

## A MSW Curriculum Analysis: Preparing MSW Foundation Level Students for Remote Practice

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**Abstract:** *As the pandemic surges, the need for remote social work practice (RSWP) is urgent and ensuring that students entering practice are prepared to engage is paramount. Students entering the workforce must be able to demonstrate competency and educators must explore how they are preparing students for RSWP. A cohort of twenty-one MSW students were invited to participate in this study exploring curriculum exposure to RSWP and subsequent confidence and readiness to engage in practice. Only a subset of this cohort (n=13) agreed to participate in the study. This study explored exposure to RSWP concepts through a foundation-level MSW curriculum, practicum, and other program contacts. Results show that even though students were primarily exposed to RSWP in practicum and courses that focus on basic interpersonal skills, other courses, such as research and policy also provided exposure. Students reported that theory and diversity courses made no mention of RSWP. This is concerning because these courses are meant to educate students on practice frameworks and service contexts for underserved populations, like those that are commonly served via RSWP. Although limited, this study has implications for how social work educators embed RSWP throughout the curriculum, instead of siloing this topic in practice courses.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, remote social work practice, e-social work, tele-social work, MSW curriculum*

At the core of social work practice is enhancing the well-being of individuals, families and communities, particularly those who are vulnerable or oppressed, but often the ability to help is compromised by service accessibility challenges. Thus, our core values are not fully realized if we do not address the myriad of accessibility challenges faced by our colleagues and clients in practice. Remote practice modalities using information and technology have emerged as a way to circumvent these challenges (Goel et al., 2020). Across multiple disciplines, including social work, there is scholarly consensus that remote practice modalities advance access to care for a number of under-served populations (Kraus, 2011), such as individuals residing in remote and rural communities and individuals who lack transportation or localized service options.

As the COVID-19 pandemic surged, these challenges were multiplied and the need for remote practice became essential. Thus, social work programs were confronted with the need to critically examine how they prepare students to engage in remote practice (Banks et al., 2020). The NASW Code of Ethics mandates that social workers demonstrate competence in practice, including competence in use of technology in practice (NASW Code of Ethics, Standard 1.04d). Consequently, social workers entering the workforce must

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demonstrate competence in varied areas of remote practice and educators must ensure that future practitioners are not only competent in using remote practice modalities, but confident in their use.

Competency and confidence may be impacted by the many monikers used and the lack of an agreed upon definition of remote practice. This is further compounded by the fact that these monikers are broad in context and refer to both the type of services being provided and the modality in which the service is being rendered. As McCarty and Clancy (2002) so eloquently stated, “Nearly anything a social worker does face-to-face could theoretically be done online. Counseling, home health visits, consultation with colleagues, research, supervision of interns, and social work education are now being performed through telecommunication” (p. 153). They suggest that mental health care was the first social work service provided remotely by way of telehealth and at the time argued that it was the most important service to be provided by way of telecommunication (McCarty & Clancy, 2002). In light of the pandemic and the evidence surrounding the implication on mental health, one could argue that this remains true. However, since 2002 the delivery of said services has expanded to include, but is not limited to, the telephone, videoconferencing, emailing, text messaging, fax machines, the Internet, and social media depending on the research article you are reading.

## **Background**

Telehealth services have become very important in the field of social work. Telehealth, tele-behavioral health, tele-mental health, e-therapy, and cyber counseling are a few of the terms frequently used to describe virtual practice (Langarizadeh et al., 2017). These terms are just the tip of the iceberg, as there are many more that hold technology term prefixes such as tele-, cyber-, e-, electronic-, online-, digital-, web-, web-based-, web-supported-, as a part of their moniker. The social work and technology fields, like many professions, are flooded with terms that are ill defined, but so commonly used that they become jargon and serve as a source of difference versus consensus. For that reason, for the purposes of this study we define Remote Social Work Practice (RSWP) as: intentional social work practice involving the use of digital information and communication technology such as computers, mobile devices, or digital applications to access or deliver services remotely. Service provided can include, but is not limited to, clinical intake and assessments, telehealth, tele-therapy and other remote behavioral and mental health services, non-clinical client engagement, remotely held administrative or community engagement meetings, online work groups or gatherings, remote support group facilitation, or any other service engagement and linkage to referrals done through remote interactions. Whether engaged in due to practice duress and emergency needs as occurred due to the COVID19 pandemic or engaged in to ensure efficiencies or expansion of practice, the basic tenets underscoring the use of RSWP remain the same - to provide social work practice at a distance using digital technologies.

Research and literature regarding remote social work practice (RSWP) is limited. That which does exist is scattered across many monikers and themes, including telecommunication (Perron et al., 2010), e-social work (López Peláez et al., 2018),

technology enhanced social work (Fitch, 2015; Goel et al., 2020), e-therapy (Cwikel & Friedmann, 2020; Earle & Freddolino, 2021), digital social work (Mishna et al., 2021), etcetera. Even across this wide spectrum, most of the literature focuses on micro-level applications such as healthcare, therapy, counseling, and case management. References to RSWP in macro contexts are nascent. What can be gleaned from the current knowledge base is that the use of RSWP modalities, along with academic and professional training, has become increasingly common—especially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research suggests that RSWP produces positive service and client outcomes. There are clear indications that client satisfaction with both in-person and online counseling services are relatively equal, with some studies showing better outcomes through virtual engagement. Based on a meta-analysis of online counseling services involving 92 studies from 64 different articles with over 9,700 participants, virtual service delivery is effective in the areas of “child psychiatry, depression, dementia, schizophrenia, suicide prevention, post-traumatic stress, panic disorders, substance abuse, eating disorders, and smoking prevention” (Kraus, 2011, p. 55). Similarly, Weinberg (2020) reviewed research regarding online therapy indicating that individual therapy via telehealth has been found to be appropriate for reducing the mental health burden of COVID-19. This study also indicates that video-based groups resulted in similar treatment outcomes to in-person groups, including improvements in coping.

Education and training of psychotherapists was also impacted by experience with technology. Earle and Freddolino (2021) conducted a survey of Master of Social Work students and found that students are technology savvy and have accepted the use of e-therapy as a whole. Students indicate that they expect to continue to use internet and communicating technologies in social work practice outside of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are confident in their abilities to establish a therapeutic alliance virtually, and they will consider e-therapy employment opportunities upon graduation (Earle & Freddolino, 2021).

In an article written by Mitchell et al. (2021), the necessity and experience of training MSW students on RSWP was presented. The authors describe the effects of COVID-19 on the social work internship experience of social work oncology interns (e.g., practicum students) and the program redesign that occurred as a result of the pandemic in an attempt to transition to RSWP. The authors describe how typical “in-office” on-the-ground intern tasks were significantly altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, interns were no longer able to engage in direct-patient contact, as only employees were allowed access to the facility. As a result, the program created online (virtual) training modules that emphasized the Council on Social Work Education’s core competencies, specifically the competencies of engaging, assessing and intervening with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. The authors note that the virtual model developed as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic should be utilized in the future to onboard new social work staff and with future interns (Mitchell et al., 2021).

Johnson et al. (2021) analyzed the impact of transitioning from in-person to virtual interactions for a PTSD-focused study. Johnson et al. (2021) found that recruitment for the study increased significantly with remote modalities, while the pool of eligible recruits remained the same. Overall, it appeared that remote services increased access to mental

health care and research. In studies conducted by Békés and Aafjes-van Doorn (2020) and Johnson et al. (2021), staff reported high satisfaction with remote work, indicating increased flexibility and improved work-life balance. A decrease in cost of supplies was also noted, which could be beneficial for many organizations. Johnson et al. (2021) notes a need for additional research regarding remote work to “advocate for sustained change to administrative and regulatory policies to support virtual high-quality care delivered in the modality that best meets the needs and preferences of the patient” (p. 491).

The aforementioned articles, (Earle & Freddolino, 2021; Johnson et al. 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021) clearly highlight the benefits of RSWP and the need for it in the profession. The literature evidences that RSWP has the capacity to produce positive outcomes for clients and staff (Weinberg, 2020). Clearly to achieve these positive outcomes means that social workers must be adequately trained on use of RSWP techniques, as Mitchell and colleagues (2021) attempted to do with the pandemic adjustments they made at a practicum site. And while their study clearly shows that practicum sites can assist in this student preparation, it is imperative that social work programs take up the baton and embed RSWP education and training in their curricula (López Peláe et al., 2018). Remote practice research suggests improved knowledge, acceptance, and skills regarding this treatment modality following clinician training (Bruno & Abbott, 2015; Chang et al., 2016; McCord et al., 2015). Similarly, clinical training led to enhanced competence using remote practice technology (McCord et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2004), increased levels of cultural competence (McCord et al., 2015), and increased satisfaction ratings from clinicians (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). Thus, programs should consider the extent to which faculty, staff, community contacts, and other program partners can assist in providing knowledge and training on RSWP to students. Student learning can happen via multiple sources, and all should be considered as programs identify ways to prepare students for RSWP.

### **Study Theoretical Framing**

The underpinnings of this study are rooted in Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) and Roger’s Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003). Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) explores the learning process which involves observing, experiencing, and imitating new behaviors that are introduced and reinforced by others within a persons’ environment. Thus, new patterns of behavior and new knowledge can be acquired through direct experiences or observations. Bandura emphasized the significance of attaining new knowledge and skills by paying attention, retaining the information observed, reproducing the observed behavior, and being motivated to continue the newly learned behavior (Thyer & Wodarski, 1990). With the sudden shift to remote learning and implementation of RSWP due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this research team was interested in ways MSW students were exposed to the tenets of remote practice so that they could aptly use it in practice. Social learning is a significant factor in changing systems (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). As such, we considered cultural attributions such as student demographic background, past educational experiences, and work background as factors underscoring student learning. The research team also considered how learning may have been influenced by the curriculum, the

faculty, the practicum, and the field supervisor. We also considered the ways non-social work courses could have contributed to the learning of remote practice.

Similarly, Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003) was considered in our research design, as a means to help us understand the extent to which students were both exposed to and adopted the innovation of Remote Social Work Practice (RSWP). This theory provides a framework for understanding the usefulness of integrating RSWP into the curriculum. Diffusion of Innovation Theory describes the process by which new information/innovations are adopted by a set demographic. This theory has been utilized by a variety of academic disciplines, including counseling, communication, public health, and nursing (Doyle et al., 2014; Murray, 2009; Rogers, 2003) to understand the integration of new technologies and ideas into those fields. According to Rogers' (1995) diffusion of innovation theory, a practice innovation can be characterized by certain patterns of adoption. These patterns range from early to late adopters of innovations (Cwiek & Friedmann, 2014). This theoretical framework aides in the conceptualization of the roadmap of learning to practice within the social work field and the extent to which MSW's can adapt remote practice skills into their professional repertoire after earning their MSW.

### **Study Aims**

The primary research aim of this project was to develop a pilot study that provides preliminary data on how an MSW curriculum prepares students for readiness to adopt the principles and tenets of remote social work practice. The first goal of the study was to understand the extent to which foundation level MSW students were exposed to RSWP within the curriculum and outside of the classroom. The second goal was to understand their readiness to engage in RSWP. Desired outcomes of this study are to also contribute answers to core questions being posed by social work scholars such as: a) how are we teaching students to engage in remote practice? (Berg-Weger & Schroepfer, 2020; Wilkerson et al., 2020); b) how should we respond to calls, including the grand challenges call, to prepare social work students for use of technology in practice and remote practice modalities? (Berzin et al; 2015; McInroy, 2019); and c) are social work curriculums preparing students for entry into a new-age practice world that will expect them to utilize innovative tele-social work practice and are they abreast of the policies, ethics, and theories that inform this practice trend? The exploratory nature of this study begins to address this gap within the social work literature.

### **Sampling and Study Methods**

This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Study participants were sampled from a cohort of enrolled students ( $n = 21$ ) who were completing their foundation curriculum year in a graduate social work (MSW) program at a mid-sized state university. Students currently enrolled full or part-time and actively engaged in the curriculum were invited to participate in the study. The only exclusionary criteria were (1) not being actively engaged in the curriculum such as being on "academic leave" or (2) being a transfer student such that the said student did not have previous exposure to the

department's social work curriculum. In this particular cohort, no students fit the exclusionary criteria, thus all enrolled students were eligible for the study.

Study questionnaires were distributed to all students in the cohort. There was a 62% (n=13) response rate. Since the principal investigators for this study were faculty who had prior or existing direct connection or familiarity to the students in the cohort, because they had either taught or mentored them, care was taken in the study notification process to reduce the potential of undue faculty influence. In the early stages of this study, prior to IRB approval, the primary faculty investigators identified and included a research assistant who had no connections to the current cohort to assist with the study. Though the research assistant was familiar with the university, the social work department, and the expectations of a general MSW social work curriculum, the research assistant had no current or prior knowledge of the sample population; nor did this research assistant have knowledge of the program's current curriculum or faculty. The research assistant was onboarded as needed to assist with sample recruitment, survey tool distribution, and data analysis to ensure objectivity throughout the research process.

To further ensure the integrity of the research process, the study team worked with the university information technology office to create a project email address that in name referenced only the social work department. This email could be used by the research assistant to send out digital surveys and communicate on behalf of the research team. This ensured that communication about the study for sampling purposes was not done through the associated faculty email addresses, which reduced the potential of unintentional influence that faculty might have over student participants. The sample received project communication and recruitment messages from this email address. Student participants were recruited over a six-month period during the transition period that marked the ending of their time in the foundation curriculum program. During this six-month period, while they were wrapping up their core (e.g., required) foundation courses and practicum, a total of three recruitment solicitations were sent out. The recruitment email explained the purpose of the study and included the informed consent agreement. If students agreed to participate as designated by their response on the digital informed consent, they were then directed to the online survey tool.

## **Measurement**

The survey tool was distributed online via the university supported Qualtrics platform. It is important to note that this study was conducted during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which state quarantine orders were in effect and the campus was closed to in-person, on-the-ground activities. Thus, it was paramount to identify a survey distribution method that was both physically and economically feasible given the circumstances. As a result, the survey was only distributed online. While this survey approach was deemed the best choice, it poses limitations that must be acknowledged. Students may lack familiarity with use of online survey tools, could run into technical glitches which could compromise survey completion, and/or may miss the opportunity to respond because they miss the survey email notification or mistake that email for spam mail (Lefever et al., 2007).

Table 1. *Remote Practice Survey Subscale Categories*

Survey Subscales	Roger's Theory of Diffusion, Theoretical Alignment	# of Items	Select Study Measures	Measure Descriptions & Response Options
Exposure to RSWP in MSW foundation practicum	Stage 1: Knowledge/Awareness	15	Student learning or engagement in RSWP at their practicum; Extent to which the student was exposed to RSWP in field supervision	Close-ended: categorical dichotomous; ordinal rating scale Open-ended: short answer
Exposure to & Assessment of remote practice knowledge/ skill in the required MSW foundation curriculum	Stage 1: Knowledge/Awareness	7	Student recollection of being exposed to or taught about RSWP in their MSW Foundation core courses & electives; student recollection of courses that provided them with assignments, engaged learning activities, trainings, or assessed their skills in RSWP	Close-ended: categorical Open-ended: short answer
Exposure to RSWP from "other" non curriculum sources	Stage 1: Knowledge/Awareness and Stage 2: Persuasion/Interest	10	Student exposure to RSWP topics from non-curriculum sources, such as academic advisors/faculty mentors, program directors, other department leadership, practicum supervisors, job supervisors, classmates, others; Student rating of the level of support & training these other sources provided	Close-ended: categorical dichotomous; ordinal rating scales Open-ended: short answer
Student remote practice supervision, & support	Stage 2: Persuasion/Interest	5	The presence & level of training, supervision & support for remote practice (from the MSW program administrators, faculty, staff, students, field supervisors, or others)	Close-ended: ordinal rating & level of agreement scales Open-ended: short answer
Student familiarity with & use of RSWP platforms	Stage 3: Decision/Evaluation	4	Familiarity with prominent clinical & client-management RSWP platforms & student use of said platforms at their practicum	Close-ended: categorical dichotomous Open-ended: short answer
Student confidence & readiness to engage in RSWP	-	10	Confidence & readiness to engage in RSWP; Satisfaction with & perception of academic exposure to RSWP in the MSW program	Open-ended Close-ended: ordinal
Sample Demographics	-	10	Gender identity, race/ethnicity, age range, employment status during MSW enrollment; other educational background (undergraduate degree, other graduate degree); practicum agency focus	

The survey tool used was a 61-item questionnaire with six subscales and demographic questions. The subscales were: (1) Exposure to RSWP in practicum; (2) exposure to and assessment of remote practice skills in the MSW program curriculum, (3) exposure to

RSWP from other non-curriculum sources, (4) student remote practice supervision and support, (5) student familiarity with and use of RSWP platforms, and (6) student assessment of their RSWP preparation, including confidence and readiness to utilize. Table 1 above presents select measures used for each category.

Face validity was confirmed for all questions and content domains for the subscales were established from literature reviews and expert-panel feedback. These experts were faculty and field practicum supervisors. Creation of the subscale domains were framed by Roger's diffusion of innovation theory. According to this theory, in order to understand adaptation of new innovation, one must explore the process of innovation adoption (Kaminski, 2011). In the context of this study the innovation is RSWP. According to the theory, there is a five-step process to adopting innovation and key elements that must be considered. The questions in this study primarily align with the first three stages: the knowledge/awareness stage, the persuasion/interest stage, and the decision/evaluative stage. Figure 1 shows the linkages between the subscales and the theoretical elements. The last subscale (six) where students are asked about their level of confidence and readiness moves the line of inquiry in the direction of stages four and five of the theory, which focus on full implementation and adoption of innovation.

### **Data Analysis**

Due to the small cohort and sample size, a robust comparative analysis was not possible. No pre-test survey was done prior to student enrollment in the program. The approach for this study was post-test single group analysis. Only univariate analysis was performed. Thus, the analysis only involved reporting of descriptive statistics including response frequencies. For all descriptive statistics, data were analyzed using Excel. A number of short answer questions were also included in the survey. For these open-ended questions, responses were grouped into salient themes.

### **Study Outcomes and Results**

The sample consisted of MSW students enrolled as full-time students in the foundation-level generalist practicum curriculum sequence. As previously mentioned, there were 21 students in the cohort and 13 consented to complete the survey. A review of the sample demographics revealed that the sample was predominantly white (64%) females (67%) with an age range of 24-49. A little less than half (45%) were employed in a social work agency during the time in which they were completing the MSW Foundation curriculum as full-time students. Most (67%) reported that they had undergraduate degrees in a social science discipline such as psychology, sociology, human services and two reported having other graduate degrees. One reported having earned a graduate degree in fine arts and another reported a graduate degree in human services.

Inherent in the study aims was looking at how the practicum, as a core part of the curriculum, also informed knowledge of remote social work practice. These questions made up one of the survey subscales. As a result, student participants were also asked about basic information describing the context of their practicum. Three-fourths of the students



reported that their practicum had some type of micro-level clinical or case management focus. Two students reported that their practicum focus was a blend of micro and macro foundation level work and one of the study respondents reported being at a practicum that focused on community practice and administration. Overwhelmingly (over 90%), students reported that their practicum required a transition to “remote only” work during the first semester of their practicum, due to public health concerns brought on by the COVID19 pandemic. When asked only one student reported that within three months after the transition to remote work, they returned to “traditional” in-person practice at their practicum. The rest of the students indicated that they continued to work remotely. When asked what kind of remote social work practice activities they completed at their practicum, students reported activities like engaging in phone or video-conference outreach, co-facilitating group session using tele-therapy principles, attending virtual seminars and trainings, conducting research, assisting with web-based social awareness campaigns and program evaluation activities, and participating in administrative and client case meetings. When asked to rate their level of agreement about the extent to which they felt their practicum taught them a lot about RSWP, all participants (100%) indicated that they at least agreed with this statement. Additionally, they all indicated that they were required to attend some type of training on RSWP in their practicum and that their field supervisors discussed with them the ethical implications, diversity implications, and research frameworks underlying RSWP. All student respondents also indicated that their field supervisors at some point in their practicum assessed and evaluated their remote practice skills. Students did not qualify if the evaluation of their remote skills in practicum was related to their practice of emergency (pandemic) related remote work or related to practice of “traditional” agency remote work.

The next subscale focused on the MSW foundation curriculum (e.g., courses) This subscale has two components. Component one asked about student exposure to RSWP and component two asked about the extent to which students’ RSWP knowledge was assessed and skills were evaluated during their foundation year. For component one, exposure was operationalized as becoming aware of RSWP because it was casually, informally mentioned in a course or becoming aware because it was specifically, formally taught by the faculty in the course. For component two, knowledge and skill assessment were operationalized as having assignments, exams, remote-practice specific course assessments, or required engaged learning activities within the course. Engaged learning activities were further defined as being required in a course to do any one of the following: a service-learning project related to RSWP; attend events, conferences, or trainings related to RSWP; listen to podcasts or watch videos; interact with some other RSWP related digital or web-based content. For all questions in this subscale students were asked to consider all the CSWE required core foundation level courses they had taken in the past year. There are nine courses that are required: (1) Intro to Social Work Practice - Basic Skills Course, (2) Generalist Practice with Individuals and Families, (3) Generalist Practice with Communities and Organizations, (4) Generalist Practice with Groups (e.g., group work), (5) Research Methods, (6) Social Welfare Policy, (7) Diversity, (8) Human Behavior in the Social Environment, and (9) Field Practicum Seminar (which accompanies practicum). Table 2 provides an overview of the responses by course.

Table 2. *Subscale Two: Student Exposure to Remote Social Work Practice in the MSW Curriculum, by Course Type*

Students reported the following courses....	MSW Foundation (Required) Core Curriculum Courses								
	Intro to Social Work Practice - Basic Skills	Generalist Practice w/Individuals & Families	Generalist Practice w/Communities & Organizations	Generalist Practice w/Groups (e.g., group work)	Research Methods	Social Welfare Policy	Diversity	Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE)	Practicum Seminar (which accompanies practicum)
Mentioned a definition, description, or some basic information about RSWP	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
Formally taught them about RSWP	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
Provided training on RSWP	x		x	x	x				x
Assessed student use of RSWP				x					x
Had required coursework on the topic of RSWP					x				x
Required that the student participate in some type of enhanced learning activity related to RSWP	x		x	x	x	x		x	x
Provided some other type of learning experience related to RSWP	x			x					x

As is presented in Table 2, students reported that they were exposed to the idea of RSWP in every core required course, except the Human Behavior and Diversity courses. In fact, over 75% of students reported that their exposure to RSWP was from direct-practice courses, including practicum. When asked to identify which of the nine required courses had some type of class assignment or engaged student learning activity related to RSWP, students reported that only two courses (the research and field seminar courses) had assignments related to RSWP and most all the courses (7 out of 9) had some type of engaged student learning activity embedded in it. The two courses that did not have any embedded student learning activity were Diversity and the Generalist Practice with Individuals and Families course. To further understand what students were being exposed

to in the classroom, the research team asked them to identify classes where they were actually trained on how to engage in RSWP. Students reported that five out of the nine courses taught them some type of remote practice skill. These courses were the Introduction to Social Work Practice Skills course, the Generalist Practice with Communities and Organizations, Research Methods, The Generalist Practice with Groups, and the Practicum Seminar. Interestingly, they did not indicate that the Generalist Practice with Individuals and Families course provided any training on RSWP; nor did they mention the research and policy course provided RSWP training, even though they stated that these courses exposed them to the concept of RSWP. Finally, for this subscale, to understand if students' knowledge and skill level around RSWP was being monitored, students were asked which courses had some component to assess their knowledge or skill of RSWP. Students indicated that the Generalist Practice with Groups and the Practicum Seminar were the only courses that assessed their RSWP knowledge and skill.

In order to understand other contextual factors which may have contributed to student exposure to and understanding of RSWP, the third subscale explored the extent to which students were exposed to (e.g., heard about or learned about) RSWP from non-academic sources. Students did not identify any non-social work electives that contributed to their RSWP knowledge or skill. They were asked if they learned about any aspect of RSWP from conversing with key individual staff or faculty in the social work department, namely their faculty mentor, the program director, or other non-teaching faculty. Over half reported that they heard about or learned about RSWP from the field director (67%) or their assigned faculty mentor (55%). Only one student indicated that they learned from the program director. All student respondents reported that they heard about or learned about RSWP from their classmates and one third (33%) reported learning about RSWP from their place of employment. Other common responses were seminar and graduate assistantships.

The fourth subscale inquired about supervision and support students received. This subscale was an attempt to understand direct guidance or assistance related to RSWP. All student respondents reported that their practicum field supervisor was the most instrumental in providing them with remote practice support. Over two-thirds of the students also mentioned getting support from faculty mentors. Students also mentioned getting support from their jobs or from connections and conversations with practicing social workers they knew. When asked to rank the top sources of support, they ranked practicum/field supervisors as one and courses as two. When asked what they think contributed to most of their training and knowledge regarding RSWP, students ranked practicum first, then coursework and jobs, respectively second and third. Students were also asked about receiving supervision to help them develop in RSWP. When asked to rank the top source for providing them with direct remote practice supervision, they ranked practicum/field supervisor as the top source. Faculty and non-descript "other" was ranked respectively as second and third in providing supervision.

To understand adaptation and use of RSWP, students were questioned about their familiarity and use of common RSWP platforms. These questions made up subscale five. All student respondents indicated they know of at least one RSWP platform and some students indicated they knew more. When presented with a list of options and asked to include any other remote platforms they were familiar with, students identified the

following platforms: Zoom, Gotomeeting, Doxy Me, Evisit, VSEE, Simple Practice, Microsoft Teams, Cisco WebEx, Skype, and conference calling. They indicated that their practicum made them aware of all these platforms, except VSEE. They also indicated that the MSW program made them aware of five platforms, namely Zoom, Doxy Me, Simple Practice, Microsoft Teams, and conference calling. When asked if they had used any of these platforms, they indicated they used Zoom and conference calling for both courses and practicum. They also used Microsoft Teams and Skype in practicum.

Finally, the last subscale asked about general confidence and readiness to use RSWP in the field. Questions in this subscale also asked students to reflect on how the MSW program curriculum prepared them to use RSWP, as a practice innovation. Over half (55%), agreed that they felt ready to use remote practice skills as a result of their past year in the MSW program. If asked to use it, all respondents (100%) felt some degree of confidence in their ability to use it if asked. A third were very confident and two-thirds were moderately or slightly confident. Eighty-seven percent felt they have adequate skills to do RSWP and 75% of them felt like their practicum provided them with these adequate skills compared to about 20% who felt like the program curriculum did. Similarly, only a little over 20% agreed that the faculty helped them learn about RSWP and only 33% were satisfied with the program's effort to teach them about RSWP. Despite this, students were hopeful and saw new curricular and staffing changes in the department headed in a direction that could provide more learning opportunities and support. The following student comment exemplifies this: "I think that the department is on the right track now with leadership headed by practice focused faculty...and student first faculty...who are actively seeking out new ways to ensure that students have resources to prepare for challenges of remote practice." Students clearly see the value of RSWP. When asked the basic question about whether they felt that learning about RSWP was important, 87% of students indicated it was. They mentioned specifically wanting to learn more about RSWP ethics, engagement, etiquette, and technical issues. Additionally, they also mentioned wanting to learn more about specific and varied RSWP platforms.

## Discussion

Study results show that students are exposed to the idea of RSWP in the MSW program through both formal and informal mechanisms. The curriculum would presumably be the primary way that students would learn practice concepts and methods. Classroom activities, assignments, and lectures, particularly in practice courses, on the surface seem like the most obvious way that RSWP knowledge would be imparted, skills refined, and support given. While the data reveals that students were exposed to RSWP across the curriculum, their exposure was beyond just the practice courses. Students received some information on RSWP in other non-practice courses such as research, social welfare policy, and human behavior. Interestingly enough, in this social work program during this particular academic year, students received no formal information, had no assignments, student engaged learning activities, or assessments regarding RSWP in the generalist practice with individuals and families course, one of the more prominent practice courses in the CSWE graduate curriculum. It is highly probable that this could be due to an increased focus on theoretical framing that can happen within some practice courses. In

fact, assignments, student engaged learning activities, and skill assessments were most common in other prominent practice courses, such as the basic skills, generalist practice with groups, and generalist practice with organizations/communities. The other courses that had required assignments, student engaged learning activities, and skill assessments were research methods, human behavior, and practicum seminars.

Practicum was the dominant course that provided the most exposure, activities, support, and supervision in respect to RSWP. Given the practice orientation and hands on service-learning structure of practicum, its ability to introduce students to practice techniques and innovations is expected. Thus, the prominence of practicum was not surprising. Study data revealing RSWP content in research methods and social welfare policy courses was more surprising. Perhaps this is related to specific case-based assignments that incorporated a remote practice framework or that merely mentioned a RSWP platform or activity. For instance, if an assignment in these courses talked about someone using Skype or Zoom then it is possible the students would have considered this as RSWP exposure. The research team did not ask for course content details. Having such information could have elucidated specifics about the courses that students felt incorporated RSWP. Such details could have been illuminating.

Another course that stood out was the diversity course. Students did not recall having anything related to RSWP embedded in the diversity course. They did not report exposure, assignments, engaged active learning activities, or assessments. The diversity course is required in the social work foundation curriculum because it aims to help students become more aware of the ethno-cultural, socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts that shape human life (Kohli et al., 2010). As these authors so eloquently put it, the diversity course is meant to sensitize students to diversity issues that shape services access and provision. Remote practice strategies, such as tele-mental health (Myers & Turvey, 2013) have often been used with individuals who have linguistic, age, economic, geographic, or other unique cultural attributes and sometimes because of these attributes and how it informs access to care, remote practice is necessary to provide services. Thus, RSWP would align directly to content presented in a social work diversity course. Use of RSWP would have implications for engaging communities in rural/remote areas, individuals lacking access to care or lacking transportation, and potentially older adults or individuals who are home-bound and unable to be reached via traditional outreach efforts, because of geographic isolation, system of care restrictions, or social work agency limitations. No mention of RSWP in the diversity course limits students' appreciation for how RSWP aligns to diversity, equity and inclusion professional principles.

The study revealed that student interactions and discussion with faculty mentors, classmates, other practicing social workers, the field education program staff, and field supervisor was instrumental in helping them learn about RSWP. They found both support and supervision from these individuals. This highlights the recognition of RSWP in the field. The fact that so many provide information and are supporting students in advancing their knowledge in this area, gives credence to the relevance and popularity of this growing area of social work practice. The most highly rated source of support and supervision was the practicum (including the practicum field supervisor). Though students reported low satisfaction with how the curriculum (e.g., courses) has prepared them for RSWP, they

consistently reported practicum as being instrumental in exposure, support, and supervision. This is a nod to how important field practicum is in shaping knowledge and skill development around RSWP.

Students felt confident and ready to use RSWP in the field, despite their low satisfaction with how the program prepared them. Similar sentiments that social work programs provide limited or poor preparation have been put forth in the literature (Perron et al., 2010; Mishna et al., 2021). Students in the study were not in complete dismay, they were encouraged with new program directions that they felt would contribute to program improvements around RSWP in the curriculum. Overwhelmingly students thought that learning about RSWP was important, and they had a desire to learn more. Many of the areas students wanted to know more about (e.g., ethics, variety of RSWP tools and techniques, etiquette, engagement) were all areas identified by other scholars as important in RSWP adoption (Bullock & Colvin, 2015; Cwikel & Friedmann, 2020; Perron et al., 2010).

### **Limitations**

The study was conducted with a small cohort of MSW students at a moderate size state university with a social work graduate program consisting of less than thirty foundation-level graduate students in any given academic year. Even with a cohort size of 21 students eligible for this study, most were all white females (over 60%), only a fraction (n=13) consented to do the survey and even then, not all responded to all 61 survey items. Given these unique sample demographics, the small sample size and low response rate, it is not possible to generalize the findings of this study to larger audiences. This study can, however, be seen as a pilot study that lends its findings to future research with larger samples. Moreover, continued evaluation across multiple cohorts and multiple years in this social work program could enhance study merit and generalizability. Replication of the study in other social work programs would be beneficial to determine the depth of how remote practice principles and skills are being taught in different size programs, different regions or environments (i.e., countries, rural environments, urban environments, etc.). RSWP has been utilized to provide services in the past, but the present pandemic climate denotes its continued relevance now and in times to come as the field of RSWP grows and adapts to the environment and its service needs.

The study design has a few limitations that should be noted. First, due to the nature of how the pandemic and subsequent events transpired, there was no opportunity to develop a pre- and post-survey design to measure student's preparedness and confidence in RSWP. There was no way to do a pre-test given when the line of research started. The study sampled students enrolled in the foundation curriculum. They were not given a pretest upon enrollment because the researchers had not started or received IRB approval to start the line of inquiry. Moreover, data collection for the study began after the unexpected conditions created by the pandemic. The nature of these conditions meant that use of remote practice was the norm both in the classroom and in practice settings. Thus, all students had some level of exposure due to the unprecedented nature of the life transitions

presented by the pandemic. Pre/post analysis with future cohorts should be considered if appropriate conditions present themselves.

Similarly, we were unable to create a control group. Because of these factors, it is hard to determine if a true relationship exists between the curriculum provided in the MSW program and the student research participant's perception or responses in the study. A future longitudinal study might be able to explicate these potential variable relationships.

The study had no control for faculty. Although academic freedom in teaching in higher education is revered and social work programs seek to have a faculty of varying backgrounds to provide different insights to students' educations, this impacted the current study as the courses that were evaluated could not control for the way each faculty member considered, prioritized, referenced, or conceptualized remote practice while teaching one of the nine required courses. Equally, it is not clear if the teaching faculty even know about remote practice aside from recent knowledge due to the COVID-19 pandemic adjustments that had to be made mid school year.

Finally, the study and student recollection were most definitely affected due to the pandemic. The intensity of this global event and the gravity with which it impacted lives could have shaped recollection of pre-COVID-19 times as the physical and mental health impacts are evident, but outside the scope of this research paper. It could have been that students did have more or less exposure, but because all were under the intense stress of living in the pandemic, and all were actively engaged in remote practice (at least in their practicum) because of the pandemic. Both of these dynamics could have inadvertently influenced their recall.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Remote Practice has grown exponentially in the United States, and the shift toward remote care to align with social distancing guidelines is fueling this growth. However, several researchers have reported that training for remote practice is rarely addressed in social work programs (Cwikel & Friedmann, 2020; Fitch, 2015; Perron et al., 2010; Robbins et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity to incorporate Remote Social Work Practice Training into curriculums in a timely and practical manner. When research participants were asked if they felt their exposure to remote practice increased as a result of the pandemic, a little over half (55%) agreed.

Given the rise of RSWP, it is important to prepare future social workers to engage in this practice, through understanding best practices, ethical concerns, and policies. This study highlighted that exposure to the tenets of RSWP should occur across the full core curriculum and should not be limited solely to practice courses. Practicum clearly stood out as being invaluable for RSWP, but due to the vastness of practicum opportunities, supervisor background and RSWP comfort, and variability of practice settings, it is not possible that students will get all they need regarding RSWP just through practicum. It clearly won't be enough. Thus, making sure that RSWP is embedded robustly across the core curriculum is important. While contextual practice issues like etiquette can be applied in practicum through trainings and practice exposure, there is a need for in-depth coverage

of theories, practice frameworks, policies, and issues related to diversity and ethics. Having RSWP in the core curriculum can ensure adequate coverage. Results from this study indicate that embedding RSWP broadly across the core curriculum is important as students felt more prepared to engage in RSWP, if they had increased exposure in a variety of courses. Thus, curriculum mapping may be beneficial to help embed the inclusion of RSWP principles throughout the entire curriculum.

This study not only has implications for curriculum and student exposure, but also for how we support and train field supervisors, who seem to provide quite a bit of support, knowledge, and training in this area. The rapid proliferation of technologies can be confounding, even for those working in the field. RSWP can be expansive and include video conferencing, social platforms, virtual worlds, digital games, and immersive environments. It becomes important for students, supervisors, and faculty to understand—what are they? How are they distinct from one another? How do they or might they support remote practice?

Similarly, training for faculty would be useful, as we recognize the need to prioritize RSWP as a burgeoning area of practice that students would need to be prepared for as they enter the field. The research team found it interesting that students reported that they were not exposed to RSWP in diversity and theory courses but had some exposure in research and policy courses. This suggests that there is a great need to push for the prioritization of this content in all core classes. Even though the majority of the sample reported a background (work or previous degrees) in human services and psychology, these background experiences were not rated highly as contributing to their exposure to RSWP. This data suggests that entering the social work field is the place where students are exposed to the principles and tenets of RSWP. Thus, heightening the importance that RSWP is addressed across social work curriculums. Future studies needed to be conducted across multiple social work programs to allow for broader curriculum coverage and greater sample sizes.

In conclusion, due to the rapid proliferation of technology, remote practice is growing across social work settings. Yet, training is not formalized or fully embedded in social work curriculums. Social work practitioners clearly see the benefits of engaging in RSWP to expand their reach and serve broader audiences. They also see the potential of how RSWP can expand and enhance practice accessibility. Consequently, social work educators must keep pace and identify ways to embed RSWP principles in the curriculum. This exploratory study shows that core curriculum areas, such as practicum and courses that teach basic interpersonal and clinical skills may be commonly considered, but educators should also consider other courses such as policy, research, diversity, and theory. As the field of social work expands, so must our curricula.

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