The Efficacy of the Family Wellbeing Program to Support Student Wellbeing and Develop Essential Social Work Skills

Research article

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Abstract

Critical reflection, effective communication and self-awareness are essentials skills for effective social work and, consequently social work training. At La Trobe University, social work students engage in a Reflective Communication subject that integrates a First Nations Family Wellbeing Program (FWB). This program aims to develop these skills and promote wellbeing and mental health. This study used a qualitative research design with seventeen participants to explore whether students found the FWB component and subject as a whole effective in promoting wellbeing. Both students and tutors found the program effective in enhancing wellbeing, mental health, and student engagement. It effectively linked theoretical skills to practical application, encouraged active listening, and fostered a culture of acceptance. The subject's content *and* processes contributed to these outcomes, emphasising the importance of a relational approach to learning in social work education.

Keywords: *Social work students, wellbeing, mental health, reflection, First Nations relational approach, online learning*

Introduction

The capacity to be reflective is an integral part of effective social work practice and an essential part of social work training (Ewing et al., 2021; Trevithick, 2012). Being reflective enables social workers to understand how their experiences, values and beliefs can unconsciously influence their practice and to develop skills to refrain from imposing their values or expectations on others (Gardner, 2024). For six years, La Trobe university has taught a subject called *Reflective Communication*, based on a First Nations Family Wellbeing Program (FWB). This subject aims to cultivate reflective practice and self-awareness, while also promoting student wellbeing (Whiteside et al., 2017). The FWB adopts a holistic worldview, encompassing physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing (Whiteside et al., 2014). Throughout the 12-week semester, students participate in small yarning circles, sharing personal stories on topics such as relationships, life journey, wellbeing, and conflict resolution. These discussions not only enhance students' self-awareness by prompting reflection on their beliefs, values, and choices but also fosters a sense of connection, belonging and empowerment. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we were interested to know if the *Reflective Communication* subject continued to positively impact on students' wellbeing and if they were still able to experience what Whiteside et al. (2017) identified as its benefits. We were also curious to know if running the subject via Zoom made a difference given McCarthy, Glassburn and Dennis's (2021) pre-COVID findings about the variability of satisfaction with online teaching. This study found that, despite COVID-19's impact, the subject continued to foster wellbeing in similar ways as it did prior to COVID-19. Minor distinctions related to COVID-19 and the online format are detailed in a separately published paper (Sanders et al., 2024). Participants focussed on the benefits of the program more than issues to do with COVID. They offered valuable insights that extend beyond previously reported outcomes. Although this was not the primary aim of the study, we believe it is essential to share these perspectives, particularly given the limited qualitative research on the application of the FWB program in Australian tertiary education. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to report on the ways the FWB program supports student wellbeing and enhances social work training.

Literature Review

University students report significantly higher levels of psychological distress (Rickwood et al., 2016) and more mental health problems than the general population (Stallman, 2010; Sheldon et al., 2021). These are linked to academic and financial pressures, low socio-economic status, being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or coming from a rural area (Browne et al., 2017). In research specific to social work, Ting (2011) reports a significant level of depression in social work students internationally and Gair and Baglow (2018) identify the links for social work students between financial hardships, the tensions of managing study, family and work and mental health issues. However, this may be context dependent with a smaller number of social work students in an Irish study identifying mental health issues (Campbell et al., 2024). COVID-19 has also added increased levels of anxiety observed in students in Spain (Muyor-Rodríguez et al., 2021) and China (Wang et al., 2020).

There are unique stressors that can influence mental health and wellbeing for social work students. Social workers are expected to demonstrate a high level of self-awareness and the ability to reflect on their practice (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2013). Having to maintain their own wellbeing given the emotional demands of the job, means being able to manage their own mental health (Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019). Because of this, social work training should help students develop a self-awareness of their own needs to ensure they don't harm their clients (Campbell et al., 2024). They must be willing to be challenged about their values and world views, which can be difficult, especially when confronting or exposing distressing experiences (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2017).

Research related to social work students supports the overall value of including self-awareness and building reflective capacity. Upon evaluating student supportive and reflective 'hubs', Howells and Bald (2020) suggest that wellbeing is crucial to social work education and practice and should be promoted throughout their professional development. Grant and Kinman (2012, p. 609) found that first and second year "social work students who were more emotionally intelligent, who were more socially confident and reflective, and whose reflective abilities were more developed, tended to be more resilient to stress" and more psychologically healthy. They recommended social work training include both reflective ability, emotional and social competence and the development of empathy. However, others such as McCusker (2021, p. 4) criticise resilience as reinforcing existing structures, instead advocating for 'critical mindfulness' to help alleviate personal distress and facilitate insight into how it is mediated at individual and collective levels. The six participants who finished the mindfulness training in this study reported greater reflexivity, with significant and transformative change in self-care.

The FWB program, which provides the foundation of the Reflective Communication subject being evaluated here, is based on a First Nations relational worldview where mental health is named as Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB), a term which holds a distinct meaning, connecting the health of First Nations' individuals to their kin and family, their community and country, their culture, spirituality, and ancestry (Gee et al., 2014). It is a more deep-rooted, collective and holistic idea of health and mental health than expressed in Western cultures (Calma et al., 2017). The FWB Program affirms that spirituality is integral to this particularly deep connection to the inner self, to others and to something greater, whatever that is perceived to be, which may or may not have a religious association. As Grieves (2009, p. 53) says, "knowing about your peoples' history and culture enhances identity, gives strength and pride, a sense of belonging, it gives more grounding in life". Relational concepts are fundamental including "spirit...an understanding that everything is sacred, and all entities are respected and held as family" (McMahon, 2025, p5). Bessarab et al. (2014, p. 28) also names the centrality of community and interconnectedness for wellbeing: "Through ceremony, practice and everyday activities, people were taught and reminded of their ceremonial and spiritual responsibilities not only to the land but to each other to ensure the continuation of their spiritual and social connections and their mental, physical and emotional wellbeing and health." In terms of healing and fostering mental health, SEWB needs to happen in a safe space like a yarning circle where people can share their stories to promote self-identity and belonging (Testro et al., 2016).

These perspectives and the expectation of a safe space based on storytelling and yarning have been incorporated into the structure of the FWB program which has been previously assessed as effective for fostering social work student wellbeing. Whiteside et al. (2017) evaluated 64 first year student responses before and after they undertook this subject finding that the subject promoted personal wellbeing, life satisfaction and social competence. FWB has also been used extensively in other settings. Findings in Timor-Leste with health managers and leaders demonstrated that participants' understanding of management and wellbeing improved (Tsey et al., 2018). With young Aboriginal men, the program improved capacity to manage relationships and mental and physical health and to engage in education and employment (Whiteside et al., 2016). Also significant is the opportunity to develop what some disciplines would call 'soft skills', such as communication skills and teamwork, or what Gabriel-Petit (2017) calls 'human qualities', which are considered less teachable skills such as empathy, intuition and self-awareness. The FWB was used with students at Shenyang University to foster these human qualities or soft skills. This resulted in significant improvements in both student wellbeing and leadership abilities (Yan et al., 2019).

Methodology

This study forms part of a larger mixed-methods project that examined the impact of the Reflective Communication subject on students' wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic [July – October 2020]. Findings related specifically to the effects of COVID-19 on students' experiences are presented in Sanders et al., (2024). However, beyond the pandemic-related data, the study revealed important insights into students' broader experiences with the FWB and its influence on their overall wellbeing. These findings build on existing literature (Whiteside et al., 2016) and warrant further exploration, leading to the development of this second paper.

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC 20193).

The subject: Reflective Communication

The FWB program is integral to a first-year social work subject called *Reflective Communication* which ran for two hours a week for twelve weeks across five campuses at La Trobe university; four regional and one metropolitan. The subject began with an introduction to reflection and key communication skills, then covered seven FWB topics: human qualities, basic human needs, life journey, understanding relationships, managing conflict, emotions and crisis and caring for ourselves (National Centre for Family Wellbeing, 2017). Students were divided into small self-facilitated groups to foster a safe space for sharing their stories. The subject tutor modelled the first topic in week two, after which students took turns facilitating each FWB topic in their small groups.

Recruitment

The study comprised two groups – first-year students enrolled in *Reflective Communication* subject as part of the Bachelor of Human Services/Master of Social Work combined degree[1] at La Trobe University, and university tutors who taught the subject across five campuses. One hundred and seventy-two students were invited to participate in focus groups, and six tutors in individual interviews, at the subject's completion. Participants received an email invitation with a Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF), clarifying that participation was voluntary and that their choice to participate or not would not affect their relationship with La Trobe University. Written informed consent was obtained before participation.

Data collection

Student participants joined one of five focus groups (one per campus) via Zoom, lasting 30 to 60 minutes. Focus groups were facilitated by a student on placement (MJ, NW) and a La Trobe academic (FG, MW, LB, RS) not teaching at that campus. The focus groups were semi-structured in nature and guided by the following interview schedule:

1. When you look back over the year and specifically the issues related to SWP1REF[2] what do you see as the most significant aspects of this for you as a student and generally?

2. How has doing this subject influenced your sense of wellbeing and mental health?

3. How did you react to doing this subject online rather than face to face?

4. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Prompting questions aimed to draw out specific information, such as: What made a difference positively or negatively? Were there particular sessions that were important? Given the centrality of spirituality to the First Nations peoples and the FWB program, we also asked: What did you think about the inclusion of spirituality as part of the FWB approach?

Tutors were interviewed by a student author (MJ) via Zoom for 35 to 60 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and were guided by the following interview schedule:

1. How have you found the experience of teaching SWP1REF generally?

2. What do you think are the benefits and challenges for students?

3. Was the subject helpful for students during the COVID-19 outbreak and if so, how?

4. How did you find the changes made to the subject for teaching in the COVID year?

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1 Three students were undertaking a different degree and participated in this subject as an elective.
2 Reflective Communication subject code

Analysis

Focus groups and interviews were audio and video recorded on Zoom, retaining only the audio for transcription. The data was transferred to NVIVO (QSR International, 2020) for inductive thematic analysis. Applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, two authors (MJ, RS) separately coded the data, then reviewed and defined emerging themes together. The coders identified similar codes and agreed on the main themes.

Participants

Fourteen students participated in the focus groups, eleven from regional campuses and three from the metropolitan campus. Participant demographic characteristics were not collected; however, both male and female students participated, with many identifying as mature-aged students.

Three of the six tutors participated in one-on-one interviews. One was from metropolitan Melbourne, and two were from regional Victoria. All tutors were female, and two had taught the subject several times prior to COVID-19.

Findings

The FWB component, along with topics of *communication* and *critical reflection*, introduced students to new ways of thinking and doing. Certain topics resonated with some students more than others. The most frequently discussed topics included *conflict resolution*, *relationships* and *life journey*, as these helped students gain deeper insights into themselves and others. *Spirituality* also emerged as a prominent theme, possibly due to the nature of prompting questions. The subject's content and processes fostered empathy and encouraged diverse thinking about both self and others. Although we recognise the interconnectedness of personal and professional identities, specific aspects of the subject were more directly relevant to professional development, while others had a greater impact on personal development and wellbeing. The core concepts that emerged from the data were organised into three broad themes – professional benefits, particularly in developing a social work identity; personal benefits, especially regarding relationships and wellbeing; and the role of subject processes in fostering these outcomes.

Theme One: Impact on the professional self/developing social work identity

Challenging assumptions and values

This theme related to students' experience of sharing stories and how this challenged their assumptions and values, reinforcing the importance of being a non-judgemental professional who values diversity. This emerged more strongly in some topics, like *life journey* which surprised some students by eliciting strong emotional responses when hearing about peers' past traumas. These experiences helped students uncover and reflect on their assumptions about other's lives, realising these assumptions were not necessarily shared or accurate:

I think it's just natural walking into a situation where you've got all these different judgments and opinions ... and then you have this type of experience ... I just walked away going like how can we be so judgmental just based off outside perspectives of how a person looks, it's just like completely different to their life and what they've experienced and I definitely found that to be just like totally uplifting and awakening.

Increased sensitivity to diversity and core social work values

Such sharing encouraged students to be more sensitive to diversity and the varied ways people react to their experiences. They learned about different hardships, along with notions of resilience, empowerment and people's abilities to overcome adversity, which enhanced their understanding of the purpose of social work and the development of core social work values:

I think also the Life Journey one touches more than we ever realised – just being able to hear everyone else's stories was amazing ... it doesn't matter what you go through you can make it out.

Similarly, the topic on *conflict resolution* helped students adopt different perspectives. For example, one student mentioned she learned to *"look at it from* [the other person's] *perspective and not just* [her] *own"* when sharing an example of a conflict she was involved in.

Recognising the need for professional self care

Another student became kinder to herself as a result of what she learnt; an important part of professional boundary setting and self-care:

I just stopped taking myself so seriously – you know I just really kind of took a step back and went like come on [own name], it's the first year of first semester, give yourself a break... I think that's what really helped me to just stop being so hard on myself, and just stopped taking myself so seriously.

Improved work relationships

Many students found the session on *essential communication* and *skills in facilitation* extremely beneficial. They not only saw the benefits for their future practice, but also noted improvements in their work relationships outside of university:

I've been able to put some of it into practice at work which has helped ... just pausing for a couple of seconds extra longer, just listening to my patients then trying to think – oh what's something that we did in class that I can ask the question to source more information out of the patient – which has helped.

Theme Two: Impact on the personal self

Firstly, students felt they understood more about themselves and how they can change, particularly in fostering their own mental health and well-being. For some this related to the inclusion of spirituality and religion.

Understanding of self and ability to change

Students articulated the value of the subject beyond the classroom, noting how it improved their knowledge, skills, and self-awareness, contributing to their overall wellbeing:

> This class was a saving grace for me personally – it gave me a lot of perspective on my past, it gave me a lot of perspective on my future, it allowed me to look at people differently, look at my family differently and just really, really, really show appreciation and gratitude for what I do have in my life ... it was really, really, good and beneficial for me and my headspace.

A number of students actively applied the learnings to their private lives to improve upon their wellbeing:

> I don't react as quickly – I am not as harsh on myself actually as I expected. ... I was always like the harshest person on myself but yes I feel like I am more understanding and more tolerant.

> I made myself a little garden outside to just go to.

Students saw the *relationships* topic as particularly beneficial, reflecting on the types of relationships they have with people close to them and how they could improve upon these for their mutual benefit.

> The relationship triangle is really beneficial because you don't ever look at relationships in that way, like you don't really break it down to those kind of levels. I've been able to ... see myself in different perspectives in the triangle and be able to move myself out of positions that aren't beneficial to me – to let go of that stress a bit.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Several participants explicitly referred to the benefits of the subject on their mental health. For example, one woman implemented her learning into her daily practice to help relieve anxiety about speaking at a public event. Another put some of her more significant life experiences into perspective:

> ... I was living in the UK prior to coming home to study because of Corona – so that was a massive change and coming to do this subject has really just helped make everything feel ok – so a lot of self-reflection definitely has helped [look] at the bigger picture and a little deeper, it's definitely helped my mental state.

For others, it was the process and the time spent together which benefited their mental health:

> You know with COVID-19 and everything else not a lot of my life changed, surprisingly – and I am grateful for that as well, but it did still have a really, really, big impact on my mental health and on my family, having the class to come to was definitely a highlight.

Tutors noted the benefits of the subject to overall wellbeing, with one saying that:

> Ultimately at the end of each class I feel like people would leave the room, even if they were talking about a shitty experience that they've had over their lifetime… feeling like "yeah I've had that shitty experience but I have control over my life and over my thoughts and emotions and so on and I'm going to make a difference in my life". So they leave feeling the same or better than when they came in.

We mentioned earlier that the *Life Journey topic* was a particularly powerful way for students to deepen their sense of hope and resilience through hearing others' stories, but it was also a useful reflective exercise that encouraged students to recognise and celebrate their own triumphs:

> I found with writing everything down on the timeline you sort of realise how far you've come – you've weathered the storm and you've come out through the other sunny side or you still have clouds around but you can look back and go wow I've achieved a lot – a bit of personal grief and all that.

Inclusion of Spirituality and Religion

While some students were less interested in the *human needs* topic, considering it part of everyday vernacular, the *spirituality* component wasn't as familiar for many. The FWB discussion on spirituality, focusing on connection, meaning, and purpose, clarified the distinction between spirituality and religion, concepts that are often used interchangeably. Some students who identified as religious or spiritual felt affirmed that this aspect of life was included when they sometimes felt it was dismissed by others:

> I have a personal interest in spirituality, so I thought it was great coming into a university course and that was an aspect of it. I also know it's not everybody's cup of tea … that makes somebody like me who loves all that sort of stuff – that's where a lot of my beliefs and my faiths and my focus in my personal life is – it makes me go "oh I am not going to be a laughing stock" or I am not going to be the butt of everyone's joke. … I thought it was a really great element.

Others realised they were already meeting their spiritual needs but didn't realise it could be named as such:

> I thought it was really good to be included because as someone who was raised religious and then has moved away from that, I thought well I am no longer religious – I am not

spiritual – though to me that's really connecting with nature and the environment that kind of thing and the fact that that is included as something to nurture your spiritual health, I just thought that was a really good inclusion.

Some students realised it was a neglected area in their life, which encouraged them to both affirm the inclusion of religion/spirituality and also to think beyond religion to identify what spiritualty meant to them:

> I feel personally I lack a lot of spirituality and that's why when [student's name] shared what she shared that it really impacted on me because I feel that you know when you say the word spiritual it just makes me think about religion and they're definitely not the same thing and I am not religious so therefore I've kind of always felt like well then I am not spiritual and [student name] sharing what she shared really helped me to see that I can still achieve those needs even without following God for example.

Theme three: Key Processes in FWB

While some of the benefits described above stemmed from the subject content, participants also highlighted the value of the processes in supporting both personal wellbeing and professional development. They emphasised the importance of sharing stories and experiences in small groups, engaging with First Nations knowledge and relational practices, fostering deep and broad connections, and actively applying reflective techniques.

Small group storytelling.

The small group setting, combined with the tutors' passion, fostered a welcoming and safe space felt by many students, encouraging deep sharing within the structure of the FWB topics.

> I think the environment that was created online was really safe and comfortable for everyone to share, and everyone actually became so passionate about it, which kind of put their barriers down, which was really nice.

The requirement for each student to facilitate a session encouraged a mutually supportive culture. While some found the idea daunting, they rallied to support each other. One participant said, "it just seemed like everyone kind of got on board with trying to support the students who were working as the facilitators and [they] started sharing more". Similarly, a tutor noted that the FWB "really encourages such rich and exciting conversations that come from people's experiences and that's why there's so much learning from each other". This promoted wellbeing as students felt supported, building empowerment, self-awareness, and empathy for each other and future service users.

The feeling of connectedness also came from the FWB process, which asks students to reveal personal stories. Each person is expected to share, which encouraged some students to try new ways of interacting.

For example, students who are more vocal and typically take a lot of the class 'airtime' valued listening to others:

> I actually learnt to kind of step back a bit sometimes and let people who are a bit shyer come out and speak and say their piece. And it's actually really nice and really uplifting to hear other people's groups just speak positively of others, it's nice to be around that kind of environment.

The use of First Nations knowledge and relational processes.

Several participants specifically mentioned the value of using First Nations' perspectives and programs in the course. One participant said:

> It's really nice that it's based off an Aboriginal program, I really appreciated that [and] I thought that was really really cool because I think it's our duty to incorporate these things and to bring that culture and to learn from them.

Its inclusion in the curriculum sends an implicit message that First Nations knowledge is valuable to personal and professional development and something that everyone can benefit from. A First Nations participant said

> I'm Aboriginal and so having to go through content that was Aboriginal related, I had a lot of anxiety around that and I felt like, am I going to have be the voice of it and am I [going to] have to justify my answers to people. But it was the total opposite and I loved, loved, this was my favourite class and hearing other people's stories and it just was amazing so yeah as an Aboriginal student in taking a class based around an Aboriginal facilitating wellbeing program – I thoroughly enjoyed it and got so much out of it.

Feeling deeply and broadly connected

A core benefit of the subject, particularly the FWB component, was the relational aspect. Many participants spoke of the connections they made with other students and how this was fostered by the program's content, structure and processes. While interactions occur in all course subjects (whether in-person or via Zoom), the relational nature of the FWB, the formation of small stable groups, the expectations of shared facilitation and personal stories, fostered a personal and sometimes significant group bond:

> I think [the] … social support is so beneficial to your health. Where you can share, and you can trust, and you can be uplifted, and you feel part of a group and welcomed. I think that's really positive.

Tutors also noted this bond indicating that it is different to those they observe in some other classes:

> So that's one of the key aspects of this subject for each individual group, they really do develop quite a strong bond. … I think that still happened despite it being on Zoom.

Some participants mentioned that it provided them an opportunity to get to know people who they would not normally gravitate towards, such as people who are older or younger or held different cultural or religious beliefs to them. This broadened their understanding of their own and other people's assumptions and beliefs. Some students saw benefit in a broader circle of acquaintances (if not friends) from whom they can draw advice and help with their other university subjects.

> I think it's nice to be able to build relationships with people who you wouldn't typically pick and choose. Like they might not have the same interests as you or like I am 29 and a mature aged student. I don't typically hang out with a lot of 18 year olds but … hearing about their life experiences – you do build like a camaraderie which is nice to have. Like when you're moving forward you can be like oh yeah you know me and this guy we are in a group together – let me ask him a question kind of thing.

Finally, the design of one of the subject assessments, in which students facilitated a FWB session with people outside of the university (with friends/family/colleagues), meant the benefits extended beyond the classroom and into students' communities. Some student participants saw people in their lives differently because they engaged in atypical conversations. Their session participants gave positive feedback, sometimes simply about enjoying the experience, others about implementing aspects of what they learnt into their lives. This activity helped some students envisage themselves as social workers and was affirming that they had picked the 'right' profession:

> I feel the subject was just like a breath of fresh air, it was also something practical to do with social work so it's not just the theory it was something where you could apply stuff and go oh my god like I can't wait to be able to do this – like I can't wait to be able to just even facilitate a group, like although you're nervous doing it for the first time it's actually really fun, so it was nice to have that – this is what it might be like in the future.

Reflection

Learning critically reflective processes was central to this subject, with reflective exercises and discussions helping to not only shape core social work skills, but build upon students' wellbeing:

> Also shows you how just reflecting on everything [is] like a massive benefit – like it helps you cope with things. Like at the moment my eight-year old's behaviour is absolutely ridiculous …if I just react that that would be bad but looking at the whole situation like you see where he's coming from and why things might be going not right – and just reflection is great.

As part of their assessment, students are required to keep a weekly journal. All the tutors mentioned this process as something that aids in students' developing self-awareness and wellbeing.

I could definitely see the confidence building through their journal writing, and definitely there was some who were a bit quieter at the start that came out of their shell a bit. I could really see the ones that had put, not just effort, but ...grasped the fact that critical reflection and doing that kind of work was really important and then they understood how to do it and they got a lot out of it. Those were the ones that you could really see that growth and those moments of like "oh" and they had some really profound times where they were like this is really important, that you could see that learning and that growth through the semester.

Discussion

The purpose of the parent study from which this paper is derived was to assess whether the Reflective Communication subject positively impacted students' wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, in similar ways as the findings from Whiteside et al. (2017) before the pandemic. Both studies found that the subject enhanced students' personal wellbeing, self-awareness, confidence, stress management skills, and relationships. Despite being delivered online via Zoom, students recognised the acquisition of knowledge and skills relevant to their professional practice, reinforcing their decision to study social work Likewise, both studies noted the "mutually reinforcing" nature of the themes, acknowledging that enhanced personal development and wellbeing contributes to improved professional competency, and vice versa. The current study's qualitative depth allowed for expansion on themes identified by Whiteside et al. (2017).

Tertiary students often experience significant psychological distress and higher levels of mental health problems (Rickwood et al., 2016; Stallman, 2010). Embedding programs like the FWB in curriculum can help mitigate mental health impacts and promote student and future client wellbeing. Students identified subject content that helped them manage psychological stress, improve conflict resolution, self-care, promote positive relationships, and understand the importance of meeting basic human needs, including spirituality for overall wellbeing, reporting that time spent being reflective, sharing important stories, and connecting with people in meaningful ways contributed to their mental health and wellbeing. These processes also highlighted the strength and resilience of the human spirit, which students found to be affirming and empowering.

We believe that opening up students' thinking on various topics, like spirituality and self-development, enhances their future professional practice by broadening thinking and 'soft skills' like empathy and self-awareness (Yan et al., 2019). This also helps students deepen their understanding of relationships by learning from other people's life experiences and perspectives to challenge their own assumptions and values. This promotes acceptance, compassion and even curiosity about diversity and postmodern ways of thinking (Whitaker et al., 2022).

Similarly, effective communication skills are essential for social work and this subject helped students develop alternate ways of communicating by better understanding their communication styles and the ways that others communicated with them. This was experienced via direct teaching on how to 'be' a social worker, and through small group work and discussion to develop social work philosophies, values and 'soft skills' such as empathy, intuition and self-awareness (Sorana, 2013). The structure of the FWB program invites and supports less vocal students to share, fostering a sense of empowerment over group participation and facilitation, while simultaneously encouraging the more vocal students to embrace silence, an equally important social work quality (Canda & Furman, 2020). Howells and Bald (2020) also found the value of smaller size, consistent groups with opportunities to share in reflexive ways.

Most subjects frame critical reflection in terms of its benefit to practice, but in many ways this subject promotes the intersection of the personal and the professional and the benefits of critical reflection in both realms, encouraging students to 'be' critically reflective rather than only 'doing' critical reflection (Gardner, 2014). Unlike subjects where students apply critical reflection to situations outside themselves (such as a case scenario or an experience on placement), this subject focusses wholly on looking inward and identifying how their thoughts, values, experiences and social context influence their behaviour as a student within and outside the university. This use of critical reflection promotes their questioning of personal assumptions and develops their reflective capacity. For some students, this is their first in-depth experience in actively developing their skills in self-awareness and is a critical early stage of students' developing skills in critical reflection.

The inclusion of spirituality in the FWB program reflects First Nations ways of knowing (Bessarab et al., 2014), which is a crucial yet often neglected aspect of social work training (Gardner, 2022). Students were able to name and explore their different reactions to spirituality and/or religion, how these were or could be influential in their own lives and by implication in the lives of their clients.

Finally, the findings support offering this subject early in the course, as it promotes relationship-building, peer support, and enhances students' resilience and wellbeing. Practically, the class structure and content fosters trusting relationships among students, which they carry into subsequent subjects, strengthening their overall learning experience. Additionally, several participants noted that the hands-on nature of the subject reinforced their confidence in having chosen the 'right' course for them, as it effectively bridges theory with practice.

Conclusion

While this study is based on a small, relatively homogenous sample of students, the findings confirm the value of integrating the FWB program into the Reflective Communication subject. The program's structure, with small groups of students expected to facilitate and share experiences fostered active participation. Topics were clearly outlined with practical exercises directly relevant to social work practice. Establishing a class culture of non-judgemental listening and openness to diversity was crucial. Experienced and committed tutors facilitated a culture of acceptance and exploration.

For students new to social work, the FWB program introduces First Nations knowledge and engages them personally and professionally with key social work topics. Our research shows that students can engage with this material effectively both online (via Zoom) and face-to-face, enhancing their well-being, social and emotional health, and collaborative skills. For students, their ability to communicate, critically reflect, and work collaboratively is strengthened, affirming their potential as effective and grounded future social workers.

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