

REFLECTIONS

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING



“Moving Together” acrylic on canvas 9”x12” F. Ellen Netting 2025

Artist’s Statement: This painting conveys connections between people as they engage in social movements and community-building—moving together, linking arms, holding hands. The articles in this issue underscore how strong interpersonal bonds and supportive communities create synergy that enables helping professionals to bond through human relationship, overcome challenges, foster a sense of belonging, and work together to make a meaningful difference in a largely very uncertain world.

General Issue

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NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

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We operate on a very tight budget that we stretch to fund a part-time Assistant Editor, a Lead Copyeditor, and students who help with copyediting and production. It costs about \$515 to copyedit one manuscript. Publishing one *Reflections* Issue costs approximately \$7,250. We strive to bring you 3–4 Issues a calendar year.

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Reflections from the Editorial Team: Recognizing Our Volunteers, and Celebrating *Reflections*' 30th Anniversary

Darlyne Bailey, Monica Leisey, F. Ellen Netting, and Kelly McNally Koney

Abstract: Our general issues of *Reflections* would not be possible without the incredible commitment of Section Editors and peer reviewers who volunteer their time to the submission and review process. Their dedication and expertise are the lifeblood of this journal. Those persons who have reviewed and provided valuable feedback to the authors whose work has been published in the last four General Issues are listed below. Prose and poetry in this Issue reveal the importance of community-building, interpersonal relationships, and engagement in the lives of students, practitioners, and service users across settings and around the world.

Keywords: volunteers, reviewers, interpersonal relationships, engagement, community-building

Appreciation to Our Volunteers

In our previous Issue, while we thanked our Section Editors who are rolling off—many of whom had been with us for over a decade—and we send well-wishes as they move into different areas of their lives. We also shared our excitement in welcoming new volunteers who joined us as Section Editors. These are the names authors will encounter when they submit new manuscripts: **Cathy McElderry** is our Section Editor for Teaching and Learning. **Anh Ngo** joined Pat Gray as co-Editor of our Practice Section. **Brie Radis** is our Section Editor of the Practicum Education Section. **Tiffany Baffour** and **Kenya Jones** are serving as the Co-Editors of the Research Section. Our Section Editors volunteer their valuable time and expertise to the submission and review process. We are so grateful for their commitment and expertise. Thank you!!

We are delighted that Salem State University remains as the Publisher of *Reflections* under the able leadership of **Beth Massaro**. **Jack Pincelli** continues to invest his highly thoughtful and caring attention as our *Reflections* Lead Copyeditor. This Issue also benefited from the copyediting knowledge and skills of **Keegan McGowan** and the attention and diligence of **Afsana Rahman**. As they both are new graduates, we know that their writing and the people they work with will benefit from knowing them. We cannot say enough about **Justin Snow**, whose expertise in e-scholarship contributes to the overall process of publication. You will also remember that we shared our excitement and gratitude to the Special Commission to Advance Macro Social Work as the new fiscal sponsor of *Reflections*. This means that you will be directed to the Special Commission's [website](#) to make your tax-deductible [donations](#) to the journal. Thank you!!

Behind the scenes are two groups of volunteers without whom *Reflections* would simply not exist. They are our publishing partners, reflecting colleges and universities who are steadfast in their dedication of time, thought, and finances: University of Georgia School of Social Work, Howard University School of Social Work, California State University Long Beach School of Social Work, and Monmouth University School of Social Work.

Last, yet certainly not “least,” are our volunteer reviewers, who are invited by our Section Editors to read manuscripts and provide formative feedback to our authors. Their value cannot be overestimated, and it is a joy for us to recognize the incredible gifts they bestow upon *Reflections*. Since their efforts are so critical to what we do, we focus our editorial team “reflections” on the importance of peer review as an act of generativity in which the knowledge and experience of the reviewer is a gift to the author.

In Recognition of Our Peer Reviewers for *Reflections* 2024–2025 General Issues

Peer review is a term dating over a thousand years ago to define a process used to evaluate the professional and ethical standards used by physicians; over time this gatekeeping function became the “gold standard” (Chong & Lin, 2024, p. 1) for evaluating the quality of submitted manuscripts in academic publishing. Various models of peer review have emerged, with double-blind peer review being the most common, meaning the author does not know who the reviewer is and the reviewer does not know the author’s identity. As with most models, there have been debates over how to approach peer review, but “it is irrefutable that feedback provided by reviewers is at the core of journal peer review, regardless of the model a journal adopts” (Chong & Lin, 2024, p. 2).

From its beginnings over 30 years ago, *Reflections* adopted the double-blind peer review approach to evaluating submitted manuscripts. Submissions for our General Issues come into one of four sections: Practice, Teaching & Learning, Practicum Education, and Research. Section Editors read each manuscript to determine if it is ready to be sent to Reviewers. If not, Editors communicate with authors about why their work is not ready for review. It may be that a manuscript would be better targeted to another journal or doesn’t yet fully address *Reflections* guidelines. In the latter case, Section Editors try to provide helpful feedback and answer questions about how the author might better address the guidelines. If the manuscript seems to be a good fit for the journal, then it is sent to “Review” and the Editor assigns two Reviewers based on their areas of expertise. Reviewers are sent automatic gentle reminders if their response and/or their review is overdue.

We have been so fortunate to have had a list of committed Reviewers who care about *Reflections*, many of whom have published their own work in the journal. But *Reflections*, like so many other professional journals, faces an ever-increasing challenge in updating lists of Reviewers and competing with so many demands that leave professional people with limited time to review. For example, one group of journal editors shared having seen “situations where more than 20 potential Reviewers were contacted without one agreeing to review” (Mendenhall et al., 2024, p. 2), and extensions of time are often requested by those who agree to review. A peer review crisis has been the subject of editorials in professional journals, given the expanding length of time it takes to engage at least two reviewers and resulting in long delays for authors in getting feedback (Parrish, 2022; Parrish, 2024).

Many *Reflections* reviewers are affiliated with academic institutions, with some being scholarly practitioners/“pracademics” who wear both practitioner and academic hats. Yet no matter the settings in which they work, “both internal and external forces are at work ... shaping the

[publishing] industry into something new—AI, promotion and tenure expectations, plagiarism/copyright concerns, reliance on unpaid labor, open access, paper mills” (Mendenhall et al, 2024, p. 3). Reviewers are often asked to click boxes by which they agree that they have not downloaded papers nor had AI write the review. Early career professionals may be advised that reviewing manuscripts takes valuable time away from the time spent writing their own manuscripts. Reviewers not tethered to academic institutions may have little incentive to review manuscripts when their agency work leaves little time for professional service, and there is no acknowledgement or expectation that this type of service is valued.

We recognize how difficult it is to find the time for peer review and to adjust to the rapidly changing forces at play in the publishing process, and this makes it even more important to underscore and acknowledge just how valuable our Reviewers are. Amid the time constraints and the fact that reviews are a “behind the scenes” anonymous process is the impetus that peer review is an opportunity for co-learning. Reading new work and providing feedback is a constructive process in which the reviewer encounters new ideas and ways of thinking, just as authors receive the gift of generativity from reviewers who value the desire to contribute their time and expertise positively to the next generation of writers.

We know that the grand tradition of peer review is the lifeblood of *Reflections*. Reviewers volunteer by dedicating their time to evaluating manuscripts so that their feedback might be used to support and strengthen authors’ valuable contributions. We are forever grateful for our Reviewers’ tireless commitment to the quality of each publication, and we extend our most heartfelt appreciation to those 55 volunteer Reviewers who contributed their time and expertise by reviewing the articles in *Reflections* General Issues published in 2024–2025.

The following reviewers provided three or more reviews for *Reflections* in Volumes 30–31:

Nathaniel L. Currie	C. Lee Anne Deegan	Elba Figueroa
Nanette I. Fleischer	Steven Granich	Sarah Louise Hessianauer
Katherine Mary Kranz	Nathan Perkins	Cathryne L. Schmitz
Johanna Slivenske		

The following reviewers provided one or two reviews for *Reflections* in Volumes 30–31:

Rosemary Barbera	Joan Marie Blakey	Shena Brown
Monit Cheung	Emily Cox	Nanette I. Fleischer
James Angelo Forte	Charles Garvin	Alex Gitterman
Annette Grape	Jay Hall	Anthony J. Hill
Erica Goldblatt Hyatt	Maryam Kahn	Tiffany Y. Lane
Carol Langer	Shonda Kaye Lawrence	Patricia Levy
Jane Isaacs Lowe	Angie Mann-Williams	Jane McPherson
Jane Miller	Matthias Naleppa	Patti Ann Nishimoto
Kanako Okuda	Jamie Peralta	Matt Price
Yvette Lashone Pye	Arlene Reilly-Sandoval	Jerry Reynolds
Tawana Ford Sabbath	Johanna Silvinske	Jessica Sniatecki

William Patrick Sullivan	Cardia Swift	Amie Thurber
Sherita L. Tompkins	Lara Vanderhoof	Quenette Walton
Tracy R. Whitaker	Collette D. Williams	Victoria R. Winbush

Many thanks for all that you do to make *Reflections* possible!!

Highlights of This Issue

In this Issue we begin with two very moving articles that offer insights into international practice.

Swargiary's story brings the reader into a world of turbulence and uncertainty, fraught with violence but tempered by the strength of women during the Bodoland Movement in India. Building on that strength, Swargiary recounts the journey of becoming a social work professional who seeks to model empathy and compassion as well as respect for all humanity and is grateful for having had strong role models.

The next article is written by Machinga-Asalou who was born and raised in Zimbabwe, moved to the United States, and became a social work student. The incredible challenges experienced by international students compelled the author to write about navigating immigration and educational policies and to share what was learned from interviews with other international students. Both Swargiary and Machinga-Asalou broaden our horizons and reveal what courage it has taken to pursue their dreams of becoming professional helpers.

The following three articles focus on creative ways of community-building.

Koller writes about the development of a university-community partnership between transgender and gender nonbinary artists and filmmakers 50+ and social work students on campus. Designed to foster town-gown connections and to engage students with underrepresented groups, a series of events and opportunities for connection created a space of belonging in which community members and students learn from one another.

Paez and colleagues detail their experiences in community-building among students and faculty in two schools of social work in southern California during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sharing strategies used to build an intercampus collaboration, they focus on how they created a safe place for dealing with institutional racism and oppression, as well as moving toward collective action.

Community-building within a school of social work is highlighted by Whitney and colleagues. Their story is about an inspiring senior faculty member who organized a writing group for junior faculty members during the COVID pandemic. In a time of great uncertainty a safe place in which to bond is created, and these relationships give the group strength in the face of a major shared loss. All three articles speak to the importance of developing in-depth human relationships.

The next two contributions include prose and poetry, both of which provide insight into how helping professionals use their experiences with and as service recipients to engage in a co-learning process.

Saulnier brings personal experience as a foster parent into the classroom so that students hear first-hand how policies and programs impact families and children that encounter the child welfare system with all its challenges. Committed to integrating real-world experiences into the curriculum, Saulnier shares the lessons learned from being an advocate for children both personally and professionally.

Silk's poem takes the reader into a medical outreach team's emotional journey as they navigate the uncertain world of persons who are unhoused. As helping professionals intervene with service users, they are painfully aware that their clients are subject to mandates that remove tents and shelters, disrupt the services they receive, and turn them into nomads as they face frequent displacement.

Our final two articles focus on working with students in the mental health professions to develop knowledge and skills while continuing to recognize the emotional aspects of learning.

Jackson Nevels, Erickson, and Lewis take the reader into a Veterans Administration hospital in which students are assigned to patients in the burn unit and the traumatic brain injury unit. Given the potential for experiencing vicarious traumatization as students witness pain and suffering, the authors offer ways in which supervisors can support student resilience.

Donnelly, Nandan, and Rhue reflect on what was learned about community-based mental health challenges when faculty and students teamed up to study the content of 911 calls. This article reveals lessons learned about interprofessional collaboration, how those lessons can be integrated into curriculum, and how important it is to reflect on the values learned in the process.

The articles in this Issue reveal the importance of community-building, interpersonal relationships, and engagement in the lives of students, practitioners, and service users across settings and around the world. We trust you will find this Issue as you find all of *Reflections*—full of compelling narrative accounts that offer insights that will be useful to multiple professions, educators, practitioners, students, and others alike. Once again, we look forward to hearing from you!!

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With Gratitude...

We would like to recognize and thank the reviewers who contributed their time and invaluable assistance to this Issue of *Reflections*, Volume 31(4):

Rosemary Barbera, Joan Marie Blakey, Nathaniel L. Currie, C. Lee Anne Deegan, Nanette I. Fleischer, Steven Granich, Sarah Louise Hessianauer, Katherine Mary Kranz, Shonda Kaye Lawrence, Jane Isaacs Lowe, Matthias Naleppa, Kanako Okuda, Jamie Peralta, Yvette Lashone Pye, Jerry Reynolds, Cathryne L. Schmitz, Johanna Slivenske, Jessica Sniatecki, Sherita L. Tompkins, Amie Thurber

As we prepare to step into our 31st year, we remain committed to our *Reflections* founders, Sonia and Paul Abeles, in making their dreams manifest. With your continued commitment to *Reflections* and its authors, we look forward to the many, many decades ahead!!

Tribal Feminism: Safekeeping Family and the Bodo Community During the Bodoland Movement in India

Bibharani Swargiary

Abstract: This article narrates the experiences of my mother, my family, and the Bodo community during the Bodoland Movement (1960–2003). My and my mother’s journeys are that of a Bodo woman struggling to protect life, family, and the integrity of the Bodo community. Thousands were killed, tortured, and raped. Bodo men were persecuted as “rebels” by the state and were therefore nowhere to be seen in everyday society. Women became human shields, peace negotiators, safekeepers of family and community, and agents of social transformation in the face of violence. I reflect on my and my mother’s experiences as a departure from mainstream feminism by tracing oppression and violence beyond the domain of men-women relationships, detailing how tribal feminism traces oppressive structures to ethnic biases/prejudices against a tribal community by dominant groups, and highlighting the agency of tribal feminism for survival, safekeeping of life and liberty, and rights of a community.

Keywords: Bodo women, Bodo movement, tribal feminism, Assam, feminism

Introduction

On a recent drive to my office at Assam Don Bosco University in Guwahati, India, I saw a young Bodo woman clad in her colourful Bodo *bedun dokhna* (traditional wrap) riding a bicycle with her daughter dressed in a school uniform perched on the back of the bicycle. She was likely riding her daughter to a school in the heart of Guwahati city. I smiled. As a Bodo woman, seeing Bodo children traveling to schools either by walking or cycling with their mothers/fathers makes me very happy because these children have opportunities to learn and to achieve in relative peace. All my life, I have lived, believed, and seen that education has been a great force of liberation—the tool to liberate one from many socio-cultural and political oppressions that beset communities such as ours. The sight of the Bodo mother riding her daughter to school on her bicycle lingered on my thoughts for days, and I was compelled to reflect upon the journey of a Bodo woman, specifically my mother. These reflections also made me revisit my own life journey: the long road to reach where I am today and the journey my mother, like any other Bodo mother, had to undertake during the Bodoland Movement.

The Bodos are the Brahmaputra Valley’s autochthones and are categorized as a Scheduled Tribe (see Bodhi & Darokar, 2023) in India. Presently, they also live in parts of India (Assam, West Bengal, and Nagaland), Bangladesh, and Nepal. The Bodoland Territorial Region carved out in 2003 is an autonomous region in Assam, Northeast India. It is made up of five districts, namely Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar, Tamulpur and Udalguri, on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River, below the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. As the Bodoland Territorial Region borders the state of West Bengal, it is also the gateway to Northeastern India. It is administered by an elected body known as the Bodoland Territorial Council. The region covers an area of over nine thousand square kilometers and is predominantly inhabited by the Bodo people and

other indigenous communities of Assam. As per the 2011 Census, its population is a little over three million (Owarie, n.d.).

There have previously been several initiatives to meet the sociopolitical and economic goals of the Bodos within the framework of the contemporary nation-state. The memorandum that Bodo social reformer Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma submitted to the Simon Commission in 1929 demonstrates how the Bodo leaders joined the fight for India's independence early on and expressed their political aspirations for autonomy in concrete terms (Kalita, 2019). The Bodos have traveled a distinctive route because of their unique social and cultural realities.

Large Bodo territories came under the jurisdiction of Assam after India gained independence from the British in 1947. Together with other tribal leaders, the Bodo leaders brought Gopinath Bordoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam, to enter into talks with them and agree to include Chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1947 in order to safeguard their rights over land in independent India. Thus, the Tribal Belt and Blocks were demarcated for protection of the tribal lands. It may be mentioned here that these protective measures were well below the benchmark of protection the tribal leaders sought for. At that time, the tribal chiefs had demanded that the Plains Tribal Areas of Assam be added to the Indian Constitution's Sixth Schedule, which has stronger provisions for protection of tribal lands.

The promises for the protection of land and socio-cultural institutions within the newly formed India temporarily quieted the Bodos. However, they soon realized that the ruling elites of the Assam state did not have any sincerity in protecting the Tribal Belt and Block areas. Rather, these areas were utterly neglected and deprived of the benefits of development. It has already been well documented that thousands of acres of lands were alienated from the tribals and used for forests and resettlement of refugees from Bangladesh in the 1960s (Brahma, 2017; Daimary, 2012). This grievously hurt not only the resource-base of the tribals but were also seen as conspiracy by the Assam state to throw into disbalance the delicate demographic makeup of the contiguous Tribal areas. Further, there were both overt and covert moves by the Assam state to coerce Bodos into assimilating within the Assamese fold. For instance, The Assam Official Language Act 1960 purported to impose Assamese language upon the tribals and other linguistic minorities of Assam.

Thus, the Bodos, like other tribals/indigenous peoples of India, faced problems of land alienation, cultural assimilation, indebtedness, and impoverishment arising out of waves of colonialism both pre-and-post-independence India (see, for example, Xaxa, 2022). As such, the Bodoland Movement has largely been a peoples' movement for survival, dignity, and human rights of the Bodos and other communities residing in Assam. The movement began as a socio-religious reformation (early 1900s). It took shape as a political mobilization for the rights of the Plains Tribes of Assam in the 1930s. After India's independence in 1947, the largely non-violent mobilizations in the initial years for rights and social justice, language, and script movement (1950–1980s), became a violent struggle for a separate state with different ideological hues (1980s–2020). I will be particularizing this phase of the Bodoland Movement, as I was born and grew up in the period.

The Bodoland Movement

The Bodoland Movement was launched and spearheaded by a student organization, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), for the separate state in the year 1987. The movement for a separate Bodo state had its origins in the economic and socio-cultural aspirations of the Bodo people. The movement had its share of different phases. The first phase was the formal Movement, which was also termed the Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF). Simultaneously, the Bodo Security Force was formed in 1986 and later renamed the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), comprising a hardcore group engaged in extremist tactics to achieve the goal of Bodoland through the means of an armed revolution. In February of 1993, the First Bodo Accord was signed between the BVF (spearheaded by ABSU) and the Union Government, but a section of the BVF rejected the accord because they felt it did not fulfill the aspirations of the Bodos. That section formed the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) in 1996. On the 29th of March, 2000, the BLT signed a ceasefire agreement with the governments (Assam, Union, and Indian). As a result, an autonomous Bodo self-governing body was created on the 10th of February, 2003, when the Assam government, the Union government, and the BLTF signed the Memorandum of Settlement on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in New Delhi. Over the years, after undergoing severe sacrifices and loss of lives and property, the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) finally came to be. The new administration has brought in many reforms for the communities, from building basic infrastructure to implementing basic services. However, peace has remained elusive. After the recent Bodo Peace Accord (2020) signed by the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the Bodo leaders (all factions of the NDFB, the influential ABSU, and United Bodo People's Organization), there is now a possibility of peace and development in the region.

Locating “Myself”

I am a Bodo woman. Bodos are also known as the Kacharis. *Kachari* is a generic term for several groups speaking a more or less common dialect or language, or claiming a common ancestry as the aborigines, or earliest known inhabitants of Brahmaputra Valley—that is, the whole of modern Assam, North Bengal, and parts of Nepal and Bangladesh. Though spread in different parts of this region, as well as in the neighbouring countries, the majority of their population is found in Central Assam. The Bodos form the largest indigenous group in the present demography of the region. Linguistically the Garo, the Dimasa, the Hajong, the Sonowal, the Deori, the Rabha, the Tiwa, and the Borok of Twipra (Tripura), and many other cognate tribes are part of this great Bodo race. They take pride in calling themselves Bodo. They identify themselves as the *Boro-phisa*, meaning Children of the Boro race.

I was born in a remote village called Hatirtary in 1983. It is in the present-day Baksa district of Assam, but previously it was part of the undivided Nalbari district. My parents, Mr. Bhaben Swargiary and Ms. Arati Ramchiary, were both government teachers and could afford the wages of a dahwna (farmboy), bokhali (nanny), and ruwathi (housekeeper) in supporting the family and its agricultural work. Every evening, while my mother would nurse my baby brother, my father would cuddle me and my sister, one on his chest and the other at the back, and sing songs for us. He also told us one story after another on a never-ending note. Sometimes it could be a

walk around the courtyard and at other times it would be just sitting and listening to his stories on the verandah. Stories about the moon, the stars, the sparrow; why the snake had a long tail and the frog none; legends of Bodo freedom-fighters such as Birgwshri Sikhla and Gambari Sikhla, Jwhlwao Swmdwn and Basiram Jwhlwao.

While growing up, the community was my playground: romping in the paddy fields, swimming in the rivers, fishing with the jekhai (handled basket for catching) and the khobai (waist-basket for carrying), climbing trees, gathering greens from the community forests, going to the school, and playing hide and seek. We had nothing to worry about. It was a childhood filled with laughter, happiness, and joy. Our community was bound together with celebrations and community help-giving. I recall my introduction to the Baisagw celebrations of the Bodo New Year. These were filled with merry-making, singing, and dancing. Girls and boys of our age would sing and dance door to door, as we moved from one house to another in colourful dokhnas and sadri with the melodious reverberations of the kham (drum), siphung (five-holed flute), serja (stringed instrument made of the sijou plant), harmonium, and thorkha (bamboo clapper used to keep time).

Songs that resounded through the village were about thanksgiving and praise for the bounty of nature. These songs also celebrated the nature of men and women, and then there were the romantic love-songs of the festive Baisagw. Each household would give in kind or cash. These household gifts would then be used in throwing a community party at the end of Baisagw month. Even before becoming an adult, children participated in the saoris, a community service programme. It is customary for all families to provide freely rendered help to all members of the community. Young girls and boys involved merrily in saori activities during the harvest seasons. I participated with most gleeful spirit in community work ranging from transplanting to harvesting of paddy to serving during weddings. The boys and men got involved in ploughing with the bullocks, building houses, erecting fences, and constructing irrigation systems in the village.

During the harvest season, boys and girls together went for mai khonsai hwinai¹. Post-harvest season, all grains collected would be dried and husked and kept for the festival of Magw². I went for the narah hanai (leftover hay) for building the camp houses, collected firewood for the camps. While we went for cutting the narah, I also accompanied our boys for digging out the mice in our paddy fields and catching the grasshopper for making a special bathwn (chutney).

My family had the first television in the village. There was no electricity then, so we would watch the TV on batteries. A battery recharge point was two kilometers away, and the boys would take turns transporting the batteries for recharging. The whole village would flock to watch Bollywood movies, or the FIFA World Cups when the matches were aired live on the Door Darshaan in 1980s. During these evenings, the TV would be placed in our verandah on a table overlooking the courtyard. The courtyard would be filled with friends, aunties, uncles,

¹ Custom of collecting the left-over grains after harvest from the paddy fields.

² The thanksgiving month—mid-January to mid-February

grandmothers, and grandfathers all watching the TV together. At times, as many as five people occupied a single chair—sitting even on arms of the chair.

Life Interwoven with the Bodoland Movement

In 1987 the Bodoland Movement gained momentum, with the ABSU spearheading the movement. The slogans “Divide Assam fifty-fifty”, “No Bodoland No Rest,” and “Do or Die for Bodoland” resounded all around our villages. During the movement, the Bodo villages echoed with patriotic songs like *Inkhilab Jindabad*³, *Jwng Bima Rao Swlwngni*⁴, and the *Akhaiao Bibar Lananwi*⁵. The Assam Police and the Indian Army responded to the separatist movement by raiding villages and homes. My brother and I were sent to boarding school about 20 kilometers away from my home. In the school, visits from family were restricted to once a month. Suddenly, my father stopped visiting us. My mother and my grandma informed us that it was not safe anymore for Bodo men to travel. My mother also said that even for Bodo women, it was no safer; women were being molested, raped, and tortured everywhere. My grandma said,

The army stares at us, checks all our bags to see if we were carrying guns, shakes our milk bottles [mom would carry milk for us every second Sunday], and opens your tiffin boxes [tiered lunchboxes]. We are also asked to shake our dokhna for them to be sure that we were not hiding anything [guns and bombs] inside.

I loved my dad and missed him dearly. I longed to see him and did not fully understand what was happening. When I returned home for summer vacation, life became even more restricted. I was told that it was no longer safe to run around the village, paddy-fields, and play hide and seek around the homestead. With constant raids by the Assam police and the Indian Army, the village became suddenly silent. Then it got worse. At night, the women and children moved into the community forest or the community cemetery to spend the nights while the men guarded the village. We were moved alternately—once in the community forest and on another day to the crematory ground. There, the skies became our roof, the thuri wild grass our natural mattress; the moon, the stars, and the fireflies provided us light. Even though we were afraid for our lives, women and children shared traditional food, blankets, and stories of their escapes from the atrocities. The nights were filled with fear but also laughter. Early morning, all of us returned to our homes.

Many men joined to form the now-disbanded Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) or join the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which opposed each other strongly. Many men disappeared or went missing. Whenever any man from the village was apprehended by the police, women would march directly to the police stations along with elder men and the village headman; women would stand guard and negotiate for the release of the captives with the darga babu (local police), keeping the men at the centre, lest the police take them too. Women stood

³ Long live the revolution.

⁴ Let us read in our mother-tongue. (The Bodos also launched a movement for introduction of Bodo language as a medium of instruction in school education in the place of Assamese language.)

⁵ I await you with a garland in my hands oh my hero. (This was a popular song among the Bodos that portrayed the support and love of the Bodo girls and women for their men who were in the revolution.)

there as grieving witnesses to the crimes being committed against Bodo men. Often the women would be successful in bringing their men back to the village, while many times all did not go well for them. They were very often lathi-charged (baton-charged) and molested, and at times raped and tortured too. Despite this, they continued their negotiations fearlessly, even by seating themselves in protest all day and night in front of the police station with no food and water. Life of the Bodo women continued as usual sometimes, but at other times, especially during raids, all of us stayed together in the village aganwadi/balwadi centre for early childcare or the lower primary school houses. Educational institutions were considered a safe place, on the one hand, and also the only structures in the village that could hold all its women and children together in one enclosure.

Surviving as a Bodo

It became dangerous for my father since he was an active ABSU volunteer who long advocated for the socio-cultural and political rights of the Bodos. Frequently, along with other Bodo men, he was taken by the police or the Indian Army who raided the villages looking for men. During one such raid, I found that my aunts and my mother were wailing and screaming uncontrollably. Someone had informed them that my dad and two other uncles were picked up by the members of the NDFB for a dialogue. And that the talks were to take place in one of the houses which was at the end of the village and whence began our paddy fields. My father was a strong supporter of the then-BLTF. At that time, the NDFB and the BLTF were already at loggerheads due to their ideological differences in achieving Bodo statehood. I walked towards the house, as if guided by some deep and resolute force within me. Someone said to me, “Don’t go, you will get killed!” I replied, “I am going anyway ... I need to protect my father, my uncles, and my community.” I soon realized that I was being closely followed by my mom, aunts, and grandmother. As I walked into the courtyard, I saw men in uniform with guns standing ready to shoot. My father and two uncles were sitting in chairs, discussing something. I stood there at the courtyard upon the verandah, towering over the men, and looked at my father. I cannot recall what they said, but my father and two uncles were released.

The difference of ideologies between the two Bodo revolutionary groups, the BLTF and NDFB, divided the Bodo community. The fight for Bodoland was both inter- and intra-community. Bodo men and women were not spared by the state forces nor by the other factional revolutionaries from the same community. Supporters of BLTF were attacked by NDFB and supporters of NDFB were attacked by BLTF. And in the process, all Bodo men and women were relegated to be rebels by the state forces. Men were no more seen in the social spaces of everyday life, and even if they were there, it was never safe for them. Hence, women had to take up more responsibilities amidst the prevailing situation of fear and uncertainty.

Since it was no longer safe for my father, the family decided that it was best for him to go undercover. He disappeared/went missing in the year 1996.

It is at this point where my childhood ended. My mother waited day in and day out for the return of my father. In fear, we moved our bedroom to the storeroom of our house because it had no direct door that could be accessed from the outside. While my siblings slept, I kept company

with my mother, sitting and waiting for my father to return, waiting for the dawn to arrive or waiting for a peaceful settlement of our revolution. None would happen for a long, long time.

I saw my father three times. One day while walking from the school to the convent where I was housed, I saw my father in a car that was passing by. I screamed at the top of my voice, “Baba! Baba!” But all he did was wave his hands at me. I was left heartbroken and cried like I had never done before as the car sped away and disappeared round a bend. The second time I saw him, I shouted again at the top of my voice. This time, the car stopped. My father just hugged me and assured me that he would be coming home soon. The third time I saw him, he was in a bus, and he waved at me. I never understood why my father would not stop the car or the bus to meet us. I wept. My father was alive, and he promised that he would return home, but it dawned on me that my father was in grave danger. My father returned home after the signing of the BTC accord in the year 2003. He had been missing for six long years.

My Mother: A Tribal Feminist

When I think of the term “feminist,” my mother comes to mind. She has always followed her own path. She was a co-owner of her family homestead, and she never changed her surname to Swargiary, instead retaining her own surname Ramchiary after her marriage to my father. After leaving her home to go to my father’s village, she was the only matriculate in the village. The community selected her to be the aganwadi worker when its aganwadi center was set up in the year 1985. A young mother of five children, she wrote her teaching exams and secured good marks. She also managed the house and the farmlands. Performing her tasks as an aganwadi worker, I would see her attending her teaching lessons and providing the boiled cereals to children and mothers at the centre. She counseled women on childcare and family. Community members came to her for medical help. Just prior to the start of the conflict, she resigned from the post of aganwadi worker and got the job of an assistant teacher at the lower primary school in our village. She was an active member of women’s collective of the village and chief advocate for change. Addressing issues of domestic violence, alcoholism, health, and equal distribution of community resources was part of her life. Then, after my father went missing, she became the reservoir of strength and consistency for her five children in terms of providing a home and food, but also protecting us from the police, the army, and the warring Bodo groups.

The raids from the Assam Police/Indian Army became very frequent because they suspected families of helping and sheltering the rebels. A loud knock at the front door during the middle of the night sent shivers down our spine. My mother would say, “Don’t fear, you little angels, as long as I am with you.” She would open the door, holding us behind her, and provided answers to every question posed to her. Often slapped and pushed back with the gun, she would gather us all near her as the police personnel turned our entire house upside down searching for my father and non-existent guns, bullets, or contraband materials. I remember her gathering the community members, particularly women and children, and advising us always to be together, assemble together and move towards the aganwadi centre, or simply assemble together and be in one safe place, or assemble together and circle men in the centre so that security forces could not take them away.

Nonetheless, we lost our community activities. We stopped our television sessions, the saoris could no longer be organized, and this in turn affected our cultivation of crops, irrigation systems, and care for the poorer families of the village. On her end, my mother could not mobilise any help for upkeep of the activities that were once the bedrock of our community. We continued pursuing our studies and she continued juggling between her job, home, and the farmlands. The community named her “Manager.” Yes, she was all in all an excellent Manager. However, she often avoided participating in the social and political gatherings. Maybe she kept herself away from all of these because she was a single mother, or wife of a revolutionary. During village council meetings (which were attended only by men and were held by night), she sent my brother—however, she always attended the women’s council meetings.

During the different phases of the Bodoland Movement, the overall aim was greater autonomy of the Bodos by carving out a territory for them. Women were active in the movement by playing myriad of roles—information gatherers, carriers, advocates, revolutionaries, witnesses, conflict resolution agents, and peacemakers. Many Bodo women were imprisoned, molested, raped, and killed. Hundreds of women also disappeared and were killed alongside their men, or widowed (Goswami et al., 2005). During the movement, women organized the Assam Tribal Women’s Welfare Federation (AATWWF) which was later renamed as All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF) and came forward to participate at the movement as well as advocate for women’s rights. However, with the subsequent formation of the BTAD under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, women had no role in the newly formed political institution. After decades of movement, the decision to govern the newly formed BTAD became an all-men institution. It negated the contributions of the likes of my mother, who single-handedly mobilized other women as agents to stand strong in the face of adversity. These women were pained much, sacrificing their whole to safe-keep life, family, and the community.

My mother’s journey illustrates the journey of a Bodo woman’s struggle to protect life, family, and the Bodo community, even when the efforts of women have not been politically recognized.

For me, this experience demonstrates that the roots of oppression and violence go beyond the domain of men-women relationship to the relationship between the state and the people. Tribal feminism thus spans the micro to the macro by tracing tribal womanhood in the face of oppressive structures beyond men-women relationship to ethnic biases and prejudices against a tribal community by the dominant groups. A modern state became the tool for oppression at the hands of the dominant. My mother’s positioning, like that of many other women in my community, highlights the agency of tribal feminism for survival, safe-keeping of life and liberty, and rights of a community (women, men, and everybody else) as against the mainstream feminism expressed in terms of individualized conflict of power between men and women.

In My Mother’s Footsteps...

In my quiet moments of solitude, or during loud and boisterous social work engagements, I must confess that my heart is deeply pained, and at the same time overflows with gratitude and thankfulness for the unfathomable strength and courage that my mother transmitted on to me and others over the years of her tribulations. I also remember with anguish and pride the

sacrifices my father had to endure for the survival and dignity of my community. I began my social work journey with a humble ambition to learn and grow personally and professionally, and to be brave and courageous like my mother has been. I had also one desire: to keep myself awake at all times and to put in my best to everything that came my way, so that my mother's sacrifices did not go in vain. I now realize that her energy has made me grow tremendously over the years, beyond my wildest dreams and imaginations.

Being a Bodo woman who has been brought up by a wonderful mother under very trying circumstances has given me the opportunity to explore, understand, and locate myself in the milieu of aspirations for a better tomorrow. It is this hope for a better future that embodies respect for life and dignity of all which puts me in good stead as a social work professional. I am blessed with the capacity to immediately empathize with all human and sentient beings. I have learnt to be kind and compassionate and to deal with my clients, students, colleagues, and people in a relational, respectful, and responsive manner. I have also learnt that it is possible to do good and remain dignified in the face of oppression, and to work towards change as a sure possibility no matter what. I believe that my mother's role as a tribal feminist has in turn imbued in me strength and character as a young mother to a son and a daughter. It has emboldened my belief and faith in goodness and strength of my clients, students, and colleagues alike. Like my mother, I stride onward with humility, grace, and courage come what may—in moments of consternation and in moments of triumphs.

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“I Wish I Knew”: Helping Social Work International Students Achieve Their Clinical Professional Goals

Rujeko O. Machinga-Asaolu

Abstract: Driven by my personal experience and a desire to understand the journey of social work international students in the United States, I conducted interviews with three social work professionals. These individuals had completed their social work training as international students in the US. The aim of this study was to delve into and share the experiences of these social work international students, particularly in their pursuit of social work professional and career goals. The study focuses on how these students navigate immigration and social work-related policies during and after their program and offers insights on how to alleviate some of the challenges they face.

Keywords: social work education, social work practice, critical reflection, foreigners, immigration

An *international student* is defined as an individual with an F-1 or J-1 visa who crossed a national border outside of their country of origin and whose primary purpose is to complete an academic course of study at an immigration-certified school in the United States (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics, 2010). For US social work programs, international students strengthen diversity, bring a global perspective to the classroom, and help prepare Americans for the cultural competence and humility required in SW practice (Song & Petracchi, 2015; Zunz & Oil, 2009). Over the past few years, full-time international student enrollment for Master of Social Work (MSW) or Master of Science in Social Work (MSSW) programs has increased (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; CSWE, 2023). Despite the restrictive and often uncertain nature of US immigration policies, international students continue to pursue a US education, driven by aspirations for advanced training, global engagement, and meaningful career opportunities. However, difficulties with immigration processes are limiting their opportunities (Mowreader, 2025). As international students face increasing challenges while studying at US colleges and universities, academic programs must understand the unique challenges these students may experience and be well informed on the best ways to support them. For the social work field, “the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the NASW [National Association of Social Workers] make a strong moral case for immigration activism” (Levine, 2024, p. 119). This perspective is particularly relevant for supporting international students in social work in the US.

Although there are common challenges international students face, they are usually not publicly discussed (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). I was blinded and unprepared for the significant challenges I faced as an MSW/MSSW international student professional in the US. Consequently, my personal experiences have compelled me to explore how other MSW/MSSW international students navigate the immigration and SW requirement policies that potentially impact their professional trajectories. My goal is to support the next generation of international student social work professionals in the US and to raise awareness among those in positions of influence,

aiming to transform the professional trajectories of international student social work professionals. To fully understand my commitment to this work, it is important to share the personal journey that shaped my perspective as an international student.

I was born and raised in Zimbabwe, but my childhood changed forever at the age of 11 when my father moved to the United States for his postgraduate studies as an F-1 visa student. Our family was initially separated until my mother (also a F-1 visa student), my sister, and I (both on F-2 dependent visas) finally joined him. Like many others from lower-income countries, we considered this move pivotal for better life opportunities, better living conditions, and undeniably an unearned chance to open doors for future generations. Unfortunately, life in the US proved more complex than it had ever been for us while in Zimbabwe. Although my parents were both funded international students and met all financial requirements on paper, the reality was that they still struggled to make ends meet as a family of four and maintain their responsibilities of taking care of their mothers back in Zimbabwe. We immediately found ourselves drastically downgrading our living standards, from an abundance of survival resources to scrambling for basic needs to be met, and from owning a five-bedroom home to being crammed into a one-bedroom apartment, among many other sacrifices. Hoping things will get better with time, many international students are forced to endure these life sacrifices in pursuit of greener pastures and a better future. For my family, the American dream was cut short by immigration laws forcing us to return home. Years later, my mother, who was then pursuing her doctoral degree on her F-1 student visa, and I, still on an F-2 dependent visa, moved back to the US, leaving my father and younger sister in Zimbabwe. This decision to yet again separate our family was not by choice, but simply because the restrictive nature of the US immigration policies made it impossible for us to be sustainably together as a family. I watched my mother work tirelessly towards completing her doctoral degree in record time, with a clear goal of reducing the time she needed to spend in the US and not burden our family longer. Fast-forwarding a few years, my mother graduated and returned to Zimbabwe, where her work calling is, while I remained without my immediate family as a young F-1 visa student. Since then, the US immigration restrictive policies have either remained unchanged or become more restrictive.

My challenges as an international student intensified after graduation, as I struggled to navigate post-graduate life to remain a lawful non-immigrant. Nonetheless, even though I have lawfully spent over half of my life in the US, I still face immigration barriers, which have been exacerbated by my being an MSW/MSSW graduate pursuing a social work career.

Consequently, I have had to put on hold my professional desire to obtain an independent clinical license, as I have no other choice but to pursue my PhD without post-Master experience. My journey reflects not just the resilience required to survive systemic barriers, but also the urgent need to reimagine immigration and social work policies so that international students in social work in the US can fully pursue futures in clinical work they have worked so hard to build.

Policies

International students face hurdles that threaten their ability to accomplish their professional goals. Upon graduating, they have up to 60 days to leave the US, enroll in a different program, apply for student work authorization allowing up to one year for F-1s or 18 months for J-1s, find job sponsorship, or change their immigration status to US permanent residency (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], n.d.-a). Unfortunately, these immigration processes are not guaranteed, are case-by-case, and can be complex and costly (Pollak, 2017). In addition, MSW/MSSW international students must also navigate social work requirements policies. For instance, to become independently clinically licensed, most states require at least two to three years of supervised clinical work experience (Munday, n.d.). There is also usually a two-year post-MSW/MSSW direct practice experience required to obtain specific jobs like teaching practice classes in higher education (CSWE, 2022). These policies are meant to maintain the profession’s integrity; however, the reality is that the combination of these policy restrictions makes pursuing specific social work careers unattainable for international student graduates. International students migrate to the US for better opportunities, and these challenges pose a significant threat to their ability to stay and realize those opportunities—or to stay at all. Unfortunately, returning home also has challenges, such as reverse culture shock (Le & LaCost, 2017) and difficulty integrating into a home country’s job market (O’Malley, 2017). With this said, one wonders what the future of MSW/MSSW international students and social work in the US will look like if nothing is changed.

Although Song and Petracchi (2015) and Zunz and Oil (2009) provide some information to help international students during their social work programs, there is a lack of knowledge about the experiences of navigating immigration and social work policies before and after graduation, as well as the support needed for them. There must be an understanding of the unique immigration-related and social work-related requirements that impact their social work professional and career outcomes. This article aims to share the experiences of some MSW/MSSW international students in the US before and after graduating to achieve their social work career goals. The question guiding this article is: How do MSW/MSSW international students navigate immigration and social work-related requirements policies during and after their program?

Brief Aggregate Description of Interviewees

First, I want to acknowledge and appreciate the interviewees’ (pseudonyms provided) vulnerability in sharing their stories. Though the three interviewees shared many commonalities, they represented a diverse sampling of how international students experience and navigate immigration and social work requirements policies to achieve their social work professional and career outcomes. The MSW/MSSW degree was the highest earned for two participants, while a PhD in social work was for one participant. Unintentionally, all participants were from African countries (Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe). Although they are from one continent, the three participants shared unique narratives that captured different universal experiences of international students that influence post-graduation professional and career outcomes. Two identified as male and one as female. The participants ranged in age from 34 to 43, and continuous years in the US ranged from eight to 20. One participant has H1-B status, which is

later explained; one has obtained US permanent residency; and one relocated to Canada on a foreign worker status. The three participants shared unique narratives that captured different experiences of international students which influenced their post-graduation professional and career outcomes.

First Interviewee

“Rudo” is a 42-year-old, single Black Kenyan female. She resides in the US, has H1-B status, and is employed providing adult rehabilitative mental health services. Rudo moved to the US in 2002 to pursue a BA in social work but switched to sociology in her first year. As a “professional student,” before graduating with her MSW in 2019, Rudo started a Master of Human Services, Planning, and Administration and completed graduate certificates in non-profit leadership and ethnic studies. One year after her MSW, Rudo returned to being a student again, pursuing a graduate certificate program in psychology. Rudo’s professional dream is to become an independently licensed clinical social worker. She is currently on H-1B working status, which is expiring soon, without knowing what to do next. Even after 20 years of being in the US, Rudo has still yet to achieve her professional SW dreams and obtain permanent immigration status.

Second Interviewee

“Ayo” is a 34-year-old married Black Nigerian male. His highest degrees are a Master of Social Work and a Master of Psychology. He arrived in the US as an F-1 student in 2016 to pursue a Master in Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality (GWS) studies. He switched to a graduate certificate in GWS and enrolled in the MSW program a year later, graduating in 2019. After his MSW, Ayo was admitted into a PhD program. However, he realized he could not achieve his goal of becoming a licensed clinical social worker on his international student immigration status. He then changed his professional career. Ayo returned to school, pursuing a Master of Applied Clinical Research program. During this program, Ayo married his American citizen fiancée and is currently a full-time clinical researcher studying HIV.

Third Interviewee

“Tino” is a 43-year-old married Black Zimbabwean male currently living in Canada with foreign worker status as a post-doctoral social work fellow. He holds a PhD from the US in social work. His first experience in the US came through a mid-career professional development fellowship program, after which he returned to Zimbabwe. A few years later, he came back to the US to pursue a MSW degree, eventually continuing on to a PhD with the goal of focusing on public health–related research and becoming a scholar in academia. However, after completing his studies, Tino was unable to secure academic or non-academic employment in the US, which jeopardized his and his family’s immigration status. As a result, he was forced to move to Canada, though he still holds some hope of returning to the US in the future.

Integrated Narrative Reflections

I aimed to understand the experiences of other MSW/MSSW international students in the US before and after graduating to achieve their social work professional and career goals. Interviews with three individuals who completed their MSW/MSSW in the US as international students revealed common and different experiences that influence social work professional and career outcomes and multiple alternatives to consider when navigating immigration and social work requirements policies. Specifically, the interviewees discussed (a) identifying the challenges caused by the policies; (b) exploring alternative solutions to the obstacles; and (c) receiving external support as significant themes for how MSW/MSSW navigate some inhibiting policies.

Identifying the Challenges

All three interviewees identified specific immigration and social work requirements policies and referred to them as “barriers” to achieving their desired social work careers. The immigration policies commonly identified as challenges for international students before graduating are the ones that restrict their work: Students may be limited to only 20 working hours per week when school is in session, forced to work on-campus during their first academic year or longer, and/or confined to certain locations, jobs, or types of work. In addition, the participants described inconveniencing policies of social work requirements before graduating, like needing to complete practicum hours of up to 16–20 hours a week. Explaining how the intersection of immigration and SW policies impact MSW/MSSW international students during their program, Tino stated:

Most of the international students I know come from low-income families. So, even if they have full scholarships, they also care for families and need to work. But, if you are doing an MSW program, you cannot take extra work because of the practicum.

Unsurprisingly, all three interviewees also encountered financial issues, which added additional stressors as students, straining their relationship with their programs and preventing them from having consistently positive experiences in the US. These economic issues were tied to the identified immigration policies.

As if the challenges during the program are not enough, the work restrictions and additional social work requirements continue after graduation, especially if one aspires to become an independently licensed clinical social worker. Tino realized that his social work career decision to be in academia was stressful, but not as bad as trying to pursue other social work careers. “There are so many protocols for you to do clinical social work, which I avoided without knowing,” he said. Here, Tino referred to the need to pass two licensure exams after graduating, and to obtain many clinical hours through a paid post-graduation job. Unfortunately, Rudo and Ayo had to experience this firsthand. Rudo failed her initial licensure exam, stating that it was stressful to write in a second language and to be rushed to complete it in three hours. Furthermore, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has acknowledged significant racial disparities in the Association for Social Work Board (ASWB) licensure exams (NASW, 2022). Rudo was confident she would have promptly achieved her clinical social work

career goals without this barrier. Instead, she has had to accrue more practice hours to avoid the hassle of taking the initial licensure exam, a luxury of additional time international students do not have. Ayo shared his experience figuring out how to meet the practice hours requirements during the one year of his valid work permit, indicating a concern about how it was nearly impossible for him. Although the number of required practice hours differs from state to state, the obstacle remains for many international social work students. Nevertheless, when discussing accruing practice hours, international students must first consider getting a job to achieve it, which is a complex outcome for these students.

Getting a job as an international student in the US is easier said than done. The participants reported being unemployed because “many social work-related organizations are unwilling to invest in sponsoring their working visas.” For example, Rudo’s practicum wanted to hire her due to a shortage of Black social workers in their school district. However, because they are a government middle school, they had to go through tedious hoops to be granted permission to sponsor her and opted not to try the process. Tino was frustrated during his job search because he constantly had to initiate the conversation about being sponsored for a green card. He described how much pressure it was to do this when trying to be competitive for a job. Thankfully, both Ayo and Rudo were fortunate to be offered employment. However, both received low-ball offers that Ayo referred to as “unspeakable.” While Ayo rejected those offers, Rudo could not afford to do the same. Unethically, Rudo’s new workplace used their willingness to sponsor her as justification for how low her salary will be and assigned her job tasks that would not contribute towards her licensure requirements. Rudo stated, “I had no choice. I mean, I wanted a work permit. I wanted the chance to stay in the US longer.” Her feelings portray a significantly similar and genuine fear that other international students have.

Exploring Alternative Solutions

Although the participants identified immigration and social work requirement policies as barriers, what stood out the most was the fact that they all figured out a way forward. This reflected how challenges induced by these policies were not barriers but hurdles/obstacles that could be overcome with additional effort or a change in strategy. All participants sought solutions, indicating that there are different ways to navigate these policies. It is important to note that mentioning various alternatives in this study is only informational and not a replacement for legal and professional law advice. International students must seek appropriate immigration legal advice and seek their USCIS-designated school office (DSO) and program faculty members for more details and proper support.

After many years in school, Rudo was introduced to curricular practical training (CPT). This program temporarily allows international students with an F-1 visa to gain practical experience directly related to their major through employment, paid or unpaid internships, or cooperative (co-op) education while still in school (USCIS, n.d.-c). Ayo experienced severe economic hardship due to unforeseen circumstances beyond his control. With much evidence, he qualified for off-campus work authorization while in school through the “economic hardship status.” On the other hand, Tino was strategic before he even came to the US. He knew he would not be able to sustain his family within F-1 status, so he instead opted to be on the J-1 status. With F-1

status, a spouse cannot work as a dependent and can only engage in part-time recreational study, like taking English classes, but the J-1 status provides permission from the USCIS for spouses as dependents (J-2s) to work or study in the US. Like CPT, J-1s can be authorized for off-campus work while in school under practical academic training. Through this, Tino had a paid internship off-campus for the entire program and sustained his family financially.

After graduation, there are also options that all three participants became aware of as alternatives to minimize the burden. Rudo found out after the licensure exam that, as a foreigner from whom English is a second language, she could have requested an additional hour for the exam from the ASWB. Nevertheless, she was grateful that she could obtain work authorization through the H-1B. The H-1B visa allows US employers to invest financial and non-financial resources and temporarily employ foreign workers in specialty occupations (USCIS, n.d.-b). Although H-1B was not Ayo’s direct experience, he mentioned it as an option, alongside the national interest waiver (NIW) and other employment-based work authorizations as potential options he was looking into. He recognized that even if immigration processes are complicated and “it is a long shot, you just have to give it a shot.” Other mentioned options are getting married to a permanent resident or US citizen to potentially get a green card, the optional practical training of up to one year for F-1 MSW/MSSW students, and academic training of up to 18 months for J-1 MSW/MSSW students. More information about the indicated immigration alternatives can be found at the end of this article.

Another alternative that all three experienced to maintain their immigration-documented status was remaining enrolled in school. I resonate with this option. However, one can only stay in school for so long, which is financially draining. Finally, Ayo said if he had known of immigration and social work limitations early enough, he would have been discouraged from studying social work. In due course, people like Ayo and Tino, who have a passion and calling for social work and can significantly contribute to the field of social work in the US, are forced to make tough decisions, whether it is to leave the field of social work like Ayo or to move away from what has been home for years in the US to a different country like Canada in the case of Tino. While it brings hope that some options exist for MSW/MSSW international students to help navigate immigration and SW requirement policies, immigration-related alternatives can never be generalized and are usually based on a case-by-case situation. In addition, international students cannot do it alone and need to seek external support.

Receiving External Support

Navigating immigration and social work requirements policies requires assistance from others like peers and family, social work faculty, international office DSOs, and employers if possible. A significant lesson learned early by Tino was that networking is essential for international students. It is not just about what you know, but whom you know that is important. Therefore, international students are encouraged to connect with many people when they know they are coming to the US. It is important to understand that some cultures view directness as disrespectful; however, in the American culture, it is very acceptable to send cold emails to different faculty members seeking mentorship. All participants were introduced to the various policies and informed about the other solutions through different individuals in their support

network. The most helpful for all three participants were family and peers. Rudo said she had to constantly go back to her peers, asking them what to do next, and for Ayo, those who had gone before him were willing to share their experiences to help him out. However, knowing that everyone’s situation is different is essential, and immigration policies can change anytime. Therefore, when information is shared from non-professionals like immigration lawyers or designated school officials for immigration purposes, it is good practice to always do your due diligence to verify whether it applies to you.

Social work faculty also played a significant role in helping international students navigate their lives during and after graduating. CPT and practical academic training require dedication and commitment from individuals, notably those in higher education positions, to make untraditional decisions that cater to international students’ needs. For Tino, it took his previous dean and current field experience coordinator to advocate for him to a local agency, so he was hired on salary for his internship. In addition, they made necessary changes and approvals for him to stay at the same practicum site for his entire program. Rudo’s program director explained different licensure alternatives to her after failing her exam. They also shared information about asking ASWB for test time accommodations because English is her second language after she failed multiple times. In addition, due to the advisor’s lack of understanding of international students’ issues, they provided Rudo with contacts of potential organizations that may sponsor her and information about immigration lawyers to help her. Ayo and Rudo experienced a significant lack of support and proper direction from the social work faculty during their time in the MSW/MSSW programs. The two reported that their faculty members “were ignorant” and did not know about their challenges. As a result, they were misguided in ways that impacted their studies and career trajectories. Rudo regrets not changing her advisors early on, and Ayo’s relationship with the program was tarnished. On the contrary, Tino had a positive, supportive experience with faculty who knew precisely what he needed and ensured he and his family were well connected. This shows that, if knowledgeable and intentional, social work faculty can transform the trajectory of MSW/MSSW international students in the US.

Finally, nothing can be done regarding immigration issues without a DSO. Every alternative option needed a DSO’s knowledge, support, and guidance. For Rudo and Ayo, it was only when they sought advice that their DSO was beneficial and even shared helpful unconventional alternatives. This means one should not wait to be approached and should take the initiative to seek guidance. Last, Tino and Rudo were fortunate enough to have practicum sites willing to work with them to navigate the challenges they faced. For Rudo to obtain her H1-B, her nonprofit practicum organization had to partner with a for-profit organization to sponsor her work visa. This was because the non-profit could not afford to hire her, and there are also advantages of a non-profit filing for a student due to not having any cap on how many work visas the government can approve. Likewise, Tino’s practicum site was willing to keep him as an employee before and after graduating with his MSW.

Summarized Findings

MSW/MSSW international students are no ordinary international students and have much more to navigate than is acknowledged. They face unique challenges because of the combination of

immigration and social work requirements policies, influencing their social work and helping their professional and career trajectory. Identifying the potential challenges of these policies serves as the first step to navigating them to avoid violating immigration status by seeking unauthorized employment. If student status is violated, students face serious repercussions like immediate termination of student status and deportation. Second, the uniqueness of the interviewees in this study is that these policy-induced challenges did not serve as barriers but simply as obstacles: temporary blocks that may be overcome with advanced planning and support systems in place. Ultimately, MSW/MSSW international students have some options to explore to help them navigate the different policies. However, even with all these alternative options, it must not be generalized as it is based on a case-by-case situation. The alternative options mentioned in this study are very complicated, and can take up to years, leaving one in jeopardy. For instance, failing to follow the working hours policy for CPT or the practical academic training may result in lost eligibility for optional practical training or academic training, respectively, after graduation. Therefore, one must carefully decide what works for them with appropriate guidance. Third, external consultation and support must be sought from the appropriate people. Through a supportive network of people, information that international students in this paper had never had access to suddenly became available at a time of dire need through other people.

A Call to Action

Implications for Social Work Programs

The findings from these interviews contribute to the knowledge of how MSW/MSSW international students can navigate immigration and SW requirements policies before and after they graduate. However, the lingering thought is that if the international students had this information much earlier and had suitable support systems in place, would their professional/career paths, outcomes, and decisions have been different? MSW/MSSW international students must make well-informed decisions to pursue a social work education in the US. Being explicit about the various issues impacting their professional trajectory is necessary. As a profession, social work takes pride in diversity, integrity, and service. As many accredited social work programs in the US continue to expand and enroll international students, the programs must seek the necessary support and become sensitized to the issues their international students' experience. The program should also work with its international students and others to inform the students about the way forward and to be flexible in their ways of doing things that accommodate arising needs. In addition, something to consider for MSW/MSSW programs is developing mentoring programs, pairing international student alumni or advanced current international students with new students. Programs could also consider having information readily available for prospective MSW/MSSW international students to be well-informed about pursuing a social work helping profession. Due to the intersection of immigration and social work policies, the international office and the social work faculty advisors must be savvy about specific immigration-related potential challenges social work international students face and how to navigate them.

Expanding Opportunities Through Policy Reform

Acknowledged is the social work profession’s movement towards changes, particularly with the licensing exam and the licensure compact. However, our international social work students will still face immigration barriers. Hence, social work professionals must also engage policymakers in modifying the national immigration policies to alleviate some of the challenges faced by international social work students. A very practical and powerful immigration policy change is to permit international US SW students to have the ability to extend their one-year post-graduation work authorization to up to three years post-graduation at each degree level. For this to happen, social work as a profession and academic field must first be recognized by USCIS as a STEM-related field (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [USDHS], 2022). As it stands, SW meets the criteria that allow this classification as being a “related field” to STEM because in our education and practice, we are actively engaging in work (clinical or not) that informs research, innovation, and the application of sciences to address complex social issues. We engage in program or service evaluations, which require statistical and mathematical analytical skills. Through rigorous scientific inquiry using statistical methods and interdisciplinary collaboration (including with psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, public health experts, statisticians, and researchers in related fields), social workers advance knowledge and develop effective evidence-based interventions to promote individual and community well-being. Therefore, the path forward is clear: In an era where clinical social workers are in high demand due to increasing clinical needs in the US population, as a profession, we must mobilize by lobbying policymakers, submitting letters of support, and urging professional organizations such as NASW, CSWE, and IFSW to formally petition with the USDHS to designate social work as a STEM-related field. Doing so will expand post-graduation work authorization for international social work students, allowing them more time to attain their independent clinical licenses, gain practical experience, contribute to the US workforce, and strengthen communities through evidence-based practices.

Research Gaps and Opportunities

Lastly, social work and higher education researchers should engage in qualitative and quantitative research to further understand the unique needs of international students in social work. Current research has identified challenges for international students during their studies: language, acculturative stress, jobs, transportation, religious interactions, identity, social interactions, Westernized pedagogies, different learning styles, lack of faculty support, and finances (Almurideef, 2016; Ejioko, 2010; Gautam et al., 2016; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Song & Petracchi, 2015; Zunz & Oil, 2009). For social work international students in the US, research has focused on how to support them in field placements (Zunz & Oil, 2009) and on adaptation needs when they start school (Song & Petracchi, 2015). However, nothing is known about how immigration and social work requirements policies impact MSW/MSSW students in the US during or after their program to help achieve their professional goals. Future research on this will be timely as social work continues to grow as a profession and international trainees are enrolled.

Conclusion on Reflection

It took me a while to acknowledge that the specific challenges I have faced might not apply to others. Curiosity, an essential skill, helped me then to explore others’ unique experiences in-depth. However, this reflection piece benefits from my basic understanding of the immigration-related terminology used by the participants. Knowledge of the concept being explored helped me develop specific probes and follow-up questions during the interviews. As a result, the data was rich, and I avoided making many assumptions. I, however, also quickly realized that there was more I did not know about immigration and SW policies, as well as alternatives to navigating them. Unexpectedly, during the interviewing process, I needed to empathize with the research participants who shared heartbreaking experiences during and after their MSW program. Transference and countertransference pay particular attention to emotional and affective reactions between the interviewer and participant (Holmes, 2014; Johanssen, 2016). If one is not self-aware in the present, projected thoughts and feelings can quickly produce an environment that results in an unbalanced, biased, or dishonest dialogue. At some points during interviews, I experienced intense frustration, bitterness, and anger regarding the ignorance of different SW program personnel in the US about the immigration and SW-related regulations international students must endure. I took many deep breaths, shed some tears, and utilized verbal and nonverbal actions to acknowledge the misery and validate the participants’ experiences.

However, hearing the success stories of some interviewees in navigating or avoiding the challenges brought hope and a sense of comfort in knowing that this study would contribute towards increasing knowledge to make social work students thrive professionally in the US. This process leaves me with some hope that, as we become more aware of these challenges, something can be done about them. I am ready to be part of that process, and my question is, are you also ready? Ultimately, this reflection has reinforced for me that awareness is only the first step. What truly matters is turning that awareness into action. I invite colleagues, educators, and policymakers to join me in advocating for meaningful changes that will ensure international social work students in the US are not only seen and heard, but also fully supported to thrive, for the benefit of a stronger, more innovative, and culturally responsive social work profession in the US.

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List of Resources for Immigration-Related Solutions

Curricular Practical Training (CPT)/Optional Practical Training, J-1 Status/Practical Academic Training

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Foreign academic students*.
<https://www.uscis.gov/archive/foreign-academic-students>

Economic Hardship

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Immigration relief in emergencies or unforeseen circumstances*. <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/special-situations>

F-1 Status/F-2 Dependent

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Changing to a nonimmigrant F or M student status*. <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/students-and-employment/changing-to-a-nonimmigrant-f-or-m-student-status>

H-1B Visa

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *H-1B specialty occupations*.
<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/h-1b-specialty-occupations>

National Interest Waiver (NIW)

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Employment-based immigration: Second preference EB-2*. <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/permanent-workers/employment-based-immigration-second-preference-eb-2>

Employment-Based Work Authorization

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Permanent workers*.
<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/permanent-workers>

Lived Experiences of Transgender and Gender Nonbinary Adults Aged 50+ Shared Through Art & Film: Reflections of a Social Work Educator

Jeanne Koller

Abstract: By featuring artists from diverse and underrepresented groups, institutions of higher education have the potential to make the invisible visible, foster connections between universities and communities, build a sense of belonging, and improve campus climate. I, a social work educator, share reflections after coordinating a college campus art exhibit with artists aged 50+ who identify as transgender and/or gender nonbinary and a companion film screening featuring a family with a transgender woman parent. Themes of visibility, belonging, and campus climate weave throughout the discussion. Beyond LGBTQ+ services on campus, programs focused on trans inclusivity and transgender and gender nonbinary identities are recommended.

Keywords: visibility, belonging, campus climate, trans spaces

Terminology

The following terms and their definitions according to the Human Rights Campaign (2023a) are provided to assist readers. However, please keep in mind that terminology is ever changing, and terms are used in personal and unique ways by each person.

- LGBTQ+: Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer with a “+” sign to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of the community (Human Rights Campaign, 2023a). The acronym LGBT+ will also be used to represent the community in this essay.
- Transgender (T): Umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression is different than cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth (Human Rights Campaign, 2023a). *Trans* and *gender diverse* are also inclusive umbrella terms used for a person whose gender is different to what was presumed at birth (TransHub, 2023).
- Cisgender: Term that describes individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth (Human Rights Campaign, 2023a).
- Gender nonbinary (GNB): Individuals who do not identify as exclusively male or female. They may identify as both, in between, or falling outside of the binary concepts of male and female. It can also be used as an umbrella term encompassing other gender identities (e.g., genderqueer, gender-fluid; Human Rights Campaign, 2023a).

- Gender non-conforming (GNC): Someone whose gender identity and/or gender expression expands beyond, actively resists, and/or does not conform to the current cultural or social expectations of gender, particularly in relation to male or female (see also gender nonbinary; TransHub, 2023). Both GNB and GNC can be used as umbrella terms for various gender identities. Throughout this essay, GNB and GNC will be utilized interchangeably as umbrella terms.

Statement of Positionality

I am a White, cisgender, older adult, able-bodied lesbian with my doctorate degree in social work. I am on faculty at the School of Social Work at Monmouth University in the United States.

Introduction

Monmouth University's LGBT+ Older Adult Project (OAP) is an initiative in the School of Social Work that seeks to improve the quality of life of older LGBT+ adults through research, education, advocacy, and community service. As the new coordinator of OAP in 2020, I searched for ways to advance this mission. Initial ideas included starting a podcast series and hosting conferences related to LGBT+ older adults.

The first two conferences were related to the larger LGBT+ older adult community, but the conference held in 2022 focused solely on older adults in the transgender and gender non-conforming (T/GNC) community. Titled "Aging and the Lived Experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming (T/GNC) Adults," this national conference was well attended, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Many, including myself, particularly liked the stories told by panelists about their lived experiences. Afterwards, I was motivated to sponsor more initiatives on issues related to older adults' gender identities. I realized I had not done enough to highlight the oftentimes invisible group of T/GNB older adults.

Six months later on a vacation in Vermont, needing an indoor activity due to rain, my spouse and I decided to visit the Middlebury College Museum of Art. Besides a handful of staff, there was no one there but us. We were not sure what to expect and had nothing but time. There was a sign at the gallery articulating this museum's mission. Museums typically have prioritized art created by White men, and contributions by marginalized groups have been overlooked. In contrast, this museum sought to feature artists from diverse groups, especially women, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color), and LGBTQ+ individuals (Middlebury College Museum of Art, 2023). This moved me. Perhaps the lived experiences of T/GNB individuals could be expressed through their own artwork and highlighted at my school.

Upon return, inspired by the power of what I saw and felt at the Middlebury Gallery, I immediately began planning an art exhibit and film screening featuring artists aged 50+ who identify as T/GNB. With support and guidance, the process was underway, and our Center for Arts issued a "call to artists and filmmakers" posted on an art gallery platform reaching people across the United States and internationally. An excerpt from the "call" is as follows:

[We are] seeking artists and filmmakers aged fifty and older who identify as transgender, gender nonconforming, gender expansive, gender non-binary or additional gender identity beyond the binary. ...

Piece(s) submitted should represent for you aspects of your life as a T/GNC individual. The art may reflect your journey (emotional, psychological, and/or physical) to live your authentic self and/or may represent other experiences you have had related to your gender identity. A short narrative should accompany any artwork you submit and include your reflections on the experiences of living as a T/GNC individual.

Films submitted should be related to the lives of T/GNC older adults.
(Monmouth University Center for the Arts, 2022, paras. 3–5)

Art Exhibit & Film Screening Details

After a number of digital submissions arrived, the artwork was reviewed, and a total of 27 pieces of high-quality mixed media art—including a short video from six artists and one full-length film for a film screening—were selected. Of note, within the T/GNC community there is tremendous diversity in all identities including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and age. The community also varies by gender identities such as trans men, trans women, gender nonbinary, gender fluid, two-spirit, etc. The artists that participated in our exhibit were all aged 50+ and their gender identities were as follows: two identified as trans women, one identified as a trans man, two identified as gender fluid and/or two-spirit, and one did not share their gender identity. We do not know the artists' other identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, etc.). The exhibit was held for one and a half months in the winter of 2023, and approximately 200–250 individuals visited the art show.

The film selected was titled *From This Day Forward* (2015). It is a documentary sharing the story of director Sharon Shattuck's family, her parents, and their marriage after Sharon's father came out as transgender and changed her name to Trisha. Trisha and wife Marcia stayed together, and daughter Sharon sought more understanding as she reunited with her parents to prepare for her own wedding. The film screening was held on one day only in February 2023 and was followed by a Zoom panel discussion with Sharon, Trisha, and Marcia Shattuck.

Feedback

After visiting the exhibit, people had the opportunity to complete a brief exit survey. The surveys were not part of a research study but were a means to gather feedback both for the gallery and for OAP about the exhibit. No hypotheses were made and no data was analyzed. Overall, the feedback was very positive and affirming.

Verbal feedback was also positive. Prior to, during, and after the art exhibit and film screening, individual LGBTQ+ students and faculty contacted me sharing that they felt this was a significant and meaningful event to them. A common theme was that this event made them feel welcomed and supported by our university. Feedback from the community outside of the

university was complimentary. The exhibit and film screening's visitors expressed a strong appreciation—both for the beauty of seeing art from the perspective of their own community and for the show's simple existence.

The film screening had a similar effect. After the film screening, attendees from the public spoke with me and shared firsthand experiences about family members and friends. Some people attended the exhibit and film hoping to increase their understanding specifically so that they could be a “better ally” to their loved ones. Some were there because they had little knowledge about the topic, and they communicated that the film and discussion afterwards opened their eyes. Most mentioned how moving the film was and listening to the family after the film was especially poignant. A few commented that it was a tribute to Monmouth University that they had this exhibit and film screening given the current hostile rhetoric related to trans and gender nonbinary individuals across the country. The art exhibit and film screening gave visibility to the T/GNC older adult community and, as a result, I hoped that a message of inclusivity was conveyed to students, faculty, staff, and the public.

Challenges

Bathrooms

I realized when I visited the exhibit soon after its opening that there were no gender-inclusive, gender-neutral, and/or single-occupancy restrooms in the building housing the art gallery and theatre. As recommended by the Williams Institute, universities should provide an ample number of gender-inclusive or single-stall restrooms across their campuses (Goldberg, 2018). I inquired about this with the directors there, who let me know that there was a gender-neutral restroom available in the building next door. I walked from the art gallery to this building. Although close by, it was highly inconvenient and would also be challenging for anyone with ambulation problems. I asked if there was any way this issue could be rectified—at least for the day of the film screening. One of the public restrooms was temporarily assigned as gender-neutral, and a sign was created for it in the lobby and hallway.

Although an arrangement was made, I was disappointed in the school and in myself. I had not thought about the issue of whether the building offered non-gendered restrooms in the planning of this event. I had visited the building on multiple occasions, including visiting the exhibit the night before it opened. Each time I used their bathroom, I never noticed there were no gender-inclusive restroom options. This very visible issue for T/GNB individuals was invisible to me. It was a significant oversight and came from a position of privilege. I suspect that if I identified as T/GNB, bathroom accessibility would have been incorporated into the planning of these events.

This lack of awareness prompted me to find out what buildings on campus have these options. The good news is that there are gender-inclusive, gender-neutral, and/or single-occupancy bathroom options scattered across campus. Unfortunately, not every building has a non-gendered bathroom option, and some of these bathroom options are inconveniently located (e.g., on the third floor). According to Beemyn, director of the UMass Amherst Stonewall Center, the lack of a sufficient number of gender-inclusive and single-user bathrooms is an example of a

cisnormative structure on college campuses, and this can negatively impact T/GNB students and their experiences at school (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2023). Beemyn explains that trans students must choose whether to face potential harassment and discrimination in a gendered bathroom; “hold it in,” which can lead to health issues; or go out of their way to get to the gender-inclusive bathroom options. None of these options are acceptable.

Art Entries

Compared with other calls for art entries that the gallery has had, we received fewer submissions than usual for consideration. Although the specific reasons for this are unclear, one plausible reason is the heightened visibility of identifying as T/GNC simply by participating in the exhibit. As compared with other exhibits where artists may or may not share their gender identity based on their comfort level, our exhibit required that the person identified as T/GNB.

This guess is in part based on a conversation I had with one of the artists whose artwork was already accepted. They reached out to me with questions about who would be attending the exhibit and film screening and had expressed reluctance to participate in an exhibit displaying the artwork of T/GNC individuals. Yet, they also expressed that this exhibit and their participation in it was important for them and for others. The artist ultimately decided to have their art included in the exhibit. Their reluctance, though, was understandable. Given the current backlash against the T/GNC community across the United States, fear of publicly identifying as T/GNC is a legitimate concern.

Other reasons for the limited number of entries may have been the strict inclusion criteria related to the artists’ identities (i.e., age 50+ and gender identity of T/GNC) and the inclusion criteria regarding content of the artwork (i.e., expressing artists’ journeys—emotional, psychological, and/or physical—to live their authentic selves and/or other experiences they had related to gender identity). In retrospect if we had the call for artwork open to T/GNC artists of all ages we may have had more artwork submitted. The percentage of T/GNC individuals in the general population is small. Thus, the number of artists within this group is even smaller. Age also impacts the numbers—older T/GNB adults are less likely than youth to be “out” with their gender identity. According to the Pew Research Center (Brown, 2022), only 0.3 percent of adults ages 50+ identify as trans or nonbinary as compared with 5.1 percent of adults ages 18–29.

This differential by age of those who identify as T/GNC may be related to older T/GNC adults having experienced a lifetime of discrimination, rejection from families, and violence (McDowell et al., 2019; Sloan & Benson, 2022). Yet, focusing on those aged 50+ highlighted a group oftentimes overlooked and invisible within both the larger LGBTQ+ community and within the T/GNC community. T/GNC older adults are impacted by multiple levels of stigma, oftentimes faring worse than their LGB older adult peers in many health and mental health measures (Fabbre & Gaveras, 2020; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014; Hoy-Ellis & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017; Lampe et al., 2023; Velasco et al., 2023).

Reflections

After the art exhibit and film screening, I wondered if these events helped current T/GNB students, faculty, and staff at Monmouth University feel supported and welcome on our campus. I also considered how these events impacted the larger community's sentiments about our school. Would prospective LGBTQ+ college students seek Monmouth as a school because it hosted these events? Will Monmouth University be perceived as providing a positive campus climate for LGBTQ+ students and T/GNB students in particular?

These are important questions to ask because unfortunately many T/GNB college students have negative experiences, do not perceive their campus climate as positive, and do not feel a sense of belonging (Austin, Craig, Alessi, et al., 2016). T/GNB students are a marginalized group within college communities nationwide. Prior to entering college, the majority who were out and/or perceived as transgender in grades K-12 had one or more negative experiences correlated with poor outcomes, such as higher rates of attempted suicide and psychological distress (James et al., 2016).

These negative experiences continue for T/GNB college students in IHEs. Challenges for these students include experiencing higher levels of harassment, feeling less accepted as part of the campus community, and reporting more discrimination as compared with their cisgender peers (Goldberg, 2018). Using data from the US 2015–2017 Healthy Minds Study which randomly selected 65,213 students at 71 campuses including 1,237 gender minority (GM) students, Lipson et al. (2019) found that GM college students have a significantly higher prevalence of symptoms across multiple mental health measures (i.e., depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-injury, and suicidality) than cisgender students. The difference was dramatic—GM status was associated with 4.3 times higher odds of having at least one mental health problem (Lipson et al., 2019). According to James et al. (2016), approximately 16 percent of T/GNB students leave school to avoid being harassed or for other reasons related to being transgender.

Findings were similar when Budge et al. (2020) sought to understand the impact of minority stress on college students who identified as nonbinary. The authors looked at the students' perceptions of campus climate and sense of belonging at the school. They found that nonbinary students who did not feel they belonged on campus and did not have a positive perception of campus climate reported more impact from minority stress than those who reported feelings of belonging and a more positive climate. The results reinforced the need for universities to improve campus climate and be more welcoming to nonbinary students. Budge et al. recommended that IHEs need to build in programming and training for faculty and staff that focus on nonbinary students and their needs, offer nonbinary inclusive mental and physical health services, and post visible and inclusive information across departments.

According to the Williams Institute (Goldberg, 2018), college curricula that addresses gender identities, and specifically trans identities and experiences, can improve T/GNB students' experiences in IHEs. Although the art exhibit and film screening were one-time events lasting for one and a half months, they were T/GNB-specific and were integrated into some course work. Visiting the art exhibit was woven into the syllabus of one social work course and

integrated into one art course. Attendance at the film screening was required by one social work course and encouraged by one communications course. Additionally, some courses offered extra credit opportunities if students attended the art exhibit and/or film screening. In these ways, curricula in three academic areas—social work, communications, and art—exposed students to learning about gender identities and lived experiences. Research shows that T/GNB students who participate in LGBTQ+ academic experiences tend to perceive a warmer campus climate (Garvey et al., 2019).

The art exhibit and film screening also highlighted the visibility of T/GNB people on campus. One aspect of belonging mentioned by minoritized students in Vaccaro and Newman's (2016) study was seeing similar people so that they do not feel like they are the "only one" on their campus. While the exhibit and film screening did not feature fellow students, faculty, or staff who identify as T/GNB, the events displayed T/GNB persons' artwork. Also, the events were not hidden—they were vigorously promoted through advertising in the student online paper, posting hard-copy flyers around campus, and advertising on social media. Thus, most of Monmouth University's students learned that these events were happening.

Ideally the visibility of these events gave some students a feeling like they are not alone, and fostered a sense of belonging. Students' sense of belonging, which can include being valued, connected, heard, respected, understood, and being their authentic selves, has been found to be closely linked with whether the students will feel comfortable and succeed at an IHE (West, 2022). Privileged and minoritized students explain belonging differently, though, with privileged students describing a sense of belonging if involvement in activities is fun and people are friendly and, in contrast, minoritized students emphasizing the importance of involvement opportunities where they could be real and find an authentic fit (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

Visibility serves other purposes too. It is one way that the LGBTQ+ community has advocated for rights over the years and creates opportunities to have community and support. According to GLAAD (2023), as the LGBTQ+ community has expanded and become more visible, acceptance and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ persons in the United States has improved, with more non-LGBTQ+ persons supporting equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community than ever before. In contrast, if marginalized communities are invisible, they can be ignored, overlooked, and have no voice—and stigma and social marginalization are reinforced.

Efforts to increase visibility of the LGBTQ+ community can be seen in various initiatives, especially since the Stonewall Uprising in 1969. The first Pride march was held in New York City on the one-year anniversary of Stonewall on June 28, 1970, and over the years it morphed into a series of gay pride events throughout the month of June celebrated now as LGBTQ+ Pride month (Library of Congress, 2023). The International Trans Day of Visibility (TDoV) created by Crandall-Crocker (2021) years later in 2009 has made a significant difference for trans individuals, especially youth. Crandall-Crocker (2021) has heard from T/GNB individuals that this day is the "most important day" of the year for them and has "saved their lives" (para. 7).

With the increasing visibility of T/GNB individuals, however, there has also been an increase in backlash, political attacks, and violence against the community, especially against trans women

of color (Human Rights Campaign, 2023b). In 2023 alone, as of May 2, 2023, over 540 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in state legislatures, and over 220 bills specifically aimed against transgender and gender nonbinary individuals were introduced (Peele, 2023). Of the 45 anti-LGBTQ+ laws that were enacted in 2023 thus far, most target the rights of transgender and gender nonbinary individuals (Peele, 2023). In addition to political attacks, we know T/GNB individuals are vulnerable to victimization and violence and are at an increased risk of psychological distress, depression, suicidality, and substance abuse as compared with their LGB peers (Hoy-Ellis & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017; Newcomb et al., 2019; Price-Feeney et al., 2020).

Thus visibility, while necessary for progress, acceptance, and support, can be potentially harmful and could be considered a “double-edged sword” for marginalized groups. It can also be argued that visibility is not problematic for the dominant culture. My positionality as a cisgender individual provided me with privilege and a perceived level of safety while coordinating these events that T/GNB persons in the same position may not have experienced. For those in marginalized groups, visibility can indeed be scary.

Mercer (2019), a member of the Stonewall Trans Advisory Group, raised the issue that many trans individuals are fearful and face potential abuse and discrimination every day, so they do not necessarily feel comfortable being visible on the TDoV. Mercer argues that to help trans individuals feel safe more people must come out as allies and show their support for the trans community. When asked, Crandall-Crocker (2021) acknowledges that any visibility can bring attacks and agrees that it is not the trans individuals who need to be visible so much as the allies. Hopefully, the art exhibit and film screening increased awareness, understanding, acceptance, and allyship of cisgender persons towards T/GNB individuals.

Finally, the art exhibit created a temporary trans-specific space on campus. Trans-specific spaces are vital in improving T/GNB student experiences (Goldberg, 2018). Goldberg (2018) explains that spaces and/or groups should support trans-related programming and events. Even if college campuses have LGBTQ+ resource centers and student groups, many are centered around sexual orientation rather than gender identity. Further, Garvey et al. (2019) found that perceptions held by trans students regarding campus climate were not solely due to the presence of LGBTQ+ student services but rather by the quality and trans inclusivity of those services. The authors recommended that IHEs create trans-centered services and programs.

Conclusions

The art exhibit and film screening were successful events and may have helped promote a positive campus climate and sense of belonging for T/GNB faculty, staff, and students at Monmouth University. In addition, the events created a temporary trans-specific space on campus. Those who do not identify as T/GNB may have increased awareness and understanding and hopefully will consider themselves to be allies and advocate for their T/GNB peers.

One takeaway for faculty in higher education is to think creatively and consider the use of art and/or film for learning activities related to understanding the lived experiences of other cultures and groups. Educators may not have the opportunity, time, and/or resources to initiate an exhibit

or film screening but can explore what their campuses and local community offer. Attendance at these events with corresponding assignments (e.g., reflection papers) can be incorporated into syllabi.

Specific towards improving climate and a sense of belonging for T/GNB students, faculty should include the topic of gender identities formally into curricula, provide educational opportunities for students related to the T/GNB community, help create trans-specific spaces, and encourage T/GNB sensitivity trainings for fellow staff/faculty on campus. These steps may also encourage true allyship for those who do not identify as T/GNB. Beyond LGBTQ+ services at IHEs, programs focused on trans inclusivity and transgender and gender nonbinary identities should be initiated.

Finally, more research assessing the best ways to improve campus climate and belonging for T/GNB students should be conducted. Although suggested guidelines for T/GNB affirmative education in IHEs have been published (e.g., Austin, Craig, & McInroy, 2016; Goldberg, 2018), these reports do not capture current literature. Research from recent years may shed light on which guidelines can be the most and least helpful in creating a welcoming environment, positive campus climate, and sense of belonging for T/GNB students.

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R.I.S.E.: An Intercampus Collaboration and Strategies to Re-Imagine Social Work Education

José Paez, Marissa C. Hansen, Melissa Hernandez, and Angelica Reyes

Abstract: During the summer of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and national protests in response to police brutality and institutional racism created intense feelings of anger, pain, and isolation. With the effects manifesting in our classrooms, we realized the need to re-establish connection and community. This paper is our story about how faculty and students from two schools of social work in southern California built an intercampus collaboration—R.I.S.E. (Re-Imagining Social Work Education)—to address the seen and felt gaps in current social work education model. We share strategies, activities, and an analysis of reflective conversations about our experience which revealed four thematic categories: (1) connection led to community-building, (2) acknowledgement led to healing, (3) critical consciousness led to empowerment and accountability, and (4) taking action led to tools for change. Our findings support the importance of intercampus collective actions to make multi-level systematic changes in social work education.

Keywords: critical consciousness, accountability, empowerment, pedagogy, social work

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy, 2020, para. 46)

Introduction

The year 2020 brought the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic, massive protests in response to systemic racism manifested by police violence and murder, and highly polarizing and tense electoral campaigns. It was a time, as the great novelist and political activist Arundhati Roy (2020) described so vividly, where “the tragedy [was] immediate, real, epic and unfolding before our eyes” (para. 8). As social work educators and students, what unfolded in our classrooms was a shared and overwhelming sense of grief and loss, disconnection, and isolation. Though we were grateful for the technological advancements allowing a rapid shift to online classroom settings, the abrupt transition accompanied by the ongoing chaos caused significant distress within the personal, professional, and political domains of our lives. We further felt constrained by pressures to maintain some sort of normalcy and to conform to the rigid expectations of course competencies, assignments, and grades. Within the context of chaos and tragedy, such academic expectations seemed much less important and relevant. For us, what seemed most pressing were the very real threats impacting our personal and relational safety, health, and well-being. Thus, we relied on classroom time to prioritize and process our frustrations, anxieties, anger, and growing disillusionment with institutions and cultural norms that lacked the necessary critical leadership, analysis, and language to help.

On a weekly basis, we looked to one another for support in trying to make sense of what we were experiencing. We also turned to our sages for guidance and hope. One particular sage was Arundhati Roy (2020), whose deft analysis of the pandemic provided the contextual social-political-historical factors and power dynamics simultaneously interacting to cause great devastation and inequity. Roy (2020) pointed out that despite the harrowing conditions, the pandemic could be imagined as a portal to a new world, offering us choices for how we would like to move forward. Her words reminded us that even in the most challenging of times, there was still hope through action, meaning-making, and finding purpose.

It was in this spirit of searching for a portal to a new world of hope that we—two social work educators and ten MSW students from two accredited social work programs in southern California—came together to create a space for intercampus collaborative dialogue we named R.I.S.E. (Re-Imagining Social Work Education). R.I.S.E. began in Fall semester 2020 and concluded in Spring semester 2022. During that time, our goal was to address the real-time impacts of the pandemic on our well-being, to build our critical consciousness about critiques of social work education, and finally to learn alternative ideas for transforming curriculum to address institutionalized oppression more effectively. In this paper, we tell our story of creating R.I.S.E. and discuss how this effort can support continued calls for challenging current social work education models while advancing the profession.

R.I.S.E. Collective

Though not all members of R.I.S.E. participated in the writing of this paper, we would first like to acknowledge their contributions, creativity, and leadership in helping to establish R.I.S.E. The authors in this paper are José (MSW educator), Marissa (MSW educator), Melissa (MSW alum), and Angelica (MSW alum). Melissa and Angelica were alumni at the time of this writing and thus share their experiences in R.I.S.E. from their perspective as students. To begin, we offer a brief statement of positionality, to introduce ourselves to readers, and to share how we became involved in R.I.S.E.:

José, MSW Educator

I identify as a cisgender, heterosexual, male, multi-ethnic person of color (Mexican/Filipino/Italian/enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz), upper-middle income, hearing, temporarily able-bodied, US citizen with advanced educational degrees. I am in my 14th year as a faculty in the department of social work. My interest in seeking out others to dialogue and collaborate with stemmed from many conversations I had in the classroom. Following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks, students consistently expressed feelings of sadness, anger, outrage, and disbelief at what we were collectively witnessing. Our class discussions offered us an opportunity to reconsider and re-evaluate so-called foundational theories in social work, such as person-in-environment, systems theory, and other long-held perspectives in human behavior and social developmental courses. What became glaringly and painfully clear was that these theories did not contain the language or analysis to help us account for the brutality of white supremacy, nor the effects of capitalism, genocide, enslavement, and cis-hetero-patriarchal norms. In other words, the gaps in

our curriculum caused frustration—as well as a positive energy that drew the class to seek other theories and communities to better prepare us. I began to reach out to colleagues and was fortunate to connect with Marissa, who was also experiencing something similar. From here, we decided to bring our students together into dialogue.

Marissa, MSW Educator

As a female-identifying, cisgender, bicultural Latinx faculty in a school of social work, I was fortunate to have conversations over the past 11 years in academia where students would bring forward concerns and frustrations in their learning experiences and struggled in their identities as social workers. With current events as they were (between community protests combating the ever-present systematic racism of the US, discourse on police brutality ignited by the murder of George Floyd, and simultaneous management of the practical and emotional effects of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic), students talked pointedly about the conflicts they felt between the academic side of social work and their real-life professional practice. Specifically, students called out the inadequacy of the acknowledgment and action of social work as a profession in correcting the historical experiences of oppression among the populations and communities it proposed to serve. In sharing these conversations with students and with colleagues, I was able to connect with others to create collaborative spaces for inter-campus dialogues and actions to address the growing gap in our education models. This was guided by the desire to positively impact responses to the racial and social injustices being fought in real time and unpack how to move forward within social work education as my part of that system.

Melissa, MSW Alum

I identify as a cisgender hetero female, first-generation educated Xicana, hearing and temporarily able-bodied. During the initial assembly of the R.I.S.E. collective, I found myself in need of community and connection. Desperate for a space to discuss and process the recent racial and social injustice occurrences, I eagerly sought room to make sense of the violent images, stories, and personal accounts broadcast in the media. As a part-time student, I felt compelled to compartmentalize my feelings and reactions. Despite the anger, frustration, and anguish building inside me and many of my peers, the educational institution was not equipped to address the societal complexities we were all witnessing. The spaces I typically engaged in didn't know how to hold space for collective healing to begin. The social work department attempted to acknowledge the tragedies, but many communications lacked depth, materializing as performative. I received an invitation from José to join a community with fellow MSW candidates and educators in conversation about what was missing and left out from the social work field academia. Coming together outside the traditional classroom, we birthed a space that honored the human experience and needs for connection we had all been seeking. This experience grounded my understanding of the disconnect between higher education textbook knowledge and community-based relational, intuitive, experiential learning.

Angelica, MSW Alum

I identify as a cisgender, first-generation Mexican-American, Latina, MSW alum. I was fortunate enough to get to know my colleagues through my participation in a social work student organization. What started off as a conversation—discussing the feelings and thoughts towards the events taking place at the time (global pandemic, killings, and protests)—led to the development of a space where students like myself could share how all of these events impacted our education and views of the world, and educators were open to hearing us. We wanted a space where we could openly discuss how we wanted our respective programs to give us more, more than just writing papers or reading books and articles, and be given the opportunity to learn how we can apply what we learn to our lives and profession. I became intrigued learning about what it means to be disruptive—challenging and decolonizing social work practices and engaging in meaningful discussions with students and educators. I am grateful for the learning experience and hearing our guest speakers share their story and how they have become organizers in their professions and community.

An Intercampus Collective Response: The Formation of R.I.S.E.

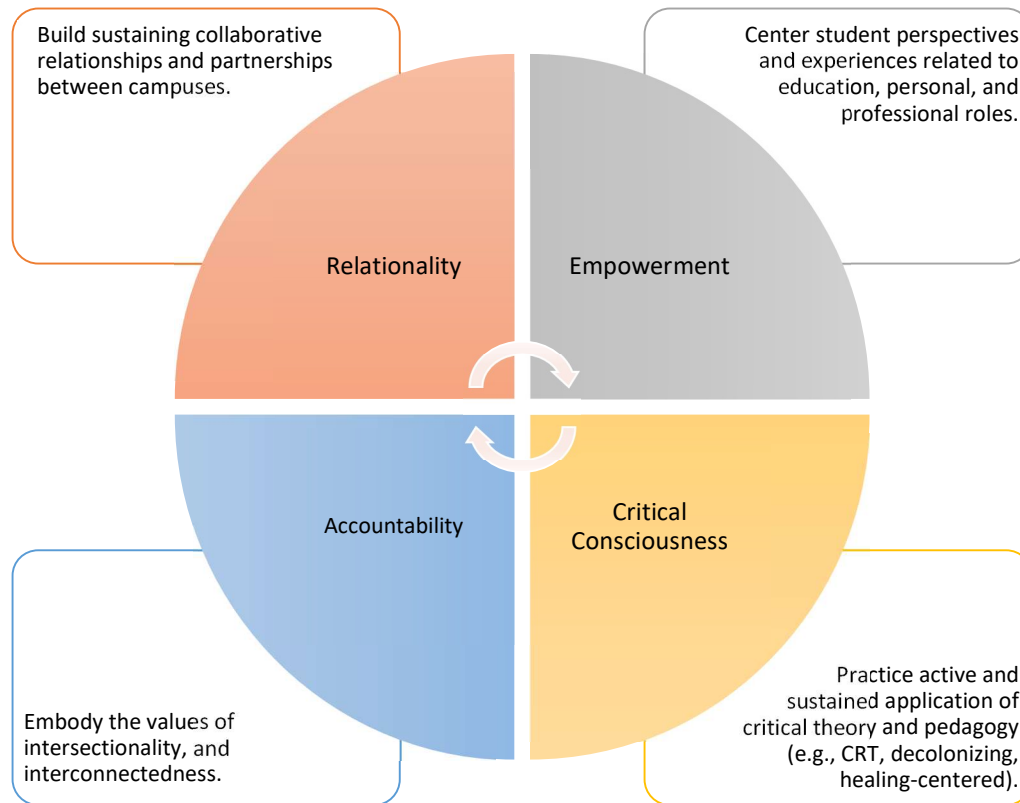
From the outset, we were intentional in creating a space to support sharing stories of personal and professional struggles—as well as individual desires for community-building and change—to directly address the many challenges facing our communities and society in general. Further, following the lead of generations of community and education activists who called for a radical transformation in education, our collective began to earnestly question and interrogate social work curriculum, theories, clinical strategies, and policy practices as part of the regular discussions and plans for action. From these powerful conversations, our collective formed a shared purpose—namely, to re-imagine social work education. In other words, through our dialogue we felt empowered to R.I.S.E. As a collective, R.I.S.E. reflected a commitment towards finding ways to shape the future of social work education by disrupting systems of oppression and eradicating white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy from social work curriculum. We further created the following mission statement to anchor our work:

R.I.S.E. is an intercampus collective of MSW students invested in shaping the transformative future of social work education. Working together to disrupt systems of oppression and build bridges toward liberation through the integration of an intersectional lens that invokes critical consciousness and transformational community healing by eradicating white supremacy, capitalism, and cis-hetero patriarchy from the social work curriculum and practices.

Rooted in an iterative process of community-building and organizing, and guided by an intersectionality analysis, our approach included relationship-focused efforts that centered members' perspectives and experiences. As our collective continued to meet, we developed a framework to shape our conversations and activities. Specifically, we focused on our relationships (e.g., taking care of ourselves and one another through partnerships between campuses); empowerment (e.g., centering student experiences in and out of the classroom); critical consciousness (e.g., learning to apply the tenets of critical theories and pedagogies); and

accountability (e.g., applying intersectionality and maintaining awareness of our interconnectedness; see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Through this framework we were able to generate options for community-based actions that supported learning and healing using education and community connections to ground critically conscious practices. Platforms were created where healing and repair could be openly processed and informed. R.I.S.E. designed, organized, and facilitated four intercampus events which invited practitioners who focused work on liberatory and anti-racist models of social work and emphasized social justice through an anti-oppressive lens. Events were held via Zoom and attended by faculty and students across schools of social work in southern California. Intercampus events held over a two-year period focused on two main topics: supporting community organization (e.g., intercampus dialogue, student-led state-wide collaborative initiatives) and critical examinations of social work education (e.g., review of current models, innovations, and alternatives).

R.I.S.E. students created a logo (see Figure 2) that we used as a symbol to represent our collective—and that we hoped would encourage and inspire others to get involved. We used the logo on our outreach materials to promote the events we hosted.

Figure 2



Method and Analysis

In this section we describe our method of analysis based on reflective conversations we had at the conclusion of R.I.S.E. Our conversations occurred over a two-month period with iterative communication on decisions relating to relevant focus of the review and themes. These personal accounts on the experience with R.I.S.E. allowed us to think critically and consider our feelings at the outset as well as our action steps and processes toward facilitating intercampus events. Given the reflective structure of our writing using personal accounts of our work post the experience with R.I.S.E., our project did not meet the requirement of Institutional Review Board approval. All information shared in the paper is identifiable, and we did not collect data outside of the personal narratives presented.

We selected a reflexive analysis of our conversation using three phases: preliminary, thematic, and interpretation (Durdella, 2018). José and Marissa separately reviewed and analyzed conversations, then afterwards met to discuss findings during each phase. The preliminary phase consisted of reviewing for a primary overt phrasing around the group's activities and aims that included repeated words, ideas, and feelings to generate a list of themes. During this phase the most prominent expression was how joining R.I.S.E. served as a meaningful way to build community, especially during a time of immense disconnection and isolation. Coming together to form a collective helped to address feelings of grief and uncertainty and simultaneously generated a sense of hope for proceeding within the social work classroom and profession. Following the preliminary narrative review phase, José and Marissa shifted to a more systematic

thematic phase of analysis in which patterns illustrative of the overall R.I.S.E. experience were identified. We created the following four thematic categories:

1. Creating connection led to community-building.
2. Acknowledgement led to healing.
3. Critical consciousness led to empowerment and accountability.
4. Taking action led to creating tools to make change.

In our final phase of analysis, José and Marissa debriefed to create consistent interpretations of each theme to support connective threads of the reflective narratives collected on the R.I.S.E. experience. Finally, José and Marissa shared descriptions of the thematic analysis with Melissa and Angelica for review. Melissa and Angelica reviewed and offered feedback, which José and Marissa integrated.

Based on our collective analysis, the primary narrative that emerged suggested that building connections between students and faculty for the purpose of acknowledging pain and anger contributed toward community-building, healing, and empowerment among R.I.S.E. members. Further, once a connection was established, members identified an increase in their critical consciousness related to efforts toward making social work education accountable and responsive to realities of the moment. Our interpretation aligns with a science-based understanding of how healing from trauma and oppression occurs, specifically that healing is not done in isolation but rather in community (Pica-Smith & Scannell, 2020). The following section highlights each of the four themes, including excerpts from our reflective conversations.

Creating Connection Led to Community-Building

The theme of creating connection was centralized on the concept of both alumni and faculty seeking connection as a commonality and expressed personal and functional need.

Melissa: I felt a disconnect having to compartmentalize the anger, rage and heartache I was experiencing from my role as a student to continue on as if nothing had changed.

On a personal level, the we talked about this emotional power of the collective as a way to build identity in a time when many in the group expressed a sense of loss: loss due to the pandemic and frustration around the lack of response by their academic institutions on the killing of George Floyd, subsequent socio-political movements across the country, and the perpetual racism and oppression students felt themselves within the social work educational, work, and community contexts.

Melissa: My idealist soul was feeling crushed, depleted, and hopeless. I knew that while what I was feeling was new to me, I was not alone in feeling lost. I joined R.I.S.E. in an effort to find and build community. What I found was a space to sort and make sense of my grief.

José: While we were certainly disappointed, angry, and frustrated by what we view as a social work education and educators protecting the status quo, we also realized that the current moment opened the door of new critical consciousness.

From a functional perspective the collective experience brought forth the need for community-building with ties to empowerment and feeling seen in a moment where their educational institutions were not providing that base. Central also were discussions of the need to feel acknowledged and guidance on how social work educational settings could and should support students with real life connections to the learning environment.

Angelica: My experience of organizing with other students around the mission of R.I.S.E. was impactful. Throughout my time with R.I.S.E. I was able to develop meaningful relationships with other peers and faculty. It was rewarding to see students coming together who shared a common view and wanted to learn how they could become involved and develop skills to support them in their journey as social workers.

As we continued these conversations, the emphasis aligned with the need to maintain the power of connection externally to colleagues and professors within their schools of social work in order to mobilize the expressed frustrations and find a home for the internalized needs for action.

Melissa: The R.I.S.E. collective fostered a sense of safety and acceptance, which offered me ease in openly sharing my input, but it also emboldened me to speak up in other spaces.

Acknowledgement Led to Healing

An important ingredient to what made R.I.S.E. successful was the intentional act of taking time to acknowledge the range of feelings we expressed. All of us described how we were impacted emotionally, physically, spiritually, and cognitively in trying to deal with a myriad of concerns. Angelica and José summarized what many of us experienced:

Angelica: There was so much chaos from experiencing a pandemic, social injustices, navigating online school, and personal issues.

José: While the election of Donald Trump in 2016 brought exposure to the foundations of what settler colonialism thrives on, it was the onset and chaos of the pandemic, the continued and highly visible police brutality waged on Black and Brown people, occurring within one of the most hostile, mean, and divisive elections in recent history, which contributed to my difficulty maintaining a sense of hopefulness about our future.

While living within this chaos left us in a state of overwhelm about our present and future, what also emerged was a growing recognition that social work education was disconnected from the reality of the moment. Melissa articulated what she observed that resulted in a questioning of the curriculum:

Melissa: As a student, the demands of academia remained the same in spite of all the civil unrest, and social and health disparities amplified by the global pandemic ... This separation felt unnatural and unrealistic. I understood that what was taking place in the outside world was directly connected to the field of social work, so why weren't we talking about it more explicitly?

It was vitally important to address our personal needs by ensuring that everyone felt seen and heard. Our action focused on taking care of ourselves through taking care of others.

José: Our meetings often felt like spaces for venting, receiving validation and acknowledgement, while understanding that things could be different; we also spent time building relationships, sharing about our experiences in social work openly, honestly, and sincerely. We worked well together, creating roles, sharing responsibilities, and always encouraging one another in supportive ways.

In finding ways to take care of one another, we created a space of healing where we learned to deal with our feelings of overwhelm. Some of the ways we accomplished a caring space were encouraging direct and honest communication, reminding ourselves of how learning from others keeps us humble, staying open to learning, and avoiding the dangers of single-storying¹ (Adichie, 2009) people's experiences. Further we applied a practice of expressing and normalizing vulnerability through example, which helped us learn to be comfortable with struggling in front of others. For José and Marissa, we were aware of the power and privilege we held as educators, and thus we made a clear effort to share openly and sincerely. We realized that students may not have felt comfortable sharing in front of us if we were not also willing to join the conversations in an authentic way. In effect, as educators our action was to counter perfectionism, and other dominant norms that define outward expressions of emotion and struggle as weakness and lack of professionalism. Angelica noted the effect this had on her.

Angelica: I felt welcomed and heard by faculty who were interested in wanting to hear how we as students want change in the curriculum to make us better practitioners ... R.I.S.E. gave a safe space for students to share their thoughts on the education they were receiving.

In turn, the commitment to sharing openly and with care inspired us each to want to contribute more towards the efforts to make a healing space. Addressing this functional need through validation and acknowledgement allowed us to honor student experiences throughout. Acknowledgement of distress allowed for meaningful discussions to begin re-imagining social work education.

Marissa: Those conversations lead us to see a need for meaningful conversations between faculty, students and practicing social workers around how gaps that existed in moving through the status quo of social work programs and curriculums we were delivering in the

¹ Described in Adichie's (2009) TED Talk, this refers to allowing a stereotype or "single story" (such as one encounter or societal, collective idea of an "other") to shape one's opinion of a person or group of people.

classroom and the world outside the classroom ... where our students were struggling and demanding answers that social work as a profession was not prepared to answer.

Finally, Melissa pointed out how through this process of acknowledgement, healing was possible, which breathed life and purpose into the R.I.S.E. mission statement.

Melissa: Coming together with my peers and being encouraged and supported by our professors helped me recognize the power and significance my voice has in a space. Working in a collaborative effort meant that all of our voices mattered and gave our mission life through action.

Critical Consciousness Led to Empowerment and Accountability

Having established a space rooted in care, encouragement, acknowledgement, and healing, we were able to simultaneously expand our critical consciousness about histories and current issues of systemic oppressive dynamics within social work education. Angelica called attention to the power of an intercampus collective discussion in widening her perspective of social work.

Angelica: I believed I knew so much about social work when I entered my program back in 2019, but when I became a part of R.I.S.E., I realized that the profession itself needs support in dismantling the systems of oppression it's rooted in.

Examples of a shift in critical consciousness emerged as members introduced language and analysis informed by critical race theory (CRT; Crenshaw et al., 1996), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), feminists, and LGBTQIA+ activists and organizers; there was an explicit and intentional effort to center the experiences of people of color, their histories of resistance, as well as the generational effects of oppression that they have endured. R.I.S.E. members were clear that in order to deal with the current issues of violence, it was important to have a language and analysis that accurately described things.

Melissa: Openly naming the root causes of the social injustices society faces allowed us to envision a path to repair the harm done by white supremacy, capitalism, and cis-hetero patriarchy.

Learning from others helped ignite a process of re-thinking and unlearning about the dominant narratives within social work education that promote more siloed learning and less mutuality in practice. However, the process toward developing a critical consciousness is challenging because it requires a willingness to interrogate what may have been considered normative while maintaining an openness to accepting new ideas. In this case, being in a collective with a shared purpose allowed members to lean into the struggle of unlearning.

Marissa: There was a need to recognize and struggle in a very open way and state that there may not be immediate answers but that there was a space to dialogue and be ok with the struggle as part of the commitment to activism and social change.

Struggling with a purpose within an affirming space allowed members to realize they were not alone in their thinking, and that others had similar questions.

Marissa: I was fortunate to find an outlet for the ideas and questions running through my head and that was conversations with a social work educator colleague who also was asking similar questions of the social work education system we were both operating in as academics and social workers.

Marissa's comment reflects a sense of empowerment through the power of collectivity. R.I.S.E. served as an essential antidote to the isolation, worry, and fear that had been building throughout the year. Melissa echoed a similar comment, noting a sense of empowerment through collective dialogue helped her feel she could influence change.

Melissa: The experience of being a part of an inter-campus collective was validating; it reaffirmed a sense of strength and power we had as a collective to influence change within the social work community.

Expanding our critical consciousness led to feelings of empowerment as well as a desire to hold ourselves accountable to the power and privilege that we held. Additionally, we felt a need to hold social work education accountable to its stated values and ethics. As we continued to meet and deepen our relationships with one another, we began to imagine ways we could take action toward accountability.

Taking Action Led to Creating Tools to Make Change

The work of R.I.S.E. served to support the realities of the student's lives and move to formulating actions to address expressed areas of change for social work curricula and professional practice guidelines. Members created tools for this effort and those that challenged the dominant narratives of the field that no longer served their truths as emerging practitioners. Tools included organizing regular meetings that prioritized open spaces for sharing and processing of emotions that ranged from frustration and gratitude. Tools also came in the form of activities that allowed for action plans informed by faculty and community experts to guide schools of social work on doing better and differently at integrating critical and anti-racist pedagogies into daily classroom activities and curriculum.

José: This was a moment to try out new ideas, to bring people together into conversation, to review our current education platforms and curriculums, and generate new ideas.

We designed, organized, and facilitated four intercampus workshops inviting social work educators, students, activists, and community organizers to share insights and strategies to re-imagine social work education. These workshops brought together students and faculty from California State University's Long Beach and Northridge campuses into dialogue, connection, and resource-sharing. The events challenged the status quo experienced in the classroom and extended the knowledge for workshop attendees, to connect ideas in more formal ways within their personal networks. For example, faculty shared having discussions in faculty meetings,

students talked about bringing the topics to student groups they participated in, and R.I.S.E. as a whole worked to outreach to other schools of social work to broaden the conversations and reach of the change process in motion.

José: I knew [cross-campus collaboration] was how to help restore hope, connection, and change especially within social work education.

Though the work was ongoing, our path reflected an experience where we felt we had gifted one another the skills of vocalizing one's lived experiences and understanding it as a crucial part of the learning process, promotion of self-advocacy and collaboration as a model for social change, and ultimately the progress one can make in shifting the status quo with those efforts.

Discussion of Findings

Based on our analysis, we learned how powerful it is to build meaningful connections between students and faculty during difficult times, which is something we believe can benefit many communities. First, coming together with the intention to openly acknowledge the various feelings of outrage, sadness, and isolation allowed for us to begin a healing process. Through our conversations, we realized that the factors that led to healing included developing our critical consciousness about the social-political-historical context. Sharing personal experiences alongside theories and actions from activists and revolutionaries gave us new language and analysis for interpretation and validation. We felt empowered to name the systems of dominance that operate within social work education. Energized through collective dialogue, we learned the importance of finding ways to get involved and be responsive to the realities of the moment.

Choosing to Walk Through It Together

As Arundhati Roy (2020) reminds us, the pandemic is a “portal,” (para. 48) an opportunity for us to shed the social work theories and practices that no longer serve us (or maybe never really served our interests to begin with). Roy (2020) challenges us to critically reflect on the dominant perspectives we have normalized while also learning to apply our imaginations to design something different. By making a choice to come together into dialogue, we were making a choice to walk through the portal together—shedding the traditional norms of power where teachers are viewed as the holders of true knowledge. R.I.S.E. became an active choice to discard those dominant beliefs of power in favor of finding commonality, validation, acknowledgment, and connection between people.

Melissa and Angelica remarked how when they were students, social work education often left them feeling in a “one down” position, noting experiences of teachers using paternalistic tones, having their ideas dismissed, and feelings minimized. Melissa and Angelica explained that R.I.S.E. gave them an empowered space to share their experiences. As faculty, José and Marissa had an opportunity to review the traditional norms and expectations prevalent in social work education. Choosing to intentionally form an intercampus relationship between students and faculty helped articulate contradictions in a social work profession that values the importance of human relationships, but that simultaneously upholds a top-down professor-over-student

hierarchy, resulting in students' feelings and experiences being dismissed. José and Marissa often debriefed separately from R.I.S.E. student members so as to assess and evaluate areas of power and privilege. José and Marissa openly shared those tensions and struggles with R.I.S.E. students, seeking out feedback as well as pointing out areas where learning and growth could occur. Ultimately, all of us felt that walking together into an intercampus journey of critical self-reflection was invaluable in establishing safety for people to share openly about their lived experiences. Our experience encourages the possibility for more social work programs to explore building and organizing intercampus experiences around solidarity movements, transformative justice, and liberation-based healing.

Implications for Social Work Education and Professional Development

Rooting our learning environments in use of trauma-informed pedagogy through healing-centered engagement (Ginwright, 2018) supports social work education grounded in fostering student and faculty well-being and a person-centered approach to learning. This accounts for the unique lived experiences we all bring to the educational environments and communities in which we work. The question remains, though, for the academia of social work—how do we disentangle the dominant pedagogical approaches rooted in the “‘authority’ over knowledge” (Arday, 2018, p. 145) approach to higher education and hegemonic norms?

The answer lies in supporting communication and vulnerability by faculty and students alike (Pica-Smith & Scannell, 2020). Allowing for spaces to acknowledge biases along with positions of power held is key to this process. Facilitating a dynamic of learning not only in the classroom but with intercampus and community dialogues where representation of multiple narratives is possible allows for the reflection of marginalized experiences of students and communities. With this approach, educators and students create a learning community that dismantles the inherent power dynamics held within traditional educational models. Fostering such connections acknowledges the sociocultural identities and political contexts that we each uniquely exist within openly and directly (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Building in training and reinforced support for educators and students to competently talk about race and racism, to talk about the role of social work in historical experiences of oppression that impact marginalized communities, and to honestly allow for true safe spaces with students where they can express dissent in opinion without fear of educational repercussions is central to this effort (Arday, 2018; Pica-Smith & Scannell, 2020).

This work towards a healing centered learning environment can also support social work education that builds on the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) that requires social workers to promote dignity and self-worth while practicing social justice in and out of the classroom (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). At the center of this is the primary skill needed for all levels of social work practice: empathy. Empathy as a tool is commonly disassociated as a clinical skill faculty impress upon students in their training, but empathy as an educational practice is one that can change the dynamics of learning. It can support the essentials of critical, positive learning environments which allows for openness, flexibility, and humility without judgment (Friedman, 2022). It promotes a sense of safety for students within the immense vulnerability of the learning environment. Further, such efforts can support

persistence in the face of adversities in the change process, especially when anchored in collaborations across systems within the social work education and practice community. Fostering these connections promotes co-produced solutions across student groups, faculty, and the profession to create more sustainable and equitable change.

Conclusion

Considering how to allow for interpersonal relationships to be forged in and out the classroom can only serve to humanize us as we work together and create mutuality within social work education systems with students, university administrators, and communities in which we work (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). Future research can support a better understanding of how to formalize such educational models within higher education and more specifically social work programs. Qualitative research that delineates the intersections of the personal, professional, and political experiences of students and faculty can inform pedagogical approaches to learning that connect community and clinical practice in the classroom and practicum experiences. R.I.S.E. serves as an example of what can be learned from in that effort, where intercampus collaborations extend the strength in how the needs to reimagine social work education models are actualized in a meaningful way through connections and dialogue.

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In Jean's Space: The Life, Death, and Rebirth of an Academic Writing Group

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Abstract: Four faculty members across disciplines relay the story of an inspiring senior faculty mentor who organized an academic writing group for junior faculty members during the COVID-19 pandemic. This exceptional mentor, who facilitated the weekly academic writing group, provided a safe and supportive respite for junior faculty members navigating the tenure track during a difficult and frightening time in our history. The writing group, who bonded personally and professionally, provide not only our individual stories, but Jean's story, as she experienced personal hardships throughout this time. We hoped that others may find solace and inspiration in Jean's story and may experiment with a similar writing group.

Keywords: scholarship, collegiality, support, loss, writing group

“The magic of the community is in the shared act. Community members find each other, work together, support each other, and achieve success together. This is the joy of doing meaningful work together with like-minded people, with your friends.”

— THINK School of Creative Leadership

Introduction

This is the story of how a dynamic academician and friend, Jean, gathered a small group of junior faculty members together to write during the pandemic. It is also the story of the safe space that she created.

We surround Jean's story with our individual stories to illustrate the importance of a mentor and a friend, and to highlight the profound impact Jean had on our individual perspectives.

Our story is one of transition, collaboration, scholarship, success, and loss. It is a story of discovering community in a virtual space during the throes of the pandemic. Driven by the larger narrative of navigating the uncertainty that plagued not only our individual circumstances, but also this unique period in time, our collective account highlights how, amongst this turbulence, unexpected friendships, challenges, and opportunities emerged.

The Invitation

In late spring of 2020, during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, Jean sent out an email invitation to junior faculty members to join a virtual academic writing group.

Hi all,

I was in the discussion on mentoring junior faculty and my imagination started running! I thought it would be fun and productive to have a virtual writing group this summer.

In order to organize such a thing, I wanted to know if there was interest and, if so, what/when/how...etc.

Let me know what you think and we can see where this goes!

Cheers,
Jean

In our school, there were frequent conversations about the need for greater support for new tenure track faculty, and Jean took the initiative to put the idea into action. Jean had prior experience with faculty writing groups. In her draft of a narrative inquiry, she wrote:

Prior to my own promotion to associate professor and being granted tenure, I joined a group of faculty members from across the school to support each other in our writing. We would meet for a day (usually a Friday or Saturday), share our writing, give feedback using discussion protocols, and spend time at our laptops writing with the presence of others in the same space doing the same thing. I found this structure to be very helpful in keeping me focused, on track, and enlivening my writing.

Each of us accepted Jean's invitation. We entered with different motives and life circumstances, yet we shared our wish to connect with our colleagues during an otherwise isolating time in pandemic life. And connect we did, even despite the departure of two members early on. Over the next year, we four would come to know Jean—and one another—more personally. We would share our scholarly signatures, our work as professors, challenges we each faced navigating the pandemic, glimpses into our work-from-home settings in different states, and insights into our personal lives. In the following section, each author of this piece will share a little bit about our lives, our work-from-home contexts, and our memories of Jean.

Emily's Story

I was in my second year as an assistant professor and led an online graduate program at the university when I entered our writing group. I was in my early 50s, married, and had enjoyed a 28-year career in education. My scholarship focus was mindfulness in education, a research agenda born of personal passion. I always believed in transformative learning and educational settings that focus on well-being and whole person development.

I had struggled in my first year to carve out time for scholarship with multiple teaching, advising, and administrative tasks, and joined the writing group in my second year hoping to make scholarship a weekly practice. This group also appealed as an opportunity to connect. I was already working remotely from the southwest when the pandemic arrived in March of

2020. Initially, I was working from a small apartment as my husband and I searched for more permanent housing. The first scholarship group meeting noted in my calendar was June 3, 2020. Juggling my husband's health challenge, a tenure track position, and living "between homes" during a pandemic was incredibly challenging. Although I did not feel like I had time to add one more commitment to my schedule, this felt important.

The initial meetings confirmed my decision to join the writing group. It was nice to connect with other faculty in a more intimate setting and begin to develop a relationship with a mentor. It became a ritual to make tea before each meeting, and my rescue pup often rested at my feet. I looked forward to connecting on Fridays at the end of a largely independent work week.

Later in the year, my husband and I moved into a home with my own home office and I loved being surrounded by a lovely view out the window, my books, plants, personal mementos, and a reading chair. I felt more relaxed with the group. We regularly talked about life and teaching in addition to our scholarship agendas. It felt safe to ask a question, share honestly, and admit when I felt tired.

My first memories of Jean were from school-wide faculty meetings during the 2018–2019 academic year. Jean often sat in the back row, sometimes knitting, carefully following conversation. She had very short hair and sometimes wore a hat. I wondered if it was purely a style choice or if she might be going through cancer treatment. Sometimes she wore brightly colored clothing—she had her own sense of style. I like that about people. She didn't speak frequently, yet when she spoke it was with an experienced, thoughtful comment or question about a particular issue. My first impressions were that she was an engaged senior faculty member, a no-nonsense person who was friendly and focused. My understanding of who Jean was as a person and mentor deepened during our pandemic writing year together.

Nicole's Story

I've never found writing groups or retreats very productive, and as a composition instructor, I often feel guilty for admitting that. One, they require me to place myself in an environment that I know I don't work well in. Two, they feel like an obligation or maybe just inorganic. But it was August 2020, the middle of a pandemic, and I had just relocated to New England from Georgia, eager to start my new position as an Assistant Professor of Literacy, Language, and Culture. As a 32-year-old lesbian woman who had spent the last seven years collaborating with a tight-knit group of scholars and minoritized youth in the southeastern US, that eagerness quickly turned to nervousness when I realized some of the new relationships I thought I would begin to build in local schools and community centers wouldn't be possible as a result of COVID-19 protections. So, when I received an email to participate in a junior faculty writing group, I promised myself that I would connect with my new colleagues even though I would have preferred to say "no."

That year, I worked from the townhouse I had moved into just a few months prior. I did not know why, but it had yet to grow on me. The structure was too new to have felt lived in, so I spent an obnoxious amount of time rearranging and decorating my office space to make it as

cozy and comfortable as possible. At times, my colleagues would catch a glimpse of my dogs, who shared this space with me. Before each writing group session, I would heat a cup of chamomile tea, leaving myself just enough time to walk up the stairs and settle into my seat before signing in. The dogs, being part of the fabric of my process, would follow me from kitchen to desk to couch where the three of us would look out the window until 1:00 p.m. on the dot.

My first memories of Jean were on Zoom. In fact, I only ever interacted with Jean on Zoom. As it was my first year at University of Southern Maine and all of our work was being carried out remotely, I found it more difficult to learn who my new colleagues were. Jean caught my attention, however, as the woman sitting in a rocking chair knitting during our school-wide meeting. At the time, I had wondered if she knit during face-to-face meetings too. I thought it was kind of badass and, quite frankly, didn't know what to make of it. Looking back and having come to understand the kind and compassionate leader Jean was, it seems in knitting, Jean was modeling a different way of being attentive and showing us, or at least me, that the academy has space for the calm—unrushed yet still deeply engaged.

Larissa's Story

I am a 40-something Afro-Boricua woman who identifies as Black. A large part of my identity is my family, as a wife of 25 years and mother to three children. The connection to my family is relevant to my career in academia because my scholarship focuses on race, racism, and education, and I often draw from the well of my family's experience in navigating schooling.

This was my first position at a regional comprehensive public university, but I previously held a tenure-track position at another institution. As such, I was awarded three years served, which means that the tenure-track was fast ticking for me! I know I needed to hit the ground running with my writing and research. Beginning a new position is always hard, but beginning it in a different state and time zone is even harder. While I would have joined the writing group regardless, the delay in my arrival to the university made the invitation even more attractive because it was a chance to not only join a group that supported my scholarship goal, but also it was a way to connect with my new peers. I appreciated that it wasn't a required space like a department or committee meeting. Rather, each of us voluntarily came together with a mutual desire to improve our scholarship. This shared purpose truly laid the groundwork for an environment ripe for relationship building, honest feedback, and meaningful connection.

My living space, including my work space, was quite busy during the pandemic. I lived in an apartment in the Midwest with my husband and my high school-aged daughter, but due to the pandemic, my other two college-aged daughters were home too. We had more people than rooms, so at the beginning of each day the five of us would gather to coordinate schedules and see which of us had Zoom meetings/class and when. My desk was the large living room table, which I shared with my husband. I consistently used the same workspace most of the day while others swapped quiet spaces as needed. Located right next to the kitchen, I was able to remain involved with the happenings of the house throughout the bustle. Two large bookshelves sat behind me. In front of me was the family room television

that we typically kept on, muted with subtitles, so we could see the ongoing updates regarding the dual pandemics: COVID 19 and the racialized uprising.

Jean and I worked in the same department, so I met her during my pre-pandemic interview process. I vividly remember connecting with her during my research talk and knew I wanted to work with her. Not long after my hire, I received a note that included this excerpt: "I wanted to reach out and offer my ear and availability for any question you might have as you move to this little corner of the country." Jean continued, "I'd like to invite you and whoever is in your family over to my deck for a physically distant, but in person gab!" She later concluded, "this time of COVID must be an especially challenging time to move—so how I help out might look different than it would otherwise, but I wanted to let you know that I am here." We would have lovely conversations over email and I would see her on a fairly regular basis at department meetings and sub-committee work sessions, often hanging out afterwards online to touch base both professionally and personally. When I found out she was running the writing group, needless to say, I was thrilled!

Melinda's Story

I began my career teaching in higher education at the age of 63, after teaching in Texas in both preschool and elementary education for over 30 years. At the time of our academic writing group, I was in my second year at the university: I served first as a lecturer, and then was rehired as an assistant professor the next year.

As a non-traditional graduate student in Texas, I sought out every writing support available, attending all-day Saturday writing sessions at the college and going to weekend overnight dissertation bootcamps. At that time, I became a well-known fixture in the college's computer lab on Saturdays. I always chose the same computer in the corner, where the windows looked on a view of the parking lot where pine trees loomed. When I first arrived as a lecturer, I would have jumped at the chance for another writing group, but alas, I taught a class when Jean met face-to-face with other faculty to write. Therefore, when Jean sent out the email invitation in summer 2020, I did not have to think twice.

The view outside my window in rural New England was breathtaking during all four seasons. My office faced the road and commanded a view of the front yard, complete with deer, dozens of wild turkeys, robins, squirrels, and chipmunks. I intentionally reflected on my Zoom background and loved the bookcases full of books that I often saw in my colleagues' backgrounds. Consequently, I arranged a similar scene of overflowing bookshelves.

My memories of Jean went back to before the pandemic. My office was adjacent to Jean's office. Before the lockdown, I remember Jean occasionally working in her office and she always left the door wide open to our suite so students might be welcomed in. Jean's father had been a pediatrician, and I remember taking my daughter to see him when she had strep throat during a summer visit. My older sister knew Jean's parents professionally, and my younger brother attended high school with Jean. When I first met Jean, I mentioned these hometown connections, and she was very kind about acknowledging that we were from the same town.

Jean's Story

I was a 56-year-old white woman who taught in the Special Education and Teacher Education programs at University of Southern Maine since 2002. Prior to this I was a special education teacher and research associate for inclusive practices. One of my areas of interest was fostering growth and development of junior faculty in the areas of scholarship, teaching, and service.

On the personal side, I was divorced in 2004 and have children who are now adults. Early in my time at USM, and in the lives of my children, having space and time away from home to write was important. The (previous) monthly writing group was critical to structuring this and I often used June to write while my kids were still in school but I was off contract for the university. Another strategy that worked for me was to register my children for summer camps or experiences, usually a week-long art or theater class, and I would set myself up at the library, overlooking the water where I would write from nine to three. It seemed that time, space, collaboration, and focus were essential to my writing life.

I lived in a small house in a small town in New England. My desk was at the end of a hallway in a niche that had windows on three sides of the desk and a bookcase I had tucked into the space. I looked out onto my yard that was ringed with old trees (maple, hickory, pine, and oak) and barely managed shrubs (honeysuckle, hydrangea, rhododendron, and lilac). Sitting at my desk, I could watch birds (cardinals, goldfinch, chickadees, and robins) come and go across the yard and mark the change of the seasons. I could see through the trees to the Saco River in the winter, spring brought the lilac and rhododendron into bloom, summer all was green, and the fall colors were lively.

Our Writing Group

Our first summer months together as a virtual writing group involved weekly meetings on Zoom. We would log in from the link that Jean had shared. Jean was almost always there first, waiting for us, welcoming us. Each of us would enter, arriving in our own box on the screen. As we each entered the Zoom meeting space, light conversation about life and work took place before we committed to a discussion of our writing goals for the day.

Jean would guide this transition by asking us to share what we intended to work on that day. There were also opportunities to ask questions. Jean or others might offer advice or information about the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or tenure review process. Jean was generous. For example, she would send us an example of an IRB form she had completed or a copy of her dossier as a model. We could work on anything we needed to during the independent work time. The entire process was about freedom and support, and it was interesting to learn about peer scholarship projects. After each person shared, we would log off for the next one to two hours to write, research, read, edit, or plan our individual projects. About 15 minutes before the end of our work session, we would again log in and report back to the group. Along the way we also shared drafts of our work, gave and received feedback, and discussed the peer review process each of us would move through that year.

Although we spent a good deal of time talking about our scholarly writing and tenure, sometimes the conversation led to the pandemic, family, food, pets, housing, and health issues. We discussed living through a pandemic, when each of us might be eligible to receive a vaccination, and what was happening in our states and cities. We discussed challenges related to supporting students through these difficult circumstances, lengthy publication timelines, and budget woes in our public university. We also celebrated one another's successes, such as publications and conference presentations.

Week after week, we entered the Zoom space and Jean was there, ready to greet us. As we logged into Zoom, Jean was sitting at her desk in her home, a staircase visible behind her. She described in her own writing that a window over her desk looked out into her yard. She was our North Star, our weekly touchpoint. Her steady and reassuring presence made this faculty work and made life feel possible.

Jean modeled extraordinary patience and presence; she possessed and modeled excellent listening skills. Deeper understanding of Jean's skill as an effective facilitator and mentor developed during our weekly writing group meetings throughout the next year. Meeting with Jean and peers was a special time. This space was full of trust. At one time or another, someone would express, "What is discussed here, stays here." Jean invested time in relating to each one of us personally. Jean modeled vulnerability. She joked. She laughed. She was honest about the job and provided a listening ear as well as support and feedback when needed. She was, quite simply, down-to-earth and real.

Narrative Writing

In July of 2021, Jean introduced the idea of conducting narrative inquiry around our writing group. Jean wrote:

Hi Folks,

Here is an "invitation" to participate—and/or a way for me to frame our writing group in the literature on narrative inquiry. Look it over and send or give me feedback at our meeting next week.

Also—be sure to keep in mind that your level of participation in the writing group over the last year should not be a consideration as to whether or not you want to contribute to this project—stories of how hard it is to write, juggle life, and manage all the other responsibilities that we have in this time of COVID are exactly what we want to document.

Cheers!
Jean

Although a bit hesitant because of time constraints, health, and COVID-19 worries, we agreed to work with Jean on this interesting idea. Jean asked each member to create a character sketch,

a Zoom context, and a chronology of their writing work from the beginning of the pandemic up to July 21, 2021, approximately a year. Therefore, in addition to our own scholarship, we joined Jean in working together on a narrative inquiry project. Each week when we met, we shared a bit more of our lives, our Zoom contexts, and/or our chronology of academic writing during the pandemic.

Trust grew and our weekly writing group became a place to be oneself, admit fatigue, mindfully listen, and experience connection. We were beginning to understand the complexities of one another's lives: Emily's challenges with a family health situation, Larissa's full family life and housing search from afar, Nicole's settling into a new home and community, and Melinda's ongoing home search in the area while living at a family's home. And Jean had serious health challenges that became clearer to us over time.

Journaling during our time together, Jean wrote,

In 2015, I was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer and have been going through a wide variety of treatments ever since. Structuring my writing is more challenging these days as my focus and stamina vary considerably. I have been writing more about my own experience in recent years as opposed to the creation of manuscripts based on external samples, hypotheses, and analysis, or what Boyer (1996) might call the scholarship of discovery.

Interestingly, we knew or suspected that Jean was battling cancer at the beginning of our writing group. However, we did not understand the full scope until much later in our year together. Jean rarely talked about her health condition with the group and maintained a professional facilitator role. From time-to-time, she would share with us a needed medical trip or note her hope to be included in an experimental treatment. She periodically noted to one or more of us in emails that she wasn't feeling well that week or that her father was taking her to a nearby city for treatment. At one particular meeting, it was only Nicole, Jean, and another one of the semi-regular group members. Jean was visibly upset, having just found out she would no longer be able to swim. The members present held space for her.

Because Jean appeared so vital, we often forgot that she had terminal cancer. However, Jean was very open and honest about her illness. In the latter months of our writing group, she was excited about the prospect of participating in a special trial, and traveled down to a medical facility every weekend for the treatments while continuing to meet with us as often as possible. Then, we received another email:

Hi all,

I'm not able to join the writing group today. My procedure last Friday was more invasive than I expect [*sic*] and I'm still recovering.

I hope I get to see you next week!

Jean

Jean's last communication with Larissa was difficult. Jean did not show up to another meeting and we were all worried. Larissa texted Jean after the group touched base:

Larissa: Hi, Jean! We missed you today! How are you doing?

Jean: Oh dear, what a week it's been. ER...ambulance. And waiting for doctors to decide if they can fix my [body part]. I hope to be home by the end of the week. Sorry for not communicating but thanks for reaching out. ❤️

Larissa: Oh, no! I am sorry that you have been going through it. Let me know if you need anything or would like someone to just sit with you. ❤️

Jean: Thank you. 🙏

We made a plan to meet again in two weeks, but our meeting never came. Neither did the two after that. We reconvened briefly at the start of the new fall school year, mostly wondering how to proceed and if anyone had heard from Jean. Then, we received another email:

Dear friends and colleagues,

I have taken a turn in my disease and have therefore decided to take the fall semester off. I will hope to join you on future Tuesday afternoons but go ahead without me.

I will be in touch.

Love
Jean

A few days later, we received word that Jean had passed away. Our time together in Jean's Space had come to an abrupt end.

Our Reflections on Our Loss

There are times in our lives when a special person enters our sphere, even for a short time, and touches us deeply and in surprising ways. Jean had spirit, tenacity, and courage. She supported us as junior academic writers during a pandemic and her illness, always providing plenty of positivity, understanding, and patience, and then she was gone. Several of us attended Jean's funeral, which was held in her backyard. Jean's view for those many, many Zoom meetings faced the front yard, the road, and the river beyond. For Jean's funeral service, in her beautiful backyard, Jean's view was the tall pine trees leading into the forest behind her house, that she so lovingly described in her writings for our group project.

Life After Jean

Beginning relationships over an online platform is odd, but even odder is developing those relationships and creating true bonds. During this time in our writing group, we not only formed relationships and created bonds, we survived and thrived during a worldwide crisis.

We four made the choice to continue writing together after Jean's death, primarily to tell this story. We have met regularly as a group for the past year to take an idea that she had introduced to us—writing a narrative about our writing group—and bring it into form. It has been a cathartic process along the way and an opportunity to create meaning together. We also felt that it might encourage others, especially those new to academia, to experience the power of writing together, navigating the ivory tower together, and supporting each other through hard times. We think there is a part of all of us that genuinely just liked seeing each other regularly, especially after sharing loss. Jean's legacy continues and the space she created still remains safe for us and, while she is gone, what she cultivated within our group lives on.

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Teaching From the Heart

Stephanie Saulnier

Abstract: Most social work instructors come to teaching with a wealth of practice experience. This experience allows us to actually teach what we know, using our experiences in the field to provide a more colorful illustration for our students. This essay describes the profound effect my experience as a foster parent has had on not only my teaching, but also my relationship with the students at my regional comprehensive university in the southeast United States. Using specific examples from my experience with children placed in my home, this paper discusses how my teaching about social welfare policy and empathy has been changed.

Keywords: foster care, social welfare, policy practice, empathy

Background

The call came less than a week after our final home visit. “Hello! Would you be able to take a sibling group of three?” My husband and I had always known we would be foster parents, but we waited until our four children were somewhat independent before going through the training and licensure process. At this point, I was a full-time social work lecturer teaching mostly social welfare history and policy courses. As a professional social worker, a mom of four, and a social work educator, I was pretty sure that I was well-positioned for this new adventure. Our family’s experiences in fostering would lead me to question everything I thought I understood about parenthood, child and social welfare policy, and my purpose as an educator. Through this essay, I will focus on the profound impact my fostering journey has had on my teaching and relationships with students.

I have taught social welfare policy history and social welfare policy practice courses in the policy sequence at my university for years. I am well-versed in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974) and its origins. I use the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) in class as a tool for critical policy analysis practice. I teach students each semester about how United States federal policy and state policy impact state regulations, which lay the groundwork for how we do our jobs as social workers. Experiencing policy and regulation and how they work together firsthand with my family and vulnerable children coming to stay in our home was a whole different thing. When we started fostering in the mid-2000s, the state child welfare program was severely understaffed and underfunded. We (Kentucky) have one of the nation’s highest rates of child abuse reports and substantiations. In fact, out of 48 states reviewed between 2005–2014, ours ranked second in rate of children confirmed by child protective services to be victims of maltreatment; at 21 children per 1,000 in 2014, this rate was over double the national average (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). As my husband and I were completing the required foster training, I shared with my social work classes what we were talking about and learning. I read the state administration regulations and the state regulatory statutes that dealt with removal of children from families and foster care in class. We discussed the content in the training and compared it to our understanding of the regulations and policies. What I learned very quickly was that the reality was entirely different.

The Reality

It is not an exaggeration to say that the first month of that first placement with “Beth” (three years), “Mary” (18 months) and “Joe” (eight months) was the hardest month of our lives. The children, whose names have been changed in this narrative, had been left by their parents with a caregiver who had serious cognitive disabilities. After three days in the hospital, the children then came to us. They were dehydrated and covered in bug bites and diaper rash. When the social services worker first called, there was almost no information available about the children. Their parents had been identified but not found. The only information was from their birth records at the hospital, and they had no clothing or other personal items. When I brought them home, we had to stop and get clothes—they had one outfit each from the hospital closet. For the entire three months they were in our home, the only information our family could be given about their previous home life and parents came from Beth, the three-year-old.

Our relationship with that first social services worker was rocky. I had high hopes because she had a bachelor’s in social work. But she had just graduated from college, was brand new to her job, and was still in training—facts she did not share with me. I was a professional social worker and an educator—facts that I shared immediately with her. I was assertive and persistent. She was overwhelmed and scared. This was not a good start. To make matters worse, our state was furloughing employees due to budget concerns that year, and there were also four state holidays during the months that the children were with us. In the second month we had the children, our worker had a total of five workdays within that month in which she was not on furlough or in training to cover her entire case load.

Another early example of the discrepancy between the ideal and reality came in regulations regarding the development of a family team plan and information sharing. By state regulation and agency policy, when there is a child removal from parental custody, a meeting to establish goals for the family and discuss the roles of the child protection system and the foster family should be called within five days. The family team meeting is an opportunity for all the parties involved to get together and share information about the family and the children. For example, the reason the children are in care and any important information about routines, culture, and medical and behavioral history of the children may be shared by the workers and birth parents with the foster parents. In our first placement with Beth, Mary, and Joe, there were no parents involved when we received the children. At the time, this meant there was no family team meeting, which meant that we as foster parents received no information. Our worker was in the middle of training that stressed the importance of confidentiality. The state statutes and agency policy about what information foster parents receive relies somewhat on worker discretion. Foster parents were given only the “information needed to care for the children.” The worker in this case was not a parent, had not had any previous cases, and defaulted to confidentiality being the overriding concern. In theory, this was exactly as we hope all social workers operate. In practice, this meant that we, as foster parents, did not have all the tools we needed to care for the children in our home. I tried repeatedly to convince the worker that I needed information about the children and their history to adequately care for them and that it would not be a breach of confidentiality to provide it. I was never successful. The feeling of frustration impacted our relationship with that worker and our ability to provide the best care for these children.

After three months, the children were moved from our home (strictly a foster home) into an adoptive home. Because the parents had not been involved in the children's care or completed a case plan within 90 days, regulations in our state allowed for the goal of the case plan to be changed to adoption, and termination of parental rights was initiated. The children were adopted by the family they moved to, and we continue to have occasional contact with them. The worker for our case ended up leaving child protection after just one year.

The Ideal

Shortly after Beth, Mary, and Joe moved, we received another placement. "Chase" was a beautiful three-month-old, happy, healthy, and clearly loved by his mother, "Nicki." This placement was completely different from our first because we had a very proactive and engaged parent devoted to getting her son back. We had all the information we needed to care for Chase and to support Nicki. It looked like a textbook case of how foster care is supposed to work—a child is placed in a supportive foster home while a struggling parent is given the tools to make changes that allow for the return of her child. As foster parents, this was exactly the situation we were hoping for. As a social worker, this was evidence that the system does work. As an educator, this was a perfect example to use in class.

The good news is that Chase returned home. Nicki had a few bumps in the road, but she worked her plan, and right before his first birthday, Chase was back with his mother. If the story ended there, it would be perfect. But it didn't. And in the next year, I learned about the social welfare system in a whole new way.

While Chase was with us, we developed a close relationship with Nicki that lasted after he returned home. She did not have any support system or family in town, so she and Chase became part of our family and, in turn, part of our support system. Nicki had overcome some—but not all—of the challenges that led to Chase being in foster care. Nicki was a single mother with a low-paying job with no benefits. Chase's father was in prison. She became pregnant again shortly after Chase went home with a man who was marginally employed and unable to provide much financial aid. Very quickly, Nicki was facing eviction. She reached out to me when she had tried everything she knew for help. Having taught for years about social welfare resources and having successfully navigated the use of the Women, Infants, and Children nutrition program (WIC) as a foster mom, I believed with my whole being that I would be able to solve Nicki's problems, so I went with her to resolve this situation.

Nicki did not have subsidized housing, so our first stop was the local housing authority. Nicki had told me that she had put her name on the waiting list when Chase was first born but I was skeptical that the list could be that long. In the office, I found out that the average wait for housing in our mid-sized city was over two years. It did not matter that Nicki had a job, had a child, and was pregnant. There was no housing assistance available. We left the housing authority with no help. Our next stop was the local Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) office. TANF replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1996 and is a time-limited cash assistance program (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022). Recipients must work or be in an education or training program to receive benefits. Again, I was convinced that

Nicki just needed an advocate to help her get the support she desperately needed. And once again, we left empty-handed. After waiting for over an hour, all we found out was that Nicki could receive emergency assistance once the baby was born, as long as she was able to prove she still had a job and could get the birth certificate to the office immediately after birth. As Nicki didn't have transportation and this was before our local office accepted files electronically, this was a tall order.

What actually kept Nicki in her apartment was a local church. In the end, we found out about a program that provided financial support for people in the community. I wrote a letter on Nicki's behalf, and within a week, Nicki received \$7,000 in financial support. As is very often the case, that financial support was only enough to sustain Nicki until the next crisis. About a year later, Nicki lost her job after both children got sick and she was unable to work. This started a slide that resulted in another removal, a voluntary termination of parental rights, and the children eventually being adopted into a wonderful family.

Living and Learning the Experience

Throughout Nicki's journey and the next several foster placements, I witnessed the real experience of social welfare in our state. With all the children that we served in our home and, in fact, in the overwhelming majority of cases of child maltreatment in our state, neglect is the only stated cause for involvement in the child welfare system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, 2021). Poverty, addiction, and mental illness are key contributors to neglect, and access to needed services is crucial in reunifying and keeping families together. In Nicki's case, the services she tried to access were run by "street-level bureaucrats," a term I now use in class. There are federal policies, state policies, and state and local regulations, but the experiences that individual clients have are directly related to the individual worker they have (Lipsky, 2010). Lipsky (2010) found that this could have a positive outcome, in that it can reduce the time it takes to implement services, and it can also result in services being more tailored to the individual—but it can also have a negative impact when the worker serves as a gatekeeper, supplying or withholding services at their discretion.

It is one thing to talk about how street-level bureaucrats can impact a client and an entirely different thing to experience it. For example, in the first placement we had, the social services worker's discretion in telling us information about the children in our care had a negative impact on our ability to care for those children. In Nicki's case, sometimes she was able to find a social services worker that listened to her issue, told her what to do, and walked her through the process to get needed services. In other cases, she hit a stone wall where the worker used their own discretion in withholding information.

One perfect example of the reality of our social welfare system involved a Verification of Household form. This is a form that people receiving TANF must fill out every year to verify that they have reported all adults living in their homes. In our state, there is no proof of identification and requirement on who can fill out the form but at this time, it had to be printed and submitted in hard copy to the TANF case manager each year. Nicki asked me to fill out the form. I signed it and she took it to her case manager. A month later, she received a letter saying

that her TANF benefits would be cut off in 30 days if she did not submit a valid Verification Letter. It turns out my signature on the letter was not readable. I needed to fill out the form and return it with a better signature. Nicki did not have an extra blank form, so I went down to the office and tried to pick one up. In our TANF office, you entered the waiting room and signed your name and case number on the sign-in sheet, then waited until you were called. I signed my name but as I did not have a case and was not opening a case, I did not have a case number. The person sitting at the sign-in desk did not put me in the queue as I had not filled in all the blanks on the form. After 45 minutes, I finally went up to the window and was escorted back to my seat by the armed security guard. I explained my issue to another worker and was finally, after 30 more minutes, allowed to go to the window to get a copy of a form. I filled it out and signed it at the window and attempted to give it to the worker, but the worker explained that it had to be submitted by the client. Nicki had to either buy envelopes and stamps or take the day off work, get public transportation, and turn the form into the worker in person. That day in that office, I had a glimpse of how demeaning and demoralizing our social welfare system is for people trying to access services. I was extremely frustrated and angry at being treated poorly for no reason other than being in that place seeking help.

In theory, my state's TANF program is one of the more generous in the country. On paper, there is a wide array of supports in place to help people just like Nicki rise out of poverty (Cabinet for Health and Family Services, 2022). My mid-sized city has educational opportunities and entry-level job availabilities. There is childcare and housing. There is public transportation. In class, I had always had students read our TANF policies and programs and discussed the array of services available to clients. We looked at the number of subsidized housing units. We talked about the average cost of childcare and the array of options. Now, we look at those documents and we talk about the real experience of trying to utilize resources. Many of the students at my university are first-generation and come from low-income backgrounds. Our service region includes many rural communities. Students often share their experiences of family that have received assistance and the struggles they have experienced.

We also talk about the stereotypical views of people who receive welfare and how our lived experiences compare. This is another area in which my fostering experience has informed my teaching. One of the concepts we learn about is *residual aid*. This is assistance provided with the understanding that you only get government help as a last resort if you are in crisis, and you only get it until you are out of the crisis. We talk about the concept of *less eligibility*, meaning you will not receive everything that you need, lest you get comfortable and stop trying to be independent.

These concepts have been in my lesson plans forever, but it took a day at the WIC office for me to truly understand their power. The youngest child in our first placement, Joe, was still on formula for feeding when he got to us. The social services worker said that he had a WIC card and suggested that I transfer it to my name and use it for formula while he was in our care. In addition to being a financial benefit for me, it would also keep his case open so that his parent or next foster placement would not have to reapply. This made perfect sense and so I started using WIC. The first visit was fine. At this time, the program in our area still used paper coupons and was a little complicated. I had a wonderful worker who helped me understand the system and

what I needed to do. During my second visit, I mentioned to a different worker that I was running out of formula before the end of the month. I told her that the doctor had told me to give Joe X number of ounces a day, but the amount of formula did not cover that. She looked me dead in the eye and said, “Do you think that we are going to give you everything? You can just get the rest.” The way I felt when she said that is something that I will never forget. After the initial shock, all I could think about was the impact on the populations we serve when they hear words like that.

After that, I started paying more attention to the treatment of people in vulnerable populations, such as the way parents were treated in social welfare offices. I also listened more to the way those parents and others responded back. I was able to keep control of my response that day when that WIC worker shamed me, but there are some days that I don’t know that I could have. I once witnessed the front desk worker at the child protection office tell a birth parent—who had taken a day off work, most likely without pay, and traveled from out of the county—that her child wasn’t available for a visit because the foster mom had another appointment and they had forgot to let the birth parent know. The mother began yelling. She was then threatened and told to “get her act together” if she wanted to get her child back. I honestly almost wept, thinking about the level of frustration that parent must have felt at that moment.

In my campus office and classrooms, I began to listen to my students’ stories differently. I asked more questions about the resources they had and needed, and sought more information services both at my university and in my community. I tell my students these stories not to make them feel sorry for our clients or to make them hate the workers. I tell them so we continue to have empathy. Our clients sometimes make horrible choices. But as social workers, dignity and respect for those clients is our mantra. This also extends to the professionals that work in these settings. We discuss burnout and what that can look like when dealing with complex client situations. We have the opportunity, using these real-life examples, to consider not only what the client might be experiencing but also what might lead to inappropriate professional behavior. We have had rich discussions about self-care and boundaries through roleplaying the WIC office and visitation examples and put ourselves in the place of the client, the worker, and others who might have witnessed the interactions.

Teaching the Experience

With these lived experiences, I am able to provide my students with a more nuanced and balanced look at the social welfare system. When we talk about the progression from mother’s pensions in the 1800s (Leff, 1973) to the development of Aid to Dependent Children (Ross, 1985) to TANF (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022), I am able to lead in discussion about not only the policies and implementation, but also the very real rules and values that impact the clients who use these services. At the beginning of this current semester (at the time of writing), I shared with my classes the Preamble to the National Association of Social Workers (2023) Code of Ethics:

Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. ...
These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing,

supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems. (para. 2)

As I talk about the experiences I have had as a foster parent, we revisit this preamble and talk about what the reality of this ideal is for our clients, communities, and organizations. All faculty in our program come into the classroom with a wealth of practice experience, and many of us—both social work educators and students—come with lived experience dealing with social work and social welfare services. Using these lived experiences in the classroom together provides the opportunity to grow empathy but also instill the drive to change the systems in real ways. What we frequently recognize is that the preamble is not always the way we as social workers treat our clients. So, we talk about how we can promote empathy and improve policies.

We have long talked about the importance of voting and often have voter registration drives on our campus. I explain my experience of sitting in court and seeing the power that our family court judges have in making and breaking families and talk about the importance of doing research about candidates not only at the state and national level but at the local level. We also talk about the importance of talking to our clients about their right to vote for the very people who will determine very tangible aspects of their lives. I made sure that all the foster parents I worked with were registered to vote and understood the importance of it by explaining how much power elected judges have and how legislators make the rules about the social supports they need. We remind students that our responsibility as social workers does not stop at micro practice with individuals—our mission is clear that we must work at all levels to effect change.

Another benefit that I have seen in my social work program since I started talking about my experience as a foster mother is that more students are now sharing their stories of involvement in the foster care system. We have a large number of students who have aged out of the foster care system, or who were adopted out of the system, because our university participates in a state-wide tuition waiver program for foster/adopted students. We also have a high population of low-income, first-generation students. Because we have worked diligently to create a safe environment in our classrooms and our offices, we have seen an increase in the number of students who openly talk about their experiences as recipients of social welfare, their experiences with social workers, and how this had led them to social work as a profession. This provides a rich discussion about advocacy, but also gives an opportunity to discuss boundaries and separating the personal from the professional. Using our history to inform our practice while recognizing that our experience may not be the client's experience can be a hard lesson to learn for students, so this opportunity is particularly helpful.

What's Next

Because of my personal experience and the professional experience of faculty in our department, we have begun doing research focusing on training for new child protection workers. We partnered with the training resource center at our university in their contract with the state to

review the training curriculum and recommend improvements. We were able to include students at both the BSW and MSW levels in this research and incorporated the findings into our classroom discussions. We have also begun research into improving the retention and graduation rates of college students who were formerly in foster care. Our social work department is collaborating with the Student Success Office and Dean of Students Office on campus to develop programming targeted to this student population based on the research efforts that are underway.

I am no longer a foster parent. Overall, we ended up having a total of eight children in long-term placements. In all but one case involving two sisters, we know that the children are in safe and stable homes. Over the years we had some great workers and some okay ones. We learned more about advocating for our children, and developed relationships that were lasting. We eventually reverted to doing respite—providing short-term help with other foster families. This has been the perfect opportunity for us, and we have had amazing experiences with kids of all ages.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed the use of my personal experience as a foster mother in my classroom to illustrate policies and programs, such as the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act and TANF, and concepts, including street-level bureaucracy and residual aid. I have provided examples of how I incorporated the real interactions I had with birth families and social services workers into my teaching, and I have discussed the importance of empathy and self-care when working with not only vulnerable families but for ourselves and our colleagues. When meeting new classes or recruiting students to social work, I tell them that my commitment to our program is based on the experience of being a client. My life as a foster mother has proven the importance of the work that I do as a social work educator. When I stand before my class, or work on curriculum changes, or read admission essays, I am not only my professional self, but I am an advocate for the children that have lived in my house. I am the liaison for parents that don't have custody of their children and desperately want them back. I am the mother standing in line at the WIC office, trying to be patient and get the things my baby needs. I consider this to be the greatest honor in the world. And at graduation each semester, I send these new social workers out into the world with a hug and the mission to remember my stories and do better.

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Endless Home Visit

Hugh Silk

Abstract: I provide homeless outreach medical care in our city, Worcester, MA, alongside a very dedicated social worker. We go where the people are. Until they are not. Our city continues to back a mandate to take down tents/homes displacing marginalized individuals and disrupting essential health and social service care. My experience is expressed here.

Keywords: anti-homeless legislation, forced dispersement, poetry

The long walk up the hill
Through the snow and wind
Into the woods
I stand now outside the tent
“Homeless outreach”
I hear my voice call out
A stirring
Clean needle kits, Narcan given
Suboxone refill done
“Are you ok”
Hand warmers, socks, water
“Hang in there”

Return days later
Your home is gone
City moved you on
We will look for you
The endless home visit
To a home that is not a home
Not allowed to be
Your belongings scattered
Health services abandoned
Left alone
We still care.
Even if they don't

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Reflections on Behavioral Health Crisis in Communities: Reimagining Social Work Curriculum and Practice

Kiarra Donnelly, Monica Nandan, and Michelle Rhue

Abstract: Social work prepares future generations of behavioral health professionals who comprehensively understand community-based mental health challenges. Social workers collaboratively partner with different disciplines in designing systems (human and technological) that reflect a seamless delivery for community residents, especially where residents enter the mental health systems through 911 calls. This paper describes how a graduate social work student and a faculty team collaborated with professionals from different backgrounds to design such a system. Additionally, the experience details the importance of social workers partnering with first responders—often the first point of contact for community residents regarding mental health. The lessons learned can guide how social work pedagogy can be more reflective of current complex community needs wherein the curriculum is horizontally and vertically integrated and guided by interprofessional collaborative practice. Additionally, these lessons speak to the dilution of hegemony practiced by faculty vis-à-vis social work students.

Keywords: social work curriculum integration, interprofessional collaborative education, mental health, crisis response

Introduction

The anxiety and uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the rates of suicidal behavior, ideation, attempt, and death in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). A coalition of healthcare experts declared a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health, which is “inextricably tied to the stress brought on by COVID-19 and the ongoing struggle for racial justice and represents an acceleration of trends observed prior to 2020” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021, para. 2). The issuance of a report in December 2021 by the U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, *Protecting Youth Mental Health*, set the stage for improving mental health crisis response for all citizens. However, the mental health crisis in the U.S. is not just reserved for the youth. Concurrent with issuance of the report by the Surgeon General, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy has also recognized the growing national need for effective mental health and substance use interventions for all ages (The White House, 2022). This crisis is a clarion call for social workers to respond more proactively to changing policies in behavioral health, a term defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (n.d.) as “the promotion of mental health, resilience and wellbeing; the treatment of mental and substance use disorders; and the support of those who experience and/or are in recovery from these conditions, along with their families and communities.” Additionally, social workers need to ensure that their respective states develop comprehensive infrastructure for the rollout of the 988 hotline authorized by the Model Law Enforcement and Other First Responders Deflection Act (The White House, 2022). As innovative and holistic change agents, social workers are needed at the forefront of the mental health crisis: for ensuring that policies are appropriately implemented; for filling in

demand gaps; for collaborating with stakeholders to build or strengthen a seamless responsive mental health delivery system; and for ensuring that social work interventions and organizational strategies for addressing the behavioral health crisis remain agile and culturally responsive. To prepare these change agents for a dynamic and complex future, a re-imagining of the social work curriculum should invite insights from practitioners, service users, professionals from fields outside of social work, and students engaged in community-based research and internship experiences (Chukwu et al., 2022). “If social work is to engender and maintain its unique and vital role in problematizing simplistic, depoliticized and individualizing constructions of mental health and illness, we need to promote more contextualized and holistic understandings of people’s experiences” (Morley & Macfarlane, 2010, p. 46). This reflective piece incorporates three different voices—graduate student, faculty teaching clinical practice, and faculty teaching community/policy practice—recommending changes in how we prepare the next generation of change agents to address the “complicated and complex problems” (Westley et al., 2007, p. 9) that appear as “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160).

Narrative 1: MSW Student, Kiarra

Student Background

In May of 2023, I graduated with my Master of Social Work degree. In 2019, I graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Theatre Arts. While in my undergraduate, I became acquainted with arts-based social justice in the form of the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology, which fostered a passion for social work within me. When I decided to pursue my MSW degree, I made two commitments to myself: I would pursue extensive experiential opportunities, and I would attempt to subsidize the cost of schooling to the extent possible. In spring 2022, the solution for both came in the form of a Graduate Research Assistantship (GRA) in the Social Work and Human Services Department under Dr. Nandan. Dr. Nandan was seeking graduate student assistance in an ongoing project examining the relationship between mental health crises and 911 responders. The following description and reflection illuminate my assistantship as well as portray recommendations to enrich social work education for future generations of change agents.

The Project

At the onset of my assistantship, Dr. Nandan had secured 200 randomly selected incident reports of closed cases from 2019, authored by county police officers responding to 911 calls. My role was to hand-code and categorize terms related to mental health, directly or indirectly. The five categories were Diagnoses, Abnormal Behaviors, Drugs, Medications, and Crimes. Each category was assigned to a color and when I came across a term that matched the category, I highlighted that term in the corresponding color. For example, if I read the term “schizophrenia,” I highlighted it in green—the color designated for the “Diagnosis” category. I kept a spreadsheet of all the terms identified under each category. The purpose of hand-coding reports was to identify a large database of “organic” words and phrases used by police officers that might indicate a potential mental-health crisis or might guide mental health providers for follow-up assessment and case management. Dr. Nandan was working collaboratively with

faculty and graduate students from Information Systems as well as Computer and Data Science to ultimately develop an AI software capable of similar analysis in real-time on a large data set of police incident reports. Essentially, I was providing a social work perspective to these collaborators for bolstering their natural language processing and AI-building abilities.

Some of the cases were easily classified as mental health calls, particularly if a diagnosis or suicide-related term was used. However, beyond that, classifying a case as mental health-related or as needing follow-up became a little subjective. Consequently, I discussed the dilemma with both Dr. Nandan and another clinical social work faculty member. Through regular deliberations, we determined that incident reports could be placed into three classifications:

1. Mental health calls that could benefit from clinical intervention or follow-up.
2. Domestic/social calls that could benefit from clinical support or follow-up.
3. Calls not requiring clinical support or follow-up.

I was provided with incident reports in two separate batches. The results of my coding are provided below in Table 1. By separating the cases into two batches and classifying them separately, I was able to confirm that my coding and classification strategies were yielding consistent results. In both batches, I determined that nearly one-third of cases could have benefitted from social work interventions.

Table 1

Determining Need for Clinical Support or Follow-Up in a Random Sample of 911 Calls

Batch 1:

Classification of 911 Call	Total # of Calls	# of Calls that Could Benefit from Clinical Support or Follow Up	# of Calls Not Requiring Clinical Support or Follow Up
Mental Health Concern	12	12	0
Domestic/Social Concern	19	19	0
Other	69	0	69
Grand Total	100	31	69

Batch 2:

Classification of 911 Call	# Total Number of Calls	# of Calls that Could Benefit from Clinical Support or Follow Up	# of Calls Not Requiring Clinical Support or Follow Up
Mental Health Concern	11	11	0
Domestic/Social Concern	21	21	0
Other	68	0	68
Grand Total	100	32	68

While working on this project, I was continuously switching between roles: graduate research assistant, full-time student, clinical intern, and aspiring social worker. Though I

spent a lot of time analyzing the cases within the larger context of the social work field, this project greatly impacted me personally, academically, politically, and clinically. In this article, I reflect on these impacts and propose recommendations for academicians, field placement supervisors, and the social work practice community.

Reflection

I felt enthusiastic about understanding the intersection of crisis response and the mental health crisis in the United States. The fragility of our national mental health and its ill-equipped response system has long been evident to me personally. The system (and its fragility) existed before COVID-19, but the pandemic certainly exacerbated both and pushed these topics to the forefront of the national agenda. Simultaneously, the police-related tragedies of recent years accompanied by images of mass protest and political rhetoric that occupied the media in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder swirled in my mind. It was impossible to broach the project without considering the larger social context of fear, control, and tragedies. Preliminary solutions to crisis response were already in the making in select Georgia counties, including co-response teams, which pair a police officer with a licensed mental health clinician. I wondered what this meant for career opportunities as I inched closer to graduation. I also wondered what it would be like to work on a co-response team, what funding and human power it would take to realistically address the need, and how much these positions would be paid. Should the government mandate these co-responder positions? From where would the funding come? How would the government fiscally value the clinicians needed to fill the positions? If the clinical positions were not paid at a competitive rate, would the age-old social work dilemma be furthered? Should social workers take an underpaid position simply because there is a void in service for a vulnerable population, or would they be enabling a systemic problem of underfunded and undervalued service by doing so? In the same vein, do social workers play a social control role or a social care role?

Academically, my coursework was building a new conceptual lens through which to view the project: Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) taught me the person-in-environment perspective, which prompted me to consider the interpersonal, intrapersonal, cultural, and societal factors that influenced each case. I was exposed to psychological theoretical frameworks through which to analyze individuals. For example, were there levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs not being met that led the individual to the crisis? In Social Work Practice I, we discussed the preventative approach to social issues. I pondered how much access the individuals in the case files had to quality, affordable mental health resources and community services. Had access been ideal, could the crisis be preempted? Meanwhile, Social Work Practice II (Community Practice) introduced me to the relevance of social workers on multidisciplinary teams. As a social work student analyzing police case files, I was actively engaging in multidisciplinary practice. It excited me to know that at least in the local county, key leadership within law enforcement valued the input of social workers, information systems, and computer and data science disciplines enough to share closed incident reports for analysis. To contextualize this partnership, the local law enforcement had already approached the social work program to recruit interns for addressing local community-based mental health calls. After I hand-coded the data, it was transferred to the computer and data science faculty for natural

language processing to design algorithms for computers to replicate human coding on a mass scale.

As Congress addressed the national mental health crisis in real time, the Social Welfare Policy & Services course helped me to discern the political undercurrents of the project. It brought to life how bills are thrown back and forth between the Senate and House of Representatives, and how painstaking regulations are created to satisfy multiple interests. An entire course could be devoted to the mental health crisis response legislation that rolled out in Georgia in 2022, but Dr. Nandan made a valiant effort to devote a portion of the semester to reviewing other relevant national and state political agendas to contextualize this topic. What could not be covered at length was provided as supplemental material.

The Model Law Enforcement and Other First Responders Deflection Act (The White House, 2022) was designed to provide first responders with resources and partnerships to serve community members with mental illness and substance use disorders more effectively. Months later, the 988 mental health crisis line launched across all 50 states (Krass et al., 2022). Each state was tasked with the responsibility of aligning its call centers with 988 by the summer of 2022, aided with grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration totaling almost \$105 million (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). At the state level, the Georgia Behavioral Health and Peace Officer Co-Responder Act, also known as House Bill 1013, was signed into law. At face value, this law seemed like a shiny solution to a very wicked problem (Westley et al., 2007). I often wondered how the proposed solutions would play out in practice. Dr. Nandan brought in speakers from a variety of sectors including the Georgia senate, a local community service board, a local sheriff's department, and an academic from Emory University engaging in research on using Reddit threads (online forum posts) as predictors of substance use trends. It became clear that while some of these essential stakeholders—important parts of the solution puzzle—intended to work with one another, others would continue to operate in silos using their language and interests: a microcosm for national discord. Would we ever build a comprehensive and seamless service delivery system that we so casually refer to in the behavioral health realm?

Clinically, as I settled into my practice experience at an internship, I began considering the individuals in the case reports through a social work lens. Several community residents who may have benefitted from clinical support or follow-up (see Table 1) were declining transport to mental health units or ER. As an aspiring social worker, I knew better than to assume that the termination of the case equated to the termination of the crisis for the client. I longed to enquire from each of the individuals depicted in the table about their experiences with the first responders. Why was the decision made to contact 911? What was the desired outcome? What benefit did the intervention serve? Why was the decision made to reduce hospital transport? What happened in the aftermath of the response? I presumed that many community residents were left with no meaningful/consequential resources or outcomes, and their attempts at seeking help were ineffectual. It seemed to me that the residents were not seeking an instant fix from a first responder, but rather access to resources and follow-up, more akin to social work case management. Without this personalized intervention, I wondered if the residents' underlying symptomologies and maladaptive interpersonal behaviors would worsen, warranting future

crises of a more severe nature and subsequent strain on first responders. As you can see, the more I analyzed the data, the more questions I developed about what this meant for prospective social workers, social work academicians, and the profession.

Recommendations

By reflecting on my experience, I have formulated some suggestions to improve the efficacy of the GRA role within social work programs. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the police reports, I carried out most of my work on this project in a small, windowless, secluded, and secure office. I sifted through hundreds of papers highlighting key terms and recording them in an Excel sheet for hours upon hours. From one angle, this was an ideal way to focus on open coding and categorizing quantitative data. However, this seclusion curtailed my creativity and problem-solving abilities since I couldn't deliberate my thought processes with another person. The only time I contacted my professor was when I had questions. Being immersed in this work did stir a fair amount of curiosity and some innovative ideas, but without any structured and dedicated time and space to process these ideas, they evaporated into the harsh fluorescent overhead lights in the office. I longed to have meaningful dialogues with all of the faculty members and other students outside of the social work department who were working on the project alongside me. I wondered about the perspectives of GRAs from information systems and computer science who were working on the project and tried to imagine how a criminal justice professor would view this work. How enriching would it have been to have a group discussion with an active co-response team? However, the task at hand was large and intimidating. So, early in my social work journey, I lacked the energy, confidence, and conviction to advocate outside of my student-researcher role and propose to be a part of the larger solution.

To truly enable an innovative and responsive interprofessional practice model, I call for a radical subversion of the rigid academic model that renders students subordinate to the decorated faculty and title-holders. Students and research assistants should be treated as equals in the research process, valued for the nuance that their generational lens and so-called "less scholarly" objectivity brings into the room. Since students are accustomed to operating within the system of academic oppression, faculty and staff members should bear the responsibility for setting a new tone—a responsibility particularly well-suited for social work faculty and staff.

When faculty members embark on projects similar to the one described, notwithstanding the exceedingly sensitive nature of the data and the novelty of the initiative, they should be open to a collaborative approach and follow up with scheduled debriefing sessions with all members. GRAs and faculty advisors should be given a forum to meet with one another to process the work and seek input. This model not only empowers the student to see themselves as a substantial voice, fostering the future of social work research, but it also reinforces the mission-minded values of the profession, which position changemaking above personal pride.

Faculty Narrative: A Response to the MSW Student's Reflection & Recommendations

Faculty Backgrounds

Dr. Monica Nandan, PhD, MSW, MBA is a macro-practice faculty member teaching in the clinically focused MSW program. Her research, teaching, and community service focuses on behavioral health prevention and intervention. She recruited Kiarra for the project based on strong recommendations from a clinical faculty in the program. Kiarra's reflections have caused two faculty members with different emphases in the MSW curriculum (policy, community practice, and clinical practice) to re-examine and reimagine how we teach MSW students.

Dr. Michelle Rhue, PhD, LCSW, MFT teaches clinical practice courses as a faculty member and also has her own private practice. Her research focuses on curriculum development as well as Interprofessional Practice & Education (IPE). As a clinician, she provides therapeutic services to individuals, couples, and families, and clinical supervision to professionals working towards their clinical state licensure.

Response 1: A Four-Pronged Approach

Based on Kiarra's reflections and insights, as well as in working collaboratively with partners from different disciplines across the university and within the community, one thing is very clear: Social work education needs to be true to its roots and adopt holistic, systemic, and flexible or agile interventions and strategies that are responsive to the evolving, dynamic, and complex community challenges.

Reflecting on how I (Dr. Nandan) have been teaching in BSW and MSW programs over the past 30 years, I have been struck by the number of times I have encountered ethical and moral obligations and dilemmas as an academician and social work practitioner preparing future generations of social workers. I have asked myself this question several times: How can we continue training future change agents for a world that is increasingly becoming more complex and dynamic using teaching strategies and content that are not keeping up with what is required? On the one hand, let's critically examine the current rates of domestic violence, poverty, income inequality, harsh work conditions in some industries and sectors, etc., and on the other hand, comprehensively review and reflect on what and how we are teaching in our respective programs. While teaching and practicing, should we not collaborate with other stakeholders who are also contributing to the solution puzzle for these complex social problems? As an academician and practitioner, I have more questions than answers, because this ethical and moral obligation must be addressed by us all who prepare future social workers. National research shows that social work students generally shy away from policy practice and research courses (Bernklau Halvor, 2016; Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2018). Based on the reflections offered by the MSW student and our academic obligations, we (Dr. Nandan and Dr. Rhue) are proposing a four-pronged approach:

1. Changes to how we teach social welfare policy courses.
2. Changes to the social work curriculum.

3. Consideration for interdisciplinary research.
4. Incorporation of interprofessional curriculum and skills.

Prong 1

Within social welfare policy courses, social work students need to understand that often several areas of policy simultaneously impact the lives of vulnerable populations: health, education, mental health, law enforcement, immigration, veterans' services, and housing, for instance. Understanding how these areas of policy intersect and often negatively impact the lives of clients can shed light on the assessments conducted by social workers and social work students. Stone and Sandfort (2009) describe a framework for understanding the policy field that impacts a community problem (e.g., healthcare, education, etc.). For instance, students can choose a substantive issue/community problem; identify the laws and regulations at various levels that impact the problem; gather programs created and funding available to solve the problem; identify the organizations that are attempting to address the problem and the level of power they possess to influence the problem; and ascertain the linkages between these organizations. Such an approach could enable students to understand the importance of working collaboratively with diverse stakeholders (who may not be social workers) who are implementing policies in the different realms— education, law enforcement, immigration, etc.—to create a meaningful impact. Moreover, in this course, social work students should apply policy practice skills (Jansson, 2019) to real-life policy issues. For instance, students need to learn self-advocacy skills to address ethical questions posed by Kiarra: “If the clinical positions are not paid at a competitive rate, would the age-old social work dilemma be furthered? Should social workers take a position because there is a void in service for a vulnerable population, or would they be enabling a systemic problem of underfunded and undervalued service by doing so?”

Prong 2

The siloed orientation in teaching social work is not doing justice in preparing social workers for a global, dynamic, and complex future—wicked problems (Westley et al., 2007). Social work curriculum delivery could adopt a “portfolio” orientation where every course provides necessary insights into understanding the layers of the onion of a wicked problem, enabling students to integrate the contents horizontally and vertically, scaffolding a wholistic and flexible solution/intervention—similar to the medical school curriculum in some places (Vidic & Weitlauf, 2002). For instance, an assignment/case which integrates relevant theories and practices from several lenses (e.g., policy practice, human behavior in the social environment, community organizing, clinical intervention with individuals and families, and research methods) could greatly enhance students' understanding of a “real world” issue. This understanding can enable them to design innovatively responsive interventions—under the guidance of a faculty team—that could be implemented through their internship site. This approach could shed new light, particularly on the relevance of two courses that most social work students try to avoid: Social Welfare Policy (Bernklau Halvor, 2016), and Research Methods (Bolin et al., 2012; Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2018). If faculty members who teach the courses align the assignments that enable students to understand and respond to complex issues using the skills learned in these courses, graduates of such social work programs would

not only be well prepared for the marketplace but would also be able to appropriately respond to other complex issues in the future. Moreover, social work programs should consider team-teaching models, where faculty members who teach clinical practice courses work alongside faculty who teach community and policy-practice to enable students to design prevention and intervention strategies that cut across all levels. This approach to teaching could address questions and reflections by Kiarra related to what triggered a 911 call by a community resident; what the desired outcome for them at the site; what can be mobilized in the future for the resident; and what can be done to address “the residents’ underlying symptomologies and maladaptive interpersonal behaviors... [and averting] future crises of a more severe nature and subsequent strain on first responders.”

Prong 3

In addition, we are proposing that social work students need to be involved in interdisciplinary “real world” research which addresses complex community problems (Miller et al., 2019). These students need to experience working with interdisciplinary faculty-research teams. Such research would not only allow social workers and students from other disciplines to “de-layer” complex issues through research but would also enable them to think creatively as an interdisciplinary team to design solutions and strategies. Such approaches to teaching and doing research can greatly enhance social work students’ research competencies (Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2018). These strategies could also address Kiarra’s recommendation to treat GRAs as “equals in the research process, valued for the nuance that their generational lens and so-called ‘less scholarly’ objectivity brings into the room.”

Prong 4

To a clinically focused MSW faculty, the student’s experiences and reflections demonstrate the value of developing a professional working relationship between social workers and law enforcement. There is a need for building a collaborative relationship that would bridge the growing gap in effective and efficient responses to citizens calling for assistance when experiencing a mental health crisis. The importance of guided training and education of social work students for interprofessional collaborative practice extends beyond healthcare professionals to include all the stakeholders and providers in the social and human service arenas.

Response 2: On Interprofessional Collaboration

According to Schot et al. (2020), *interprofessional collaboration* is defined “within health care as an active and ongoing partnership between professionals from diverse backgrounds with distinctive professional cultures and possibly representing different organizations or sectors working together in providing services for the benefit of healthcare users” (p. 333). Over the last decade, research literature has consistently validated the benefits of interprofessional collaborative practice as an ideal approach to providing more holistic and quality care to patients in need of healthcare services (Guraya & Barr, 2018; McCave et al., 2020). Kiarra’s reflection

illustrates the benefits of collaborative practice to help address the mental health crisis growing in our country.

Kiarra's reflection also illuminates the importance of training and preparing future generations of social workers and other social service sector providers (e.g., first responders) in requisite skills for interprofessional practice (values, communication, roles and responsibilities, and teamwork) in the community settings. Her narrative spoke to her desire to regularly interact with students from other disciplines who were concurrently working on different components of the project. When tending to citizens battling a mental health crisis, first responders, mental health professionals, and the team of students working on the project need to operate as a cohesive interprofessional team.

Interprofessional education (IPE) is becoming the prerequisite to proper preparation for interprofessional collaborative practice (ICP; de Saxe Zerden et al., 2018; McCave et al., 2020). IPE focuses on building the knowledge, skills, and abilities of professionals to establish efficient partnerships in client care (Interprofessional Education Collaborative [IPEC], 2016). Research supports the effectiveness of IPE closing the gap in communication, role clarification, and maintaining the focus of holistic client care within the interprofessional practice (de Saxe Zerden et al., 2018; Guraya & Barr, 2018; Yan et al., 2007).

Essentially, this student's reflection and interprofessional collaborative experience confirms the significance of preparing students adequately for interprofessional collaborative practice by increasing opportunities for interprofessional education training in the curriculum. The World Health Organization (2010) reports:

Interprofessional education occurs when students from two or more professions learn about, from, and with each other to enable effective collaboration to improve health outcomes. Once students understand how to work interprofessionally, they are ready to enter the workplace as a member of the collaborative practice team. This is a key step in moving health systems from fragmentation to a position of strength. (cf. IPEC, 2016, p. 8)

In social work education, we teach the importance of assessing clients' needs systemically. As professional social workers, we work with multiple professionals in diverse organizational settings, but what is not often taught is how to develop those interprofessional collaborative relationships (Adamson et al., 2020). Fortunately, the Council on Social Work Education (2022) has acknowledged the significance of including interprofessional collaboration in our core competencies. However, Kiarra's experience demands a more intentional approach to prepare social work students with interprofessional collaborative competencies. Collaborative learning and practice opportunities in social work programs will not only enhance students' abilities to provide effective and holistic care but will also decrease fragmented responses to community mental health crises (D'Souza et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This narrative and reflection has established the importance of educating graduate social work students in interprofessional collaborative practice orientation for addressing complex and dynamic community behavioral health challenges. Social work educators can lead the way in partnering with professionals from different disciplines as well as community stakeholders for designing responsive behavioral health systems (human and technological). These educators can also lead the way in integrating the practical significance of research and policy into all forms of social work practice and illustrate how exactly to apply this with real-life community examples. Scaffolding students' assignments (especially if they originate in internship sites) throughout the social work curriculum, where students apply the skills they have learned in each of the courses, can enable students to effectively integrate course contents into understanding and solving real-life issues. In essence, we are recommending that social work curricula and pedagogical approaches may need to change to prepare the future generations of change agents in the social work profession who can effectively address challenges specific to a population or community.

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