Education, 27,* 258–70.

Rehr, H., & Caroff, P. (1986). *A new model in academic-practice partnership: Multi-instructor and institutional collaboration in social work.* Lexington, MA: Ginn Press.

Robbins, V. C., Robbins, S. P., Jacobs, S., & Alpert, S. (2009). *The signature pedagogy: Defining, measuring and operationalizing competencies in field education.* Handout prepared for Council on Social Work Education /APM, San Antonio, November 7, 2009. Retrieved from first author's website http://www.susanrobbins.com/Field%20Handouts%20for%20CSWE-APM.doc

Rosenblatt, A., Welter, M., & Wojciechowski, S. (1976). *The Adelphi experiment: Accelerating social work education.* New York, NY: Council on Social Work Education.

Rothstein, H. R., Turner, H. M., & Lavenberg, J. G. (2004). *The Campbell Collaboration Information Retrieval Policy Brief*. Retrieved from Campbell Collaboration website http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/artman2/uploads/1/Information_Retrieval_Policy_Brief.pdf

Rubin, A. (2008). *Practitioners guide to using research for evidence-based practice.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Schlosser, R. W., & Sigafoos, J. (2009). Empty reviews and evidence based practice. *Evidence-based Communication Assessment and Intervention, 3,* 1–3.

Schneck, D., Grossman, B., & Glassman, U. (1991). *Field education in social work: Contemporary issues and trends.* Dubuque, IO: Kendall Hunt.

Shatz, E. O. (1989). Preface. In M. Raskin (Ed.), *Empirical studies in field instruction* (pp. xxv–xxvii). New York, NY: Haworth Press.

Sheafor, B., & Jenkins, L., (1982). *Quality field instruction in social work.* New York, NY: Longman.

Shek, D. T. L. (2008). Comprehensiveness of *Social Work Abstracts* as a database for researchers and practitioners. *Research on Social Work Practice, 18,* 500–506.

Shulman, L. (1992). *Interactional supervision.* Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Shulman, L. S. (2005). Signature pedagogies in the professions. *Daedulus, 134,* 52–59.

Sowers, K. M., & Dulmus, C. N. (2009). Social work education: Status quo or change? *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 114–115.

Spencer, A., & McDonald, C. (1998). Omissions and commissions: An analysis of professional field education literature. *Australian Social Work, 51*, 9–18.

Stoesz, D., & Karger, H. (2009a). Reinventing social work accreditation. *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 104–111.

Stoesz, D., & Karger, H. (2009b). Social work education in wonderland: Stoesz and Karger reply. *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 131–133.

Stoesz, D., Karger, H., & Carrilio, T. (2010). *A dream deferred: How social work education lost its way and what can be done.* New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction.

Taylor, B. J., Dempster, M., & Donnelly, M. (2003). Hidden gems: Systematically searching electronic databases for research publications for social work and social care. *British Journal of Social Work, 33,* 423–439.

Taylor, B. J., McCaughern, E., Dempster, M., & Donnelly, M. (2006). *Systematic searching on the AgeInfo database.* Bristol, UK: Social Care Institute for Excellence.

Taylor, B., Wylie, E., Dempster, M., & Donnelly, M. (2007). Systematically retrieving research: A case study evaluating seven databases. *Research on Social Work Practice, 17,* 697–706.

Thomlison, B., & Corcoran, K. (2008). *The evidence-based internship: A field manual.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Thyer, B. A. (2009). The CSWE and social work accreditation: Not guilty on all charges. *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 127–130.

Watkins, J. M. (2009). Response to Stoesz and Karger's article, "Reinventing social work accreditation." *Research on Social Work Practice, 19,* 112–113.

Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2006). The need for radical change in field education. *Journal of Social Work Education, 42,* 161–169.

Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2007). The authors respond. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *43*, 163–164.

Wessel, R., & Faith, G. B. (1953). *Professional education based in practice.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work.