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Experiences of social work students undertaking a remote research-based placement during a global pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Field education globally, has been highly disrupted by restrictions associated with COVID-19. This disruption has forced many students to engage with online learning. The current article presents a student-led co-operative inquiry exploring the experience of four social work students undertaking a remote research-based placement in regional Australia during a global pandemic. In this inquiry students' critically self-reflected on the strengths and challenges of remote research-based placements. Despite some initial reservations, the students' experience was positive overall. This article reports on four key themes that emerged from this inquiry: the translation of social work communication and relationship-building skills to online environments, the development of professional identity in a remote research-based placement, access to supervision in a remote context, and reflection on the experience of completing a research placement guided by the social work value of respect for persons. We conclude that undertaking a remote research placement helped forge students' appreciation for the role of research in social work, enhanced their communication and research skills, and strengthened students' sense of professional identity. These findings confirm remote research-based placements can offer relevant and effective placement opportunities that can inform social work field-education heutagogy as we move beyond the restrictions associated with the pandemic.

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Introduction

The emergence of the coronavirus in late 2019 required social work students and supervisors to review their expectations of field education (Beesley & Devonald, 2020; Bourke et al., 2021; Walter-mccabe, 2020). Many students were transitioned from direct-service placements to remote research or project-based placements. The current critical self-reflective piece reports on research that aimed to capture the student perspective of remote research-based placements. Four social work students from three regional

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universities within Australia who undertook a remote research placement in 2020 initiated a co-operative inquiry to explore social work students' experiences of remote research-based placements during COVID-19. Findings from this inquiry may help to inform the social work knowledgebase about how research-based placements can operate remotely to achieve placement learning outcomes.

On the 30th of January 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was declared an international public health emergency (World Health Organisation, 2020a), and shortly thereafter was officially announced a world-wide pandemic (World Health Organisation, 2020b). In many countries, governments directed people to self-isolate and physically distance to contain the spread of the virus (Pawar, 2020). As a consequence, social work placements globally were either suspended or transitioned to remote online learning, leading to more students than usual undertaking project, research and/or remote placements (McFadden et al., 2020; Zegwaard et al., 2020).

This has important implications for the discipline, where field education has and continues to play a key role in the socialisation of students into the social work profession (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020a; Brodie & Williams, 2013). In Australia, students are required to complete two placements across diverse settings, totalling 1000 hours, with at least 500 hours being in a direct practice role utilising interpersonal skills and having a social work qualified supervisor (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020a). As such, students expect to complete placements in service delivery contexts and rarely consider research as a placement option. Indeed, social work students are often reluctant or fearful of undertaking research as part of their studies, and struggle to see how learning research skills can facilitate their practice or professional goals (e.g. Berger, 2002; Dodd & Epstein, 2012; Frampton et al., 2020; Gredig et al., 2020; Harder, 2010; University of Newcastle, 2020). However, if we hope to produce graduates who can 'demonstrate a critical appreciation of research and evidence-based practice', as is required by the Australian Social Work practice standards (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020a, p. 21), it is essential that educators address this reluctance. One way to help support emerging social workers to effectively utilise research evidence to guide their practice (i.e. research informed practice) and to employ research methods to evaluate their own practice (i.e. practice informed research), may be further integration of research opportunities within field education. Combining practice experiences, which are widely positively viewed by students, with research may help to overcome research-reluctance (Hewson et al., 2010) while also illustrating to students that these two aspects of social work are closely associated (Berger, 2002).

Given requirements in Australia for students to demonstrate learning of skills aligned with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Practice Standards (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013), the impact of COVID-19 on student placements is an important area of study. Research is already emerging regarding the impact this new coronavirus is having on student placements. For example, Salter et al. (2020) reviewed four practice-based placements that were transitioned to remote delivery due to COVID. The authors concluded that 'with three placements occurring completely online and one placement having a mix, no major difference was noted in student outcomes' (Salter et al., 2020, p. 594). This study highlighted a number of advantages of remote placements including greater flexibility for supervisors to offer

shorter but more frequent supervision meetings. They also identified some challenges including restrictions on student creativity due to not being immersed in the placement face-to-face, delays in communicating via email negatively impacting on productivity, and people receiving services not always being available for telehealth appointments. While this study described some of the advantages and challenges with remote placements, it was not specific to the experiences of social work students, nor did it include the voices of the students themselves.

In another study, McFadden et al. (2020) examined the impact of COVID lockdowns (and the approaches taken to adapt to lockdown) on social work placements across seven countries (Australia, England, Finland, Northern Ireland, Norway, Ireland and Sweden). They did this by inviting academics from across those countries to share their experiences. The academics from these seven countries reflected that their respective universities had managed the situation well overall (McFadden et al., 2020), however, again, this study has only captured the experiences of social work educators. Similarly to other studies, it does not give insights from the student perspective.

Likewise, Morley and Clarke (2020) described an innovative research-based placement that was implemented at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) for six students after their agency-based placements were ended due to the pandemic. The students participated in an existing research project that was being conducted by one of the QUT supervisors. Activities that the students engaged in during their placement included conducting literature reviews, discourse analysis of government documents/media articles, and contributing to an evidence-based advocacy submission to the university for relaxing eligibility requirements and providing greater financial support for students on placement (Morley & Clarke, 2020). The students explored current issues relevant to the field of social work, including the impacts of COVID and physical distancing requirements and wide-scale unemployment on mental health, the strengths/limitations of the job seeker and job keeper schemes, the impact of the rapid transition to telehealth and remote service delivery for human services, as well as the impact of COVID on domestic violence and financial stress for international students. Morley and Clarke (2020) conclude that the research placement led to the development of a wide range of important learning outcomes, including critical literacy, critical reflection, analytical research skills, communication skills including group work and networking, and 'the linking of theory and practice in order to formulate ethical responses to current challenges' (p. 1054). The research-based placement implemented at QUT was so successful the authors stated that they will be expanding the model in the following semester to almost 30 students. Once again however, the experiences of the students undertaking these placements themselves are missing. In one rare example of the student voice, a Master of social work student, Semmens (2020), describes in a short opinion piece how his learning was impacted by the sudden change to online study. Thus, while the perspectives of social work field education supervisors and academics have been well captured in current research, fewer studies have explored the placement experience from the student perspective.

Given the importance of research to the social work profession, engaging students in research is necessary in upholding social work values and evidence-based practice (Hewson et al., 2010). Research-based placements present an opportunity for students to develop their research knowledge and skills, integrate theory and methodologies into practice, combat stereotypes and negative attitudes, and engage in the social work

community through research (Cameron & Este, 2008). They also are well-suited to remote delivery, which has obvious benefits in the current climate (i.e. pandemic). With the long-term impact of COVID-19 likely to involve ongoing disruption to student placements (Zegwaard et al., 2020) and reduced availability of agency-based direct practice placement opportunities, consideration of alternative placement options is needed. We argue that research-based placements represent one such option. While there have been reservations that research-based placements may not support the development of required social work skills and knowledge (in comparison to agency-based placements), we argue that research placements should represent an equally high-quality educational placement experience, with unique benefits to student learning and socialisation into the profession.

In summary, given the rapid shifts in the execution of placements having taken place in response to COVID-19, something described in the literature as ‘panic-gogy’ (Baker, 2020; Dean & Campbell, 2020), it is timely now to reflect on the successfulness of these changes. It is now more important than ever that we reflect on the experience and implementation of research placements. Thus, the current co-operative inquiry, initiated by four social work students on research placements, seeks to explore the student experience of remote research-based placement during the current pandemic, including a critical analysis of the benefits and challenges of the remote placement format, and in doing so, seeks to address the lack of student perspectives captured in the literature.

Method

This exploratory study adopted a co-operative inquiry methodology. Co-operative inquiry was selected because it is a participatory, democratic, and inclusive approach to research that promotes critical self-reflection and respects all voices—and in particular, hearing voices that might otherwise be overlooked (Duncombe et al., 2020; Godden, 2016). As such, we felt co-operative inquiry was a good fit for the current research, which aimed to privilege the voices of students, in contrast to current literature which often focuses on the voices of academics. The inquiry team made a conscious decision that this project would align with the AASW (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020b) Code of Ethics values of respect for persons and professional integrity.

Participants

This co-operative inquiry involved four university students studying social work, one research officer and four researchers (three of whom were social workers) from across three regional universities in Eastern Australia. All co-inquirers were equal members of the team, influencing all aspects of the research process, including determining conclusions. However, priority was given to the student voice (Godden, 2016). All students have prior work experience and are working in the human services sector.

The student researchers, supported by the academics in the research team, were undertaking a social work research-based placement during COVID-19 and engaging in a range of research activities in addition to engaging in this co-operative inquiry. Tasks that students undertook in association with their research placements included

negotiating with a reference committee, literature reviews, preparing ethics proposals, data collection through focus groups, transcription of interviews, coding and analysing qualitative data in NVivo, and reporting findings. These research-based placements were also examples of remote learning, as each student worked entirely online and individually from home due to the requirement to isolate during the pandemic. Two of the students were supervised by an internal social work fieldwork supervisor and two students were supported by external social work fieldwork supervisors. All of the research supervisors are academics and experienced social work practitioners and researchers in a range of methodologies, including co-operative inquiry.

This co-operative inquiry was directed by the students; with the primary role of the research supervisors and research officer to support the students. With this in mind, the use of the word 'we' in this article when reporting the findings refers to the students as a collective of four. This co-operative inquiry was optional and separate to the student's research placements. There was no obligation or requirement for students to participate in the co-operative inquiry in addition to their research placement.

The students and supervisors met for one hour a week, after which the students then met by themselves for a further hour without the supervisors. This mitigated power imbalances allowing the students to work on the project without influence from the academic team. All members of the co-operative inquiry were equal co-authors, co-researchers, and co-inquirers (Reason & Heron, 1995). Given the participatory nature of this inquiry, and that the project was student-led and there was no dependency relationship, this research was established as a low-risk project. Student engagement in the co-operative inquiry was entirely voluntary. Participation in the co-operative inquiry occurred in addition to the student's other research placement activities, and this project was not a requirement for passing placement. Whether students were involved in the co-operative inquiry or not had no impact on the completion of their research placements or grades. All students agreed on this co-operative inquiry topic and could choose to leave at any time. The research question for this inquiry was chosen by the students and all of the findings from this research represent their reflections of their experience of undertaking a research placement remotely during COVID-19.

Ethical approval was not sought, since this research was deemed low-risk given no third-party or sensitive data was collected, and in accordance with the methodology, power was equally shared amongst all researchers given each researcher was also a co-subject. However, the academic members of the team acknowledge the possibility for power differences to exist between the students and supervisors. In line with ethical principles, ethical questions of inclusive practices were repeatedly revisited throughout the data collection and analysis process, as described in the methodology section below. Participation in the research as a co-inquirer/co-subject was entirely voluntary, and members were free to withdraw at any time. The co-operative inquiry was conducted in addition to the student's research placements, and successful completion of their placement was not in any way connected to their involvement in the co-operative inquiry.

Methodology

This research adopted the co-operative inquiry methodology, pioneered by Heron and Reason (Reason, 1994; Reason & Heron, 1995). Co-operative inquiry is a participatory method which supports critical self-reflections and in-depth conversations about a focus area (Short & Healy, 2017) and involves each member participating in all decisions and phases of the research (Alston & Bowles, 2018). Co-operative inquiry cycles through four phases.

Phase one

During phase one (first two weeks of the inquiry), the group members became researchers, defined the focus of the investigation and developed the research question in-depth, and decided when and how we will collect the data (Short & Healy, 2017). Our inquiry group met two hours every Wednesday via Zoom[®], with one student volunteering to chair each meeting and one student taking minutes (roles rotated weekly). We established two Google Docs[®]: one to keep minutes from the meetings and one to write the journal article. The order of authorship was agreed on by all members at the beginning of the inquiry, prioritising students in order of contribution to the writing of the article as we led the research.

Phase two

In phase two, the researchers became the subjects of the project (Reason & Heron, n.d.; Short & Healy, 2017). To do this, the group began discussing the topic, reviewing literature, and reflecting on their personal experiences relating to the research question. In this phase, all members contributed our personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings regarding the impact of COVID-19 on our placements. As each student shared our experiences, we began finding common themes and discovered that we shared many similar thoughts and feelings about our placements during this time and how our remote placements impacted on ourselves.

Phase three

Phase three required the subjects to engross themselves in the defined question and themes, to share openly with each other, and to define what would be explored and recorded. Over the next 2 months, all members became immersed in the topic, engaged in more in-depth discussions, took action, and collected resources (Reason & Heron, nd). In this third phase, the group further solidified the themes that were to be investigated and discussed relevant literature and resources (Short & Healy, 2017). It was during this phase that the University Centre for Rural Health (UCRH) funded Charles Sturt University to provide the research team with a research officer, Nicola Ivory, whose primary responsibility was to assist the learning process and support the writing of the final draft of the journal article. This paper was written collaboratively; the students led the content and the academic members of the team provided editorial assistance. This is reflected in the authorship order.

Phase four

In the fourth and final phase carried out over the next month, we agreed on the writing process for the paper, reflected on our progress, presented the research to students and academics, and started drafting this article, as per the co-operative inquiry methodology (Reason & Heron, n.d.). The research supervisors facilitated and guided the students in the reflective and writing processes. Each of us students volunteered to lead different sections of the article and we wrote and edited collaboratively. In this final phase, to promote the trustworthiness and qualitative reliability of the themes presented, we also began re-examining our data, cross checking our writing with it, so as to ensure this article accurately reflected our experiences. We continued to discuss and reflect on our process until we defined the themes detailed below.

Learnings (themes)

Our remote research-based placements contained many of the challenges that our peers also faced during this pandemic (such as outlined by Morley & Clarke, 2020), including a need for placements that met social distancing restrictions while still upholding social work values of respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020b). Undertaking a research placement in response to these challenges was novel and we all commenced our placements tentatively, as reflected by Laura ‘This is such a new experience for everyone—it’s so important’ and Kelly ‘We weren’t sure if this was more or less positive than a regular placement and if our experiences had been positive because of our adaptability or because of the placements themselves’. In reflecting on our research placement experiences in the current co-operative inquiry, we collaboratively identified four key themes which described our experience of undertaking a remote research-based placement. Each of these themes are discussed below.

Theme one: translating social work communication and relationship skills to remote environments

The development of effective work-based communication skills is a core field education learning outcome (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020a). As Kelly said ‘... an important aspect of social work is bridging gaps in knowledge and communication’. We recognise that placement provides opportunities to apply and refine the communication skills addressed in coursework, such as active listening. We reflected on how our research-based placements supported the development of effective social work communication skills. Our findings revealed that remote project-based placements can provide authentic learning opportunities for the development of adaptable and effective communication skills essential to professional relationship building.

Studying through regional universities, working in separate spaces, across distance and with some of us in isolation, meant that communication and relationships emerged as a key challenge. As Emma commented ‘I wished I could pop in and have those incidental conversations ... that then direct your work and reinforce learning’. Similarly, Kelly said ‘I have been very much alone in this placement ... so I am really grateful for this inquiry’.

While each of us participated in regular video-conference meetings with our supervisors, there were barriers to conversational learning. At the beginning of placement, for example, we had a higher need for communication, however, the absence of spontaneous conversation made it more difficult to articulate the kind of support that we required. The loss of opportunities for corridor conversations revealed to Emma her extroverted learning style. Emma acknowledged that for her, meaning making emerges from conversation with others. This was a new insight for Emma about her preferred learning style. In contrast to Emma's experience of undertaking placement solo, Georgie and Laura, when it was possible, met face to face. As Georgie described 'because we are doing this together, we get to chat [online] each morning and discuss ... placement' and as Laura stated 'I definitely don't think my experiences would have been so successful or positive without Georgie ... I would definitely recommend that other Uni's explore pairs for future placements'.

Although access to face-to-face interactions differed, the importance of interaction and communication in learning were significant and shared by all students. This experience resulted in rich insights that could inform our future practice.

Kelly reported that she felt the social work degree encouraged creativity, critical analysis and the ability to learn different ways of communicating. She, along with the other authors, felt that the remoteness of this placement opportunity encouraged them to develop valuable online communication and problem-solving skills.

With the effects of COVID-19 and thus the quick transition to remote learning and online social work practices, we noticed rapport became more difficult to establish. A problem we found with building rapport remotely is that non-verbal cues and body language techniques are harder to both deliver and receive. We found this can make for a rocky start to remote placements, as this can leave an individual feeling, alone, not heard, confused, and unsure. However, Georgie and Laura felt that once the initial stage of rapport was built, it developed into an even stronger bond between them and their supervisor, as there was a sense of being 'in this together'.

Ultimately, we all welcomed the opportunity to work remotely. Firstly, as a new way of working that is likely to be an increasingly common way in which social workers deliver services into the future, as the world continues to adapt to living with COVID-19. Secondly, the skills we developed in videoconferencing, and utilisation of email and shared documents for communication, proved to be important tools for our learning. We also enjoyed participating in online focus groups and transcribing the recordings of these conversations. These were new experiences. For example, Emma reflected on how she was able to translate her learnings within her research-based placement to her workplace, which was similarly being challenged by the rapid pivoting to new technology due to the pandemic.

In sum, we feel that the remoteness of this placement did not jeopardise our development of effective professional communication and relationship building skills. Rather, we argue that skills were developed which position us well for current and future approaches to social work practice that will rely on online delivery. The challenges of a remote placement helped us develop the ability to be adaptable and creative, and the practical skills to use modern practice tools, for example, Zoom®, Google Docs®, and One Drive®.

Theme two: developing professional identity in a remote research-based learning context

In this theme, we discuss the impact of remote learning in a research-based placement on the development of professional identity. We were initially concerned that the isolation imposed by COVID and undertaking a placement remotely, might impact on the development of our professional identities.

Indeed, media reports suggest that students' satisfaction with their education is lower in an online learning environment (Rowbotham, 2020). Additionally, as a human services profession, concerns have been raised about the ability of social work students to learn skills in isolation without face-to-face opportunities and to develop their professional identity in research settings (Short et al., *in press*; Social Work Taskforce, 2009; Zuchowski, 2015). However, we found we were able to overcome the isolation of remote placements through our connections with each other, as a team of four students in this co-operative inquiry.

Secondly, we recognised the need to develop a broader sense of professional identity by participating in these research-based placements. Prior to commencing this placement, we had conceptualised our professional identity in terms of direct practice. We had not imagined ourselves as social work researchers. For example, Laura stated 'I didn't really understand how a research placement would work. I wasn't necessarily reluctant to undertake research, but more uninformed of how my placement would look and how it would impact my ability to form a professional identity'. Georgie said 'The whole idea of placement and working from home was different, I was not reluctant, I was just going to take the first one [placement] I received . . . I enjoyed it more than I initially thought I would'. In contrast, Emma was initially resistant to accepting a research-based placement as direct practice had been the focus of her developing professional identity.

However, our exposure to multiple research activities allowed us to grow our professional identities and see the relevance of research processes in social work to social justice and social change (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020b). Partnering with social workers currently undertaking research enhanced and expanded our conceptualisation of professional identity. We each participated in multiple research activities during our placement, such as shadowing researchers and transcribing recordings for research projects, which were established prior to our placement starting. As Georgie states '[My supervisor] taught me a lot, and allowed me to . . . shadow her work . . . '.

We also compared our experience of co-operative inquiry with our experience of other research methods in our research placements. We witnessed the difference between how power was shared. For example, we saw how the use of power is embedded in knowledge creation processes including whose voices are heard and which voices are missed. Specifically, Emma's experience of working in an action research project provided her with opportunities to observe and participate in complex focus groups that were designed to be inclusive. However, her reflections and comparisons of those research projects with the co-operative inquiry approach revealed that some research methods did not embrace power sharing to the same extent as co-operative inquiry.

Additionally, critical reflection within supervision contributed to the development of Emma's professional identity as a social work researcher, rather than simply a research identity. Emma grappled with tensions fundamental to participatory research,

particularly maintaining the integrity of the research process and scope while being responsive to an over-sighting committee. Rich discussions with social work supervisors assisted her professional identity formation and highlighted that this is an ongoing process—that is, our professional identity matures as we practice in different settings. This research placement left Emma with ‘a keen sense of my social work identity and renewed strength in my social work values and the unique insights the social work lens brings into the diverse settings in which social workers practice’.

Theme three: the challenge of supervision during COVID-19

Supervision is an integral part of the social work profession, promoting social work identity and connections between practice and theory, and is an essential component of field education (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018). COVID-19 is challenging access to supervision in field education, in particular to indirect or informal supervision, with many students receiving supervision remotely. As students, we were initially nervous about how we would be able to participate in supervision, given that communication with supervisors was to be entirely remote, via videoconferencing or phone. As such, we were particularly concerned about our access to informal supervision. This was highlighted by Emma who stated ‘It is both the challenges with supervision in a remote setting and the loss of or reduced access to informal supervision’.

However, despite our initial reservations, we found the experience of supervision a positive experience overall. It has been argued within the social work profession that onsite one-to-one supervision is the most effective in producing quality social work professionals (e.g. Vassos, Harms & Rose, 2019). However, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was often not possible, including for the four students in this cooperative inquiry. In fact, in light of the challenges imposed by the pandemic, the Australian Association of Social Workers (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020c) adapted their expectations for supervision and placements to include support for the use of group supervision and the completion of some or all of placement remotely.

Our experience (Georgie and Laura) of group supervision alongside one-to-one supervision, even at a physical distance, was particularly beneficial, as it gave us an opportunity to develop a learning community. It ensured we had a similar learning trajectory and that we met our learning goals. We felt confident in raising any issues or questions we had about our research projects. Georgie and Laura’s experience is consistent with Vassos et al.’s (2019) report that group supervision can be as effective as one-on-one supervision, provided that effective supervisory relationships are established.

Research shows students are feeling more depressed, anxious, and lonely since COVID-19 (Arit, 2020; Yehudai et al., 2020). Our experience of online placement and isolation during COVID-19 has been mixed. As aforementioned, it became evident that Georgie and Laura, who participated in their placements as a pair, reported markedly lower feelings of isolation and loneliness, when compared to Emma and Kelly who completed their placements independently. All four students reported feeling appropriately supported by their field education supervisors.

However, we also noted several advantages of virtual supervision such as the removal of travel time and flexibility within supervision sessions which enabled Kelly to attend more frequently and increased the richness of her supervision experience during COVID-19. Kelly felt that she had no reason to not attend supervision in these circumstances, as the external limiting factors were not as significant. Laura and Georgie also found they were able to tie their experiences of supervision to the values of respect for persons, where different viewpoints are recognised and considered, as they regularly felt their voices were heard. Similarly, although supervision occurred online, students felt they were effectively supported to reflect on the experience of placement which facilitated enhanced placement learning and integration of theory in practice.

In summary, the challenge of supervision during COVID-19 was initially much harder than that of supervision in person. However, we found that after rapport and trust was established between us students and our supervisors, supervision became a more comfortable and relaxing environment.

Theme four: research guided by the social work value of respect for persons

Initially we students were somewhat daunted by the notion of engaging in research for placement. It seemed a step removed from ideas about the social work practitioners that we planned to become. This is consistent with prior observations that social work students are often reluctant to study research and struggle to see the connection between research and practice (Berger, 2002; Cameron & Este, 2008; Hewson et al., 2010). As indicated above, we engaged in research with our supervisors as well as the research associated with this co-operative inquiry and these parallel experiences provided a basis for comparison. As students we identified that participating in the co-operative inquiry method enabled us to witness the enactment of the value of respect for persons that underpins all areas of social work practice (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020b). The International Federation of Social Work states 'The social work profession's core mandates include promoting social change, social development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people' (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2021).

We compared our experience of research processes including our co-operative inquiry with the social work values as listed in the AASW Code of Ethics. What brought the research alive for us was conducting our own co-operative inquiry. On reflection, we realised that our project and the co-operative inquiry methodology are in alignment with social work values.

We were struck by questions of power. Respectful sharing of power is integral to the co-operative inquiry method and is in harmony with the AASW Code of Ethics, which 'advocates responsible use of power and authority in ways that serve humanity' (AASW, 2020b, p. 10). This sharing of power was highlighted in our conversations. Emma stated 'It's a really safe space because it's embedded. I wonder about hidden power dynamics in other research models'.

As Emma indicated in her quote above, the social work values informed our application of the co-operative inquiry method. Emma contrasted this with the other research project she participated in outside of this co-operative inquiry which involved a research team, a stakeholder advisory group and research participants. In this external project,

despite being engaged in participatory methods, and the researcher's best efforts to the contrary, Emma witnessed the influence of the researchers and the data generated, collected and analysed in the other project. The participants' voices were welcomed and valued, however, in contrast to co-operative inquiry, participants did not determine what was published.

Respect for persons was evidenced in the current study through explicit power sharing; working 'with' people rather than having our experience being investigated by others (Reason & Heron, n.d.). This shift in the research process and power was significant for us as students. We felt respected and valued in the research process. We were able to take the lead on the project. For example, we chaired meetings and guided the discussions. We determined what data was generated, collected, analysed and presented, and the above quotes are evidence of our experience. The co-operative inquiry methodology relies on co-operative relationships where members are both researchers and subjects. Social work is a relationship-based profession which addresses inherent power structures in the social work role by building a respectful and collaborative relationship, in a person-directed approach where the person identifies their needs. The co-operative inquiry research process has permitted us students to have explicit power, and the opportunity to jointly share power with our supervisors. We shared the leadership in this research and were the primary researchers in this project and the lead authors. The development of co-operative relationships allowed us to experience a research-based placement during the COVID-19 pandemic as co-researcher, co-inquirer, and co-subject, as Emma states "There is a different voice that arises out of the co-operative inquiry process because we play that role of both researcher and subject".

Discussion

This student-led co-operative inquiry, by examining the experiences of four social work students, builds on the practice understanding of undertaking a remote research-based placement during a global pandemic. It identified the strengths and challenges associated with research placements in a remote environment. As shown in the four themes above, and consistent with other contemporary research where students have been transitioned to an online research placement due to COVID (e.g. McFadden et al., 2020; Morley & Clarke, 2020), our collective view is that undertaking an online research-based placement was overall a valuable and rewarding experience. We consider that student participation in remote research projects to be a rich ground for placement and the development of professional social work identity.

These findings suggest that remote research-based placements do not compromise the quality of work integrated learning. Rather, students had the opportunity to critically reflect upon, and demonstrate and develop capacity towards meeting the practice standards as required during placement (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013). The research processes in which students participated invited them to demonstrate and examine values and ethics (Practice Standard 1, Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013) aligned with the social work profession. This, in turn, invited critical reflection about professionalism (Practice Standard 2, Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013) and inclusive practices (Practice Standard 3, Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013). Using applied research skills enabled the application of knowledge to practice (Practice Standards 4 and 5, Australian Association of

Social Workers [AASW], 2013) as interpersonal skills were refined for the online environment (Practice Standard 6, Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013). By completing literature reviews, research reports, minutes of meetings and collaborating on the writing of this article, skills were developed in recording and sharing information (Practice Standard 7, Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013). The findings of the current study mirror the experiences of other social work students who have undertaken a research project as part of their studies, who similarly report an increased understanding of the link between research and practice and generally becoming more research-minded (e.g. Berger, 2002; Vincent & Hamilton, 2021). Finally, these placements prepared students to access supervision remotely if needed into the future (Practice Standard 8, Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013).

Being on placement during a pandemic held the potential to be difficult, for example, dealing with isolation. However, the quality of the placement experiences surprised our inquiry team and proved to be a more positive and beneficial experience than expected. For the students, the research placements encouraged the development of professional skills, allowing creativity and resilience to grow during a crisis. This experience of placement highlighted the strengths of social workers during a crisis, including problem solving, adaptability and being agents of change. Collaborating on the production of this paper offered a unique understanding of research-based placements, from the perspective of four students from three regional universities. It reveals how students experiencing isolation can develop skills that they can carry forward into their careers. In contrast to propositions that remote study is isolating, this study found students can connect and engage through online processes.

Through our placements, with regards to 'being', we witnessed the nuanced ways in which social work values are embodied by social work researchers and are embedded in research and the challenges in doing this (Pawar & Anscombe, 2015). We developed our 'thinking' dimension by applying social work theories (Pawar & Anscombe, 2015). In relation to 'doing', we developed communication skills that bridged geographical distance using technologies, facilitating focus groups; transcribing, coding and analysing data; delivering and negotiating results with a research steering committee, report writing, project management and self-advocacy and workplace negotiation skills (Pawar & Anscombe, 2015). As students we also found we were able to develop our professional identity in contrast to concerns expressed in literature (e.g. Short et al., *in press*; Zuchowski, 2015).

These placements highlighted the value of research in social work and the importance of developing future social work researchers. Our insights from contrasting generalist research processes against social work research processes has supported the emergence of our own social work research identity. It highlighted for us the importance of generating social work knowledge. This research confirmed that remote research-based placements can address practice standards and prepare students for a range of roles in social work. Importantly, this research experience has helped students develop a stronger understanding of the link between the evidence-base which research creates, and social work practice and social justice. The findings of this study, highlighting the student voice that is often unheard, have implications for expanding placement opportunities through research placements including in online contexts.

Nevertheless, many questions remain about the radical impact that COVID-19 is having upon social work students in regional and urban regions. Such questions include, what is the long-term impact of studying in isolation on preparing students for the workplace? And what are the skills that students acquire from novel methods of social work practice which embrace new technologies, post-COVID?

Limitations

The current research has a number of limitations. This project was small and purposeful, which means the findings are not necessarily transferable to other student situations (Alston & Bowles, 2018). Another limitation is that we are a like-minded group, as the four social work students all completed placement via remote online learning and subsequently the findings cannot be generalised. At times us students found it easy to distract each other rather than focusing on the project. When this happened, we would regroup, and with the support of our supervisors, review the research question, what we had written and resume the inquiry conversation. Finally, this study did not include an external reviewer to triangulate the themes with the literature, which may have strengthened the reliability of the findings.

Recommendations

We recommend future larger studies about the student experience of undertaking a remote research-based placement during the global pandemic and that the findings from those studies be triangulated or compared with the themes identified in the current inquiry. For people undertaking similar projects, we recommend that student research groups regularly return to the focus area/question; meet on a systematic basis; and review minutes. We recommend, in addition to support provided by supervisors, that future students undertaking research placements be partnered with another student whilst on placement. We appreciate this may not always be practical and may not work for every student given different personalities and learning styles. However, the students who were paired-up for placement reported a less isolating experience than those students who completed placement alone.

Conclusion

This co-operative inquiry examined the experience of four social work students undertaking online and remote research-based placements during COVID-19. The inquiry showed undertaking a remote research-based placement was a positive and transformative professional learning experience. This inquiry revealed that a flexibly delivered research placement can give students opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of social work values, a greater appreciation of how research can inform social work practice and therefore, how social work research supports social justice. Further, the remote research placements allowed the formulation of a professional identity and the development of skills that respond to the dynamic nature of social work in contemporary contexts.

In conclusion, our experience indicates that it is possible for students completing remote research-based placements to successfully meet the learning outcomes required by the AASW practice standards (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2013). While we hope that a crisis such as the novel coronavirus is never seen again, the learnings from this research challenges the assumption that all placements need to be clinical and in person to meet learning outcomes. Thus, this research supports the expansion of the scope of placements in social work. Our insights into the successful implementation of four remote research-based placements may help inform the way the profession and universities conceptualise social work placements into the future.

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