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A transnational student-led, rural-focussed inquiry: social work educational competency in disaster management

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ABSTRACT

Due to the impact of natural and human-caused disasters, for example, climate change, social workers are increasingly needed at the frontline of disaster management. However, some social workers feel unprepared for responding to the needs of vulnerable communities experiencing a disaster. Alongside this, many rural communities that experience disasters also live with social disadvantages, resulting in added layers of difficulty. In response to a gap in social work curricula, the authors residing in both Ireland and Australia decided to conduct a student-led, rural-focussed co-operative inquiry into the research question: *How can social work curricula support emerging social workers in developing their competency for working in disaster-affected rural communities to enable resilience?* In addressing this question, we propose that social work education include learning the four phases of disaster management (prevention, preparation, response and recovery) through the lens of social work ethics. We posit that social work students need to graduate with an awareness that disasters can exacerbate the issues of distance and social isolation, especially in rural communities. Further, students interested in rural practice would benefit from the cognizance of the factors that increase community vulnerability and the acquisition of strategies and skills associated with strengthening community resilience.

Introduction

This article aims to explore the education of social work students in relation to rural disaster management, so they are prepared for future practice. The authors present the themes from a transnational, rural-focussed, student-led co-operative inquiry into how tertiary educational institutions can support emerging social workers learning to practice in the context of a disaster. This includes the building of resilience within rural

communities. This inquiry focussed on natural and human-caused disasters. The topic was relevant for all the authors, particularly the Australian authors given the 2022 disaster events in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales (NSW) in rural Australia. Whilst the Irish students at the beginning of the inquiry had not yet personally experienced a disaster caused by climate change, they were much closer to other kinds of disasters, such as the refugee crisis impacting their country caused by the war in Ukraine (Donnarumma et al., 2022). However, during the inquiry, a county in Ireland experienced an unexplained and unexpected flood. These examples demonstrate how disasters can cause widespread destruction, displacement and devastation to individuals and communities (Dombo & Ahearn, 2017), particularly in rural areas.

Rurality, a key theme for this inquiry, is a complex concept. Each rural location differs, influenced by local culture, geographical terrain, infrastructure, population density and distance to urban centres. Rural communities can be disproportionately impacted by disasters due to greater disadvantage and vulnerability. For example, isolation, socio-economic disparities and access to adequate support (Wu et al., 2022). The displacement and ongoing effects of disasters, such as trauma and loss for vulnerable communities, further exacerbate social inequalities and impact the community and individual capacity to cope (Dombo & Ahearn, 2017). Hence, social workers practicing in rural Ireland will face different challenges than those working in rural Australia.

Social workers are well-positioned to respond to the needs of disaster-affected communities (Harms et al., 2022), as they possess skills for interventions throughout every phase of disaster management—including prevention, preparation, response and recovery (Boetto et al., 2021; Nimbin Disaster Resilience Group, 2023). Social workers hold appropriate knowledge and a unique skill-base that supports individuals and communities. For example, case management, psychosocial interventions, trauma-informed practice and enhanced community support and development by building resilience and action through advocacy (Dombo & Ahearn, 2017). Further, social work principles, virtues and ethics promote ecological and environmental sustainability when practicing (for example, Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020; Garlington & Collins, 2020; International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2022; Irish Association of Social Workers [IASW], 2020).

Nevertheless, from a student author perspective, disaster management appears to be lacking in social work curricula. In response, a co-operative inquiry was conducted into the research question, *How can social work curricula support emerging social workers in developing their competency for working in disaster-affected rural communities to enable resilience*? The co-operative inquiry methodology was chosen because it facilitates reflection on both personal experience and expertise and contrasts them with the extant literature. Consistent with the participatory approach of co-operative inquiry, the article was written in the first person.

Our critical interrogation of the literature through a student-led lens indicated that the role of the social worker in disaster management has been well documented (Harms et al., 2022). However, there appears to be a dearth of literature regarding incorporating disaster management in the social work curriculum, both in Ireland and Australia. We became curious about this gap in the literature.

In undertaking the inquiry, four themes emerged: Students' sense of confidence in responding to disasters; disaster management content within the social work curriculum;

the role of social work in all four phases of disaster management (for example, prevention, preparation, response and recovery (Boetto et al., 2021; Nimbin Disaster Resilience Group, 2023, p. 27)); and utilizing disaster management theories to work with rural communities to enhance resilience.

In this inquiry, we acknowledge both the numerous existing strengths of social work programs and curricula (Cooper & Briggs, 2014), and the strong connections that are present in many rural communities. We support the social work 'person in environment' (that is person in context) perspective (Dombo & Ahearn, 2017; Petrakis, 2023, p. 9), which conceptualizes people in holistic ways (Dominelli, 2014; Wu et al., 2022), as relevant to the disaster management continuum and rural resilience.

From a social work student perspective, our inquiry proposes an extension of the social work curriculum regarding disaster management learning, to better prepare future social workers. The disaster management field is complex requiring specific knowledge and skills so as to not further oppress communities and individuals (Dominelli, 2015). Consistent with what some scholars have already recommended (Cooper & Briggs, 2014; Dominelli, 2014; Hay & Pascoe, 2021; Wu, 2021), we support the addition of units and/or the embedding of materials into existing subjects that focus on disaster management frameworks and skills, and which align with strengths-based community development approaches and social work ethics and virtues. Additionally, we propose that these units and educational materials include epistemologies regarding the building of rural resilience by addressing the fundamental needs of vulnerable rural communities experiencing the trauma of disasters.

Engaging with the literature

Defining disaster

The literature identifies the importance of resilient communities and the benefits attributed to being disaster-prepared (Golding et al., 2020; Rowlands, 2013). A disaster for this inquiry was defined as 'a serious disruption of the functioning of a community, ... leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts' (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], n.d.). In recent years, disasters have increased in number and strength, disproportionately affecting the most marginalized populations (Boetto et al., 2021; Findley et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2018). Environmental change has irremediably changed communities worldwide, exacerbating social inequalities, poverty and vulnerabilities (Boetto et al., 2021; Dominelli, 2014; Drolet et al., 2015; Tan & Shajahan, 2022).

Calling for social work education in disaster management

The social work profession, with its principles of respect for people, social justice, human rights and professionalism (AASW, 2020; IASW, 2020), is very ductile—able to respond to the changing needs of societies by looking at the interaction of the different systems, such as rural communities experiencing a disaster and resilience building (Hay & Pascoe, 2021). Hay and Pascoe (2021) recognize this responsiveness and argue the value of social work across all four phases of disaster management. These phases are identified for this article as: *Prevention* - which includes those social work actions that would help reduce

the risk and severity of a disaster; *preparation* - which includes the social work interventions that ensure effective response and recovery; *response* - which includes practice during or immediately after an emergency and *recovery* - which includes social work practice that supports recovery of the economic, natural, social and built environment (Nimbin Disaster Resilience Group, 2023, p. 27). These phases and their associated actions can build resilience within rural communities (Nimbin Disaster Resilience Group, 2023, p. 27). Hence, Hay and Pascoe (2021), call for social workers to be skilled accordingly.

The International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW] promotes the development of a social work curriculum that addresses climate change and focuses on disaster risk reduction (IASSW, 2021). Existing scholarship supporting this argues for social work students to be educated in disaster management processes and associated skills to enhance the resilience of communities (Boetto et al., 2021; Dominelli, 2015; Drolet et al., 2015). Despite the professional bodies and the existing scholarship valuing the role of social workers in disaster management, internationally, many peak social work regulatory bodies, at the date of writing this article, are still to mandate specific knowledge and skills in disaster management in core social work curriculum (AASW, 2020; Boetto & Bell, 2022, 2023; Cooper & Briggs, 2014; CORU, 2019). Some scholars perceive this lack of specific education in disaster management has resulted in vague roles and duties for social workers in the field (Sim et al., 2022).

Considering natural and human-caused disasters are increasing, emerging social work graduates will likely be required to work with disaster-affected communities during their career; hence they will need appropriate education and comprehensive frameworks that inform their practice (Drolet et al., 2015; Sim et al., 2022). Our critical review of the literature shows that extant scholarship supports eco-(green) social work, including disaster management, being part of the curriculum (Boetto & Bell, 2022, 2023; Boetto et al., 2021; Dominelli, 2014; Drolet et al., 2015; Tan & Shajahan, 2022; Wu et al., 2022). For example, Baikady et al., (2018), Cooper and Briggs (2014), and Harms et al. (2022), argue students would benefit from being taught skills that address the complexity of disaster management. However, this needs to be done sensitively, ethically and with an understanding of privilege because supports such as eco-volunteerism and international volunteerism can be positive and negative (World Vision, 2021).

Additionally, Hay and Pascoe (2021), suggest tutorials and group discussions grounded in real case studies and community development activities with simulated disasters be embedded into social work curricula. Similarly, Cooper and Briggs (2014) posit that social work curricula be extended to include how to: facilitate collaboration between agencies during disasters; meet safety and complex legal requirements; and provide interpersonal and ethical service provision in logistically challenging environments. In critically reviewing this literature, we noted that these calls for changes to the curricula are primarily by academics and lack the student voice.

Social work education concerning rural communities and resilience

Disasters are a global reality and there is a need for a relevant curriculum that prepares social workers for this type of work (Healy, 2009; Rowlands, 2013; Wu, 2021). This is particularly important for rural regions because they experience many challenges, such as

isolation, substandard infrastructures, scarcity of resources and increased vulnerability, compared to urban settings (Harvey & Jones, 2022). We agree with the literature, disasters can disproportionately affect people experiencing disadvantage (Findley et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2018); for example, people experiencing 'low income, unemployment, low levels of education and discrimination' (Boetto et al., 2021, 1632). These can influence the degree of disaster readiness of individuals and groups. Additionally, the more severe the social and economic inequalities are, the more challenging it is for communities to respond to and recover from disaster events (Ogie & Pradhan, 2019).

Defining resilience

Communities can be described by their vulnerabilities; however, they can also be recognized for their resilience and distinctive strengths to face catastrophic events (Ogie & Pradhan, 2019). Resilience is a complex concept. Community resilience is defined in this article as: the ability of a community to respond to and/or overcome hardships (Golding et al., 2020). A resilient community can 'adapt to an adversity, . . . absorb the disturbance, . . . and has the potential to even perform better in comparison with the pre-disturbance situation' (Rapaport et al., 2018, p. 471).

Rowlands (2013) suggests that social work graduates require a rich awareness of the needs of rural areas and how social workers' assumptions and worldviews impact working with disaster-affected communities. In the context of disasters, students need to learn to identify and address rural vulnerabilities as well as build resilience from their strengths. Many of the existing theoretical frameworks, models and approaches to practice taught within the social work curriculum can be extended to include resilience and the multi-layered complexities a disaster brings to rural communities. For example, Cooper and Briggs (2014), Golding et al. (2020), and Rowlands (2013), concur that anti-oppressive, human rights frameworks, ecological models, strengths-based approaches, community development, and trauma-informed practice can all be aligned to disaster management and the enhancement of resilience. Similarly, Dominelli (2015), and Findley et al. (2017), argue that social work students could benefit from being equipped with educational competencies regarding grassroots disaster management practices that maximize interventions that improve well-being and resilience. Disaster management competencies with a resilience and community empowerment focus will enable future social workers to provide appropriate early trauma-informed interventions, prepare disaster risk reduction plans, and increase interagency connections that better assist local populations (Boetto et al., 2021; Findley et al., 2017; Harms et al., 2022).

For example, the social work curricula could include skills in how to apply the asset-based community development (ABCD), models during a disaster. These ABCD models can increase people's mental health, social connections and overall resilience in remote communities (Scott et al., 2018). The community assets of social capital, strong connections and the ability to organize themselves can be primary resources and protective factors for rural areas experiencing a disaster (Cross, 2022; Golding et al., 2020). Understanding these dynamics can help emerging social workers make sense of the complexities of rural environments and address their issues more holistically. This would be supported by lateral thinking (Harvey & Jones, 2022), and partnership with other rural professionals, local governments and community representatives, such as First Nations elders and leaders, community members with a variety of skills and

knowledge, and those community members with a vested interest in the sustainability of the community (Scott et al., 2018).

Methodology

Our research required a participatory methodology that: promoted co-creation (that is, the engaging of stakeholders in understanding the issues and designing solutions about a phenomena), engaged co-design principles (that is, equal collaboration between stakeholders that are solution-focussed), and aligned with a student-led approach to research (Vargas et al., 2022). Co-operative Inquiry is a qualitative research methodology, known for its approach to researching and writing 'with' people, not 'about'' people (Reason & Heron, 1995; Short & Healy, 2017); understanding and mitigating power imbalances in order to promote empathy; and the generating of meaning. As a participatory approach to research, co-operative inquiry requires action from all involved in all phases of the research (Short & Healy, 2017). This differs from many traditional research approaches that perceive the roles of the researcher and subject as mutually exclusive (Reason & Heron, 1995). Valuing lived experience and compassion, Reason and Heron's (1995) contrasting approach where the research roles are in equal partnership was deemed most useful for this project. In this article, the authors engaged with literature in the public domain and critiqued it according to their experiences. This approach meant ethical issues were mitigated. No second or third party data were collected.

Participants

Academics who are members of the International Network of Co-operative Inquirers [INCInq] offered students an option to participate in a co-created research opportunity. The students were invited by their placement coordinators in their university to participate in an optional rural-focussed co-operative inquiry. The students were not compelled to join the inquiry and they engaged in research activities as an unassessed part of their placement.

Eleven participants from five different universities and two countries participated in this student-led, rural-focussed co-operative inquiry. Participants included six social work students. The students were supported by five academics, all with professional experience in the field of social work. One student was also a research officer. For a participant breakdown, refer to Table 1.

The inquiry was voluntary for all group members, egalitarian and student-led. This allowed the equal sharing of power between students and academics (Reason & Heron, 1995; Short & Healy, 2017), ensuring that due weight and autonomy were given to the voices of all researchers (Donnarumma et al., 2022; Godden, 2016; Lomas et al., 2022). Furthermore, due to everyone being authors and the inquiry not acquiring any third-party data, this investigation was considered low risk and no ethics approval was required.

This inquiry was transnational and online platforms were used to ensure effective collaboration and communication and that everyone participating had full power over all stages of the inquiry (Whitaker et al., 2022). The group met online weekly for two hours, and students volunteered to take the minutes on a rotating basis. The weekly

Table 1. Introducing the co-authors/Participants (Donnarumma et al., 2022.).

No. of participants	Roles	Institution	Country
2	One social work student/research officer and one social work academic.	Charles Sturt University	Australia
3	Two social work students and one social work academic.	Southern Cross University	Australia
1	One social work academic.	University of Sydney	Australia
3	Two social work students and one social work academic.	University College Cork	Ireland
2	One social work student and one social work academic.	University of New England	Australia
Total	*N* = 11	*N* = 11	

minutes became the data. Students took turns facilitating the group, ensuring that everyone had the opportunity to speak and that the student's voice was leading the inquiry (Donnarumma et al., 2022). The authors considered the importance of ethical research, genuine co-production and power sharing, and engaged in specific processes to ensure this. We had ongoing explicit discussions regarding ethical issues within this Inquiry.

For example, to further ensure an equal distribution of power, the academics attended the first hour of the two-hour weekly meetings, providing mentoring and answering questions, such as research processes and methodology. The students then met separately for an additional hour. They decided to author this article with the academics sharing their knowledge about the field and providing editorial support when requested. The students are the first six authors of this article, followed by the academics.

The co-operative inquiry phases

Co-operative inquiry cycles through four phases of reflection and action (Reason & Heron, 1995), in a non-linear fashion, with some inquiries cycling through each phase multiple times (Reason & Heron, 1995; Short, 2018; Short & Healy, 2017). Please refer to Figure 1. for a diagram of the co-operative inquiry phases.

Phase one

In phase one of the inquiry, all group members become co-researchers agreeing to meet to investigate an established field of human activity (Reason & Heron, 1995), also known as the focal idea (Heron & Reason, 2006; Short & Healy, 2017). People began identifying the key ideas outlined in this article (Reason & Heron, 1995; Short & Healy, 2017).

Phase two

In phase two, group members become co-subjects (Short, 2018), reflecting on their own observations (Reason & Heron, 1995) and discussing the focal idea in depth. Conversations began regarding both human-caused and natural disasters within Australia and Ireland. The students formulated our research topic and question. We presented the 'beginning of our research journey' at the 9th Asia Pacific Biennial Conference (Donnarumma et al., 2022). This involved writing a conference paper, which also contributed to phase three of our inquiry.
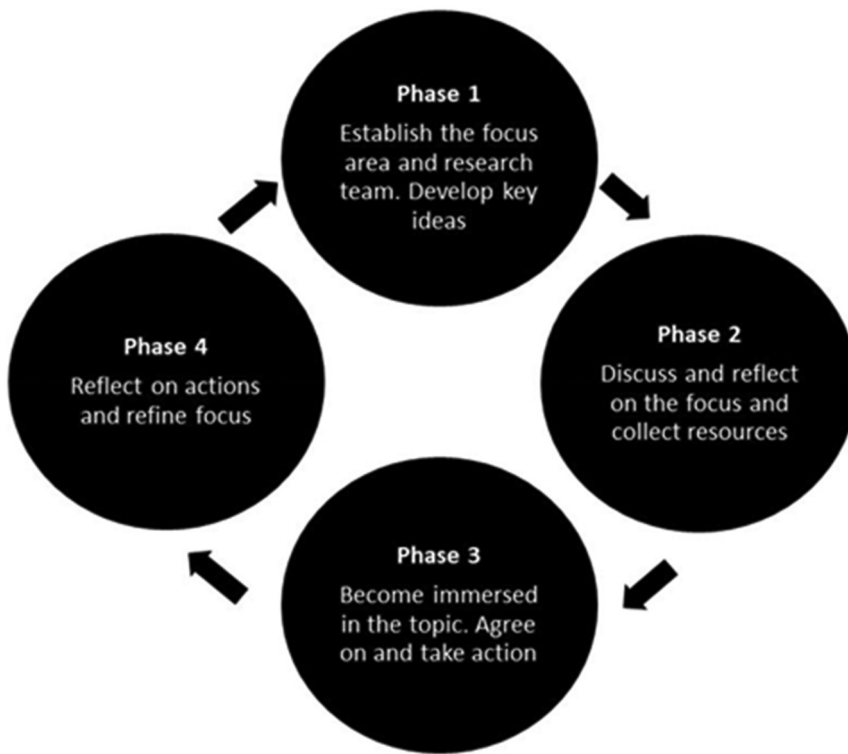
Figure 1. The co-operative inquiry phases (Reason & Heron, 1995; Short & Healy, 2017).

Phase three

Our inquiry group cycled through phase three twice, allowing all authors to be fully immersed in the topic (Short, 2018). During the first cycle, we (the students), felt our understanding of the topic was superficial. This necessitated a further cycle.

In the second cycle, group members shared in depth their personal experiences (Short, 2018) and we, (the students), deepened our understanding of the inquiry field (Reason & Heron, 1995; Short & Healy, 2017).

Phase four

Within phase four, group members resume the role of co-researchers, while also becoming coauthors (Short & Healy, 2017). In phase four, we identified themes from the data and collaboratively drafted this journal article drawing on the themes that had implications for social work curricula in at least Australia and Ireland (Short & Healy, 2017).

Themes

This inquiry was transformational for us all, encouraging us to think more deeply about the topic. Four key themes emerged; i) students' confidence in responding to disasters is limited; ii) a need for disaster management skills within the social work

curriculum; iii) a role for social workers in each of the four phases of disaster management; iv) utilizing disaster management theories to work with rural communities to enhance resilience.

Students' confidence and education in responding to disasters is limited

As students, we had not experienced working as a social worker during a disaster or responding to crises. However, more than half of the inquiry participants had recently been impacted by floods. This gave us (the students) pause to reflect on our level of resilience and preparedness for responding to a disaster and to consider what we might need in terms of educational skills. For example, Emma (student-Australia) highlights this:

> Responding to crises as emerging social workers, where do we fit in?

Comments such as Emma's encouraged us to interrogate the literature about the involvement of social workers in disasters and resilience building. There were some examples of literature detailing social workers' involvement in disaster management, specifically on the front line in the Gaza Strip (Peled Avram et al., 2021; Tosone et al., 2016; Wagaman et al., 2015), responding to and planning for earthquakes, such as, in Aotearoa, New Zealand (Hay & Pascoe, 2021). However, our inquiry found no literature that discussed disasters from an Irish perspective (Donnarumma et al., 2022). In reply, Dave and Kate (students-Ireland) shared their own experiences concerning unprecedented recent flash floods in rural Ireland and how the town was unprepared with blocked drains and no sandbags and that people suffered, whilst being unsupported by government and non-government organizations. Furthermore, many communities experiencing the unprecedented Irish floods were also supporting the recent resettlement of Ukraine refugees. Kate (student-Ireland) stated:

> Disadvantaged, vulnerable communities were told to buy their own sandbags . . . it was really frightening that local authorities did not seem to know how to support the community.

And Dave (student-Ireland) commented:

> Organisations who have responsibilities need to be held accountable.

Similar to Dave and Kate (students-Ireland), Emma and Kate (students-Australia) shared their experiences of being affected by major flooding within their own rural communities and the level of support that these rural communities did and did not receive. Macey (student-Australia) also reflected on her own privilege of being in an urban area and the readily available access to resources. The collective knowledge led us to ask: How can social workers assist during a disaster? What skills and knowledge do social workers require to help build resilience in the community? This informed our research question.

Next, we considered the impact of climate change. Macey (student-Australia) shared:

> Up until recently natural disasters weren't happening . . . as frequently as they are.

Macey's point was worth considering more deeply. The effects of disasters owing to climate change are relatively more recent, this perhaps could explain why the Irish and Australian disaster management services are not always adequately prepared. This led us

to consider how prepared social workers are for responding to disasters and building resilience.

We (the students) felt that the educational curriculum in the Australian and Irish social work Masters (professional qualifying) and Bachelor degrees did not fully prepare a social worker with the knowledge and practice skills required for the four phases of disaster management. We wondered if this lack of preparedness would potentially impact emerging social workers' ability to provide assistance during a disaster. Kate (student-Ireland) commented:

> I don't have formal training in disaster management . . . from a student perspective, I am not confident going into a disaster.

and Dave (student-Ireland) concurs;

> I feel the same. If it weren't for the co-operative inquiry, I would not have had an introduction to disaster management.

Kim (student-Australia) brought an Australian perspective into the conversation:

> Living in a flood-affected rural community, I now consider disaster management as a major role for a rural social worker.

These conversations raised further questions about our own individual preparedness, and we felt it is going to eventually become a growing moral obligation for social workers and educators to study disaster management. For example, Macey (student-Australia) stated:

> We are the next generation of social workers . . . So it's really important that our institutions are preparing us now.

Need for disaster management education within the social work curriculum

When discussing teaching and learning in social work curricula, we (the students) identified the gaps that currently exist and what we would like included in a curriculum about disaster management and resilience building. As Sara (student-Australia) commented:

> . . .disasters tend to hit harder on vulnerable community members, and as social workers our role is not to leave anyone behind in the event of a disaster.

Macey (student-Australia) similarly reflected:

> We want to be taught how to deliver these challenging roles . . .

Dave (student-Ireland) added:

> . . . disasters are happening more now.

Kim (student-Australia) noted:

> I really thought there was a lack of curriculum and that was the reason why disaster management was not in our courses. Now I see it is there, though it has not [always] been implemented.

Pete (academic-Australia) also commented:

> ...looking at community development, lessons learnt, needs based. How do we then translate into that social work undergrad experience? Is there a way to embed that into the experience.

These quotes gave us pause to consider the strengths of our current curriculum and expand this to include disaster management content.

This conversation concluded with the suggestions that students could learn what disaster management is, its cycle and phases, its nonlinear nature and how social workers can contribute across the disaster management cycle. We thought that an in-depth study of eco-social work (Tan & Shajahan, 2022), and discussions around the 'person in environment' perspective are fundamental in preparing students to understand how a changing environment can affect marginalized parts of the population, and the resilience of their local communities, such as in rural Australia.

It led us (the students) to ask the academics why internationally, some educational institutions don't routinely implement disaster management and resilience building education into their social work curriculum.

Louise (academic-Australia) commented that perhaps:

> ...it was because the course was already full of content.

Louise encouraged us to investigate whether any universities were running elective courses in disaster management in Australia or Ireland. We observed at the time of writing this article that few universities in Australia have introduced disaster management and resilience building units. Some exceptions being, Charles Sturt University [CSU] (2023), Australia, which offers an elective unit titled *Disaster recovery: A human service perspective* and University of New England [UNE] (2023), offering a unit titled *Counselling for trauma*. However, some of us who are studying for a Masters (professional qualifying) degree, did not have elective options and would be unable to select such a unit.

Next, we started to wonder about what professional education existed for qualifying social workers, internationally, including skills with a rural focus. Given the limited curricula content, the students sought but struggled to locate learning opportunities in disaster management and resilience building. Macey (student-Australia), reflected on this further and wondered why internationally more institutions have not yet embraced the importance of disaster management.

> Thousands of social workers are graduating each year [internationally] ... who will be potentially working in disaster-prone rural communities.

We (the students) argue that there is a potential to capitalize on the emerging workforce by delivering disaster management education, which includes an emphasis on building resilience in rural communities.

A role for social workers in each of the four phases of disaster management

Our inquiry helped us (the students) recognize that social workers can be extremely valuable in every phase of disaster management, and resilience building. First, social

workers could include disaster *prevention* and *preparedness* in their holistic assessment routines and frameworks to enhance resilience and ensure that even the most vulnerable individuals have an emergency plan for when a disaster strikes. Second, social workers can facilitate meaningful community action and connections with the aim of increasing psychological resilience connected to disasters (Australian Red Cross, 2013). Third, we consider the social worker's role to be permeated by creativity in *response* and *recovery* phases, as lateral thinking can promote community-focussed and trauma-informed interventions, making a positive difference. For example, Pete (academic-Australia), who as a rural social worker responded during the 2022 Lismore NSW, Australia flooding events, experienced telecommunication failures; using his problem-solving skills and creativity, he set up a table and a mobile phone in the only spot in town where a telephone signal was still available. This crisis intervention supported the rural community's mental health and well-being—enabling people in Lismore to connect and communicate with family and friends so they knew they were safe. Kate (student-Ireland) responded to Pete's narrative:

> …the importance of the therapeutic value of 'just' listening to people's stories in this context.

Dave (student-Ireland) also highlighted,

> The flexibility of our role moving from welfare support to assisting people with forms whenever needed was important.

This conversation prompted us (the students) to consider the utility of social work theory and frameworks such as community-led development, crisis intervention, case management and trauma-informed approaches and their relevance for each of the disaster management phases and resilience building. Although our current social work curricula already cover these frameworks, we believe they may be more explicitly connected to disaster management. For example, case studies applying the frameworks could be extended to include the knowledge that rural communities experiencing a disaster are determined not only by their vulnerabilities but also by their resilience, social capital and distinctive strengths in facing catastrophic events (Ogie & Pradhan, 2019).

Using disaster management theories to work with rural communities to enhance resilience

When working on building community resilience, social workers frequently start by using grassroots approaches, focusing on the strengths, assets and existing networks of a given region to enhance and/or create social connections that will define the community's own way of preparing for or responding to a disaster (Harms et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2018). For example, Monica (academic-Australia) explained:

> In the past, when activated to respond to a disaster or providing social work interventions during the recovery phase, I try to honour the social capital within a town and make time to talk with local volunteers, community elders and grandparents. This is because they can explain how people are connected in a community, what are the grassroot needs and can draw maps on how to avoid closed or dangerous roads.

Narratives such as Monica's helped confirm for us (the students) that strengths-based and community-led development approaches to resilience building can be participatory and tend to be inclusive of a broad range of community representatives and members drawing on local skills knowledge, and interest in the sustainability of the community (Scott et al., 2018).

Similarly, it appeared that our social work courses teach how to enhance resilience by drawing on individual and community strengths. In discussing this, questions emerged regarding how to build community and personal resilience. For example, Dave (student-Ireland) asked,

> Is resilience a muscle we build over time?

Resilience building plays an important and dominant role in the future well-being of our communities, particularly in relation to disasters. This was witnessed by Sara (student-Australia) after a significant flood in 2022 in the rural community of Murwillumbah (NSW, Australia):

> The community came together giving people hot meals and a car was going around collecting dirty clothes and dropping them back in the evening washed, dried and folded; it was really beautiful to see how the community came together because for two weeks we didn't see anyone from the government.

Similarly, Emma (student-Australia), living in the rural town of Broken Hill (NSW, Australia) observed how supportive these communities can be in times of crisis and floods,

> …with people assisting their neighbours and the offering of free sandbags available for everyone.

Further, Pete (academic-Australia) reflected on his experience of working with rural communities during a disaster event:

> Resilience almost organically happened, and the community came together so quickly.

These examples showcase the social capital, social connectedness and adaptability of rural communities, which enhance resilience. However, communities that are viewed as resilient can run the risk of becoming encumbered with too much responsibility leaving the community open to blame. This can deflect attention away from the government regarding its responsibilities. Reflecting on these experiences and on how resilience is produced, Kate (student-Ireland) wondered:

> …[do] you almost have to be traumatised to become resilient?

In response, Sara (student-Australia) spoke about what she has been learning in her course and the value of adaptive learning that happens after a traumatic event.

> If I have never experienced a disaster it is difficult to figure out how to build resilience in this context, … Resilience is built once experienced by a disaster. Get better next time.

The statements from Kate and Sara highlight the transformational impact a disaster can have on people. It seems that having explicit knowledge about the factors that influence how community resilience is enhanced and strengthened during each phase of disaster

management is important when working with rural communities. For us, this was important as we contemplated how communities that experience recurrent disasters manage to maintain their resilience and how communities that have never experienced a disaster become resilient in a disaster.

Further, we (the students) wondered, how can we draw on the practice wisdom produced by those with experience in the field and who have been affected by disasters so that we can transfer that knowledge to our emerging practice. We argue that case studies and the opportunity to engage in tutorials with social workers with the lived experience of responding to disasters can be extremely valuable to include when teaching disaster management in social work curricula.

Discussion

The aforementioned themes reflect how unprepared we (students) feel for practicing in the context of a disaster—hence our research question: *How can social work curricula support emerging social workers in developing their competency for working in disaster-affected rural communities to enable resilience*? Through the inquiry, we have grown our understanding of: disaster management and resilience building, working with disaster-affected rural communities and the importance of applying our social work ethics within this field. In answering the research question, we discovered: first, a gap in the literature regarding the implementation of disaster management and resilience building education in the social work curriculum; second, that there appears to be a dearth of literature concerning this field from a student perspective; and third, limited recognition of the impact of disasters on rural communities. These gaps led us to propose that more universities take similar steps to the UNE (2023) - which has introduced a *Counselling for Trauma* subject, and CSU (2023), with its elective *Disaster recovery: A human service perspective* and integrate into their subjects disaster response related materials such as Cooper and Briggs (2014), Findley et al. (2017), and Harms et al. (2022), have assembled.

Calling for extending generic social work courses to include disaster management skills for urban and rural settings

As suggested within the literature and confirmed through our inquiry discussions, social work courses within both Australia and Ireland are often generic, and helpfully designed to provide skills across a range of settings. Emerging social workers will enter practice with a number of transferable generic skills, including crisis intervention, communication skills, time management, trauma-informed approaches, counseling skills etc. While this is positive, this inquiry, similar to the literature, identified the need for more specialized disaster management and resilience building education. For example, knowledge in eco-social work, where risk reduction planning and disaster management education integrates the social work role of community development with building resilient communities (Boetto & Bell, 2022, 2023; Boetto et al., 2021; Drolet et al., 2015; Tan & Shajahan, 2022). Many communities worldwide are affected by climate change; it is becoming imperative for social workers to learn how to mitigate the effects that these changes have on the most vulnerable. Our Inquiry and scholars, such as Sim et al. (2022), Boetto et al. (2021), and Wu et al. (2022), affirm this. Similarly, the then United Nations

Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction (Wahlstrom, 2017), agrees—highlighting the importance of the social worker's role in addressing environmental factors (2017, p. 334).

Calling for grassroots educational opportunities

Eco-social work educational skills can address building resilience in rural disaster-affected communities. Research points to community-led development programs that support the community to feel in control (Dominelli, 2015; Golding et al., 2020). Disaster-specific curricula focusing on rural communities can provide emerging social workers with the skills and competence necessary for future practice in the field, for example, with risk-reduction strategies that can give agency to the community amidst growing concerns about climate change and its relationship with increasing disasters.

Our inquiry, which reflected on disasters in 2021 to 2022 in Australia and Ireland, confirmed the imperative for local community agencies and their social workers to be more prepared for future disasters, both natural and human-caused. This inquiry supports the argument that grassroots social workers can play a vital role in: resilience enhancement because of their networks and links to welfare agencies and support services; and in educating the next generation of social workers in the phases of disaster management.

This inquiry recognizes the value of students gaining experience in disaster management within rural communities. New and emerging social workers could be encouraged to draw on local organizations that provide support across one or more of the four phases of disaster management. We now think that the option of a work-integrated learning placement in a rural community with a focus on disaster management would be helpful; proving mutually beneficial for both the community and student. We are conscious of the ethical implications that surround placing students in communities affected by disasters and suggest that this be navigated with care.

Calling for ongoing professional education opportunities

In critiquing the literature through the lens of our inquiry, we consider that working in emotionally challenging circumstances such as disasters can be potentially difficult for social workers (Bauwens & Naturale, 2017; Hay & Pascoe, 2021; Holmes et al., 2021; Tosone et al., 2016; Wagaman et al., 2015). Due to the uniqueness of each disaster, it is imperative that both emerging and experienced social workers are flexible, adaptable and understand the four phases of disaster management. They need to feel confident in their skills and supported through quality regular supervision, pre-briefings and debriefings. In our inquiry, we argue: i) for social workers alongside other professionals to be disaster-equipped and ready and ii) that disaster education and resilience building is not a linear one-off experience or intervention. Consideration may need to be given to curriculum design, models, and content, such as the inclusion of case studies, inquiry or problem-based learning approaches that embed exposure to disaster-frameworks and their links to other vulnerabilities across the learning experience and practice fields.

Further, we consider it advantageous for people to know about extracurricular educational opportunities, for example, the 'Red Cross Psychological First Aid

course' in Australia and Ireland (Australian Red Cross, 2013; Irish Red Cross, n. d.). This is because such educational skills equip social workers with the epistemologies and skills necessary for supporting people and helping clients identify what is most important for them during a disaster. For example, we discussed in the inquiry how it would be useful for all curricula and professional education to include:

   (i) Case management and other intervention models that address people's complex situations during all phases of a disaster;
  (ii) Simulations or scenarios about disaster management included in course content and learning activities; and
 (iii) Professional ethics and virtues useful in a crisis such as promoting dignity and silent compassion (Garlington & Collins, 2020; Wagaman et al., 2015).

Calling for rural-focussed disaster management education

This inquiry recognizes that rural areas can present a number of challenges—such as geographical distance, social isolation, and lack of services and resources—which are exacerbated by disasters. In contrast, Golding et al. (2020), identify similar points to those of Emma and Sara, who confirmed from their lived experience how their own disaster-affected rural communities, now in the recovery phase, had developed tighter bonds and a stronger sense of community. As students, with the lived experience of rural communities, we propose that resilience building education about social work interventions in rural disaster contexts should be a priority. This is supported by Harvey and Jones (2022), who confirm the complexity of rural settings, while Wu et al. (2022), highlight the need for emerging social workers to be explicitly educated about rurality and its specific features. As social work students, we recognize the need to study how social isolation affects vulnerable people in disaster settings and how skills in building social capital and adopting an ABCD approach could increase resilience in rural areas. Additionally, Scott et al. (2018), and Harms et al. (2022), report on the positive effect that ABCD skills could have when supporting people in rural communities affected by disasters.

Limitations

As the discussion implies, co-operative inquiry methodology encourages active participation and values the voices and diverse perspectives of all participants, leading to the richness of the qualitative data (Heron & Reason, 2006). The authors acknowledge that bias and 'groupthink' may occur in these circumstances, partially due to participants being from similar professional and academic backgrounds with shared values (Alston & Bowles, 2018; Short & Healy, 2017). Similar to other participatory research methodologies, such as appreciative inquiries, the authors also recognize that bias and groupthink could possibly cause ethical issues to emerge, for example, disrespecting diversity.

Further, we consider the small sample size and convenience sampling, which focuses on selected students and academics from Ireland and Australia, as a limitation. We acknowledge that the opinions, perspectives and insights developed through this inquiry

are our own and may not be generalizable to a wider population (Donnarumma et al., 2022).

However, despite these limitations, we are convinced of the value of co-creating social work pedagogy and content so that our curricula meets the needs of emerging social workers. We are also convinced that there is space in the current and important conversations about social work curricula for inquiries such as this one.

Recommendations for educational systems

The authors suggest that social work courses be reviewed, ensuring they help frame the needs of students as emerging practitioners. We recognize that there is an opportunity to more broadly investigate the social work curriculum provision to inform further inquiries. This includes considering relevant curricular models to support student development of the complex knowledge and skills required for working in a disaster context (for example, Bruner's (1960) spiral model and co-operative inquiry). We recommend:

(a) Disaster management and resilience building educational skills be offered as a stand-alone core unit or be a subsection within core units; and this learning contains rural-focussed case studies, statistics and simulation activities. This includes having a module on rural-focussed disaster management that incorporates building resilience in rural communities.
(b) Courses amalgamate content on community-led development into training.
(c) Disaster management and resilience building skills from a trauma-informed approach be included in community development and case management subjects.
(d) Where possible, provide assistance for grassroots community organizations to develop disaster management plans; for example, this could be a workplace learning activity.

Conclusion

In addressing the aim of this article, it was identified that gaps in some social work education curricula exist regarding the preparation of social workers who are planning to work in rural regions and who will need to respond to disasters and help build resilience in the impacted community. Further, some social work students feel they are not being adequately prepared for disaster management work and are calling for these gaps to be addressed.

In response, we conducted a co-created and co-designed inquiry that addressed the research question: *How can social work curricula support emerging social workers in developing competency for working in disaster-affected rural communities to enable resilience*? In answering this question, we acknowledged the increase in the number and intensity of disasters worldwide, and we posited that it is likely that many social workers will increasingly be involved in all phases of disaster management (Boetto & Bell, 2022; Hay & Pascoe, 2021; Tosone et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2022). Likewise, our inquiry has convinced us that social work curricula would be enhanced by increasing content regarding epistemologies of the resilience of disaster-affected rural communities.

Whilst our inquiry recognized that some social work education in disaster management does exist, it can be sporadic, and not necessarily meet the needs or expectations of newly graduated and undergraduate social workers. Implementation of the above recommendations will assist with addressing the growing demand for formal disaster management unit/s that include social work interventions that promote resilience in disaster-affected rural communities. Further, as aforementioned, we recommend embedding disaster management content into subjects; this will provide opportunities that enhance students' learning, skills and confidence in delivering services to at-risk rural communities. These subjects include, but are not limited to, community development, case management and workplace learning.

Finally, in this article, we argue that skilled social workers have a critical role in disaster management and resilience building due to their ethical and theoretical foundations and their capacity to creatively problem-solve and advocate for vulnerable groups. This is consistent with the emphasis already placed in generic social work degrees around ethics, virtues, principles and values, which are enshrined in professional standards globally (AASW, 2020; Garlington & Collins, 2020; IASW, 2020).

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