MAKING SENSE OF THE SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION LIAISON ROLE AND IMPACTS OF NEOLIBERALISM: AN INVITATION TO REFLECT AND REIMAGINE!

Corresponding author: Ann Carrington, Ph.D., BSW(Hons), James Cook University, Cairns.

Email: ann.carrington@jcu.edu.au

Address: P.O. Box 6811, Cairns, Queensland, 4870

Abstract

The social work field education liaison role is fraught with tensions, contradictions and role ambiguity causing confusion about the role, functions and responsibilities of the liaison across individual staff, students and universities, resulting in students' divergent experiences and liaison staff floundering in the mire of uncertainty. As an academic my experiences of undertaking the liaison role across different institutions, observing colleagues fulfilling the role differently and managerial changes to resourcing prompted me to review the literature further to develop understanding of the role and to inform my practice. A thematic literate review was conducted win which 36 academic articles were reviewed, excerpts collated, coded and analyzed. Five themes emerged and are explored in this piece: signature pedagogy and the importance of the liaison role; under researched and ambiguous; roles, functions and responsibilities; a conduit of the university and governing bodies; the neoliberal managerialist context; and a call to revitalize the liaison role. Further, reflections on how reviewing the literature informed my practice are shared. It is hoped this paper will provide an exploration of the liaison role that will invite others to engage in a reflective process and to begin reimagining how they fulfill the role.

Key words: Social work liaison, liaison faculty, liaison role, field education liaison, neoliberalism,

Introduction

The social work field education liaison role is fraught with tensions, contradictions and role ambiguity resulting in staff not always knowing what to do in practice, with the role looking different across individuals and universities (Cleak & Venville, 2018; Egan & Hill, 2020; Olson-Morrison, Radohl, Dickery, 2019; Tully, 2015). The liaison person (or a variation of) is a common and vital member of a social work student's placement team. In Australia, a social work student is supported on placement with a professional supervisor (a qualified social worker preferably located in their placement agency), a task supervisor (agency representative responsible for agency specific tasks – this role is often included as part of the professional supervision role if they are located in the placement agency) and the liaison person (representative of the university can be academic or casual staff). However, it is acknowledged that this role may look different, be labelled differently or not exist in social work courses from other countries around the world. For example, Lei, et al., (2021) uses the language of supervisor for both the agency and the university support person. While there is a pleather of literature exploring the professional supervisor role within placement less attention has been afforded to the liaison role. This paper assists in addressing the gap by focusing specifically on the social work field education liaison role.

The liaison role has historically been ambiguous and varied across individuals, universities and countries. Although there is a general shared understanding that the liaison represents the university in liaising with the student and the agency (Anderson et al., 2019; Armenta & Linseisen, 2015; Danis, Woody & Black, 2013; Egan & Hill, 2020; Guransky & Le Sueur, 2012; Ligo & Ward, 2005; Rosenblum & Raphael, 1983; and Zuchowski, 2015), how and by what methods is inconsistent. This causes much confusion regarding the role, functions and responsibilities of the liaison person across individual staff, students and universities, resulting in students' divergent experiences and

liaison staff floundering in the mire of ambiguity. Academics both new and old to the role may struggle to find clarity and it is hoped this paper will prompt individuals working in this area to engage in a reflective process which will provide insight into their own practice in this space.

While individual academics may be grappling with how to conduct this important role changes to the role resulting from the neoliberal managerialist agenda provide additional uncertainty and complexity to the role at an individual and institutional level. With the perceived high costs associated with running a quality field education program it has become a vulnerable low hanging fruit for the neoliberal managerialist cost cutting agenda in the higher education sector (Cleak & Venville, 2018; Morley & Dunstan, 2013). While the tangible function of assessment and administration may be recognized by management and allocated in workloads other elements such as teaching (Agllias, Wendy, Cassano, Collingrindge, Dawood, Irwin, Lukic, Maywald, McKinnon, Noble, O'Sullivan, Wexler, & Zubrzycki, 2010; Egan & Hill, 2020; Faria, Brownstein & Smith, 1988; Olson-Morrison, et al., 2019; Rosenblum & Raphael, 1983; Smith, Faria, & Brownstien, 1986;) and relationship building (Cleak & Venville, 2018; Tully, 2005) seem to be undervalued and overlooked in workload allocation transferring these elements into the invisible workload of the academic. However, while undervalued and made invisible by management the relationship with the liaison person is often identified as most valued by students and field educators (Anderson, Drechsler, Hessenauer & Clark, 2019).

Positioning the author and this paper

The impetus for this paper was my questioning of what the social work field education liaison role was and what was required by the liaison person to fulfill this role well. This questioning occurred across more than 20 years first, from the position as a student, then as a casual staff member and finally as a fulltime academic undertaking the role across different universities within Australia. While this questioning had spanned many years I was finally spurred into action after moving between different universities several times and sharing numerous conversations with colleagues where we deliberated upon role but continued to share very different ideas of the role and understandings of how and what must be done within the role.

In 2016, I conducted a significant informal review of the literature to inform my own professional development and practice in the liaison role better to understand the role and how I should be conducting it and to inform a project I was working on with colleagues. While my engagement with the literature at this point helped to develop a better understanding of the role and how I would perform it, institutional changes to the time and resources allocated to the role encouraged me to revisit the literature again in 2021, further to understand the role and the impacts of neoliberal managerialism.

My aim in 2016 was to understand, what the liaison role is? how it should be conducted? factors that influence the role and how it is conducted? and whether it should be more standardized? One Search was used to seek out relevant articles that would respond to my questions. I included search terms such as social work field education, social work liaison, liaison role and field education liaison role. Although I was interested in the current situation, I was also keen to contextualize this within the evolution of the role across time with articles being included from 1986 to 2016. Further, some articles identified through bibliographic chains were included. Overall, 30 academic papers were reviewed and some documents specific to professional guidelines were also included. Each article was read, excerpts were collated and coded, with the following themes emerging: signature pedagogy - field education central to social work; ambiguous role - enacted differently across universities; dearth of literature and importance of the liaison role; changes to the role decreasing its value, constraints to the role and why the changes; standardized practice; role and function – what are people doing; and inherent conflicts and tensions within the role.

As mentioned, in 2021, I reengaged with the literature, in response to internal institutional changes, to garner further information about the role, how it was changing and the influence of neoliberalism. The aims of the original review were expanded to include a more specific focus to the changes and impact of neoliberalism. Again, One Search was utilized to search for literature using similar search terms as the original search within the date range of 2016-2021. Six further articles were included. Each article was read and excerpts collated and coded. A meta-analysis of the collated and code excerpts across both searches was then conducted. This process further refined the themes to

those presented in this paper and include: signature pedagogy and the importance of the liaison role; under researched and ambiguous; roles, functions and responsibilities; a conduit of the university and governing bodies; the neo-liberal managerialist context; and a call to revitalize the liaison role. Each theme from the literature will now be explored before the author shares their reflections from engaging with the literature and then finishes by drawing conclusion informed by the literature reviewed.

Signature pedagogy and importance of the liaison person

Field education is central to social work education and in many Western English-speaking countries has developed as social works signature pedagogy (Armenta & Linseisen, 2015; Bogo, 2015; Clark & Remmers, 2019; Cleak & Venville, 2018; Egan, Chee, Long, McLean, Parrish & Spencer, 2018; Egan & Hill, 2020; Olson-Morrison, et al., 2019). A signature pedagogy is a discipline's way of educating students to enact the values, knowledge, skills and professional identity of the discipline (Chick, et al., 2012). While many Western English-speaking countries (such as Australia, New Zealand, UK, Canada and the USA) may position field education as the disciplinary signature pedagogy Wallengren-Lynch et al., (ahead-of-print) remind us that cross-nationally the idea of a shared social work pedagogy is still developing. Armenta & Linseisen (2015) and Bogo (2015) explain that field education has been proclaimed as the signature pedagogy of social work by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). The importance of field education within social work education is not just recognised by educators and governing bodies but by students of social work in identifying placement as a critical component in preparing them for work after graduation (Crisp & Hosken 2016). This sentiment is echoed by Bogo (2015) in arguing that placement 'is crucial as it provides the underpinning of subsequent growth' (p. 317). Further she argues that it is an essential gatekeeping tool in assessing students' readiness to graduate. She assigns it such significance as to urge that it must become a priority of the profession and for all social work educators not just those delivering the field education component of a social work course.

Olson-Morrison et al., (2019) and Anderson et al., (2019) reiterate this call for faculty to undertake the liaison role and where this is not possible Anderson et al., (2019) and Clark & Remmers

(2019) advocate for comprehensive and/or standardize training for liaisons. While there is limited research and literature focused on the role of liaison the importance of the role in social work field education is acknowledged in much of which does exist (Anderson et al., 2019; Clark & Remmers, 2019; Cleak & Venville, 2018; Faria et al., 1988; Ligon & Ward, 2005; Olson-Morrison, et al., 2019; Tully, 2015). Clark & Remmers (2019) highlight the importance of the liaison role and the integral part it plays in supporting both student and field educator. While others highlight the roles importance as the connection, bridge, linkage or conduit between the field and university (Anderson et al., 2019; Armenta & Linseisen, 2015; Danis, Woody & Black, 2013; Egan & Hill, 2020; Guransky & Le Sueur, 2012; Ligo & Ward, 2005; Rosenblum & Raphael, 1983; and Zuchowski, 2015). Further, Cleak & Venville (2018) emphasize the importance of the liaison role as it relates to the students' and field educators' satisfaction with the learning experience during placement yet expands on this with the caveat that the quality of the liaison contact is also important especially face-to-face contact (with two face-to-face visits the preference) and the level of skills and knowledge held by the liaison. Some participants in Cleak & Venville's (2018) study found liaisons to be "extremely unhelpful" (S6) (p. 40) with the reasons potentially associated with approaches to the role informed by cuts to resources and time allocation such as not responding quickly or providing feedback.

Under researched and ambiguous

Within this signature pedagogy of field education, Armenta & Linseisen (2015) place utmost importance on the field liaison role and yet highlight that limited research exists in regard to the liaison role. Ligon & Ward (2005) further note that research and literature in relation to the liaison role has been scant recently and historically. Egan & Hill (2020), Tully (2005) and Zuchowski (2015) supports this in highlighting that although the field liaison holds a key role in field education minimal attention has been given to the role in the literature. In the review of literature for this piece the author can confirm that the literature on the liaison role was scant with far more emphasis and focus on the role of the field educator/professional supervisor. These current concerns echo those of Faria et al., (1988) of over three decades ago. Ligon & Ward (2005) also bring attention more specifically to a lack of research from the perspective of those in the role of liaison. Ligon & Ward (2005) along with

Faria et al., (1988) called for greater exploration of aspect of the liaison role such as the role, the responsibilities, performance and evaluation. However, a burst of literature (such as Anderson et al., 2019; Clark & Remmers, 2019; Cleak & Venville, 2018; Egan & Hill, 2020; Olson-Morrison, et al., 2019) in recent years is starting to address this gap.

The position of liaison has no absolute or accepted set of expectations and is without a clear role definition, delineation, or strong evidence base to support its pedagogical underpinnings (Cleak & Venville, 2018; Egan & Hill, 2020). Not only is the role itself ambiguous and enacted differently across individuals and universities but the structure of the programs and how it is staffed varies across universities (Cleak & Venville, 2018; Egan & Hill, 2020; Olson-Morrison, et al., 2019; Tully, 2015). Participants from Egan & Hill's (2020) study discussed role confusion and lack of role clarity expressing that these states are experienced by all stakeholders not just in relation to the role and functions of the liaison but concerning confusion of each other's roles in the field placement team and how they work to support the student's learning.

Little seems to have changed from when Faria et al (1988) emphasised in their findings that there was little agreement of what the liaison role actually consisted of and noted that this diversity must be taken into account. This idea was expanded upon by Ligon & Ward (2005) who highlighted that 'less than 75% of current liaisons use the learning plan consistently in conjunction with the field activities' (p. 241). Ligon & Ward (2005) use this as an example of how training in the liaison role may be helpful. This argument would then assume that some level of standardisation is desirable and would be achieved through training as advocated by Clark & Remmers (2019). The desire for clear parameters of the liaison role and a level of standardization across universities was also expressed by participants in Egan & Hill's (2020) study. Certainly, in Victoria, Australia, achieving a standarised model for field education has been a priority for the Victorian Combined Schools of Social Work as illustrated in Cleak, Hawkins, Laughton, & Williams, (2015) paper presenting a common assessment tool. This may be reflective of the quest for universalism at the global scale where global qualifying standards are being sort along with an agreed international definition of social work (Gray & Fook, 2004). However, the literature explored here demonstrates that although there may be some points of

agreement in the liaison role as a disciple, we are far from a standardised approach within individual universities or across individual staff and this has not changed over a significant span of time. However, one may question if this is something all social work educators would advocate for as standardization is often a tool of neoliberalism that reduces the presence of alternate discourse (Garrett, 2010) and undermines the sophisticated use of discipline specific knowledge (Morley & Dunstan, 2013) by eroding the ability of individual liaisons to draw from their theoretical practice frameworks within the role.

Roles, functions and responsibilities

The work of Smith et al., (1986) and Faria et al., (1988) provide a foundational contribution to the exploration and understanding of the field liaison role in social work. Smith et al., (1986) and Faria et al., (1988) identified two components relating to the field liaison the first being aspects of the liaison role and the second being liaison functions. Roles of the liaison included advisor, monitor, consultant, teacher, mediator, and advocate. Functions of the liaison included practicum placement, linkage, evaluation and administrator. Significant in this research was the finding that the descriptions of the liaison role were diverse and limited. Additionally, different levels of importance were placed on different aspects of the role and functions by different field educators which may result in the field liaison 'having to be different things to different field instructors' (Faria et al 1988, p. 143).

Rosenblum and Raphael (1983) described the liaison role 'as the connecting link between the school of social work and the agency in which the student was placed' (p. 96). They proposed that performing this role involved 'building, maintaining, and traversing an imaginary bridge between these two systems' (p. 69). They argued that complexity was inherent in the role due to the functions required including '(1) facilitating field teaching, students' learning, and integration of theory and practice, (2) monitoring educational opportunities offered by the agency and students' progress and fostering inter-change between school and field, and (3) evaluating field instructors' efforts and students' achievement' (p. 69).

Exploration by Cleak and Wilson (2007) (cited in Agllias, et al., 2010) identifies three similar key functions of liaison as: (1) Monitoring and evaluation - assessing the quality of placement and

monitoring and assessing the students' performance, (2) Education - creating links between classroom teaching and the placement experience, (3) Support and problem-solving - providing support, problem solving and mediation as required during placement. Hendricks, Finch, and Franks (2013, cited in Tully, 2015) on the other hand explore the responsibilities rather than functions including advisory, instructional and evaluative responsibilities. With a focus on responsibility the focus shifts to one where the liaison is accountable for the educational experience of the student.

Egan & Hill's (2020), more recent exploration of the role developed through speaking with those acting in the liaison role and reiterated some of the roles, functions and responsibilities already explored providing a glimpse into the current context of the liaison. Their work highlighted the multifaceted nature of the liaison role with their analysis identifying two key overarching themes 1) operationalizing, administrating and implementing the role and 2) creating and protecting the learning environment. Elements identified as relating to the first theme included operationalising the parameters of the role; improving role clarity; role orientation and induction; and logistics of undertaking the role. Element of the second theme included facilitating learning and assessing student learning outcomes; managing diverse support needs of all stakeholders; and bridging, scaffolding, gatekeeping across stakeholders.

Across most of the literature assessment and evaluation is identified as a central tenant of the liaison role (Agllias, et al., 2010; Clark and Remmers, 2019; Egan & Hill, 2020; Faria et al., 1988; Olson-Morrison et al., 2019; Smith et al., 1986) and often conducted through the development of learning goals captured in learning plans. Learning plans are foundational and provide a guide to the placement activities and are a central means for assessment by the university. However, even with such a central tool there is variation and ambiguity in how it is used. As previously mentioned, Ligon & Ward (2005) found that less than 75% of liaison in their study used learning plans consistently. Fifteen years on this inconsistency is still present with participants of Egan & Hill's (2020) study raising it as a concern for stakeholders with specific apprehension about what constitutes a minimum standard.

A conduit of the university and governing bodies

More generally Tully (2015) explains that the liaison is the representative of the university and is responsible for creating the links and relationships between the university the agency and the student. He further contends that the field liaison is responsible for ensuring that the theory, concepts and content of the classroom is transferred, understood and applied within the context of the placement experience. This focus on the educational and university representative aspect of the liaison role is further emphasised by Armenta & Linseisen (2015) Danis et al., (2013), Guransky & Le Sueur (2012), Ligo and Ward (2005) and Zuchowski (2015).

In Zuchowski's (2015) study a majority of participants highlighted bringing the universities perspective to the placement as an important component of the liaison role. This included clarifying roles, briefing people, being available and supportive, ensuring degree requirements are met, ensuring students have opportunities for learning and that there is a safe learning environment. Danis et al., (2013) suggested that monitoring was a key component of liaison as the university representative and included activities such as reviewing hours, regularity of supervision and resolving issues or disputes between student and field educator. Homonoff (2008) emphasised consultation as a core component of liaison particularly in supporting the field educator when there may be a negative evaluation. Homonoff (2008) found that 'most field instructors in this sample consulted with their field liaisons as representatives of their schools' positions on curriculum, research, and especially evaluation of students' (p. 162).

Agllias et al., (2010) suggests that in addition to guidelines put forth in literature or by governing bodies most universities will describe a range of responsibilities of the field liaison. These responsibilities which are framed as a form of monitoring include a focus on the learning plan, student progression, professional conduct of the student and engagement with available learning opportunities, ensuring social work specific experiences are available, communication between the student and field educator, that theory and skills from the course are being applied in practice and occupational health and safety.

There seems to be little specific direction from the CSWE (2008) in guiding the implementation of the liaison role amongst social work courses in the USA. However, the CSWE

does state that programs are required to 'Specifies policies, criteria, and procedures for selecting field settings; placing and monitoring students; maintaining field liaison contacts with field education settings; and evaluating student learning and field setting effectiveness congruent with the program's competencies' (p. 9). This may be a factor in the calls for increased and more standardised training of liaisons (Anderson et al., 2019; Clark & Remmers, 2019). The Australia Association of Social Workers (2012) in the past has been more specific in providing minimum requirements as guidelines. These guidelines provide a general overview but also home in on specifics such as providing parameters in relation to face-to-face contact and use of communication technology like video conferencing and Skype. Although the most recent iteration of guidelines is truncated from an in depth 12 pages to a summative 5 pages with a reduction in the number of times the liaison is mentioned from 6 to 1 (Australia Association of Social Workers, 2012; 2020) potentially increasing ambiguity around the roles, functions and responsibilities of the liaison.

The neoliberal managerial context

The liaison role cannot be understood in the current context without acknowledging the influence of neoliberalism (Guransky & Le Sueur, 2012; Hosken, Green, Laughton, Van Ingen, Walker, Goldingay, & Vassos, 2016; Zuchowski, 2015). Neoliberal managerialism has impacted the university sector and the welfare sector in which field placement occurs. Garrett (2010) argues that neoliberalism has had a major impact on the trajectory of social work. One characteristic of neoliberalism Garrett (2010) draws attention to is that of 'precariousness' created through job insecurity. Job insecurity and contract work is common across both sectors and is increasing in field education (Cleak & Venville, 2018; Egan & Hill, 2020). Perhaps more concerning is the idea that neoliberalism is closing the space for alternative discourses in social work (Garrett, 2010). Garrett (2010) argues that 'One of the main ways of achieving this, of course, has been to try and ensure that the professional formation of new social workers fits with, or does not unduly destabilize, neoliberal nostrums' (p. 349).

Morley and Dunstan (2013) echo and expand on this concern speaking directly to the consequences of neoliberalism not just on social work education but field education specifically. They

outline three core consequences of neoliberalism including '(1) the ascendance of competency based initiatives which undermine more sophisticated approaches to theorised practice; (2) the creation of divisions between academia and the field; and (3) the marginalisation of field education within universities where it's constructed as a resource intensive component of professional programmes, juxtaposed against the income generating activities of funded research' (p. 142). In relation to the liaison role Morley & Dunstan (2013) are concerned that these consequences will result in academic staff being disinterested in liaison work which not only further places field education at the peripheral but means academic staff will be disconnected from the field in any meaningful way.

The rise of neoliberalism and managerialism has created a dynamic and changing context in which field education is occurring. Funding concerns have impacted both the university and the field. Within the university sector cuts to funding and the emphasis on research grants and publications has resulted in liaisons being outsourced and academic staff being less likely to take on liaisons (Armenta & Linseisen 2015; Beck & Kosnik 2002; Bogo 2015; Danis et al., 2013; Hosken et al., 2016; Morley & Dunstan 2013). Armenta & Linseisen (2015) highlight that in response to the constraints and economic pressure present some schools of social work have decreased expectations of the liaison role reducing site visits and employing the use of technology as a replacement. Such moves were the impetus for Danis et al., (2013) study comparing traditional face-to-face liaison contacts with technology facilitated liaisons.

In the field, the managerialist approach of funding cuts and high workloads has placed constraints on availability of appropriate field educators and placement agencies (Guransky & Le Sueur 2012; Hay, Dale, & Yeung, 2016; Hosken et al., 2016; Zuchowski 2015). The pressures on both the university and field have increased existing tensions with the university reliant on the good will of the field to support student placements (Hay et al., 2016). This is occurring in the context where student numbers have increased and placement opportunities have decreased or become more competitive due to high numbers, limited places and paid placements (Cleak et al., 2015; Crisp & Hosken 2016;). Yet, the field is also reliant on the university system to provide well trained social

workers to employ (Hay et al., 2016). As such, Guransky & Le Sueur (2012) express concern that this symbiotic relationship between the field, university and the student leave all susceptible to collusion.

Egan & Hill (2020) continue the premise found in existing literature that there is currently an erosion of the value and role of the liaison across universities. They highlight decreased on-site liaison visits, increased use of technology-based contact, casualisation of the role, liaisons not being involved in the teaching the curriculum and a decrease in the number of academics in the role as evidence of the value erosion. These are observations supported by authors such as Armenta & Linseisen (2015), Clark & Remmers (2019), Danis et al., 2013, and Cleak & Venville (2018).

Participants in Egan & Hill's (2020) study highlighted that such changes were presenting challenges in fulfilling the role of liaison. They expressed concerns that the move to one face-to-face contact per placement did not allow for the liaisons to get a complete picture of the student's progress or form the necessary relationships with stakeholders. During the Covid-19 pandemic this has reduce in many cases to no face-to-face contact with a concern that this may become the new accepted norm beyond Covid-19 restrictions. Further, although cost cutting measures such as reducing face-to-face visits may be perceived by management as reducing cost participants from Egan & Hill's (2020) study highlighted that such measures left them feeling they did not have the time to perform the basic required functions of the liaison role within the hours allocated.

A call to revitalise the liaison role

The neoliberal informed changes to field education have seen decreasing budgets, cuts and the casualisation of the field education roles (Cleak & Venville, 2018; Morely, 2014; Olson-Morrison et al., 2019) but it has been argued by some that with field education as the signature pedagogy what is actually needed is an increase in resources and a revitalising or strengthening of the field education/liaison role (Cleak & Venville, 2018; Egan et al., 2018; Olson-Morrison et al., 2019). Field education moves learning from classroom-based delivery to the masses to individualised tailored experiential learning for students and as such this individualised approach and the value provided through this method should justify an increase in resources (Egan et al., 2018).

The importance of academic staff members involvement in field education (Anderson et al., 2019; Olson-Morrison et al., 2019) and specifically in the role of liaisons is one element that may assist in re-establishing the value and revitalising the role of liaison. Academic staff are best suited in this role as being permanently within the university system they can better perform as the conduit between the student, field educator and the 'university', they have in-depth knowledge of the assessment process and minimum standards, but perhaps that which is most commonly acknowledge in the literature is in terms of their intimate knowledge of the social work course curriculum that allows them to position and support the students learning within the curriculum context (Cleak & Venville, 2018; Egan & Hill, 2020; Olson-Morrison et al., 2019). For this to occur we will need to deconstruct the managerialist perception of field education as a resource intensive component of social work programs (Morley & Dunstan, 2013). If this were possible then perhaps models like Olson-Morrison et al., (2019) could provide a potential way forward that values field education and the importance of the liaison role to achieve the best outcome for all stakeholders involved.

Reflections of the author

The literature for this paper was reviewed as an informal process for my own professional development. As such, I have included here how the review of literature informed my understanding and practice of the field education liaison role. When I first engaged with the literature in 2016 my different experiences of the role across institutions and the differing views and application of the role by colleagues (across institutions) prompted my questioning of what the role was, how best to fulfil the role and should the approach be more guided or standardised. Reflecting on the literature in 2016 validated my experience of the liaison role and the ambiguity and confusion I had experienced. It validated the importance I placed on the role and the strong instinct I had to 'protect' it. I was validated that I was doing the role 'correctly' and that the ambiguity and role confusion was a 'normal' element of the role. However, the most significant insight occurred in reflective conversations with my colleagues where we identified that ambiguity was not constrained to the liaison role and that it is present in much of social work practice. Normalisation of the ambiguity then allowed a reframing of the 'problem' and a recognition that the liaison role is no different from other

areas of social work practice which is informed by one's professional practice framework. As such, different colleagues do fulfill the liaison role differently as informed by their various professional practice framework and this may be considered best practice.

As a critical social worker while standardisation of the role may feel easier in some ways it does not sit comfortably with me as Garrett (2010) cautions this is often a tool of neoliberalism to reduce alternate discourse. Morley and Dunstan (2013) further caution that it can undermine the sophisticated use of discipline specific knowledge in favour of generic competency-based training. In contextualising the liaison role as social work practice that requires the application of one's professional practice framework, I felt comfortable again with the ambiguity or the 'grey' areas as from a critical perspective it is in these spaces that we can create change and resist or subvert the impacts of the neoliberal agenda. I moved forward within the liaison role more confidently and was able to clearly articulate my position and how I approach liaison to the field educators (professional supervisors) and students. This helped to address concerns students expressed about divergent experiences students had with different liaison persons. It also became a learning opportunity as I shared with students my reflections on how and why different liaisons undertake the role differently and encouraged them to make links between how a person engages in the role and their practice framework highlighting that all tasks as a social worker (including academic tasks) are informed by one's professional practice framework.

I am still processing my learning from the reengagement with the literature in 2021 but at this stage my positioning as a critical social worker encourages me to resist the erosion of important elements of field education, such as the liaison role. While this is not always easy in the current neoliberal context I can (using the ambiguity and 'grey' spaces) push back and resist some changes. I can provide evidence of the importance of the liaison role and field education in general to management through extant literature, emerging research, and student feedback. Further, the review of literature has invited me to harness the pressure created by the neoliberal agenda to innovate and develop new and potentially better ways of doing things as other are attempting to do as reflected in much of the literature reviewed in this piece. Most important, I have been encouraged to look for

solutions outside of the Western centric ways of doing and thinking I am comfortable with and to look to other countries with different approaches that may bring a fresh and invigorating perspective to finding solutions in this space.

Conclusion

Examination of the literature concerning the liaison role in social work field education has illustrated that many of the issues facing today's liaisons are not new. The ambiguity of the roles, functions and responsibilities, the inconsistencies in fulfilling this role across individuals and universities, reduction in time allocation, need for new ways or technologies for working have been captured in the literature across a broad time span. Perhaps what feels new and concerning is the reduction of value in the role and the lived experience for the student, field educator and the liaison person as the pace with which these factors impinge on the role continues to intensify. While individuals will always have the responsibility of managing ambiguities inherent in the liaison role and tensions between providing a quality learning experience within the constraints of a neoliberal context they must be guided by their professional practice framework, discipline specific knowledge, reflective practice and continued professional development. This paper adds to the calls of recent scholars to strengthen and revitalise the role of liaison, to ensure a high-quality student learning experience, support, committed field educators and fair workloads for liaisons that honours the value and importance of the role.

References

Agllias, K., Wendy, B., Cassano, B., Collingrindge, M., Dawood, A., Irwin, J., Lukic, M., Maywald, S., McKinnon, J., Noble, C., O'Sullivan, J., Wexler, J., & Zubrzycki, J. (2010). A guide to supervision in social work field education: revised edition, *Australian Learning and Teaching Council*.

Anderson, J., Drechsler, K., Hessenauer, S., & Clark, J. (2019). Training faculty field liaisons: the role of social capital theory, *Journal of Social Service Research*, 45(2), 254-268.

Armenta, K,. & Linseisen, T,. (2015). The indispensable faculty liaison within the signature pedagogy: the integrated field/classroom model (IFCM) as an example, *Field Educator*, 5(1).

Australia Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2012). Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS).2012 V1.4: revised 2015.

Australia Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2012). Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS): Guideline 1.2: field education programs.

Australia Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2020). Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS).

Beck, C. & Kosnik, C. (2002). Professors and the practicum: involvement of university faculty in preservice practicum supervision, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 6-19.

Bogo, M. (2015). Field education for clinical social work practice: best practices and contemporary challenges, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 43(3), 317-324.

Chick, N., Haynie, A., Gurung, R., & Ciccone, A. (2012). Exploring more signature pedagogies: approaches to teaching disciplinary habits of mind. Virginia: Stylus Publishing.

Clark, S., & Remmers, C,. (2019). Comprehensive training for field liaisons: a necessity for evaluating student performance, *Field Educator*, 9(1).

Cleak, H., Hawkins, L., Laughton, J., & Williams, J. (2015). Creating a standardised teaching and learning framework for social work field placements, *Australian Social Work*, 68(1), 49-64.

Cleak, H., & Venville, A. (2018). Testing satisfaction with a group-based social work field liaison model: a controlled mixed methods study, *Australian Social Work*, 71(1), 32-35.

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2008). Council on social work education: educational policy and accreditation standards, *Council on Social Work Education*.

Crisp, B., & Hosken, N. (2016). A fundamental rethink of practice learning in social work education, *Social Work Education*, 35(5), 506-517.

Danis, F., Woody, D., & Black, B. (2013). Comparison of face-to-face vs electronic field liaison contacts, *Field Educator*, 3(1).

Egan, R., Chee, P., Long, N., McLean, S., Parrish, J., & Spencer, A. (2018). Field education as a distinctive pedagogy for social work education, *Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education*, 20(1), 32-46.

Egan, R., & Hill, N. (2020). A preliminary conceptualisation of the social work field liaison role through collaborative practice, *Australian Social Work*, 73(4), 499-507.

Faria, G., Brownstein, C., & Smith, H. (1988). A survey of field instructors' perceptions of the liaison role, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 24(2), 135-144.

Garrett, P. (2010). Examining the 'conservative revolution': neoliberalism and social work education, *Social Work Education*, 29(4), 340-355.

Gray, M., & Fook, J. (2004). The quest for universal social work: some issues and implications, *Social Work Education*, 23(5), 625-644.

Guransky, D., & Le Sueur, E. (2012). Conceptualising field education in the twenty-first century: contradictions, challenges and opportunities, *Social Work Education*, 31(7), 914-931.

Hay, K., Dale, M., & Yeung, P. (2016). Influencing the future generation of social workers': field educator perspectives on social work field education, *Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education*, 18(1), 39-54.

Homonoff, E. (2008). The heart of social work: best practice rise to challenges in field instruction, *The Clinical Supervisor*, 27(2), 135-169.

Hosken, N., Green, L., Laughton, J., Van Ingen, R., Walker, F., Goldingay, S., & Vassos, S. (2016). A rotational social work field placement model in regional health, *Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education*, 18(1), 72-87.

Lei, J., Lu. W., Höjer. S., Repo, A., Su. Z., Ou. M., Yang, H., Yu. L., & Feng. B. (2021). Building bridges between Europe and China to strengthen social work field education: preliminary findings from Guangdong Province, *China Journal of Social Work*, 14(3), 192-212.

Ligon, J., & Ward, J. (2005). A national study of the field liaison role in social work education programs in the United States and Puerto Rico, *Social work Education*, 24(2), 235-243.

Morley, C., & Dunstan, J. (2013). Critical reflection: a response to neoliberal challenges to field education? *Social Work Education*, 32(2), 141-156.

Olson-Morrison, D., Radohl, T., & Dickery, G. (2019). Strengthening field education: an integrated model for signature pedagogy in social work, *InSight: A Journal od Scholarly Teaching*, 14(1), 55-73.

Rosenblum, A., & Raphael, F. (1983). The role and function of the faculty field liaison, *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 19(1), 67-73.

Smith, H., Faria, G., & Brownstien, C. (1986). Social Work faculty in role of liaison: a field study, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 22(3), 68-78.

Tully, G. (2005). The faculty field liaison: an essential role for advancing graduate and undergraduate group work education, *Social Work with Groups*, 38(1), 6-20.

Wallengren-Lynch, M., Chen, H., Muurinen, H., Segev, E., Hollertz, K., Bengtsson, A., Thomas, R., & Carrasco, M. (ahead-of-print). Is there a shared social work signature pedagogy cross-nationally?

Using a case study methodology to explore signature pedagogy in England, Israel, Finland, Spain and Sweden, European Journal of Social Work. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1760795

Zuchowski, I. (2015). Being the university: liaison persons' reflections on placements with off-site supervision, *Social Work Education*, 34(3), 301-314.