## Article

## Collective advocacy in the age of neoliberalism: Getting political in an interdisciplinary law clinic

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## Abstract

Background: In a context of neoliberal policies where social, health and legal services are increasingly scarce, legal or interdisciplinary clinics can play a pivotal role in defending the rights of the most marginalized, in addition to training students on the structural and political dimension of the law and social-work practices.

Purpose: Based on students' experiences of collective advocacy at the Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic Law Clinic, this article explores the nature and impact of learning through community engagement and collective advocacy.

Methodology: A case study conducted through semi-structured interviews with 9 clinic students and analyzed using an inductive approach.

Findings/Conclusions: The learning experiences transform students' conception of justice, by integrating the basic needs of all community members along with ending oppressive police and judicial practices, but also the role they wish to play as future professionals for social justice.

Implications: These findings demonstrate the importance of addressing the political dimension of higher education.

**Keywords: Experiential learning; Social justice; Case study; Community settings; Higher education**

### Introduction

Neoliberalism, characterized by the deregulation of financial and labor markets, is based on the idea that free markets and private property are the best ways to ensure equality, and that public institutions are ineffective in economic and social matters (Brown 2006; Harvey 2005). Since the 1980s, the neoliberalization of public policy has imposed the market logic on the entire state structure, resulting in increasing economic inequalities in almost all countries, even those with effective social-protection systems (Navarro 2007; Word Inequality Lab, 2022).

Although the neoliberal doctrine advocates for a "smaller state," the actual downsizing of neoliberal states has not been observed. To the contrary, in most countries, while budgets allocated to social missions have been shrinking—leading to cuts in social services, mental health programs, addiction treatment, and affordable housing initiatives—repressive institutions (police, courts, prisons) have seen their budgets increased exponentially, with the effect of over-targeting poor and marginalized social groups (Wacquant, 2009).

Instead of addressing the structural causes of rising inequalities, neoliberal discourses and policies tend to criminalize social problems, framing them primarily as "mental health" and "security" issues rather than as social and economic issues (Boyd & Kerr, 2016). As a result, a "law and order" agenda, focused on maintaining social stability and protecting property rights, has taken precedence (Harvey, 2006; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). This has led to harsher law-enforcement responses to social problems, such as increased policing and surveillance of marginalized individuals and communities (Perlin & Lynch, 2016; Wacquant, 2009) and a 5,5% increase of the prison population worldwide in the last decade (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024).

Legal clinics, which provide support to individuals and groups who face barriers to accessing legal representation, can play a significant role in countering police profiling and coercion geared towards homeless individuals, while exposing and training students in the social justice dimension of the law practice (Buhler et al., 2015; Macfarlane, 2009). While legal clinics are often focused primarily on providing individual support, collective advocacy, education, and community outreach can also play a major role in defending the rights of the most marginalized, all the while having a global impact on community solidarity (Ashar, 2008; Barbera & Protopapa, 2020; Carolin, 2014).

In terms of education, clinical experience enables law students to move away from legal "book education" to understand the legal problems of everyday life, to develop self-reflection in relation to practice and to reintroduce justice into the law (Cooper & Trubek, 2018). The integration of social-work students into legal clinics helps to make social justice and advocacy a key element of clinical education through the sharing and articulation of disciplinary knowledge and values (Baines, 2017; Breunig, 2019; Dalrymple & Boylan, 2013). While acquiring new skills, knowledge, and forging a more complex understanding of situations (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 2006; Boys et al., 2015; Colarossi & Forgey, 2003; Morton et al., 2010; Stein, 2004), law and social-work students work as an "experientially integrated team" (Current & Ryder, 2023, p. 9) and develop a critical approach of the law in its political, economic and social contexts. However, Dodge and Smyth (2018) highlight that relatively little scholarship discussing the possibilities and challenges of collective advocacy in clinical education have been done, many clinics operating on an individual legal services model. According to the literature, collective advocacy can address structural issues by adopting an anti-oppressive approach that challenges the traditional hierarchies of legal consultation by considering the knowledge and priorities of those directly affected. However, this approach requires significant work from clinicians, who must often unlearn and deconstruct certain assumptions and methods acquired in academic settings, particularly in law schools. Additionally, collective advocacy is difficult to fund, as it does not align with the expectations of funders for measurable outcomes based on the of individual consultations (Dodge & Smyth, 2018).

In this paper, we will discuss the case of the Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic, which is the fruit of a partnership between the Faculty of Law, the School of Social Work and the School of Nursing at the University of Ottawa, Canada. The Clinic, which opened in September 2021, not only offers consultations, legal proceedings information and support (regarding criminal, family, administrative, housing and health-related matters) to people who are at risk of or who are experiencing homelessness but is also equally involved in collective-advocacy projects relating to community issues on homelessness and local police profiling. The Clinic has the distinctive feature of being a training

center for university students in law, social work and nursing, as well as for trainees in paralegal education programs. Based on a qualitative case study of "community based-knowledge" (Seaman et al., 2020) and a collective advocacy experience conducted between 2021 and 2023, we will present, the students' learning experience in terms of solidarity, knowledge mobilization, and professional skills. First, we will detail the ways by which cities, such as Gatineau, Quebec, Canada, the city where the clinic operates, deploy modes of policing geared toward the homeless and marginalized communities, which legal clinics are called upon to respond and resist.

**Context. Cities' responses to homelessness: from containment to therapeutic policing**

Since the early 1990s, studies in urban sociology and critical geography have highlighted the spread of urban conflicts in several North American cities faced with an increasing and visible problem of homelessness. These studies have underlined how, over the past 30 years, cities have become sites of rising tensions between the homeless individuals and residents (Amster, 2003; Davis, 1990; Mitchell, 2003; O'Sullivan, 2012; Snow & Mulcahy, 2001; Wasserman & Clair, 2010; Watts et al., 2018). Homeless populations are seen as "out of place" (Cloke et al., 2000; Cresswell, 1996) and are portrayed as undermining the commercial and touristic attractiveness of cities, as well as residents' sense of security (Gibson, 1998; Mitchell, 2006, 2011; Takahasi, 1998). Existing literature has documented how local governments, the state, and communities respond to urban tensions primarily with increasingly punitive measures that bear down on the homeless and their use of space, constantly surveilling and pushing them out to geographically marginal areas (Maestri & Hughes, 2017). In their article, "Space, Politics, and the Survival Strategies of the Homeless" (2001), Snow and Mulcahy identify three modes of policing: containment, displacement, and exclusion, which differ slightly in terms of objectives and methods. First, containment seeks to corral homeless individuals by reducing their public visibility and interactions with other citizens, and by using disruptive tactics to curtail their mobility and ecological range through tactics including profiling, surveillance, and arrest. Second, displacement seeks to temporarily dislodge and remove (and, more rarely, relocate or resettle) homeless individuals from all spaces (whether used as a home or to panhandle, for example) through tactics such herding, demolition of camps, squats, or shantytowns, or revising local zoning ordinances. Exclusion refers to a strategy, often used in conjunction with the first two, to permanently keep homeless people out of designated areas. The NIMBY ("Not in My Backyard") phenomenon or other collective opposition, such as petitions, to the construction or relocation of homeless shelters in specific neighbourhoods are examples of exclusion strategies. Walby and Lippert (2011), in continuity with previous typologies and consistent with critical legal literature on aesthetics and urban order (Ghertner, 2010; Gibson, 2005; Lippens & van Calster, 2002; Mitchell & Staeheli, 2006), consider a fourth mode they describe as "dispersal" policing. These policing aims to temporarily dislodge or remove homeless individuals from all spaces for reasons of aesthetics and beautification. Research on this final mode of containment has shed light on initiatives to displace homeless people from urban public spaces to enhance the city through recreation or tourism. Techniques deployed in this mode seek to avoid the concentration of homeless bodies in commercial zones, by temporarily dispersing them out of sight, as "unsightly trash to be removed, objects with limited aesthetic value" (Walby & Lippert, 2011, p. 1019), therefore creating "spectral geographies that hide homeless lives from view" (Walby & Lippert, 2011, p. 1029).

In a context in which social services are lacking, the police are the first respondents (McKenna et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2018). They are seen by public authorities as key players in resolving safety crises (Van Veen et al., 2019), which explains the proliferation of new models of therapeutic policing, adding to the list of contemporary policing modes. Guided by these models, the police have been adding to their conventional policing mandate—linked to criminal law—a therapeutic mission that aims, in theory, at helping poor and marginalized people reintegrate into society. Homeless people, who are perceived, in a neoliberal doctrine, as a public-space nuisance and regarded as the epitome of a "bad citizen," are particularly targeted by these therapeutic policing practices.

Therapeutic policing operates as a form of outreach social work that aims to transform and reintegrate residents as productive, self-governing citizens. Equipped with new legal tools and expanded discretionary authority, officers use coercive ultimatums—enter a rehabilitative program or go to jail, look for employment or suffer monetary fines—to instil residents with new habits, attitudes, and dispositions. Deployed as "tough love" for residents' own good, this street-level mode of poverty governance legitimates elevated levels of repression while widening the net of coercive control. As a result, additional (and previously noncriminal) behaviors and populations are subjected to ubiquitous surveillance and intrusive regulation (Stuart, 2016, p. 15).

The effectiveness of such police practices is controversial. While some studies show that they are less traumatic and less likely to result in arrests or injuries compared to conventional police practices (Puntis et al, 2018; Watson & Wood, 2017), studies conducted among the people concerned and their families show an equivalent perceived level of coercion, notably because arrests are replaced by involuntary emergency-room admissions (Furness et al., 2017; McKenna et al., 2015; Watson & Wood, 2017). Studies also show that the way in which police officers identify, select or target people for therapeutic intervention depends on their opinions, perceptions, or preferences, not on clear universal guidelines (Perlin and Lynch, 2016). Moreover, research shows how groups that are marginalized by intersecting systems of oppression (e.g., race, social class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, ethnicity and age) are more often the targets of police surveillance and harassment (Boyce et al., 2015; Desmond, 2012; Wacquant, 2009; Watson & Wood, 2017).

In the city of Gatineau, where the Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic is implemented, several of these policing techniques (dispersal, containment, exclusion and therapy) have been deployed in response to increasing poverty and homelessness, mirroring a national trend (Fagan, 2023). Police officers are issuing a growing number of fines related to the use of public space, including to shelter users or to those without a permanent address. Three-quarters of these fines lead to incarceration despite a 2020 legislative change prohibiting courts from issuing warrants of imprisonment in case of inability to pay (Radio-Canada, 2022a). Historically, the city of Gatineau holds the record for incarceration for non-payment of fines in Quebec (Chesnay et al., 2014). At the request of citizens who fear for their safety, "calls are once again being made for a law and order response to address this highly visible manifestation of urban poverty" (O Gready et al., 2011, p. 6). During the Covid-19 pandemic, demands for emergency accommodation rose by 18% (Ministry of Health and Social Services, 2022). However, the various levels of government have not released the funds needed to respond to the crises, whether by opening more places in shelters and day centers, by serving more meals or by building social housing. Access to transitional housing is also a limited, since it is conditional on participation in a recovery program, whether related to employment, drug or alcohol abuse, or mental health (Tsemberis, 2010). The police have therefore been increasing their presence and exercising ever closer surveillance with tougher laws and stricter enforcement (Herring, 2019), all the while prompting people to take part in recovery programs (Rutland, 2023). The Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic users report having experienced daily contact with the police, to the extent of feeling stalked and harassed. Many have spent time in prison for unpaid tickets or are in hiding because of warrants of imprisonment against them. In addition, they express a sense of being ignored since they are not consulted when decisions affecting their lives are taken. While the methods used to control the homeless are numerous and increasingly well documented, the collective responses that attempt to resist those methods are less so. In the next section, we will describe an example of a collective mobilization and community solidarity that took place in the city of Gatineau in response to increasing policing measures geared towards the homeless communities. We will focus on the role played by the Clinic in this mobilization, notably through collective advocacy.

**A clinical practice in the city: resisting oppression through collective advocacy**

According to Abramowicz (2004), the three most fundamental defining characteristics of community legal clinics are local community governance, practice in the areas of poverty law, and legal response provided through a broad array of services (Abramowicz, 2004, p. 73). Collective advocacy, on the other hand, which seeks to better engage the community to achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes, is rarely defined as a key component of such clinics. And yet, in a neoliberal context that maintains and reinforces situations of injustice, collective advocacy makes it possible to aim for the systemic changes necessary for people's well-being and for greater social justice. Paulo Freire (1993), in his discussions on collective advocacy, emphasizes the power of collaborative efforts in advancing social change. He underscores the importance of individuals coming together to collectively advocate for shared goals and challenges the notion that advocacy is solely an individual endeavour. Freire envisions a participatory and inclusive approach where communities unite to address systemic issues, fostering a sense of solidarity and empowering everyone involved in the pursuit of a more just and equitable society. Freire's ideas hence highlight the way legal clinics benefit from shifting towards a collective advocacy approach (Mimoso et al., 2018).

The Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic was recently involved in a collective advocacy action that took place in 2022 and 2023 following the plans for the city of Gatineau to move its police headquarters to a site located in close proximity to the major homeless shelter and community services (Radio-Canada, 2022b). This plan, which was announced in the media in November that year, was made without consulting the residents nor the local community actors in the area. The Gatineau police department dominated much of the public discourse on the issue. In a series of media appearances and public presentations, the police department depicted the city's homeless situation as a public-safety issue requiring greater police presence. In addition to citizens' fears, the police were reporting a growing number of "heavy users" of their services, therefore needing to get closer and to better assist them. On numerous occasions, municipal representatives echoed the police department's rhetoric.

The Clinic's team, composed of supervisors, professors and students, published in newspaper several open letters highlighting the issues at stake for the many homeless people in the area (Tunney, 2022). Drawing on research findings and clinical observations, the letters highlighted the risks of harassment, profiling and judicialization, as well as the displacement of homeless and low-income people to areas further away from social services. Calling for a public consultation on the issue, the Clinic's team appeared on several occasions at city-council hearings alongside its community partners. Several information sessions about the City of Gatineau's decision and the issues it raised were organized by clinic students.

In January 2023, the Clinic and a few community groups organized a public forum about the future of the site that had been designated by the city to house the police headquarters. The aim of the forum was to start a conversation about the wishes and desires of people living in the neighbourhood, including people who use the Clinic and local homeless services. The clinic's students documented the ideas that emerged from this exercise and were specifically attentive to the needs and reactions of the homeless people themselves.

In January and February, the Clinic's team, in collaboration with its community partners, kept up the pressure on the city council, multiplying open letters, media interviews and attendance at city council hearings. At the end of February, the city council voted against moving police headquarters downtown, and announced a public consultation (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2023).

The criticisms levelled by some elected officials at the Clinic's team was that its actions are based on academic research and not on what citizens, including people experiencing homelessness, really think.

Proponents of moving police headquarters downtown claimed that homeless people want more police presence for their own safety, although the people concerned were not directly heard.

To enable people experiencing homelessness and the community workers who support them to make their voices heard during the public consultations, the clinic, in collaboration with a community group, conducted an action-research project on relations with the police and the future of the neighbourhood. The project aimed to identify community needs through a participatory and creative process, while producing knowledge useful in mobilizing public authorities to support claims based on real needs and legitimate interests (Sauvé & Provencher, 2019). Inspired by the method presented in Mapped! A youth community mapping toolkit for Vancouver (Ragan et al., 2009), the study proceeded through a process of mapping the city, followed by an activity to create a "dream tree." The aim was to document and bring to light people's experiences in the neighbourhood, as well as their ideas and aspirations for their community. Data collection and analysis, as well as the writing of a research report, were carried out by a student on a research internship at the clinic with the support of the team's professors.

The research report can be used in future public consultations, as well as a guide to support the clinic and its community partners in future actions (Clinique en droit social de l'Outaouais et al., 2023). A second phase of research is currently underway, aiming to delve deeper into certain topics through individual interviews with research-action participants.

In Gatineau, as in many other Canadian cities, an encampment has been set up to compensate for the lack of housing and shelter spaces. During the summer of 2023, with the support of a street outreach worker, the campers formed a committee to advocate for the rights and needs of people experiencing homelessness in the city. With the support of a student, a supervisor and a professor, the "campers' committee" drafted a letter addressed to the public, which was published in the local newspaper (Les campeurs en câlisse, 2023).

**Method**

The research team has practical and research experience in legal clinics, in community settings and in the context of homelessness. The training and service model developed at the Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic is based on the cross-results of studies conducted by team members in recent years.

Research design : case study and participants

The Clinic is conceived as a case study, as it aims to document and disseminate knowledge about the benefits of our interdisciplinary, collective advocacy-based approach for students, users, and the community at large. The study carried out at the Clinic includes students, users and community partners, but in this article, we will present and discuss only the results for students. Since the opening of the Clinic, all students have been invited to participate in approximately one-hour semi-structured interviews on the themes of their clinical experiences, the relevance of the training offered, and how they envision their civic and professional future. Our main research question concerns the impact of clinical experience on student training and professional identity, but we also seek to better understand the impact of collective advocacy on the way law and rights are conceived. Participation is voluntary, and not participating has no consequences for students' involvement in clinic activities. The interviews were conducted by a research assistant, and the students were not compensated for their participation. Given the small sample size (4 participants in 2022–2023 and 5 in 2021–2022), this case study approach is particularly suitable, as it acknowledges the limited scope for generalization across clinics more broadly. Nonetheless, the themes emerging from the data may provide valuable insights

and food for thought for other clinicians who run or wish to establish similar clinics. These findings, while contextualized within our specific setting, hold the potential to spark dialogue, inspire innovation, and inform best practices in clinical legal education. By documenting students' experiences, we aim not only to improve training and clinical follow-up but also to deepen our understanding of the nature of their learning and its impact on their academic and professional trajectories. The Clinic also serves as a platform for fostering critical reflection, empowering students to engage with complex social issues and develop advocacy skills that extend beyond the classroom. Our research findings will be used to create practical training and clinical intervention tools that can be adapted and applied in other legal clinics. These tools, grounded in our case study data and linked to pre-existing literature, will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on experiential learning and community-oriented legal practice. From the outset, the Clinic received approval from the University of Ottawa Ethics Committee, ensuring compliance with ethical standards in our documentation and dissemination process.

Materials

Our main material consists of nine thematic individual interviews carried out in French with law and social-work university students, as well as one paralegal trainee during the academic years 2021-22 and 2022-23: Lucien, Suzy, Mourad, Rita and Angelica (paralegal trainee and law student); and Simone, Nanette, Mario and Iman (social-work students). We chose to proceed with individual interviews rather than group interviews due to previous research experience in interdisciplinary clinics where we observed that law students tend to dominate discussions, to the detriment of social work students. We wanted to ensure we created an environment where students would feel comfortable discussing issues that matter to them, particularly in relation to interdisciplinarity. Individual interviews are also a means of documenting individual experiences in depth, which can vary significantly.

These interviews aim to shed light on various experiences of "community-based knowledge" (Seaman et al., 2020), with the goal of uncovering the collaborative dynamics and collective learning that emerge from these contexts. During the interviews, students were asked to describe their experiences and their learnings at the clinic, and to situate them in their academic and professional paths. Through this case study, we will explore the intersection of theory and practice within the framework of community engagement. By drawing from both the collective advocacy work and individual interviews, we aim to highlight the different ways in which knowledge is co-constructed, shared, and applied in community settings. This approach will also allow us to reflect on the broader implications of community-based knowledge for social change, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and the potential for transformative action at local levels. Ultimately, we seek to demonstrate the power of collective action and its capacity to generate innovative, context-specific solutions to pressing societal challenge.

Interview canvas

1-      What was your motivation for joining the Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic?
2-      What were your learning and training expectations?
3-      How important is interdisciplinary collaboration in your clinical experience?
4-      How important is collective advocacy in your clinical experience?
5-      What has collective advocacy taught you about the practice of law or social work?
6-      What kind of (legal or social work) practice are you interested in?

<u>Coding and analysis strategies</u>

The interviews lasted about an hour and were recorded. They were then transcribed. A coding grid was constructed inductively, based on the content of the interviews, and covered experiential versus theoretical learning, community involvement, collective advocacy, law, justice and rights, and the concept of self as a professional. It was while constructing the coding grid that it became evident to us that the collective advocacy constitutes a form of experiential learning in itself.

The analysis aims to highlight the community and political dimensions of experiential learning in interdisciplinary clinic settings to underscore their transformative potential. However, throughout the analysis process, we ensured to maintain proximity to the data by creating analysis categories that reflect the words used by students in interviews. We also chose to incorporate quotation of their statements as much as possible in our writing.

**Learning through "community engagement"**

Students at the Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic have been involved in various ways at all stages of these collective advocacy activities, be it by conducting research, drafting documents, representing the clinic at events, or asking questions at municipal council meetings. They have worked closely with the clinic's community partners and interacted with clinic users in a context different than individual consultations. Here, service users and community workers hold essential knowledge for action, and through their immersion in the community, students are introduced to the complexity of regional issues through both personal and collective experiences, which is the main source of clinical learning (Ajagunna & Byron, 2024; Barry et al., 2011).

For the Clinic's trainee and students, the most significant aspect of their learning is connected to community solidarity. Based on their immersion in the community environment, they have asserted that the community is "united" and "like a family."

They recount having discovered solidarity through the generosity of clinic users, as exemplified by Lucien: "It's ironic in the sense that it's the people who have the least who give the most. In the sense that users are like, 'Oh, that person needs a coat, I'll give it to them.' That really struck me." Iman explains that she realized that homelessness is first and foremost a social disaffiliation, and that community solidarity has the power to "reaffiliate" people by creating "communities that accept everyone." She explains:

> People experiencing homelessness remind us of the importance of creating a society that is more inclusive, more focused on community life. It shows us the extent to which in our society we live our lives individually. Seeing people experiencing homelessness who get off the street and then really need to connect reminds us that there's something wrong with the way we live our lives. You know, we need each other.

Through these experiences, students gain a profound appreciation for the interconnectedness of community life. Witnessing acts of generosity and solidarity among individuals with so little challenges traditional assumptions about poverty and powerlessness. These examples underscore the transformative potential of community solidarity in addressing social exclusion and reestablishing a sense of belonging. The students' reflections also highlight how immersion in such environments reshapes their understanding of societal priorities, encouraging them to envision a more collective, inclusive future.

Immersion in community work also helps students transition from theoretical knowledge to a practical understanding of justice. Students report that their immersion in the community has made them understand how inaccessible the law and justice are for the most marginalized communities, and how this affects everyday life. They knew it before, but only theoretically, as Simone explains:

> It was something I had read about and heard about, but seeing it, talking to these people who tell you their stories, how their rights are violated left and right, how they're made to feel like they don't even have the right to say anything, and they just must accept it because they're in a precarious situation... It puts things into perspective, it's completely different.

**The Emotional Impact of Experiential Learning**

Active, experiential learning also evokes strong emotional responses from students, ranging from "shock" and "powerlessness" to empathy and newfound awareness. In interviews, the students recount the "shock," the "powerlessness," the stress and the empathy they experienced (Dodge & Smyth, 2018; Macfarlane, 2009). These emotions ground their most tangible insights, starting with the awareness of their own privileges (Barry et al., 2011), as expressed by Nanette:

> It made me realize: "Wow, how I'm lucky to have a roof over my head!" It made me aware of my blessings. If I'm not in that situation [homelessness], it's not because of me and not because I'm better or smarter than someone else. No, no, it's the opportunities I've had through my parents, through the history of my entire family, the advantages I've had because of my parents' jobs, my easy childhood and all that.

For many students, the emotional weight of their experiences not only deepened their understanding but also motivated them to act. Empathy became a driving force behind their efforts to address systemic injustices. Students described moments when witnessing the resilience of clinic users prompted them to reevaluate their assumptions about vulnerability and strength. These moments of connection and empathy allow students to see beyond the abstract concepts of law, justice and social work, grounding their learning in real life experiences. By engaging with individuals who embody resilience and agency, students gain a deeper appreciation for the collective strength within marginalized communities. Empathy thus becomes not just a personal response but a professional tool (Lawton, Saban & Whittam, 2022), inspiring students to approach advocacy with humility and a commitment to amplifying the voices of those most affected. Through their emotional engagement, students transition from theoretical understanding to embodied knowledge. Experiences of shock and stress challenge their assumptions about fairness and justice, while feelings of empathy and connection motivate them to act. These moments help students bridge the gap between their academic training and the lived realities of marginalized populations, fostering a sense of responsibility to address the structural inequities they encounter. This emotional grounding not only enhances their professional competence but also equips them to approach their future roles with humility and a commitment to advocacy. By confronting uncomfortable truths and engaging with the human impact of systemic injustice, students emerge with a deeper understanding of their potential to effect meaningful change within their communities. The literature also notes that clinical experience is particularly effective in developing a sense of professional and social responsibility among students, in addition to cultivating reflexivity about their own practices (Ajagunna & Byron, 2024; Maresh, 2018; Sossin, 2014; Barry et al., 2011; Sandefur & Selbin, 2009).

**Co-Creating Justice with Community Partners**

Even though many clinic users "know their rights very, very well," they struggle to assert them. As seen in other collective advocacy projects (Dodge & Smyth, 2018), in interviews, students talked about how law and justice are often at the root of rights violations. While they observed these dynamics in individual consultations, it is in the context of collective advocacy that they recognize their structural dimension. They report that homeless individuals have all received fines for actions such as crossing the street in the wrong place, making noise, or urinating in public. These experiences have created, according to several students, a significant breakdown of trust in the judicial system, causing people to no longer want to assert their rights.

When asked about their experience at the clinic, all the students shared a sense of injustice which is often presented as a driving force for action. The injustices experienced by the clinic's users are omnipresent in their social experiences and go beyond the question of rights or law. They are rooted in something much more fundamental, which pertains to the very structure of social fabric (Barry et al., 2011). Both the awareness of individual privileges and the understanding of their structural dimension led the students to readjust their way of conceiving justice, as well as understanding their own role in terms of justice (Breunig, 2019). Social-work students reported realizing that their vision of law and justice was idealistic. Simone, for instance, said that "what makes us human is having rights." She questioned the meaning of social intervention in a context where rights are simply denied. Law students highlighted that it can be uncomfortable to provide legal information to individuals with practical experience who have a much better understanding of the law than they do. They know they must consider the experiential knowledge of the clinic's users to understand the law, something the Faculty of Law did not prepare them for.

Through collective advocacy experiences, clinic students, together with service users and community workers, co-create a conception of justice that considers the basic needs of all community members, along with an end to oppressive police and judicial practices. Justice then functions as a social determinant of health that can serve as both an improvement lever and a factor aggravating inequalities. It is thus through a shared understanding of justice that a genuine sense of community belonging can take shape for students, extending beyond the clinic, as Angelica describes: "When I arrived at the clinic, that's where I built that sense of belonging, and it was so helpful to have people [users of the clinic and community workers] who have the same perspectives."

The experiences of clinic students underscore the transformative potential of co-creating justice through collective advocacy. By engaging directly with marginalized communities, students moved beyond theoretical learning to develop "a nuanced understanding of systemic inequities", as one student mentioned. These experiences highlighted the limitations of traditional legal and social-work frameworks while offering new pathways for addressing structural issues. Through collaboration, students learned that justice must be redefined to address the lived realities of those most affected by systemic oppression. This reimagined justice is rooted in community solidarity, experiential knowledge, and a commitment to systemic change.

### Collective advocacy as a Catalyst for Systemic Change

While justice, combined with an awareness of the social determinants of health, serves as a tool for collective action, it also reveals the structural and political dimensions of inequalities. The daily life at the clinic responds to systemic inequalities and right violations: tenants illegally evicted, homes infested with cockroaches and rats, police officers refusing to take a sexual assault complaint against a landlord, arguing it's a private dispute, police assisting landlords in illegal evictions, police harassment, imprisonment for unpaid fines, and insufficient access to food, healthcare, and housing. For the students, these structural issues, which stem from current or past political decisions, require different strategies than those employed during individual consultations. In a legal context where, apart from

certain aspects, collective actions, rights, and remedies are individual, collective advocacy must necessarily involve political mobilization. Recounting her experience at the citizen forum, Iman asserts that "what we did there was really to give a voice to people and for people experiencing homelessness to be able to express themselves and be heard." This experience has enabled her to put into practice the feminist approach she believes in by exposing the "oppressions and political background behind it."

Therefore, the students and interns report that they have learned that their actions have the most impact when they participate in collective advocacy alongside clinic users. Angelica explains: "The collective struggle led by the clinic and its community partners have shown me the impact that activism can have at a political level. These mobilizations have demonstrated that they can be a powerful instrument of significant change for the community."

Hence, by engaging with community partners and addressing structural injustices, students were able to bridge the gap between individual legal remedies and broader social inequalities. The issues they encountered—illegal evictions, police harassment, and inadequate access to basic needs like housing and healthcare—reveal how systemic problems are often the result of political and structural decisions rather than isolated incidents. Through their collective advocacy efforts, students learned that meaningful change often requires political action. Iman's account of amplifying the voices of homeless individuals at a citizen forum exemplifies this approach, as it situates advocacy within a framework of empowerment and feminist praxis. By exposing the structural oppressions that underlie social issues, students were able to challenge the status quo and foster a sense of agency among marginalized groups. This process underscores the importance of advocacy as both a practical and political intervention—one that seeks to reshape systems of power and reimagine justice in more inclusive and equitable terms. Finally, the students' reflections on the limits of the legal system as a tool for justice are particularly striking. By questioning practices that facilitate access to a system that often exacerbates oppression, they challenge the fundamental assumptions of their respective fields. This critical perspective is essential for rethinking the role of law and social work in addressing inequality. Advocacy, as the students discovered, is most effective when it moves beyond individual cases to engage with the broader political and structural dimensions of injustice.

**Transformative Experiences and Career Implications**

Our results are consistent with the literature regarding the impact of clinical experience on the professional trajectory of students, and more particularly on their commitment to social justice (Ajagunna & Byron, 2024; Kotkin, 2018; Maresh, 2018; Sandefur & Selbin, 2009). For all Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic's students, the experience of collective advocacy has been transformative in that it has changed their vision of law and justice, and their vision of their role as professional. By participating in collective advocacy, students not only deepened their professional skills but also cultivated "a sense of responsibility and belonging" that guide their future careers. For many students, these advocacy experiences have shaped their academic and professional aspirations, as well as on their community involvement. Many have expressed a desire to continue contributing directly to the community, through volunteering, summer employment or work with a community group or involvement with the clinic, as students or as volunteers. Regarding further studies, many want to build on their experience to guide the next steps in their academic journey.

For example, several social-work students are considering pursuing law degrees to support their social-work practice, to better understand and support people affected by the law and legal processes; law students contemplating to do a master's degree have expressed their intention to focus their research on structural legal issues. When it comes to career choices, all the students have asserted that their collective advocacy experience has at the very least confirmed, and in some cases has redirected, their professional perspective. For social-work students, the collective advocacy experience confirmed that

social-work practice can deal with "structural issues," address "the root of the issues" and aim for "long-term social change." When it comes to law students, some are considering practice in a legal-aid office, while others envision a career in the community sector, options they had never thought about before. Social-work students' interest in law degrees reflects their recognition of the intersection between legal systems and social justice, while law students' newfound focus on community-oriented practice reveals a shift from traditional legal frameworks to more holistic approaches. In both cases, the students express their hope that through their professional engagement and involvement, they can continue the collective advocacy work they experienced at the Clinic. These career aspirations highlight how advocacy can serve as a catalyst for long-term systemic change, not only through direct action but also by inspiring a new generation of professionals committed to addressing root causes of inequality.

**Discussion: The political dimension of higher education**

The results of this case study highlight how collective advocacy and community-based learning are a central part of community interdisciplinary clinics in the neoliberal area of rising inequality and increasing policing measures geared toward homelessness individuals. This approach recognizes that learning is not confined to formal educational institutions but can thrive in everyday experiences and interactions within a community. Hence learning is seen not just as an intellectual exercise but as a political means to address and improve social conditions. While collective advocacy typically includes "letter writing campaigns, formal political engagement with elected decision makers, public protests, and community planning meetings" (Dodge & Smyth, 2018: 52), it also entails what is known, in social work, as "community based-learning:" a notion that was first though of by Jane Addams (1964), a major figure in the settlement house movement and co-founder of the Hull House in Chicago at the turn of the 20th century. Her work at the settlement Hull House involved a "clinical practice" in the city, by providing services and support to the community. Addams believed in empowering individuals to take collective action to improve their own conditions and emphasized the importance of local communities in addressing social problems, such as poverty and inequality, through collective action and community engagement. She believed that using collective action to bring about systemic changes would benefit society as a whole. Settlement houses, like community legal clinics today, were located in poorer neighborhoods and were considered as hybrid spaces, between academia and social institutions, which created learning opportunities rooted in the community. Addams viewed community-based learning as a way to promote active participation of citizens in shaping their communities. Collective advocacy, in her view, was not just about addressing immediate needs but also about fostering a sense of civic responsibility and engagement. Jane Addams's community based-learning thus emphasize community engagement and social solidarity, and addresses issues through collective action. The application of her ideas provides insights into how community legal education clinics offer valuable learning opportunities through collective advocacy activities. Her perspective is also in line with Freire's (1993) emphasis on critical thinking and active learning, which are key components of his pedagogical approach (Hegar, 2012). Furthermore, Freire's focus on dialogue and awareness aligns with the goals of community based-learning, which non only aim to empower marginalized communities, but also students. In sum, Addams and Freire's principles encourage students to engage with real-life cases of collective advocacy and work towards social change.

The findings of our study align with this literature, showing that clinical experience, especially through collective advocacy, plays a pivotal role in reshaping students' perceptions of their roles as professionals. Through these experiences, students move beyond their position as knowledge-holders and experts, and embrace a more open, learner-centered approach in relation to the Clinic's users. Following Freire's teachings (1993), collective advocacy serves as a way of considering and levelling class relations and place students in a position of reciprocal leaning with the communities they serve. The Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic's experience shows that in this setting, real political

engagement and solidarity can develop. Many students question the practices aimed at facilitating access to a legal system that produces so much risk and oppression for marginalized communities (Ashar, 2008; Buhler, 2017; MacDonald, 2010). For many students, it is the political engagement through collective advocacy that appears to bring about the essential structural and systemic changes. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that collective advocacy has a lasting impact on students' career choices. Beyond steering them toward social justice-oriented careers, it reshapes how they perceive their professional roles, focusing on the structural and political dimensions of inequalities and offering a material conception of justice. As students transition from academic settings to professional practice, these insights are likely to inform their approaches to real-world work, whether in legal or social work environments. These transformative learning experiences are essential for sparking broader structural change—provided universities commit fully to engaging with marginalized communities.

However, current practices in higher education reflect a disturbing neoliberal shift, which serves to undermine these progressive educational models. Universities, under the influence of neoliberal policies, are increasingly promoting an education that is disconnected from the realities of marginalized communities. Exorbitant tuition fees, selective admissions policies, and a focus on theoretical, middle-class-oriented curricula contribute to perpetuating the status quo. Rather than challenging inequality, universities train professionals who are often complicit in reinforcing neoliberal structures, including lawyers and social workers who adopt a therapeutic, policing approach to social issues.

In this context, legal and interdisciplinary university clinics, which involve both students and community residents, hold a critical social responsibility. They are uniquely positioned to serve as hubs for community engagement, community-based learning and political resistance. Through collective advocacy, the clinics can become pivotal spaces for mobilization, solidarity, and the promotion of popular democracy, actively fighting against oppression. The case study of Outaouais Interdisciplinary Social Law Clinic demonstrates, as highlighted in this paper, how collective advocacy can address structural issues in real-time, as they arise, while resisting the pervasive forces of neoliberalism. These clinics are not only sites of legal education but also spaces of political resistance that embody the potential for transformative social change.

In conclusion, collective advocacy and community-based learning serve as vital tools for challenging the systemic inequalities entrenched within both higher education and society at large. By engaging students in direct action and fostering connections between academia and marginalized communities, these clinics can create a more inclusive, politically engaged form of education. However, for these transformative practices to thrive, universities must commit to real partnerships with communities and resist the pressures of neoliberal forces that seek to reduce education to a commodity. Only through this commitment can higher education fulfil its true potential as a site of resistance, social justice, and collective action.

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