Social Work Students During Covid-19: How a Reflective Communication Subject Fostered Wellbeing and Mental Health

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Abstract

Student wellbeing and mental health is recognised as a significant issue, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Caring for your own wellbeing is key to effective social work practice and is the focus of *Reflective Communication*, a La Trobe University Social Work undergraduate subject based on a First Nations Family Wellbeing Program. This study explored the impact of this subject on student wellbeing during the pandemic. This mixed-methods study utilised an online questionnaire that measured students' experiences of wellbeing before and after participation in the subject. Forty-three students completed online questionnaires, with 13 completing at both pre- and post-participation in the subject. Five focus groups comprising 14 students were conducted, as well as interviews with three subject tutors. Survey results indicated a stable and moderate level of mental distress amongst students, but a small sample size prevents conclusions from being drawn. The qualitative analysis indicated that students valued the subject for its promotion of social connection during the pandemic, but did find online classes challenging, with staff and students preferring in-person learning. Results support the subject's value, and by implication, the relationally based Family Wellbeing Program, in enabling students to develop and/or maintain wellbeing during a challenging and unpredictable time.

Keywords: *Social work education; Wellbeing; Covid-19; Family Wellbeing Program*

Introduction

Given social workers require self-awareness and reflective capacity to manage the inevitable pressures of their work, these skills must be taught as part of Social Work courses. *Reflective Communication* is a first-year social work subject primarily based on a First Nations Family Wellbeing Program (FWB) that builds skills in self-awareness, empowerment, and reflection. Previous research has demonstrated the subject's effectiveness in promoting self-awareness and student wellbeing (Whiteside et al., 2017). However, stresses associated with the Covid-19 experience have significantly impacted student wellbeing and mental health (MH) and it was unclear if Reflective Communication remained helpful (Blake et al., 2021; Wynter et al., 2021).

This study explored how the Reflective Communication subject was influenced by Covid-19 and how, in turn, the subject was able to influence students' experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and their overall wellbeing. Unlike previous years, the subject was taught online via Zoom due to Covid-19 restrictions. Questions generated by educators included whether students were still able to experience what Whiteside et al. (2017) identified as the benefits of participation in the subject, or whether they were experienced in some qualitatively different way. Overall, this study found there was still an overwhelmingly positive response to the subject, with interview conversations transcending Covid-19 and emphasising its benefits to everyday experiences. Because of the breadth of responses, this article reports only on those responses that explicitly addressed issues to do with Covid-19, with other subject related content being reported in a separate article.

Literature review

Concerns were already being expressed about the MH and wellbeing of university students before the Covid-19 pandemic. Headspace and the National Union of Students found that 65% of the 2636 respondents aged between 17 and 25 described themselves as having high or very high psychological distress, with 53% of students over 25 reporting the same levels (Rickwood et al., 2016). Similarly, Stallman (2010), who surveyed 6479 students from two Australian universities, found a higher prevalence of MH problems than in the general population. These problems could be predicted by students being between 18 and 34, female, full-time, having financial issues but not studying in first year. Other researchers, such as Douglass and Islam (2009), found that, for first¬-year students, MH problems indicated academic difficulty for female students but not males. Browne (2017) links poor MH with academic pressure and performance expectations, financial pressures and low socio-economic status (SES), coming from rural and regional areas and/or being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. However, Burns and Crisp (2020) suggested the increased numbers of students seeking counselling may indicate increased willingness to seek help as opposed to increased incidence.

The Covid-19 pandemic has added complexity to the student experience locally and globally. For example, Muyor-Rodríguez et al. (2021) found that fear of Covid-19 was associated with pre-existing anxiety and being female in Spanish students, even when social support was high. In China, Wang et al. (2020), who surveyed the general public in China and had 1210 responses, reported that being female and a student was associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression as a result of Covid-19.

Australian universities also report students' increased levels of psychological distress (depression, anxiety and stress) during the pandemic compared with similar-aged peers (Dodd et al., 2021; Wynter et al., 2021). In social work education, Tosone et al. (2021) found students identified with both Covid-19 related stress; pre-existing anxieties intensified by returning home or feeling unsafe and/or challenged by isolation; but also the value of self-care, relationships and awareness of how emotional responses impact on relationships with others.

Those writing more specifically about social work education argue that students need to develop resilience given the complexity and emotional demands of the profession (Grant & Kinman, 2012; Howells & Bald, 2020). International evidence indicates a significant level of depression in social work students, with many reluctant to seek help because of stigma, distrust and concerns about confidentiality and cultural competence (Ting, 2011). Social work students need to learn how to manage their own MH as they will need to manage the emotional demands of the job and their wellbeing (Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019). Grant and Kinman (2012) recommend inclusion in social work training of reflective ability, emotional and social competence, and the development of empathy to foster resilience, given "more resilient employees tend to manage work-related stress more effectively and experience greater well-being" (Grant & Kinman, 2014, p. 19). Similarly, a systematic scoping study identifies that social work education needs to foster resilience through "increasing students' self-knowledge and awareness (Hitchcock et al., 2021, p. 2369) as a way of combating poor mental health. The self-knowledge and awareness that comes from critically reflective practice is also helpful with self-care because it encourages social work students to pay attention to themselves and the context they found themselves in, which benefit themselves as well as those they work with (Gardner, 2014).

Fundamental to the Aboriginal-developed FWB program is the expectation of stimulating "transformative learning based on Aboriginal empowerment principles" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019) through deep, shared, peer group listening. Explicit here are First Nations' principles of a whole-of-life health relational worldview, where people's selfhood and identity are more collective than individual, connection to Country is central to cultural identity and spirituality and are linked to understanding of personal and cultural history and context (Dudgeon et al., 2022). Relationships are central and interconnectedness is key to the quality of life because quality relationships are synonymous with quality health (Mila, 2017). These ways of knowing underpin the subject with an emphasis on deep sharing of experience in small groups to build connection and understanding of self and others. The expectation is that, in these classes, as in other contexts, the FWB program will enable students to feel connected, developing awareness of their own values and beliefs and how these are similar to (and different from) others and to become more critically reflective – able to see how their own history and context and that of the broader culture influences their experience. The FWB program encourages participants to reflect on different aspects of their life including, but not limited to, the human qualities they value; their mental, physical, spiritual and emotional health; relationships; how they manage conflict and promote self-care. These ideas are somewhat familiar to some students but feel very new to most.

The FWB program marries well with the Reflective Communications subject overall premise, that working to help other people as social workers involves first understanding ourselves and building self-awareness and personal skills to deal with our own life situations. Central to this is critical reflection and effective communication, which are both key concepts and skills developed in this subject.

Significant research about the FWB Program is used in the Reflective Communication subject, reinforcing its effectiveness in facilitating wellbeing. Whiteside et al. (2017) evaluated the wellbeing of 64 first-year students before and after they undertook this subject and found it contributed to life satisfaction, building personal wellbeing and social competence. This has been reinforced in other studies in Timor-Leste with health managers and leaders (Tsey et al., 2018), with second-year university students in China (Yan et al., 2019), and with young Aboriginal men in Australia (Whiteside et al., 2016). The question for this study was whether this effectiveness would continue in a time of major crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The study aimed to: (1) to assess the impact of FWB program/subject on student wellbeing; (2) to consider students' views and experiences of the FWB program/subject during Covid-19 times; 3) to consider tutors' views on the impact of the FWB program/subject and Covid-19 on students. Given the unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated social distancing rules, we chose not to make any hypotheses, but rather maintain an open exploratory stance.

Materials and methods

This exploratory mixed-methods study investigated the impact of the Reflective Communication subject on students who participated during the Covid-19 pandemic (July–October 2020). The study comprised three research activities: 1) a pre/post online questionnaire for students; 2) focus groups with students; and 3) interviews with subject tutors. Student and staff perspectives were sought from all five university campuses across metropolitan and regional Victoria, Australia.

The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of La Trobe University (HEC20193). All participants were given a copy of the Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Participants

First-year students enrolled in a Reflective Communication subject as part of the Bachelor of Human Services/Master of Social Work combined degree at La Trobe University were invited to participate . University tutors who taught the subject in one of the five campuses were invited to participate in interviews. Participation was voluntary, and it was made explicit that choosing to participate or not would have no impact on their relationship with La Trobe University.

Research Activity One: online student questionnaire

Recruitment

An anonymous online questionnaire was distributed through each student's online learning management system (LMS). Reminder messages were sent through the LMS, emails and from the subject tutors during classes. Participants consented by ticking "yes" to consent at the end of the PICF that was embedded into the first page of the survey. Students were asked to complete the same questionnaire in the first week (time point 1 (T1)) and the 12th week (time point 2 (T2)) of the semester and informed that the questionnaire would take about 15 minutes to complete.

Measures

The questionnaires comprised two measures of wellbeing (The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10) and the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (AUWI)), questions about demographic characteristics (age, gender and employment) and two open-ended questions as described below:

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10): The K-10 is a widely used self-reported measure of psychological distress (i.e., anxiety, depression, non-specific distress) (Andrews & Slade, 2001; Kessler et al., 2002). Respondents reflect on their experiences over the preceding four weeks using a five-point Likert scale from 1 (all of the time) to 5 (none of the time). Scores on all 10 items are totaled, with a maximum score of 50 (indicating severe distress) and a minimum score of 10 (indicating no distress). The K-10 has been validated with culturally diverse populations (Stolk et al., 2014), and has sound test-retest reliability over various testing intervals, 1-2 weeks (ICC = .86) and 8-13 weeks (ICCs = .88) (Merson et al., 2021).

Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (AUWI): The AUWI is a self-report survey that measures subjective wellbeing on a Likert scale of 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied) across eight domains: health, personal relationships, safety, standard of living, achieving in life, community connectedness, spirituality or religion and future security (Australian Unity, 2019). Scores on all eight items are totaled with a minimum score of 0 and a maximum score of 80, which is then converted into a percentage. Higher scores indicate higher levels of wellbeing. Factor analysis has validated the integrity of this scale (Cummins et al., 2003).

Open-ended questions: Two open-ended questions at the end of the survey asked:

- Are you facing any challenges in your life?

- What would you like to get from this subject?

Data analyses

Quantitative analysis: The quantitative data from the online student surveys were analysed using SPSS version 27 statistical software. The demographic data of participants who responded at both time points were analysed using descriptive statistics. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to test for statistically significant differences in scores on the K-10 and AUWI between T1 and T2.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, Bonferroni adjustments were not used, and $p<0.05$ was reported for significance of main effects. Spearman correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between the K-10 and the AUWI to further verify their validity.

Qualitative analysis: Qualitative responses from the questionnaire were transferred to a single Word document. Conceptual content analysis was used to identify preliminary codes, which were then compared at T1 and T2. Using non-pre-defined categories allowed flexibility to add categories throughout the coding process. All comments were coded, but those with very low frequency (<3) that were unrelated to the research purpose were discarded (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Activity Two: student focus groups

Recruitment

Students enrolled in the subject were emailed an invitation to participate in a focus group within two weeks of subject completion.

Data collection

Five student focus groups (one for each university campus) were held via Zoom and took between 30 and 60 minutes. Focus groups were facilitated in pairs and, where possible, contained one student author and one La Trobe academic not teaching at that campus. The focus groups were semi-structured and sought students' views about what were the most significant aspects of the year for them as students, what they considered to be stressful, what challenges and benefits they experienced in relation to Covid-19 and the subject, and their reactions to online delivery of the subject. No identifying information was used so participant data remain confidential.

Analysis

Focus groups were audio and video recorded however, only the audio was retained for transcription purposes. Qualitative data were extracted into NViVO (QSR International, 2020) for inductive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were applied: familiarising ourselves with the data, generating codes, searching, reviewing and defining themes, then producing the report with vivid participant-based examples of the themes. Two authors coded the transcripts separately and discussed their interpretations as they developed the main themes.

Research Activity Three: tutor interviews

Recruitment

Tutors who facilitated the Reflective Communication subject were emailed a PICF and invitation to participate in a one-on-one interview after the subject completion.

Data collection

Tutor participants were interviewed by an author not responsible for their employment (XX). Interviews were held via Zoom and took between 35 and 60 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and sought tutors' views and experiences about their experience of teaching Reflective Communication generally, their perception of the benefits and challenges for students, how the subject was helpful for students during the pandemic, and their experience of teaching by Zoom. No identifying information was used so participant data remain confidential.

Analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted as described according to the methods described for Research Activity Two.

Results

Research Activity One: online student questionnaire

Participants

Forty-three students completed the online questionnaire at the commencement of the subject (T1), and 22 completed the questionnaire upon its conclusion (T2). Only participants who completed both questionnaires (n = 13) were included in the quantitative analysis, however, all participant responses to the qualitative component of the questionnaire are included (n = 42). This equates to a 25% response rate at T1 of the 172 students, 13% at T2 and 8% of responding at both timepoints. Table 1 presents the distribution of age and gender at T2 for the 13 participants who responded at both times. A comparison of students who did and did not complete the questionnaire at T2 demonstrates no significant difference (using the $p<0.05$ criterion) in gender or age, indicating that the students who responded at T2 were representative of those who responded at T1 only. However, the low response rate precludes confident representativeness of the broader student population.

 Student scores on the K-10 at both T1 and T2 indicate that participants were likely to have a moderate level of psychological distress (Andrews & Slade, 2021). Compared with the average score (76.5) of other Australians who had responded to the AUWI around the time the study was conducted (Australian Unity, 2021), this study's participants scored approximately 10 percentage points lower at T1 and 6% lower at T2, indicating lower levels of wellbeing than the national average.

Table 1

Participant Demographics for the Online Student Survey

Demographic	T2 (n = 13)	Count	%
Gender	Female	12	92
	Male	1	8
	Gender diverse	0	0
Years of Age	19-25	7	54
	26-35	4	31
	36-45	2	15

Relationship between the K-10 and AUWI

Spearman rho correlational analyses showed a strong negative correlation between the K-10 and the AUWI in both the T1 (ρ = -0.594, p= .032) and T2 (ρ = -0.606, p =.028) questionnaires, indicating a high level of confidence that they are measuring similar concepts.

Differences between T1 and T2

There was no significant difference between scores at each timepoint for the K-10 (z=-.157, p=.875) or the AUWI (z=-.709, p = .478), suggesting that the subject had no significant impact on student wellbeing scores.

Qualitative questionnaire results

Thirty-two participants responded to the question, "Are you facing challenges in your life?" at T1 and 14 at T2. The main challenges related to personal wellbeing and mental illness, relationship breakdowns/difficulties, life events (such as unemployment, housing, illness) and maintaining a balance between competing demands. The challenges were mostly consistent across time, except for a proportional increase in references to Covid-19 at T2. Three of the 32 respondents (9%) mentioned Covid-19 as a contributing factor to life challenges (employment, income stability, isolation) at T1, whereas seven of the 13 respondents (54%) mentioned Covid-19 as a challenge at T2. One person simply stated "Covid" perhaps indicating an all-encompassing or overwhelming challenge. Others identified how Covid-19 lockdowns impacted general life challenges such as employment, strains on relationships, feelings of isolation, and its impact on their MH.

When asked "What would you like to get from the subject?", the main themes related to personal development, professional development and learning with and from others. Comments related to improvements in self-awareness, emotional wellbeing, and self-development were prevalent over time, but dominated at T2. This may indicate either increased value placed on these attributes post-subject or suggest the benefits from participating in the subject.

Research Activity Two and Three: qualitative focus groups and interviews with students and tutors

Participants

Fourteen students participated in one of five focus groups. Three were from the metropolitan campus and 11 from the four regional campuses. Demographic data were not collected; however, we noted the presence of male and female participants and that most participants identified as mature-aged students more likely to take a leadership role in groupwork. Similar ideas emerged in all five focus groups suggesting that data saturation had occurred (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Three of the six tutors participated in interviews: one from metropolitan Melbourne, and two from regional Victoria. Two had taught the subject several times prior to Covid-19, and one was teaching for the first time.

Qualitative focus group and interview results

This study aimed to explore whether the Reflective Communication subject continued to benefit students or whether this was experienced differently during Covid-19. The benefits identified were similar to the Whiteside et al. (2017) study. While there were Covid-19 related comments, this was one of many examples to describe the positive attributes and effects of the subject overall. For example, several students saw the subject as important for their professional development; however, there was only one comment (by a tutor) that mentioned the potential Covid-19 benefits such as familiarity with online forms of work. Moreover, while a significant number of students reported existing MH concerns and the positive impact of the subject, they only sometimes linked this with Covid-19. There were, however, two Covid-19 related themes that dominated – the subject's positive contribution to meaningful connections during lockdowns and experiences of doing the subject online via Zoom – which are the focus of the following sections.

Social connections: A core benefit of the subject is the relational aspect. Many participants spoke of connections made with other students fostered by the FWB program's content and processes based on First Nations ways of relating, meeting as peers to share and listen deeply to each other. This was particularly cogent during lockdowns, as noted by several student participants:

> During a … pandemic … I think that the one thing it obviously lacks is connection, and you know people are so isolated and disconnected, that the most helpful and important thing has been the actual facilitating groups. The group basically continued communication up until now [and] we're still talking. We're still sending each other emails like asking how we're going with assignments and just life in general.

> Because Covid's on, having a closer connection to people that you build in the groups is super beneficial, which obviously means more because we're so isolated.

When someone did the crisis and emotion topic I feel like people were able to better connect with each other because like judging from the situation that we're all in right now with the whole Covid and everything – like everyone was talking about how they were managing through this crisis of Covid and how some people weren't able to see family or travel out of the state. Like there was a lot of connection formed that was similar which was experiencing this crisis and trying to manage it – so I think that's one good thing to point out.

This was also observed by tutors:

> … people talked about the connections they made through Zoom through their groups. … Literally people would say it was lifesaving, like in terms of the connections people had. … I suppose it was predictable, … reliable, consistent, it was something that they really needed, that came on a regular basis.

> It gave them enough of that social interaction that they could put a lot of that aside, …so even though it was via Zoom … it may have filled a particular need at the time – of connection.

Online delivery: When asked about the challenges of the subject or how the experience was generally, Zoom was often one of the first issues to be raised. Analysis revealed a mixed reaction to online learning.

The tutors unanimously agreed that the subject works better when students are in the same physical space. One tutor said, "there's so much that you gain from being in-person with people that I think can get missed in Zoom – even though you try your best, it just doesn't feel as personable". All three found it more difficult to connect via Zoom and wondered if the impact of the subject was as significant for this cohort compared with previous cohorts who participated on campus.

Being in separate physical spaces sat uneasily with at least one tutor who felt vulnerable not knowing what was happening in each virtual breakout room. Typically, they would subtly "monitor" the room in case they needed to step-in to support students through difficult conversations but that wasn't possible with multiple virtual 'breakout' rooms:

> If I can see someone appearing to be distressed or worried or concerned then I know and I can make a decision about what to do about that – I felt quite vulnerable that I didn't know if those conversations were happening or people were feeling that in their breakout room.

However, this privacy was seen as a benefit by one student who said:

> "we'd go into the breakout room so it was just our group like no-one could hear what we were saying, like there wasn't someone sitting over on the table that could listen".

The students had mixed reactions to Zoom, particularly concerning their levels of comfort and contributions to group discussions. Some wondered how much more powerful the subject would be in person:

> I think when you're in a class situation and actually face to face you have that chance to get to know people that little bit more and connect with them and be able to have little chats and stuff, whereas doing everything online this year it's been hard to make connections with other students.

> Definitely better off than not doing anything – I got so much out of this – I would love to know what more we could have got out of it being in class – I feel fulfilled with the subject and walking away knowing that I have the best out of it – so if it could be even better in person that just blows my mind.

Conversely, a couple of students thought that they may have opened up more because it was online and they felt safer to share their experiences from the comfort of their homes, with the power to turn off their cameras:

> I really think having this in an online environment rather than face-to-face has just allowed people to open up so much more … with the laptop you can still connect to the person, but know you're in your own house, so you're in your own environment – and because you're in your own environment you just open up so much more.

> Benefit is you're in your own home so you're in your own safety net so you can feel freer to speak and you can always just press a button and have a blank screen so no one can see you.

Similarly, there were mixed thoughts about the practicalities of Zoom. On the one hand, there were practical benefits of not having to travel and being home to care for children:

> I think the online delivery makes it a bit more flexible to fit in with some people's lifestyles, I know [student name] and myself have both had to deal with home schooling while everything has been happening, but I do really miss that face-to-face physical classroom delivery.

Others found they were quite distracted by people or animals walking in the background or when they were wondering if their classmates were truly engaged when their cameras were off.

> I think sometimes you could see people coming and going inside people's frames … I mean you can't stop everyone coming in, [but] I think there is an element of distraction because you can't.

One person being able to turn the camera off when she cried. While she saw this as a positive feature because she could conceal her emotions and did not have to be comforted by her peers, it could also be argued that this denied her the opportunity to confront her discomfort, learn from this and ultimately advance her sense of empowerment over it. This was raised by others but from the opposing perspective. Some participants mentioned that the topics that tend to rouse emotional responses can be more difficult on Zoom because the recipients of the stories can find it difficult to respond in what they consider an appropriately sensitive way, such as a hug or gentle touch of support:

> It's a lot harder to show your support. We had groups where myself and other people would be crying and it would just feel like the other people didn't know what to do over a setting like this.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether students experienced the benefits of participating in the Reflective Communications subject as identified by Whiteside et al. (2017), or whether these were heightened or changed during the pandemic. There was evidence that students were facing additional negative experiences such as feelings of isolation, stress from unemployment, and the impact of the distracting nature of the pandemic on their studies; however, the main challenges expressed in the focus groups were everyday difficulties such as relationships and managing pre-existing conflict. Students reported that the subject was useful for managing their responses to these and focus group data outlines the value of attending the workshops.

The low response rate to the follow-up questionnaires meant no firm conclusions can be formed about the impact the subject had on students' wellbeing. However, the limited data were heading in a positive direction with improved levels of wellbeing at T2 for those students who responded. The sample size was not large, particularly at T2, but the presence of Covid-19 in students' responses to the challenges they were facing was evident. Given the added stresses of Covid-19, it is remarkable that the data suggest improved wellbeing is possible, for at least some students, as reported by other studies (Dodd et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2021; Wynter et al., 2021).

This is reinforced by the qualitative findings that the relational nature of the FWB program often helped reduce feelings of isolation. Participants who reported feeling isolated from friends and family during lockdowns said the subject gave them at least one weekly opportunity to share some meaningful time with others. Other studies have reported similar findings, with students feeling lowered mood and loneliness due to social isolation (Knight et al., 2021). Unlike many other university subjects, Reflective Communication content encouraged personal and in-depth conversations, which may have helped alleviate some participants' sense of isolation and loneliness.

While interactions occurred in all of the students' other subjects, Reflective Communication, guided by the relational nature of the FWB program, enabled the formation of small stable groups and the expectation that all participants will "dig deep" and share personal stories. This appeared to foster a familiar and sometimes significant group bond. Some students believed that being on Zoom in the safety of their own homes meant they were even more likely to share intimate stories. This echoes findings which highlight the important and beneficial role of digital communication platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams across the lifespan during Covid-19 (Dedryver et al., 2021; Shapira et al., 2021). However, many students said they would have preferred to experience the subject in person, highlighting the potential challenges of online learning for this content.

These results reinforce the value of the First Nations relational approach (Whiteside et al., 2017). Godwin and Truebridge (2021) affirmed that "One of the many lessons that the Covid-19 pandemic is teaching us, however, is that wellbeing is not solely an individualistic proposition ... wellbeing is interdependent with the wellbeing of others – including those not only across from us in the classroom but also across the globe" and that a sense of relatedness and interdependence needs to be included in wellbeing education (p. 19). The program can open opportunities for "emotional contagion", "the phenomenon of an automatic adoption of an emotional state of another person" (Singer & Tusche, 2014, p. 514) and stimulate the biological mechanism of mirror neurons, in which observing other people's states of arousal and emotions (such as happiness or enthusiasm) leads our mirror neurons to experience the same emotion and help us to be "empathic and fundamentally attuned to other people" and to foster flourishing as individuals (Godwin & Truebridge, 2021, p. 2). This kind of engagement internally and with others is supported by the relational nature of the FWB program. The ultimate message that we hope is being roused and transmitted between group members is positive, enlightening, and empowering. This will, in turn, increase resilience, the ability to respond constructively to challenges in social work practice (Hitchcock et al., 2021). As such, we recommend that educators, of not only social work courses, but of tertiary students more broadly, include in their course design opportunities for students to share meaningful time together in stable groups that are provided with activities that build open communication in an effort to better connect students and potentially help relieve mental stressors associated with tertiary education.

Limitations and future research

While this was an exploratory study, the small sample size of the quantitative component made it not possible to draw any firm conclusions about the impact of the subject on students' wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic. The high non-response bias means it cannot be considered representative of the population (Fincham, 2008); however, we believe it is incumbent upon researchers to report the results as they present themselves. The increased reference to Covid-19 and time pressures at T2 might go some way to explaining why there was a lowered response rate. A further limitation is that the study does not account for other significant confounders that may impact upon the results particularly the specific impact of Covid-19.

It is worth noting that Covid-19 related restrictions differed for those students at the metropolitan campus compared with regional campuses. Those in Melbourne were much more impacted by the social restrictions and the possibility of becoming infected by Covid-19. We believe this led to less participation from the metropolitan students. An additional limitation to this study was the lack of demographic details of focus group participants making it difficult to know how representative the sample is of the broader population. In the future, measures of fidelity, attendance and engagement may provide useful information relating to the impact of the subject.

Conclusion

Our experience of the Reflective Communication subject in a social work course during Covid-19 reinforced the value of the relational approach embedded in the FWB program. The statistical data can only be suggestive of a possible positive relationship, which may well be significant given the added pressures of Covid-19 for students. Certainly, the qualitative data support the view that students found the opportunity to build relationships using this structured approach helpful in a time of greater social isolation and to learn what sustained their individual wellbeing and how that compared to others. This affirms the value of the subject and the FWB program's emphasis on relationships and interconnectedness as ways to foster wellbeing in general and which can also be sustaining in challenging times.

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