Exploring Food Security in Social Work Field Education: Analysis of a Food Relief Program

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores field education as a place for student learning with regard to household food insecurity for vulnerable groups in regional Australia. Through the examination of a Uniting Church faith-based food relief program, students and field educators provide an analysis of the complex relationship between climate change, food insecurity and vulnerability. Using a critical reflective approach, the benefits and challenges associated with faith-based food relief programs and food security are discussed at the micro, meso and macro levels of practice. The authors conclude that this field education encounter provided a positive learning experience for students in relation to developing an increased awareness of food insecurity as part of social work's vision for human rights and social justice. Implications for social work education are considered, including the need for a more inclusive and transformative approach to curriculum design for embedding the natural environment in social work.

Keywords: *Food insecurity; Social work field Education; Climate change; Faith-based; Ecological social work; Food relief*

INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity

It seems strange that people living in economically advanced countries such as Australia can be experiencing hunger when it is well known that the majority of hungry people in the world, numbering about 842 million, live in the Global South (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO], International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD] & World Food Programme [WFP], 2013). Australia's economy is one of the most advanced in the world, having remained relatively stable during the recent 2007–08 global financial crisis according to economic growth statistics during that time. Australia has had its economic status confirmed in the latest World Economic Outlook report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2014) forecasting strong Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth projections for outperforming every major advanced economy. It is estimated that Australia, with a population of just 24 million, produces enough food to feed around 60 million people (Prime Minister's Science, Engineering & Innovation Council [PMSIEC], 2010) and yet research indicates that significant sub-populations experience household food insecurity (Anglicare Australia, 2012; UnitingCare Australia, 2013). Those most vulnerable to food insecurity in Australia include people who are economically disadvantaged, people with special needs (such as those suffering from ill health or mental health issues), people who are homeless, those who have disabilities, and people living in rural and remote communities (Centre for Public Health Nutrition, 2003). These groups are the main focus for social work, a profession that operates within a human rights and social justice framework (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2004). This professional value base suggests that social workers have a responsibility to respond to current food security issues as an ethical obligation.

This paper explores field education as a place for student learning with regard to household food insecurity for vulnerable groups in regional Australia. Through the examination of a Uniting Church faith-based food relief program, students and field educators provide an analysis of the complex relationship between climate change, food insecurity and vulnerability. A widely acknowledged definition of food insecurity was developed by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), which defines food insecurity as:

A situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. It may be caused by the unavailability of food, insufficient purchasing power, inappropriate distribution or inadequate use of food at the household level. (FAO et al., 2013, p. 50)

It is worth noting the difference between *national* food insecurity and *household* food insecurity. Food insecurity on a national scale is of particular concern to some nations in the Global South where hunger and extreme poverty are large-scale problems. Other nations, such as Australia, are food secure at the national level, but have significant sub-populations experiencing household food insecurity (Anglicare Australia, 2012; UnitingCare Australia, 2013).

Although Australia does not have a comprehensive approach to measuring national household food security, some evidence based on household incomes provides insight into food affordability. According to the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS, 2012), 12.8% of adults and 17.3% of all children are living below the poverty line, which is calculated as being less than 50% of the median income for a single adult ($358 per week) and for a couple with two children ($752). As income is a major indicator of food insecurity (Tarasuk, 2001), these figures give serious cause for concern. The capacity to afford nutritious food is further compromised when families are burdened with price rises associated with the impacts of climate change, such increased costs for fresh foods, fuel, electricity and water.

UnitingCare Australia (2013) conducted a national financial hardship survey with 131 individuals who accessed UnitingCare Emergency Relief and Financial Counselling services. The survey found 65% of respondents could not afford enough food, and that, in respect of regional respondents, over 90% could not afford enough food on a regular basis. In its latest 2013 report, Foodbank Australia reported a 9% increase in people receiving food relief, and that approximately 473, 000 people sought food relief each month, of which 35% were children (Foodbank Australia, 2013). The report noted that a major characteristic of welfare agencies distributing Foodbank's supplies is a reliance on volunteers to undertake the tasks associated with food relief. In the absence of comprehensive national food security data, these figures provide some evidence that food insecurity constitutes a significant issue in Australia.

The effects of anthropogenic climate change have been identified as a major risk factor to the long-term provision of food and sustainable agricultural practices around the world. It is predicted that rising temperatures and increasingly extreme weather events will cause large-scale water shortages and agricultural instability (International Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2007, 2013). Australia is no exception, with climate scientists making links between climate change and extreme weather events that have occurred throughout much of the 21st century, such as drought, floods and bushfires (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation [CSIRO], 2014). These conditions are expected to worsen and cause severe damage to Australia's agricultural industry. For example, the Murray Darling Basin in Australia (which produces more than 40% of Australia's total gross value of agricultural production), is predicted to decline in annual output by 12% by 2030 and 49% by 2050 if anthropogenic climate change is not abated (Garnaut, 2008). It is expected that the Australian agricultural industry will undergo major structural changes and, as a consequence, Australian families and communities will suffer large-scale economic and social burdens.

Social work and food insecurity

As evidence relating to the consequences of climate change becomes more apparent, the cumulative, disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation on health and welfare of vulnerable groups are of major ethical concern to social work (Dominelli, 2012). Many contemporary authors agree that the integration of the natural environment and sustainability in social work is an ethical issue closely associated with environmental ethics and environmental justice (Dominelli, 2013; Gray & Coates, 2012; McKinnon, 2008).

In efforts to incorporate an environmental perspective into social work, some national codes of ethics have recently recognised the natural environment as integral to social work, including the Australian and British codes of ethics (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010; British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2012). The AASW *Code of Ethics* refers to the natural environment a total of five times, for example, it recognises the "protection of the *natural* environment as inherent to social wellbeing" and states this is an explicit principle of social justice (AASW, 2010, section 3.2, p. 13). These changes are evidenced internationally by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), in partnership with the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) in the *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Commitment to Action* (2012). This document outlines five specific commitments for action during 2012 to 2016, including the promotion of "sustainable communities and environmentally sensitive development" (2012, n.p.) aimed at protecting the natural environment. These changes provide a professionally sanctioned requirement for social workers to practise in an environmentally conscious way, not just as a peripheral or incidental issue of concern, but as a central responsibility for ethical practice. This professional recognition is consistent with worldwide consensus that the effects of climate change are posing a serious threat to the quality of human life, including a decline in food production and availability (Garnaut, 2008; IPCC, 2013).

From a theoretical perspective, social work traditionally has adopted an environmental position through systems and ecological perspectives. Although this emphasis has largely comprised a socio-cultural focus (McKinnon, 2008), contemporary authors are now calling for renewed vigor more explicitly incorporating the natural environment in social work theory (Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2012; McKinnon, 2008). The 'person-in-environment' perspective has had a significant influence on social work since Germain and Gitterman's (1980) life model of social work practice. Person-in-environment describes the inseparability of an individual and their environment and the transactions that occur between them (Connolly & Harms, 2012): an individual is influenced by the environment around them, just as the environment is influenced by people. Early conceptions of this approach emphasised the socio-cultural context of the environment; however, there were exceptions where concern about the neglect of the physical environment was identified (e.g., Germain, 1981; Weick, 1981). This person-in-environment perspective provides insight into how social work can understand the complex nature of human-induced climate change, and provides a theoretical basis for integrating natural environment issues, such as food insecurity, into social work practice.

To date, several social work authors have identified food security as a concern for social work, particularly with regard to the impacts of climate change on marginalised groups. Authors in North America have explored various aspects of social work's role in addressing food insecurity, including working towards change of inequitable food systems (Kaiser, 2011, 2013), analysis of government programs relating to food security (Hoefer & Curry, 2012) and the impact of fossil fuel dependence on food security (Polack, Wood, & Bradley, 2008). Elsewhere, food security issues have related to sustainable vertical farming initiatives (Besthorn, 2013), gender inequities associated with food security and women's health

(Phillips, 2009), and community-based responses to the impacts of climate change on food sources (Drolet, 2012). Riches (2011) provides a rich critique of welfare reform in nations from the Global North, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom that undermine or divert government responsibility from providing basic survival needs, such as food, to marginalised groups. This literature reflects an emerging professional concern for food insecurity and provides impetus for continuing the development of a social work role in addressing food security issues.

Program description

The social work field education placement that is the focus of this article was located at UnitingCare in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales (NSW). Wagga Wagga has a geographical catchment area that includes approximately 100,000 people, and relies heavily on agricultural, manufacturing, and retail industries (http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/). Many surrounding rural villages, townships, and farming communities are serviced by the regional centre for health, business, employment, education, and other consumer needs. Two social work students were placed within the Community Development Partnerships Program at UnitingCare. This placement provided the opportunity for students to work closely with volunteers from the Wagga Wagga Uniting Church which coordinates a range of food and hospitality support programs, including two school breakfast programs, a drop-in centre and a grocery hamper and bread redistribution program that are collectively known as the Food and Hamper Ministry. Some of these programs have been provided by the church for many years, including: the Afternoon Tea Program, which originally commenced approximately 80 years ago; the Drop-In Centre, Bread Ministry and School Breakfast Programs, which have operated continuously for over 15 years; and the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program, which commenced approximately 10 years ago.

Although the students had some involvement with all of these programs, the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program was the main focus of activity for the social work practicum. This program operates as a local distribution outlet for Foodbank NSW and SecondBite Community Connect programs. Foodbank is an independent not-for-profit organisation dedicated to alleviating hunger by saving and storing excess food from food services, such as supermarkets, farms and bakeries in warehouses to be distributed to food relief agencies for dissemination to people who do not have access to available food sources. The Wagga Wagga Uniting Church Food and Hamper Ministry order, on average, 250-300 kg of dry food per week from the NSW Foodbank warehouse and distribute this as packaged 5 or 10-kg hampers. These hampers are purchased for the freight-cost-recovery fee of $1AUD per kg from the food ministry shop.

The SecondBite Community Connect Program also provides food to the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program. SecondBite Community Connect is an independent national, not-for-profit food recovery and redistribution program established in Victoria in 2008. Unlike Foodbank, SecondBite focuses specifically upon fresh produce. Its Community Connect program, in association with a national supermarket company, links charities that register with them to their local supermarket outlets to collect produce that otherwise would go to waste. Donated bread from a local bakery and fresh fruit and vegetables sourced through SecondBite is distributed free by the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program.

There is no overt evangelism associated with the grocery hamper program, and service users do not need to provide proof of identity to receive assistance. This appears to be a unique aspect of the program, certainly compared to other similar Uniting Church food and bread ministry programs in NSW and ACT. The client group attending the grocery hamper program numbers around 40 people per week approximately two thirds of whom attend on a regular basis. These comprise a number of self-identified "street" people, as well as families on social security payments. There are also tertiary students from the local university and a small number of working poor households seeking to stretch their budget.

Significantly, the grocery hamper program operates primarily through word of mouth and has no formal referral arrangements with other agencies. In 2008 there were 14 organisations providing various forms of food assistance in Wagga Wagga on a regular basis; by 2013 this had been reduced to four. Several agencies have ceased operations or moved to providing vouchers or ad hoc assistance because of problems with managing both supply and demand issues for food.

The practicum was coordinated and arranged by Charles Sturt University in conjunction with the Wagga Wagga Community Development Coordinator from UnitingCare, who is employed as part of the UnitingCare Community Development Partnerships Program. Two social work students were selected based on their identified interests in pre-placement evaluations and each student completed approximately 500 hours of on-site experiential-based learning as part of the field education requirements set out by the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2012). Two field educators were allocated to support the students: the on-site field educator was an appropriately qualified and experienced community development practitioner and worked at UnitingCare as a Community Development Coordinator; and the off-site field educator was a social work academic employed at the university. All four participants – the two social work students, and the field educators – had personal and professional interests in sustainability and the impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups, and are the authors of this paper.

Students undertook a range of activities on placement, including working at the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program which involved preparation and packaging of food, welcoming and supporting service users, and liaising with fellow volunteers. The students also participated in the formation of the Wagga District Food Group – a coalition of government and health, education and community service agencies looking to work collaboratively to improve the access, availability and usability of healthy food to vulnerable groups in the local government area. The students were able to influence the group to amend the group's name from the "Food Coalition" to the "Food Group" as a result of informal feedback received from people accessing the program. Students undertook both mapping and consultative activities with welfare service providers about the access needs of people who use food services. In doing so the students developed a map showing where people could access food assistance, and also providing useful information to the group about the expectations that users have of these services. The map is on display in several key locations, including the local hospital, Centrelink, library, and around the city. As part of the placement, students were also involved in the formation of a breakfast program and urban farm at two separate high schools.

Critical reflective process

A critical reflective approach was used throughout the field education placement to explore the issue of food insecurity for vulnerable groups. The question being asked was "What role do social workers have in addressing issues relating to food insecurity for vulnerable groups?" Critical reflective practice refers to a process of identifying (or uncovering) personal assumptions in order to make changes to professional practice (Fook & Gardner, 2007). First, the process required students to identify and examine their values, beliefs and assumptions. This involved reflection on the experience and articulation of the meaningful aspects of the placement experience during the events taking place, such as thoughts, feelings and actions. These experiences included conversations, meetings, group experiences, observations or a critical incident – virtually anything that elicited a reaction from the students or which unsettled them. Second, the reflective practice involved students identifying any gaps between their personal assumptions relating to the practice experiences and the profession of social work. Finally, the process involved the development of new perspectives and ways of thinking. This stage considered how to develop and improve social work practice, including possibilities for change in a broader societal context. Reflexivity and praxis were adopted, which involved an appreciation of the impacts of students' behaviour on others and the use of theory to strengthen the critical reflection process. For example, critical theory was employed to question dominant discourses, such as neoliberalism, to provide alternative explanations for social issues through the examination of unequal power relationships (Fook, 2012; Healy, 2014). This approach encouraged consideration of the structural issues and political nature of issues relating to climate change and food insecurity, as well as the domination of powerful groups that might exist in the context of these issues (Fook, 2012).

Throughout placement activities, the students recorded their observations and experiences as part of field educators' supervisory requirements. The students maintained written journals consisting of experiences, thoughts and ideas, and brought these to the field educators for discussion and analysis. Together the students and field educators reflected on these and discussed them in relation to social work foundations for practice, including values and ethics, theory, education and practice.

As part of their learning, the social work students analysed the food relief programs at UnitingCare, particularly the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program, from a multi-dimensional perspective. Social work is characterised as having a systemic approach to practice that spans work with individuals, groups, communities, organisations and broader social and political systems (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Healy, 2012). Influential models reflecting this multidimensional approach to practice include ecological systems theory (Siporin, 1975), Germain and Gitterman's (1980) life model, and Personal Cultural Structural (PCS) model and anti-oppressive practice (Connolly & Harms, 2012). This multidimensional approach to practice enables social workers to recognise the interconnectedness of human problems, in this case household food insecurity, from both individual and structural-based perspectives. Individual and family issues relating to household food insecurity and broader political and economic structures associated with this insecurity were considered.

The multidimensional approach to practice for analysing the program involves the micro, meso and macro domains of practice, which acknowledge the interconnected relationship between these three levels of practice. This model is widely adopted in social work education and is used in social work texts, including Healy (2012), Zastrow (2010) and Maidment and Egan (2004). The micro level of practice refers to work with individuals and families on a one-to-one basis and primarily deals with personal issues relating to income security, physical health, education, employment and emotional wellbeing. The meso level refers to direct work with groups and organisations, and the macro level of practice refers to work with broader systems, including communities, research and policy (Healy, 2012). The following discussion adopts this model to outline the students' reflections relating to household food insecurity at each of these practice dimensions. Student reflections are presented below, in the first person, as part of the reflective process.

DISCUSSION

Micro level of practice

At the individual level of practice we observed the food relief program to provide immediate assistance to individuals and families struggling with food affordability. Anecdotal evidence based on our informal conversations with service users identified the importance of receiving food supplies for providing a basic means of survival for a range of people, including low-income families, university students, refugees and people who are unemployed and/or homeless. This problem-solving approach to social work practice is a common form of intervention and specific approaches, such as the task-centred approach, are commonly used to solve problems of daily living (Connolly & Harms, 2012). Other advantages we observed included the social experience and networking opportunities for service users – for example many ongoing relationships between service users and volunteers were observed throughout the placement. Although not directly observed by us in this case, food relief programs have the potential to provide a link or referral point to other welfare services.

However, we also critiqued problem-solving methods in relation to food insecurity because this approach is most useful for practical and short-term rather than long-term issues (Healy, 2014). Problem-solving approaches also lack a structural and critical level of analysis, for example by not responding to underlying oppression of vulnerable groups (Payne, 2014). In the case of food security, food relief programs do little to empower vulnerable groups and do not provide them with the ability to manage and control their own food sources. By contrast, we participated in the establishment of an urban farm at a local high school, a project initiated by the school and aimed towards providing a sustainable approach to food security. Based on these experiences, we were able to consider the importance of food relief programs as a short-term solution, but also the value of more sustainable community-based programs for longer-term solutions. These latter grassroots sustainable food practices ensure access to healthy foods whilst at the same time preserving the long-term viability of an environmentally friendly food production system (Besthorn, 2013).

Meso level of practice

At the meso level of practice, we identified benefits and challenges in relation to the organisational and group aspects of the food relief program. We were welcomed into the

camaraderie of the team and developed positive relationships with the volunteers. We respected and admired the altruistic and unselfish attitudes of the volunteers who worked tirelessly with no recompense for the benefit of others. Volunteers consisted of both church members and non-church people and, at times, we could not distinguish between the volunteers and service users, which reflected the interchangeable roles, respect and acceptance of each person as being equal. Interestingly, several of the volunteers were from farming backgrounds and consequently discussed changing weather patterns, including recent droughts and floods, and the impacts these were having on local farm production, yet no real link was made about these variations in relation to climate change.

On the other hand, we identified conflicting issues relating to the role and purpose of the food relief program. While the program alleviated hunger, provided social support for many service users and contributed to community capacity, we felt it did little to provide a sustainable *resolution* to the problem of household food insecurity. Riches (2011) suggested that governments have a responsibility to address food insecurity as part of meeting the basic needs of citizens. While he acknowledges the role of food relief programs as crisis assistance, he contends they represent a failing public welfare system. This is becoming apparent in the United Kingdom where the process of structural reform to welfare since 2010 has seen a substantial increase in both the number and size of food assistance programs. Increasingly, these programs are trying to manage a client base with needs that extend beyond food relief, and include complex social and health issues (Lambie-Mumford, 2014).

Other issues we discussed in supervision relating to the meso level of practice involved the reliance on volunteers for the operation of the service. In this case, the volunteers were mostly beyond retirement age, which raised concerns about the sustainability of the service in the long term if younger volunteers are not recruited. Also, as a volunteer service, there were no defined or clear processes for responding to critical incidents or inappropriate behaviour of volunteers. While we felt that training of the core group of volunteers would promote functionality within the team, we also acknowledged that this might erode the egalitarianism that existed amongst volunteers. This reflects the challenge that the increasing reliance upon volunteers, particularly from a church community, to providing services to vulnerable groups is altering both the social and spiritual contract of volunteering (Bellamy & Leonard, in press). An emphasis on training and supervising volunteers emerges because of the increasing levels of both skills needed and complexity of the work, and the behaviour and values necessary to undertake the work. There are also questions about whether the purpose of training is about development and growth or regulatory compliance.

Macro level of practice

At this level, we explored food security as a complex and multi-faceted issue. Not only is food security about access to food, but about a range of systemic issues including climate change, international trade issues, land ownership and the distribution of resources (Phillips, 2009). We examined the impact of neoliberalism in Australia. Neoliberalism emphasises the role of a free market and promotes profitmaking strategies, such as privatisation, free trade, deregulation and managerialism (Mullaly, 2007). By undertaking an audit of of low-cost/free food providers in the community, we examined the level of government

support for vulnerable groups struggling with household food insecurity. We found that government responses to household food insecurity are limited. Apart from income benefits received from the Federal government through Centrelink , direct access to food for vulnerable groups in Wagga Wagga is provided by four faith-based organisations: Uniting Church, St Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army and Wagga Anglican Parish. Of these, only the Uniting Church has a dedicated focus on food assistance. This relates to Riches' (2011) critique that food relief in economically advanced countries is considered a matter of charity by governments, rather than a political issue related to citizenship rights.

Neoliberalism has caused significant structural and social change for Australian farmers and rural communities (Cheers, Darracott, & Lonne, 2007). We observed the efforts of Foodbank NSW and Uniting Church volunteer groups to divert tonnes of useable fresh produce grown in western Riverina farms to charity. Many farmers who experienced difficulty in attracting buyers willing to pay adequate prices chose to donate their produce in return for a charitable tax donation certificate. Farming businesses increasingly have to adhere to rigid standards as supermarkets adopt various tactics to manage the supply chain and control prices (Lawrence, Richards, & Lyons, 2013). Over time, many farmers have been disempowered in this process and forced to leave the industry. The subsequent withdrawal of services in rural areas, such as banking institutions, government services, and private businesses, has exacerbated rural disadvantage and is linked with high rates of unemployment and poverty (Cheers et al., 2007).

As part of our placement we also were involved in the formation of a breakfast program at a high school and became aware of a large number of school students buying breakfast at a nearby fast food outlet on their way to school. We therefore considered how the market dominance of relatively few global and national corporations across the food sector has shaped choices about the accessibility, affordability and usability of food for vulnerable groups, especially in relation to optimal nutritional value, which can in some cases compromise health and wellbeing (Burns, 2004).

By applying the AASW codes of ethics to household food insecurity, we were able to ask questions relating to equality and fairness. If Australia produces enough food to feed 60 million people, yet still pockets of household food insecurity exist, then distributive and social justice issues need to be addressed. Distributive and social justice issues relevant to food security involve the equitable allocation of goods that sustain access to food. Several documents pertinent to food security are relevant to social work, including the national AASW Code of Ethics, the IFSW Ethical Statements, and the UN Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25). These documents suggest an ethical imperative for social workers to respond to current household food security issues as a matter of social justice and human rights. The effects of anthropogenic climate change pose increasing challenges to ensuring food security in Australia, not only to the agricultural industry, but to vulnerable groups who are affected disproportionately by climate change impacts.

From a positive perspective, we reflected on how food redistribution services such as Foodbank contribute to reducing food wastage in Australia and decreasing adverse environmental impacts by redistributing excess food. A national food waste assessment

(Mason, Boyle, Fyfe, Smith, & Cordell, 2011) undertaken for the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities estimated that one-third of community waste is food and one-fifth of commercial and industrial waste is food (equivalent to 7.5 million tonnes of food wastage in total). Using greenhouse gas emission factors published by the Australian Government Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, it is estimated that approximately 6.8 million tonnes of carbon dioxide is produced by sending this waste to landfill. It is estimated that Foodbank collected and redistributed 10, 000 tonnes of edible food in 2009–10 (Mason et al., 2011). This assessment report indicates the importance of redistribution food services in promoting positive environmental outcomes.

Implications for Social Work Education

Using a critical reflective approach we were able to analyse a range of issues relating to food insecurity and social work at the micro, meso and macro domains of practice. Our knowledge and understanding increased which indicates that the field education experience expanded our perspectives about the complex interplay between climate change, food insecurity and vulnerability. This field education provided us with a unique opportunity to integrate knowledge developed during the course work component of learning to the practice context. This means for example that, during the practicum, we were given the opportunity to explore theory, values and ethics in relation to food insecurity and apply these to the practice context. After interacting with vulnerable groups such as homeless people, low-income families and unemployed people, we reflected on questions such as "How are vulnerable groups impacted by climate change, particularly with regard to food security?" and "What role does social work have in addressing social justice issues relating to food insecurity?" These questions raised pertinent issues and provided the context for rich discussions during supervision about the interconnectedness between the natural environment and human health and wellbeing.

Although awareness about the relevance of climate change in social work is increasing, the integration of the natural environment in social work education is still in the development phase. Jones' (2013) content analysis of online curricula from 27 Australian social work courses, indicated there is little evidence for the inclusion of the natural environment or sustainability in curriculum content. Field education can provide the opportunity to expand curriculum content by providing practicums with an ecological focus, such as food security, thereby strengthening overall course design. This expansion not only reflects current trends within the profession, but also helps to address the ethical imperative now placed on practitioners to promote sustainability as part of practice (AASW, 2010).

Nevertheless, whilst commendable, the extension of field education opportunities with an ecological focus represent an "add-on" curriculum initiative, which is highly dependent on available placements and identified interests in student pre-placement evaluations. Jones (2013) advocated a "transformative" approach to curriculum design (pp. 219–220). He described three approaches to developing a more ecologically informed curriculum, including the "bolt-on", "embedded" and "transformative" (pp. 217–220). Each approach represents a higher order of integration; however, the transformative approach is the most radical and requires a substantial shift in orientation by developing deep understandings of

the natural world. A key aspect of transforming social work curricula is the incorporation of principles relating to deep ecology, reflecting human harmony and holism with nature (Besthorn & Canda, 2002). One of the most confronting future challenges for social work transformative curriculum design is acknowledging that the profession was born out of industrialist and capitalist roots, for example, by growing nationalist welfare states that support capitalist endeavours (Coates, 2005; Ife, 2013). This has resulted in an inherent assumption within social work that humans govern the natural world, rather than being interdependent with it (Coates, 2005), and this presents an incongruency with transformative curriculum design.

In order to nurture a deeper understanding of the interdependence between people and the natural environment, an ecologically informed curriculum would benefit from adopting a range of experiential techniques including field education, study abroad programs, nature-based activities and interactive skills programs. Experiential learning enables students to make personal contact with the natural environment and to engage with real-life issues. This accords with Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning where a concrete experience is followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. In addition to experiential approaches to education, the embedding of ecological principles across the curricula is needed to enhance knowledge and provide the foundation for ecologically informed practice. This may involve: developing a broadened theoretical understanding of the social environment to include nature (Zapf, 2010); the acknowledgment of social work's origins in modernism and the impact this has had on the profession's view of nature (Coates, 2005); and the ability to apply values of social justice and human rights to environmental issues (Dominelli, 2013; Gray & Coates, 2012). Skills relating to advocacy, casework, group work, community-based interventions, policy development and research are important for promoting sustainability and an ecological focus in practice.

Implications for social work education at the macro level involve the rewriting and updating of professional policy documents, including the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (ASWEAS. The ASWEAS document provides guidelines to education providers about principles, standards and graduate attributes and states "Australian entry-level professional social work education recognises that social work operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, spiritual and physical environments" (AASW, 2012,p. 5, section 2). However, the term "physical" is not defined and the pragmatics of how this occurs systematically across university curricula are uncertain. Given that the AASW Code of Ethics is the foundation document that informs all other policy documents and requires Australian social workers to incorporate sustainability in practice (see for example, Sections 1.3, 3.1, 3.2, 5.1.3), it would be expected that the ASWEAS would follow suit. A national approach for integrating the natural environment into Australian social work education is required to prepare graduates for increasing practice demands relating to climate change.

CONCLUSION

Australian social workers, in accordance with the AASW Code of Ethics (2010), are required to incorporate pro-environmental values into day-to-day practice for the wellbeing of individuals, groups, communites and the ecosystem. Such an ethical imperative requires social work education to adequately prepare graduates to understand the complex interplay between the natural environment and human health and wellbeing. Field education has provided one such opportunity that enabled two social work students to integrate knowledge developed during the course work component of the curriculum into the practice context. However, while field education represents an important dimension to expanding an ecologically informed curriculum, a more transformative approach to social work education is required.

An analysis of a social work practicum with a focus on food insecurity was used to explore social work's role in working towards sustainability in practice. Using a critically reflective approach, the benefits and challenges associated with faith-based food relief programs and food insecurity were explored at the micro, meso and macro levels of practice. Student knowledge and understanding was observed to increase, indicating that this field education experience expanded students' perspectives about the interplay between climate change, food insecurity and vulnerability. Collaborating with this faith-based food relief program overall provided a constructive pathway for developing a social work contribution to a sustainable environment.

Notes

[1] Centrelink is a service agency of the Australian government Department of Human Services. Centrelink delivers payments and services for retirees, job seekers, families, carers, parents, people with disabilities, Indigenous Australians, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and provides services at times of major change (http://www.humanservices.gov.au/corporate/about-us/ accessed 1/04/2015).

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