

Teaching Research in Social Work Through Academic Practitioner Partnerships: Knowledge, Competency and Confidence

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ABSTRACT

Practice research in health and mental health social work contributes to an increasing demand for accountability and evidence-informed practice in health settings. Social work students who aspire to work in the health setting are encouraged to develop, not only theoretical knowledge, but competency and confidence to graduate as research-focused practitioners. In addition, educators need to support those students who have career aspirations as research leaders in social work. This is a challenge for educators as integrating the varied skills required to implement research on graduation, requires opportunities within the classroom and field-work placement to support students in their learning. In this article the process of engaging students in an existing research study, implemented as part of the academic practitioner collaboration between a university department of social work and fifteen health social work departments, will be described. Students from the qualifying Master of Social Work degree were engaged at different levels of research participation in fieldwork and classroom contexts.

Keywords: *Social work practice research education; health social work; field placement; evidence informed practice; fieldwork education*

INTRODUCTION

Research partnerships between academic institutions and health social work practitioners support the development of an evidence-informed base for social work practice in health and mental health settings. The importance of this cannot be understated given the rising demand for accountability within the profession (Hewson, Walsh, & Bradshaw, 2010). Academic practitioner partnerships can, in addition, provide opportunities for students to engage in and develop research knowledge, competency and confidence. Opportunities for research participation can co-exist alongside field placements which are structured to include research as either a required component of the placement or as the central aspect of the student's field work experience (Hewson et al, 2010).

We describe the participation and process evaluation of forty three students on fieldwork placements, in fifteen social work departments in health and mental health services across Victoria, Australia (see Appendix A) as part of a qualifying Master of Social Work degree. The students participated in a collaborative research study, "Evidencing Social Work Practice in Health and Mental Health," which was developed and implemented within an academic practitioner research partnership between the Department of Social Work, University of Melbourne, and health and mental health social work departments across the state of Victoria in Australia. The university academic and social work managers engaged with the students and field work coordinators to support the students' research training.

Once the fieldwork placement was completed, students were able to continue their research learning from the project. The data analysis, research evaluation and discussion components of the research study were integrated into tutorials as part of the practice research subject taught in the following semester.

The "Evidencing social work practice in Health and Mental Health" research study

Aims

The aims of the Evidencing Health and Mental Health Social Work Practice study are to:

1. Describe patient-specific clinical interventions
2. Define non-specific, patient-attributable activities and non-clinical interventions
3. Clarify theoretical approaches and models informing intervention
4. Define the mode of patient interventions undertaken by social work practitioners.

The study arose because social work managers in Victoria were keen to gain an understanding of the current practices of practitioners in their departments by exploring the discipline-specific competencies of social work in a hospital setting. The results provide an evidence-informed base to support both professional and student training programs as well as a classification of professional activities requested by social workers in health and mental health settings.

With increasing cost-cutting initiatives (Auerbach, Roch, Goldstein, Kaminsky, & Heft-Lapente, 2000; Reese & Raymer, 2004), and within a medical model that does not systematically privilege psychosocial concerns (Schroepfer, 2011), social workers have much to gain from examining the positive contribution they make to hospital services.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology is a prospective audit of routine hospital and community mental health based social work practice over a 24-hour period. The data were collected via a spreadsheet divided into 5-minute intervals, populated with data codes from a coding sheet and subsequently entered into a database for analysis. Social workers (N=532) were asked to audit their activities over a 24-hour period. The original audit tool was developed in a practitioner academic research collaboration between the University of Melbourne (UOM) (Lynette Joubert) and St Vincent's Hospital's Department of Social Work (SVHM SW) (Sonia Posenelli). In summary, the methodology is: 1) multicenter, strengthening external validity; 2) a prospective, one-day 'snapshot' of social work activity; 3) utilizing an evidence informed audit tool, which 4) delivers a comprehensive and high-quality data set with over 10,000 items of social work activity in health and mental health. The study received ethical approval from the University of Melbourne as a quality improvement study and was, in turn, accepted as a quality improvement strategy by each of the participating health services. One health service requested a minimal risk ethics application which was submitted and approved. The ethics process was completed prior to the students beginning their placement.

The practitioner academic research collaboration utilizing this methodology has progressed in phases. A previous study involved the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre (PMCC) and an Australian Trans-Tasman Collaboration with the University of Auckland. The current phase is a Victorian practice research initiative led by the University of Melbourne and joined by participants from the Victorian Health Social Work Director's Group, and the fifteen Health and Mental Health Social Work Departments which participated in the audit. The research team met regularly to adapt the audit tool for use, and to ensure fidelity of data collection across all sites. Similarly, an educational package and manual was developed and edited to ensure consistency of application. One of the final year qualifying masters social work placement students assisted with the finalization of the manual which became the handbook utilized by each site during data collection. The dataset has become a source of ongoing multiple analyses which promote the continuing collaboration between academic and practitioner research partners.

Figure 1. Conceptual Map of the “Evidencing Health and Mental Health

Value of research placements

While research studies are part of social work curricula internationally, opportunities for students to participate in the research process are challenging and, in general, social work students have limited opportunities to participate as researchers outside the classroom setting (Maidment, Chilvers, Crichton-Hill, & Meadows-Taurua, 2011). This is despite professional bodies such as the *Australian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics* (AASW, 2010) and the *National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics* in the United States stressing the need for research competence (Rubin, Valutis, & Robinson, 2010). There has been a shift towards reflection within practice settings as compared to the usual pedagogical approach of focusing solely on research knowledge and practice skills in the classroom (Satka, Kaariainen, & Yliruka, 2016) but actual practice as a researcher participating in an active research project remains problematic for students in social work.

Despite these difficulties, positive outcomes have been reported from a variety of types of social work placements or practice experiences aimed at increasing engagement with research. These range from research placements in community settings (Maidment et al., 2011); faculty-mentored research programs (Whipple, Hughes, & Bowden, 2015); research placements at a research centre attached to the social work faculty (Hewson et al., 2010); and practical research modules within a social work course (Satka et al., 2016). Community agencies have been encouraged to offer a mix of direct practice and research oriented work, with the aim of increasing understanding of the link between the two (Maidment et al., 2011). A number of models have been developed to understand the learning process of students on research placements. For example, Maidment and colleagues (2011) suggest that the “communities of practice” model which proposes that practical learning occurs through the informal exchange occurring between peers in the workplace, can be utilized when developing research education. In contrast, Satka and colleagues (2016) utilised the “triological learning theory” to understand the combination of learning in a university setting and learning within the workplace. They suggest that social work students conducting research in a practical setting become research minded as a result of the

interaction between knowledge acquisition and participation, which supports the creation of knowledge and facilitates learning.

Student experience in research placements

Social work students have been reported to have an aversion to research due to fear and low self-perceived competency (Epstein, 1987). Research placements can, however, offer an opportunity for students' research skills to develop in a practice setting leading to increased confidence (Hewson et al., 2010). A recent study evaluated how involving junior and senior Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students in a faculty-mentored research program impacted on students' sense of competency across a number of different research skills, and was found to be highly successful (Whipple et al., 2015). Using a pre- and post-test design it was found that students' ratings of their competency over 15 research areas improved, with three of these being statistically significant. Interestingly, anxiety levels of the students did not change. Recurring feedback from the students was that the practical research experience "made research real and less complicated" (p. 399).

The reasons for students choosing a research placement were explored by Hewson and colleagues (2010). They found that many students wanted to strengthen their research skills and develop a deeper understanding of research as well as having a competitive advantage when applying for postgraduate study or employment once they had graduated. Students have reported some challenges with their field placement experience including funding cuts impacting on their projects, prolonged time lines and difficulty adapting the learning agreement given the nature of their placement (Hewson et al., 2010). Another challenge for students is that being on non-traditional social work placements may have an impact on how they establish their professional identity (Scholar, McLaughlin, McCaughan, & Coleman, 2014).

More recently practice research experience in field placements has shifted to incorporate service users' perspectives in service delivery and evaluation. Austin and Isokuortti (2016) proposed a framework to incorporate service user involvement in practice research, which can be implemented in social work research education. They describe five phases including: engagement, recognition, and problem formulation; assessment and service planning, participation and study plan; service implementation, collaboration, and shared data collection; service outcome assessment and shared data analysing; and service transition/ termination, self-advocacy and reporting (p. 17). These phases have built upon traditional research methods and offer students an opportunity to understand the role of service user involvement in practice research.

Student Engagement in the "Evidencing Social Work Practice in Health and Mental Health Study"

The study offered students practical and theoretical research experience at three different levels:

1. Three students who had requested a predominantly practice research placement took a leadership role in the study, supervised by the health social work managers and the university academic.
2. Forty-three students on placement in one of the fifteen health social work departments which participated in the study, participated as part of the research component of their fieldwork placement and were supervised by their fieldwork supervisor in the agency and the health social work manager.
3. Ninety-eight students who were enrolled in the *Researching Social Work Practice* 1 subject participated in data entry, data analysis, and discussion of the results.

Group 1: Students on a Health Social Work Practice Research Placement

The study actively engaged three students on their professional placement at North Western Mental Health (NWMH) (two students) and the Peter McCallum Cancer Centre (PMCC) as lead student researchers on the study. These students were provided with meaningful, practical and diverse research experience, project management and leadership skill development opportunities within the Victorian health and mental health sector.

Two of the students completing their placement at NWMH and PMCC were tasked with coordinating and facilitating the training and support for the completion of the project across all the sites associated with these health services. This included the facilitation of a total of fifteen training sessions with staff and students across sites as well the development of the training materials (which included a PowerPoint presentation), providing the research materials to all staff and students, and providing assistance and support (via email and telephone) on the day of the audit. Prior to delivering the training at each site, students engaged with senior health social work staff from each of the sites to coordinate a suitable training date. Students were provided with opportunities to develop their interpersonal communication skills (engagement and rapport-building skills, cross-cultural communication skills and professional communication skills) as well as organizational and project management skills. They reported early on in their placement that this experience assisted in the development of a growing confidence and capacity to effectively manage complex projects.

Database Development

The two students at NWMH expressed an interest in building and managing the customized database to input the data using the online application REDCap (Harris, 2009). They were provided with introductory REDCap training from University of Melbourne staff to build the database shell. They then utilized university academic, supervisor, peer and self-learning to further customize the database to meet the specific needs of the research project. As REDCap was an application that neither student had utilized previously, developing the database required significant collaborative and problem-solving skills within a professional research setting. Following the development of the REDCap database, a user-friendly manual for both student and staff use was developed by the students. These developments were implemented both independently and in close contact with the social work managers and the university academic.

Active student engagement throughout the 'Evidencing Social Work Research in Health and Mental Health Study' from the early stages of the project to the data entry stage, provided the research placement students with experience and insight into professional research activity as well as learning and teaching skills beyond the learning outcomes prescribed in the social work curriculum.

Group 2: Students on Health Social Work Fieldwork Placements

All forty-three social work students on placement at one of the research sites became the "Audit Champions." The Audit Champions worked for the week before the audit date identifying who would be on shift that day, ensuring there were enough paper copies of the audit tool for each staff member, handing out the forms on the day, reminding staff on how to fill in the form, arranging where staff were to leave the completed forms and then collecting the forms.

The Audit Champions also provided encouragement to staff throughout the weeks leading up to the Audit Day and on the day itself. For busy clinicians, having to fill out a lengthy audit tool for every 5-minute block of their day required commitment, interest in, and engagement with, the study. The students helped provide incentives needed to obtain staff cooperation in a way that was engaging and encouraged participation. The rate of participation in the study was 94%. For one service involved in the audit, there were over twenty sites from which the data were collected. The only way this could be managed logistically was to enroll the support of the eight social work students on placement at that service. The students were supported and coordinated by the research placement students who, in turn, were supervised by the student coordinators and academic at each health service. The research team, consisting of research students and each organization's fieldwork coordinator, supported students on fieldwork placements with an enhanced induction into how to fill out the audit form. They provided advice on how to address the common issues that staff might experience in completing the form. In this way a supported network of student researchers facilitated the data collection across the fifteen health services (532 social workers).

Students completing fieldwork placements at one of the participating health services obtained experience of being engaged in the implementation of a research process, from understanding the study proposal, formulation of the audit tool and ethics process and finally, being engaged in the practical challenges and excitement of implementing the study protocol.

Group 3: Students Enrolled in the Researching Social Work Practice 1 Subject

A tutorial class utilised the "Evidencing Health and Mental Health Social Work Practice" study as a practice research exemplar. The aim of the tutorial was to provide students with the opportunity to work with a meaningful dataset and to receive peer education and support in doing this. Students in the class worked in pairs and were taught by the three research students who had developed the database on placement, on how to understand the construction of the database and the method of entering the data. The use of peer learning not only provided the research students with relevant learning and teaching skills, but also assisted in creating a safe space for their student peers (many of whom had not participated

in research-related activities previously) to develop data entry experience. Facilitating the training sessions required the research students to actively reflect and discuss with each other on how they could best communicate challenging concepts and instructions to their diverse student peers within a supported academic environment

Process evaluation

Process evaluation of student learning as part of an academic practitioner partnership suggests that theoretical teaching and placement supervision offered to students who engaged at any of the three levels enhanced both classroom and fieldwork education in practice research.

The pedagogical benefit can be summarised as follows in a three stage model of *Academic Practitioner Student Training in Research*.

Group 1: Students on a Social Work Practice Research Placement

- Knowledge of the research pathway from proposal to study outcomes;
- Competence in research leadership, including implementation, coordination, writing and teaching;
- Confidence to be a social work practice researcher on graduation.

Group 2: Students on Social Work Fieldwork Placement

- Knowledge and participatory learning about the research pathway;
- Competence in coordinating data collection and understanding the challenges of rigour, interpersonal communication, and scholarship in practice research;
- Confidence to engage in practice research on graduation.

Group 3: Students Enrolled in a Social Work Research Subject

- Knowledge of the research pathway through participatory engagement;
- Competence in working with databases, data entry and analysis;
- Confidence and reduced fear in graduating as a research focused practitioner in social work.

Perhaps the best understanding of the value of the Academic Practitioner Student Training in Research Model is found in the words of one of the students (from Group 1):

Pivotal to my current social work career, was my experience being involved as a student in practice research with a Professor of Social Work and other key Senior Social Work Managers around Victoria.

As a result of my experience on placement I gained firsthand experience in practice research. This was something that I believe gave me a competitive edge on my resume, and ultimately assisted me to gain employment. I have gone on to further engage in practice based research in my current employment as a health social worker, and to develop and coordinate practice research projects.

The experience of being on a predominantly research fieldwork placement involved me as a student in practice research with a “live” data set; in collaborating with various stakeholders; being involved in the development of the online data capture tool; in coordinating the data entry; and being involved in teaching students how to use the database to enter the audit data.

I am appreciative of the research opportunities that were provided to me as they increased my confidence and skill, contributed to my ongoing interest and value in practice based research and sparked my interest in potentially completing a PHD in Social Work. (Erin, 2016)

CONCLUSION

The article describes an integrated practice research study that offered a unique opportunity for students to engage in fieldwork learning as part of a joint project with university partner practitioners. There are core elements of the experience that can be utilized as part of smaller projects offering students a research experience, which we have named *staged process engagement and learning in practice research*. A key element of this approach is for students to be engaged in the study-implementation process from proposal to analysis, and then to be able to contribute to discussion of outcomes. We hoped to encourage students to regard research as an integral part of their future practice. To achieve this, we needed more than classroom lectures to equip them to gain the appropriate knowledge, competence and confidence to engage in practice research on graduation. Not all students envision themselves as researchers in their future careers, but all students can benefit from participating in placement and classroom learning. A research experience can be offered that promotes their increased interest and confidence in research participation which they will be able to use in their practice.

Most importantly, students were offered the opportunity to assist with a range of research tasks required in a research project. The study was highly valued by each social work department which participated. They in turn, valued the students’ participation as well as reinforcing the students’ understanding of the significance of social work practitioner research to the health setting.

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Appendix A: Collaborating Institutions

| INVESTIGATOR | ROLE | INSTITUTION |
|---------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Bridget Wall | Manager, Social Work | Alfred Health |
| Sharon Sutherland | Manager, Social Work | Alfred Psychiatry |
| Debra Leahy | Manager, Social Work, Interpreting, Aboriginal Health and Pastoral Care | Austin Health |
| Catherine Ludbrook | Clinical Manager, Social Work | Ballarat Health Services |
| Robyn Van Ingen | Manager of Social Work and Aboriginal Health | Barwon Health |
| Tory Whitman | Manager, Social Work/Psychology | Cabrini |
| Glenda Kerridge | Manager, Sub-acute Social Work | Eastern Health |
| Marg Petrie | Social Work Manager | Epworth Health |
| Julia Blackshaw | Manager, Social Work & Cultural Diversity | Melbourne Health |
| Carol Quayle | Clinical Manager, Social Work | Monash Health |
| Lisa Hebel | Social Work Clinical Educator | North Western Mental Health |
| Alison Hocking | Head of Social Work | Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre |
| Penelope Vye | Manager, Social Work | Royal Women's Hospital |
| Lisa Braddy | Manager, Social Work | St Vincent's, Melbourne |
| Anita Morris | Manager, Social Work | Western Health |
| Nicole Hill | Lecturer, Social Work | University of Melbourne |