Research Note—Interpersonal Classroom Model: Groupwork at Social Work Field Internships

Tee R. Tyler & Amanda N. Walker

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Research Note—Interpersonal Classroom Model: Groupwork at Social Work Field Internships

Tee R. Tyler ⓘD and Amanda N. Walker

ABSTRACT

This research note explores Bachelor of Social Work students' perceptions about how well their group practice courses prepared them for group opportunities at field internships. We conducted a posttest-only design pilot study to compare field groupwork experiences of students who attended group practice courses taught with and without the interpersonal classroom model, a teaching approach designed for social work group practice courses. In this research note, we share study results, including data about the types and amount of groupwork experiences students received at their field internships and responses to questions regarding how well their group practice courses prepared them for field groupwork experiences. The research note concludes with a few limitations and future directions.

Groupwork offers a strengths-based way to maximize clients' growth and resilience via mutual aid, an opportunity not replicated by individual casework (Gitterman & Knight, 2016). Yet social work students often receive minimal preparation for group practice (Knight, 1999), with some graduating without any groupwork experience (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994). Social work students' abilities to lead groups effectively can be compromised if they lack adequate preparation (Knight, 1999). In contrast, the more field groupwork experiences students report, the more prepared they perceive they are for group practice opportunities (Clements, 2008).

Decades ago, social work groupwork education literature focused more on the classroom than on students' field internship experiences (Glassman & Kates, 1988). Years later, researchers reported that although classroom experiences are beneficial, groupwork opportunities occurring in field internships actually represented a stronger predictor of students' group knowledge and skills (e.g., Clements, 2008), leaving some educators to believe that the majority of groupwork education will be provided to students at their field internships (Hessenauer & Lind, 2013).

Expecting all groupwork education to occur at students' field internships is problematic, for two reasons. One, many field instructors lack training necessary to provide group practice supervision (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994), and field instructors with a minimal understanding of groupwork may pass on their misunderstandings to students (LaPorte & Sweifach, 2011). Two, many students receive no group practice experience at their field internships (Clements, 2008), yet eventually go on to lead groups in their social work careers (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994).

Educators can train students to cultivate group leadership skills in the classroom, yet field internships also play an essential role in preparing students for group practice (Knight, 2017). Therefore, an effective approach combines learning in the classroom and in field internships, prioritizing guidance from instructors and field supervisors who are knowledgeable and skilled group practitioners (Clements, 2008). When social work students complete courses focused on groupwork, they exhibit positive views toward group practice (Knight, 1999), and when students receive supervision from a field supervisor with groupwork experience, they are more likely to engage in groupwork practice

(Knight, 2017). The more prepared social work students feel for group practice, the greater intention they will have to lead groups in the future (Clements, 2008).

Field groupwork experiences

Previous research explored social work students' field internship groupwork experiences. Wayne and Garland (1990) asked Master of Social Work (MSW) students if they received field groupwork experiences. Out of 180 students, 123 (68%) reported they had worked with a group during the academic year and 57 (32%) reported they had not. Birnbaum and Auerbach (1994) invited graduate programs to report whether they required MSW students to engage in field internship groupwork assignments. Out of 74 schools, 25 (34%) reported a current requirement and 49 (66%) did not. Knight (1999) administered a questionnaire to Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and MSW social work students at field internships to provide information about their field internships groupwork experiences. Out of 655 BSW and MSW students, less than one-half reported a requirement that they receive groupwork experiences at their internships. In addition, about one-third did not receive an opportunity to lead or colead a group at their internships.

Birnbaum and Wayne (2000) reviewed data collected from practice faculty members in BSW and MSW programs. Respondents indicated that about half of the BSW and MSW students from their programs received groupwork assignments at their field internships. Some faculty members recommended more groupwork field assignments for students and training for field instructors in group methods. Clements (2008) collected data from BSW and MSW students in field internships. Out of 296 students, 136 (46%) had not led a group alone, 178 (60%) had not co-led a group with a social worker, and 62 (21%) reported that their field instructors never discussed groupwork in supervision. Field instructors may not talk to their social work field interns about groupwork if groupwork is not in their agency's specific scope of practice.

LaPorte and Sweifach (2011) collected data from 1,360 MSW students about their field groupwork experiences. Out of the total sample, approximately two-thirds of students reported facilitating at least one group and over half reported that their field supervisor offered minimal information about groupwork theory or groupwork practice. Knight (2017) collected data from 330 BSW and MSW students currently in a field internship. From this sample, 116 (35%) reported no experience leading, coleading, or observing a group with clients at their internships, even when programs required groupwork opportunities for students at their field internships.

Students need the opportunity to apply their groupwork knowledge and skills gained in the classroom at their field internships (Dennison, 2005). Social work programs must ensure that students receive guidance from classroom and field instructors knowledgeable about groupwork (Clements, 2008). Social work programs can work closely with field instructors and agencies to make sure students receive groupwork opportunities so that students' groupwork opportunities at their field internships complement their groupwork learning in the classroom (Knight, 2017).

Interpersonal classroom model

The interpersonal classroom model (ICM) is a teaching approach designed for group practice courses (Tyler, 2021). An aim of the ICM approach is to provide experiential learning opportunities in the classroom to prepare students for field internship groupwork opportunities. For example, educators can provide experiential opportunities for students to learn about group dynamics (LaRocque, 2017) and to experience mutual aid with classmates (Skolnik, 2019). In addition, the ICM focuses on assisting students with understanding the ongoing group process, something frequently overlooked within field education groupwork training (LaRocque, 2017).

The ICM is a flexible teaching approach. Instructors using the ICM can provide diverse weekly group activities, such as fishbowl group practice role play scenarios or full semester demonstration groups. The ICM follows David Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory explicitly. Each week

students experience the four modes of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation when students engage in group activities, complete reflection journal entries and evaluation surveys, apply what they learn to their group leadership skill development, and select new goals for the following week of class.

Weekly evaluation surveys represent one attribute that differentiates the ICM from other group education approaches. Each week students evaluate their application of group leadership skills: mindfulness, here-and-now comments, mutual aid, group conflict, and group cohesion. For example, after each week students respond on a Likert scale of 1 (*disagree*) to 4 (*agree*) to the following statement about their effort to create a cohesive group environment in the classroom: I worked on developing trust in my relationships with other members today. In addition, students also evaluate if the instructor and fellow students demonstrated these five group leadership skills. The ICM weekly survey consists of 15 questions and, at the end of the semester, the instructor shares the average survey results for each question with students during the final week of class. Sharing the results provides instructors an opportunity to encourage students to engage in group practice assessment and to make group leadership decisions based on group outcome evidence.

Current published articles provide an overview of the ICM approach (Tyler, 2021) and three classroom examples (Tyler, 2017), yet no evidence about whether students found courses taught with the ICM approach useful to prepare them for future groupwork opportunities. This research note explores if students received groupwork experiences at their field agency, the type of groupwork experiences in which they engaged, and whether their group practice course prepared them for groupwork experiences (both with clients and working on a team with agency coworkers).

Methods

We administered a posttest-only design pilot study without randomization (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). We invited BSW social work students from a public 4-year university in the southern United States to complete a 13-question survey. Students responded to the survey after completing their group practice course and then a semester at their field internship. Our 13-question posttest-only follow-up survey addressed three primary research questions:

(1) Did students engage in groupwork opportunities at their field internships?
(2) Did students in ICM courses report greater preparation for field groupwork?
(3) What did students report about how their course prepared them for groupwork?

We recruited students from four separate BSW group practice courses to participate in this study (two courses taught using the ICM approach and two comparison courses). Of the 78 students we invited, 57 students participated in this study. From this amount, we excluded three participants from our sample who reported no field internship during the past semester, resulting in a final sample of 54 participants (32 ICM course students and 22 comparison course students).

In two consecutive semesters, the BSW program offered one ICM group practice course and one comparison group practice course, resulting in four separate groupwork courses taught by four different instructors. The two instructors who implemented the ICM approach followed guidelines outlined in a previously published article (Tyler, 2021). The two instructors who taught comparison group practice courses employed various teaching strategies. For example, one instructor had students complete task group quizzes, which involved small groups of four students collaborating for 15 to 20 minutes to respond to multiple choice questions based on course textbook content. This instructor used task group quizzes throughout the semester.

Informed consent for this Institutional Review Board–approved study happened when group practice courses began. We notified students that they would receive a survey invitation after one semester of their field internship and that survey completion was voluntary and not required. We informed students that we would administer an anonymized survey via the Qualtrics survey platform.

We created four copies of the same survey, one for each group course, to ensure that students from each group course completed a separate survey copy. This allowed us to differentiate responses between each group course and also compare ICM with non-ICM course students. We did not collect additional demographic category–related information beyond course designation.

If students attended a group practice course in the spring semester, they received survey invitations at the end of the following fall semester, and if students attended a group practice course in the fall semester, they received their survey invitations at the end of the following spring semester. We administered surveys with 13 individual questions separated into three categories: (a) groupwork field internship experience, (b) Likert scale group practice course evaluation, and (c) group practice course feedback. After we received participant survey responses, we calculated response frequencies, percentages, and average scores. We organized data from students in the ICM and comparison courses for side-by-side review (Tables 1 and 2).

Results

In this section, we review the results of participants' posttest survey responses. We organized the results according to our three research questions. As mentioned previously, inclusion criteria for this study required that students (a) complete a group practice course and then (b) a semester of their social work field internship. We had 54 BSW student participants.

Did students engage in groupwork opportunities at their field internships?

We discovered that 44 respondents attended a field internship that offered group services for clients. Of this number, 31 reported leading, 38 reported coleading, 19 reported sitting in, and 19 reported observing group services at their internship. The range of how many group meetings students led or co-led varied (0–70), yet each student who reported leading or coleading groups with clients reported doing so an average of 10.7 times. In addition to groups with clients, 48 students participated in agency meetings at their field internships. Students reported attending a range of one to 60 agency meetings during the semester. The students who answered yes reported attending an average of 12.1 agency meetings (see Table 1).

Did students in ICM courses report greater preparation for field groupwork?

Students responded to four Likert scale questions on a scale of 1 (*disagree*) to 4 (*agree*). In response to all four questions, the students from the two ICM courses reported higher average scores than the comparison students, albeit not significantly higher. For the question about confidence to lead groups, ICM students reported a higher average response. For the question about developing interpersonal skills needed to lead a group with diverse members, ICM students reported a higher average response. For the question about groups courses preparing students for professional relationships, ICM students reported a higher average response. For the question about groups courses preparing students for interprofessional collaboration with nonsocial work professionals, ICM students reported a higher average response (see Table 2).

What did students report about how their course prepared them for groupwork?

For our final three survey questions, we invited students to provide general feedback regarding (a) what was useful, (b) what they still wanted to learn, (c) and feedback about how to improve their group practice courses. In response to each open-ended question, we identified common responses from students. For example, *gaining group leadership skills* represented a common response by ICM and comparison students about what they learned in their course that was useful at their internship. Some

Table 1. Groupwork experience questions.

Survey Questions	ICM-Taught Courses	Comparison Courses	Total Sample
1. Did you work at a field internship during this semester that's now ending? (if no, do not complete the rest of the survey)	32	22	54
2. Did your field internship offer groups as a service for clients/service recipients?	26 (81%)	18 (82%)	44 (81%)
3. Did you have the opportunity to lead, colead, sit in, or observe any group meetings? (select all that apply, if no groups, select only "NA")	Lead 17 Colead 22 Sit in 11 Observe 13	Lead 14 Colead 16 Sit in 8 Observe 6	Lead 31 Colead 38 Sit in 19 Observe 19
4. Approximately how many group meetings did you lead or colead at your field internship?	Range 2–28 Average 10.7	Range 0–70 Average 10.7	Range 0–70 Average 10.7
5. Did you attend agency meetings with coworkers, supervisors, administrators, etc.? (excluding one-on-one or group supervision meetings you attended)	29 (91%)	19 (86%)	48 (89%)
6. Approximately how many agency meetings did you attend at your field internship?	Range 1–20 Average 9.2	Range 2–60 Average 16.3	Range 1–60 Average 12.1

Note. Amounts for questions 1, 2, and 5 only represent the number of students who answered yes in response to these survey questions. ICM = interpersonal classroom model.

student respondents commented on the usefulness of group facilitation skills, such as establishing boundaries and expectations when a group begins.

Preparation to serve various populations represents a common topic that social work students from both course types wished that they learned more about. For example, students describe wanting preparation to work with children, adolescents, bilingual clients, low-income clients, and "people older

Table 2. Likert scale comparison questions.

Survey Questions	ICM Courses (Average Score)	Comparison Courses (Average Scores)
7. I feel confident that I can lead group meetings with clients at my field internship or in the future.	3.4	3.2
8. In my groups course, I developed interpersonal skills needed to lead a group with diverse members.	3.7	3.5
9. My groups course prepared me for professional relationships (coworkers, supervisors, administrators, etc.).	3.7	3.5
10. My groups course prepared me for interprofessional collaboration with nonsocial-work professionals (e.g., nurses at a hospital, teachers at a school).	3.3	3.0

Note. We included responses only from students who reported engaging in client group meetings or agency meetings at their field internships. We made the decision to only include results from students who received an opportunity to apply their group-related skills. Therefore, 26 ICM students and 18 comparison students responded to questions 7 and 8 and 29 ICM students and 19 comparison students responded to questions 9 and 10. ICM = interpersonal classroom model.

than you." In response to the survey question that requested general feedback, most students requested *more group practice scenario role plays*. One ICM student wrote, "Perhaps role playing certain situations we would likely encounter." Student responses appeared to request different groupwork scenarios facilitators may face. For example, an ICM student wanted skills to lead "a group through a tough time" or when "people have conflict."

Discussion

This study underlines the importance of groupwork education for preparing students for groupwork opportunities at field internships. Regarding our first question about whether students engaged in groupwork at their field internships, we learned that although some students did not engage in

groupwork at their internships, the majority did. This finding matches a previous study with a majority of students engaging in field groupwork opportunities (Wayne & Garland, 1990).

Regarding our second question, about if students in the ICM courses perceived that they received greater preparation for group leadership and professional relationships at their agency, the ICM students scored higher on each question than the comparison students. Yet our small sample size and the closeness of scores did not yield significant differences. These results do represent a favorable starting point regarding the potential effectiveness of the ICM teaching approach, yet additional research is necessary to make any viable claims regarding comparisons between the ICM teaching approach and any other teaching approach for group practice courses.

Our third question explored general feedback from students about how their courses prepared them for field internship group opportunities. We learned that students valued group leadership skills and appreciated gaining a greater understanding of the group process. For example, one BSW student from one of the two ICM-taught courses shared this comment:

> The experiential group we did in our groups course was the most useful in my field placement. I was able to observe and experience the different stages of group development so I knew what to expect as a group leader.

Another BSW student shared how their ICM-taught group practice course informed their professional relationships with colleagues at their field internship in the following comment:

> I learned how to react to certain situations. I also learned that everyone is in the same boat and that we shouldn't be embarrassed to ask for help. This really helped me communicate with my supervisor and my coworkers as well.

Students from all four of the BSW group practice courses wanted additional training to lead groups with various populations and group practice scenario role play opportunities. This request is understandable, yet difficult for classroom educators to implement, especially when students are preparing for field internships serving diverse community client populations. Yet the request encourages educators to create lessons and role plays that prepare students to offer groups to clients from various age groups (e.g., children, adolescent, and adult clients) and to diverse community populations that students will serve (e.g., bilingual or low-income clients).

Limitations and future directions

The first limitation of this study is a small sample size, especially compared to other studies exploring the topic of groupwork experiences at field internships (e.g., Clements, 2008). Even if the Likert scale questions comparing student groups yielded greater differences between average responses, this study is not sufficiently powered to detect statistical significance with a total sample of 54 students. A future study with a larger sample could compare the experiences of students from ICM group practice courses with students from other group practice courses.

Second, this study does not account for the variety of supervision experiences students received. Some may have received supervision from a supervisor with significant groupwork experience and others from a groupwork novice. In a future study, researchers may also assess the past groupwork experiences of field supervisors. Researchers can explore the effect that providing field supervisors with groupwork trainings can have on the supervision they provide students (e.g., Kurland et al., 2004), such as continuing education workshops (Knight, 2009) or social work programs providing field supervisors with groupwork knowledge (Knight, 2017).

Third, our survey prioritized general questions about students' groupwork experiences, with less focus on exact educational strategies that informed students' group leadership training. Students may have experienced a variety of educational strategies that informed their perceptions when evaluating their preparation for groupwork opportunities at their field internships. A future study could assess the implementation of specific group practice educational techniques. For example, classroom and field educators can use process recordings to help students make group theory to practice connections (Cohen & Garrett, 1995) and to familiarize students with group leader actions, interventions, and

groupwork skills (Knight, 2017). Using the same educational strategies may also help classroom and field educators build a common groupwork language to collaboratively teach students effective groupwork best practices (Hessenauer & Lind, 2013).

Fourth, this study compared results from in-person group courses, yet the ICM was also designed for online group education (Tyler, 2021). Field internships will likely include more online groups (Skolnik & Skolnik, 2022), because virtual platforms also create opportunities for group members to work on cohesion and mutual aid (Skolnik & Skolnik, 2022), two skills that the ICM invites students to assess on a weekly basis (Tyler, 2021). A future study can focus on how online cohesion activities, such as spectrograms (Giacomucci & Skolnik, 2021), influence weekly ICM survey results. In this manner, the ICM teaching approach may increase students' skills to offer online group practice services to clients during their field internships. A study of this nature could be helpful, as research about online groups remains scarce (Weinberg, 2020).

Finally, ICM and non-ICM course designations represent the only demographic information we collected for this study. Researchers can replicate this study, yet also include statistical analyses to make associations between categories (e.g., age, gender, race, and student response outcomes).

Conclusion

Students primarily develop group practice skills in their field internships (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994), yet research demonstrates the value of experiential techniques in the classroom to teach students group practice skills (Skolnik, 2019). Teaching groupwork in a process-focused experiential manner may contribute to reaffirming the importance of groupwork as an essential focus within social work curricula (Knight, 1999). Social work students benefit from purposeful approaches to acquiring groupwork knowledge and skills (Hessenauer & Lind, 2013) and we encourage educators to consider the ICM as a teaching approach for group practice courses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Notes on contributors

Tee R. Tyler is an associate professor at Texas Christian University. *Amanda N. Walker* is a graduate student at Texas Christian University.

ORCID

Tee R. Tyler 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6631-274X

References

Birnbaum, M. L., & Auerbach, C. (1994). Group work in graduate social work education: The price of neglect. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *30*(3), 325–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.1994.10672243

Birnbaum, M. L., & Wayne, J. (2000). Group work in foundation generalist education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *36*(2), 347–356. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2000.10779013

Clements, J. A. (2008). Social work students' perceived knowledge of and preparation for group-work practice. *Social Work with Groups*, *31* (3–4), 329–346. https://doi.org/10.1080/01609510801981391

Cohen, M. B., & Garrett, K. J. (1995). Helping field instructors become more effective group work educators. *Social Work with Groups*, *18*(2–3), 135–145. https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v18n02_11

Dennison, S. (2005). Enhancing the integration of group theory with practice: A five-part teaching strategy. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, *10*(2), 53–68. https://doi.org/10.18084/1084-7219.10.2.53

Giacomucci, S., & Skolnik, S. (2021). The experiential social work educator: Integrating sociometry into the classroom environment. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *41*(2), 192–202. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2021.1886223

Gitterman, A., & Knight, C. (2016). Promoting resilience through social work practice with groups: Implications for the practice and field curricula. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *52*(4), 448–461. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1198295

Glassman, U., & Kates, L. (1988). Strategies for group work field instruction. *Social Work with Groups*, *11* (1–2), 111–124. https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v11n01_09

Heft LaPorte, H. H., & Sweifach, J. (2011). MSW foundation students in the field: Reflections on the nature and quality of group work assignments and supervision. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *31*(3), 239–249. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2011.580240

Hessenauer, S., & Lind, K. (2013). Preparation for group work: Perceptions of bachelor-level social workers. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, *18*(1), 141–156. https://doi.org/10.18084/basw.18.1.r7x5514345426760

Knight, C. (1999). BSW and MSW students' perceptions of their academic preparation for group work. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *18*(1–2), 133–148. https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v18n01_11

Knight, C. (2009). The use of a workshop on group work for field instructors to enhance students' experience with group work in the field practicum. *Social Work with Groups*, *32*(3), 230–242. https://doi.org/10.1080/01609510802546235

Knight, C. (2017). Social work students' experiences with group work in the field practicum. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *37*(2), 138–155. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2017.1294130

Kolb, D. A. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson.

Kurland, R., Salmon, R., Bitel, M., Goodman, H., Ludwig, K., Newmann, E. W., & Sullivan, N. (2004). The survival of social group work: A call to action. *Social Work With Groups*, *27*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v27n01_02

LaRocque, S. E. (2017). Group work education in social work: A review of the literature reveals possible solutions. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *53*(2), 276–285. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1246270

Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. (2016). *Research methods for social work* (9th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Skolnik, S. (2019). Coming together: Factors that connect social workers to group work practice. *Social Work with Groups*, *42*(1), 2–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2017.1384948

Skolnik, S., & Skolnik, L. (2022). Beyond challenges: Opportunities for enhancing group work field education. *Social Work With Groups*, *45*(2), 103–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2021.1981515

Tyler, T. R. (2017). Interpersonal classroom model: Learning from diversity in group practice courses. *Groupwork, 27*(1), 87–95. https://doi.org/10.1921/gpwk.v27i1.1098

Tyler, T. R. (2021). Interpersonal classroom model: Students experiencing the group process. *Social Work with Groups*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2021.1896448

Wayne, J., & Garland, J. (1990). Group work education in the field. *Social Work With Groups*, *13*(2), 95–109. https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v13n02_08

Weinberg, H. (2020). Online group psychotherapy: Challenges and possibilities during COVID-19—A practice review. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, *24*(3), 201–211. https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000140