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PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH UPHOLDING COLLABORATION IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK FIELDWORK EDUCATION

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Abstract

Internationally, minimum standards for social work education specified by the International Federation of Social Workers include the ability to demonstrate a critical understanding of social research and the principles, ethics, and applications of scientific inquiry. Co-operative inquiry is a collaborative research methodology suited to field education research as, consistent with social work principles, it is respectful and participatory, and upholds the unique dignity of each person involved in the research. An inquiry process is grounded in the idea that research can be conducted *with* people, not *on* people. Co-operative inquiry highlights the principle of the equality of voices within the co-authoring process; this is made possible because students and academics have power over what is written and published. It brings students and academics together as co-authors, co-participants, and co-researchers. A community of trust is developed, combining participants' values with their professional or personal knowledge and experience.

Considering the tensions and pressures inherent in neoliberal higher education, this paper will remind us of the codes of ethics of the Australian Association of Social Work, the Social Work Registration Board (CORU), and the Irish Association of Social Workers and emphasise the importance of collaboration and respect concerning social justice, and social theory research. The outcomes of three student inquiries will be shared, including how they led to students connecting to an international research network, presenting at international conferences, and publishing their work in international academic journals.

Student participant feedback indicates the value of their involvement in co-operative inquiry, as traditional research typically does not include student voices, which is why this research was special because it was led by students and gave them more significance.

Keywords: co-operative inquiry, student-led research, work integrated learning, fieldwork, social work.

INTRODUCTION

This paper shares the opportunities and challenges that the authors believe exist for contemporary social work education, fieldwork, and research internationally. It presents our experiences and outcomes from participation in three student-led, rural-focused research projects conducted across three different placement cycles between 2020–2023. The first was Australia-based (1), and the second and third inquiries (2,3) were transnational. We argue for the importance of collaboration and respect concerning social justice and social theory research in social work fieldwork education.

Despite the numerous opportunities that student engagement in the three research projects offered, questions and challenges to student participation exist, such as how to support students' learning, practically and academically. How to mitigate the risk of students feeling overwhelmed and ensure that their primary placement learning objectives are met and not compromised by their engagement with the project? How to overcome the practical challenges of time zones and geographical distance?

Transcending Potential Risks

In 2019, colleagues from the International Network of Co-operative Inquirers (INCInq) examined emergent themes from four innovative international social work placement scenarios from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland. The findings pointed to "enablers, markers, and aspects of quality learning" that helped to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by placement innovation and learning (4). Challenges identified included placement scarcity, rapid placement innovation, and the mitigation of risk while preserving placement quality. The authors concluded that creativity and innovation, guided by well-articulated educational principles, clearly identified learning outcomes, and evidence-based pedagogical practices, promote the construction of quality placements that help to transcend risks (4). How to deliver quality placements in a pandemic posed both challenges and opportunities for all involved in social work education. This inquiry was followed by three student-led, rural-focused co-operative inquiry projects. In social work, practice research is a collaborative and negotiated process of inquiry that involves practitioners, researchers, service users, and educators. Participants in co-operative inquiry work as co-inquirers, co-researchers, and co-subjects in this practice-based research approach that involves cycles of reflection and action. Work-integrated learning has been studied using the co-operative inquiry approach, and our student-led inquiry projects have demonstrated that it can be applied as a technique as well as a method, promoting power sharing, teamwork, and participants' transformative learning. Our outcomes support broadening the scope of placements accessible to students, which goes some way toward meeting unmet needs, and validate the ability of placements incorporating experiential research to prepare students for professional practice (5).

METHODOLOGY: CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY

These unique student-led research projects were undertaken fully online and led by seventeen social work students completing their placements in Australia and Ireland. Students aimed to co-write journal articles on mutually agreed topics, focusing on issues affecting rural social work services. Students were on placement in Australia (twelve fully online placements, two on-site placements with an online research component) and Ireland (three on-site placements with an online research component). Supported by academics, students met online to conduct in-depth conversations that involved sharing their knowledge, observations, and experiences. Available literature was accessed by students and linked with themes emerging from the online conversations. The research data constituted the collective wisdom of all participants.

The projects were designed and enacted using co-operative inquiry as the research methodology. Co-operative inquiry is participatory, inclusive, highly collaborative, and action-based (6). The process uses

"critical friends", where knowledge and experiences are analysed by the group. The process is grounded in the idea that research can be conducted *with* people, not *on* people (Russ et al., In press) and highlights the principle of the equality of voices within the co-authoring process, where the researchers are also participants in the research. This methodology aims to promote equality in research, where everyone is on equal footing and all opinions are sought (7).

Co-operative inquiry methodology involves four phases that are cycled through providing opportunities for reflection and sharing ideas (Fig 1.). This process of reflection and action allows for the development of the research topic while adding to the depth of the data.

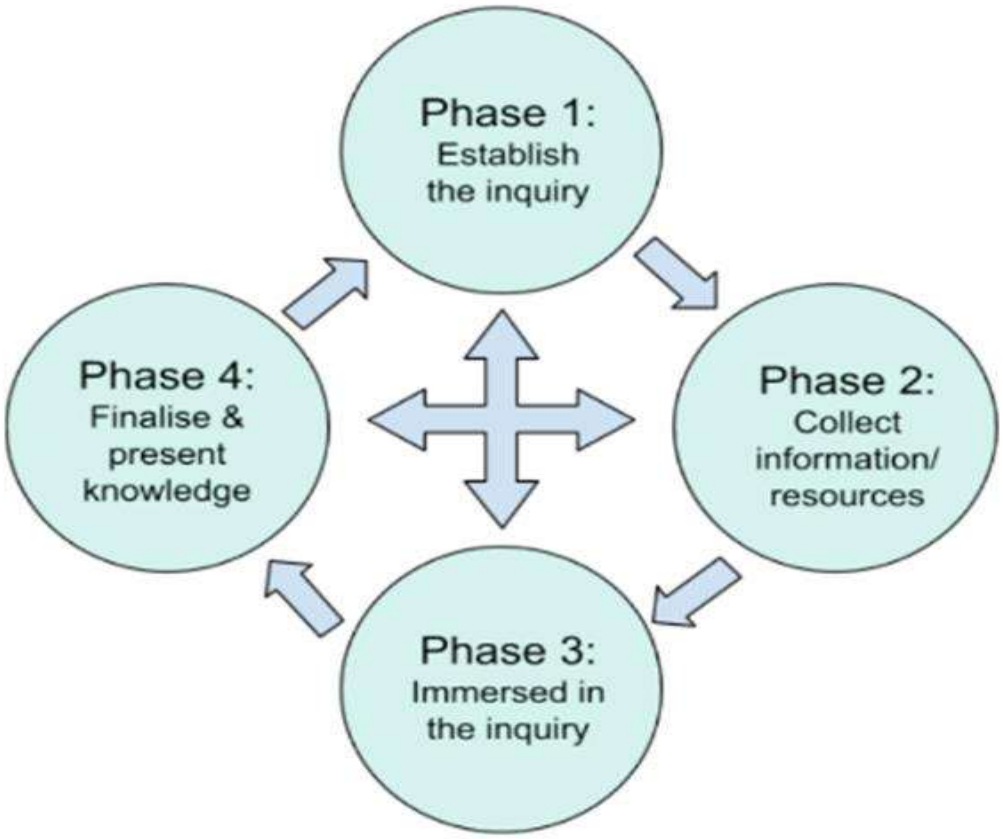


Fig. 1 A co-designed graphic representation of the four phases of Co-operative Inquiry (8)

In phase one, the group comes together as a new research team. They establish ground rules to facilitate a cohesive group process and enhance member participation. The method of data collection and details of the project are discussed and agreed upon, and agreement is reached on the focus of the research and how the data will be collected (6).

In phase two, information is collected, with further discussion of the research topic (9). Members share their opinions and experiences with the group, thus generating data collection and discussions. Their combined knowledge informs the inquiry, and central themes begin to emerge, laying the foundations for the resulting article.

In phase three, the team becomes immersed in the research topic. They explore the information gathered, share ideas, and discuss practice experiences and personal lived experiences to fully engage themselves in the topic being researched. Reflective processes are used to enhance engagement with and exploration of the topic from multiple perspectives.

The fourth phase consists of the team critically reviewing the data and the themes that have emerged (9). Patterns in the data may be identified to discover common themes and interpret meanings. They begin to write the journal article or to collate other dissemination materials (e.g., conference presentations). This process is collaborative, ensuring all voices and opinions are heard and respected. There follows an extensive and collaborative editing process to produce the final article.

STUDENT-LED, RURAL-FOCUSED INQUIRY PROJECTS

These projects started during COVID-19. Australian colleagues initiated the first project to support social work students undertaking isolated, remote research projects for their placement. Students required more opportunities to collaborate and build skills relevant to their social work placements, and co-operative inquiry provided an opportunity to do this. Following the success of the first project, there followed two further student-led, rural-focussed projects and University College Cork joined three universities from across Australia. The second project examined the challenges and opportunities of rural social work practice, and the third explored issues of disasters and social work practice within the disaster, response, and recovery context.

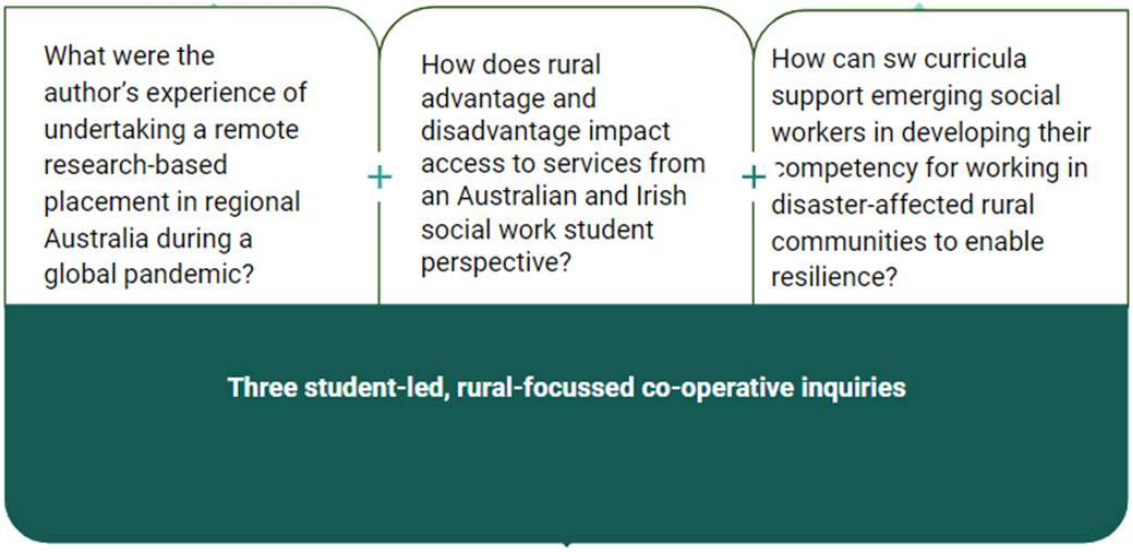


Fig. 2 The three projects (8)

Funding support was secured from the University Centre of Rural Health-Sydney University and Charles Sturt University, and two inquiries also received funding from University College Cork. Together, students learned a research methodology that aligns with social work ethics. They engaged with an international research network, co-produced and co-presented at international conferences, and co-produced and co-published in international journals (8). Our research demonstrates that the strengths of the inquiries greatly outweighed the challenges.

The inquiries contained some administrative challenges. Each participant and institution had different needs and reporting requirements. The project coordinator from Charles Sturt University, Australia (also known as the chief investigator as per the funding process) had to learn about receiving, reporting, and administering funding in multiple currencies and across institutions so that all involved could access resources and opportunities for example, the payment of conference fees for an online international conference in American Dollars or Thai Bhat so people from numerous institutions could attend was not straightforward. Another challenge was ensuring that all key stakeholders were comfortable with the inquiries, their setup, progress, and outputs while keeping to the numerous timelines, institutional requirements, and professional bodies' standards. The strategies that helped

overcome the challenges were a) to ensure that everyone agreed with the same aims, goals, and objectives, b) everyone involved having a can-do attitude and c) belief that together we can find a win-win solution for every institution if we think about it as a community activity. The administrative burden became easier with each project.

A common challenge for all participants was working across time zones and cultures. This was also a strength because it grew our social work knowledge and skills. One member described how they found it inspiring as an educator to see people grow in cultural responsiveness, including cultural sensitivity and cultural humility, and enhance their positive problem-solving skills. Cultural responsiveness ensures cultural safety and "is what is needed to transform systems; how individuals and organisations work to deliver and maintain culturally safe and effective care and services" (10)

Much like their Australian colleagues, participation by Irish colleagues in the projects was self-directed. The Irish coordinator found herself learning about and transferring social work skills to her fieldwork role and making sense of "integrated practice", which has emerged as a concept for professionals working in higher education where the "blended professional" can naturally cross boundaries and often has both professional and academic credentials (11). This concept of the 'third space' as the interface between academic and professional activity in higher education was first articulated by Celia Whitechurch in 2013 (11). This helped them transition professionally from social work practice to working within social work higher education, ever mindful of maintaining professional standards during a pandemic.

RESEARCH ETHICS AND LEARNINGS

The authors' engagement with this project promoted an alternative perspective based on the codes of professional social work ethics (12,13,14). It emphasised the importance of collaboration and respect concerning social justice and social theory research in applied research on fieldwork placement. This project is an example of how these principles apply to all contexts of social work practice, education, and research.

Co-operative inquiry represents a collaborative research methodology suited to field education research as it is consistent with social work principles, is respectful, participatory, and upholds the unique dignity of each person involved in the research. The value base within higher education is a collective responsibility for individual human rights, which is in keeping with the Global Definition of Social Work articulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (15). The project data was analysed using a thematic approach to identify key findings;

1) Facilitation: In the group, generative conversations were facilitated by participating academics who scaffolded the group process.

"This environment allowed us to get creative with this new research method and share our opinions freely without fear of judgment. However, we knew the academics were there as a soundboard for our ideas and as a safety net."
(student reflection (11)

2) Confidence Building: Trust and confidence building between students and academics is a major feature of Co-operative inquiry methodology. However, students acknowledged that it took time for them to believe in and engage in the egalitarian research process.

"Before this my confidence would have been low, but after…my confidence is high."
(student reflection (16,8)

3) Safe Space: A safe, collaborative space was created for students and academics to work together, share ideas and knowledge, and learn collaboratively about the research process and the topic. The collaborative space bears all the hallmarks of Freire's democratic learning space, where responsibilities are shared, and roles are given equal status (11)

"It's a really safe space because it's embedded. I wonder about hidden power dynamics in other research models."
(student reflection (17)

4) A Pedagogy of Practice Research: Taking teaching and learning of research out of the classroom into an applied placement setting.

"The CI project highlighted the differences between learning research in the classroom versus in practice."
(student reflection (11)

5) An experiential approach to learning practice research: The methodology is founded on principles of collaboration, participation, equality, and social justice (18).

"I had not had the opportunity to do collaborative research before and I learned a lot about myself and how I work as part of a group. …. I learned skills from this project that I wouldn't have had by doing research on my own. I felt more confident about doing research, as this experience made research accessible to students in a very non-intimidating way…"
(student reflection (11)

Co-operative inquiry promoted the *"dismantling [of] boundaries*" between students and academics as articulated by one student participant (11). In the research process, students experienced that traditional roles of academia were turned on their heads, and they were facilitated to lead the process. Students described this as a new way of thinking for them, as they were used to being taught by academics who *"know better"* than we do.

OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

Consistent with social work values and educational focus internationally, the collaborative and transnational nature of the student-led co-operative inquiry projects provided rich learning opportunities for students. Some consistent features evident across these projects include:

- Sustainability through technology
- Building student understanding, use, and confidence in research
- The integration of ethics and social justice principles in action

The sustainability, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness of using technology were central. Using standard technology platforms, including Zoom®, Google Docs®, and One Drive® were easily accessed by participants. Using the Zoom® video conference platform for regular meetings, students got to know each other and developed effective collaborative relationships. Zoom® could record meetings and provide transcripts, enabling those who missed meetings to view discussions. In Australia, telehealth is a strong trend in rural and remote practice, so technology builds student skills in communicating and working with others through online platforms. Google Docs® provided easy access to research documentation and allowed live-time simultaneous use during meetings and the journal writing processes. Students could add reflections, comments, or observations during or following meetings, enabling active engagement for those who missed a meeting, and it enabled further

exploration of the topic between meetings. The geographically diverse collaboration was able to be effectively managed and rendered cost-effective and sustainable over time. Hence our ability to continue to complete further research projects.

Secondly, co-operative inquiry has built the understanding, connection, engagement, and confidence of students in research. The projects are an experiential introduction to research methodology. They helped students to understand how valuable research is in developing and drawing on practice knowledge through their placements in the research context and how research can inform practice. Thus, building student understanding of the interplay between knowledge, practice, research, and application of research in practice.

These projects demonstrate ethics and social justice in action, as one academic mentor stated:

> *"It's our values to practice that underpin the way we've used technology…throughout the co-operative inquiry processes, ethics and issues of power were an ongoing conversation, embedded in the egalitarian process of this participatory research approach."*

The project groups worked from the position of academics as guides and mentors rather than principals or leads. Through this process, a shared approach was developed, empowering students who, as they worked through the project, felt that they were operating as equals, could raise issues, and each lead particular elements. Students engaged through consistently reflecting on, developing an understanding of, and addressing ethical concerns and issues of power in the group dynamics.

Co-operative inquiry is an action-based participatory methodology. Not only were these projects beneficial from the perspective of student learning, but they also resulted in multiple research outputs that disseminated the findings of each project. Outputs include the publication of two student-led research journal articles, with a third article in press at the time of writing this paper. Consistent with the principle of the student-led approach, all outputs have the students as lead authors.

The first project produced a paper on student perspectives on undertaking remote research-based placements, published in a first-quartile international social work education journal (1) with 2,394 views at the date of writing this paper. The second project on rural social work practice produced an article in a regional journal (Australasia) (3). In addition to the publication, student participants also presented an e-poster at the 26th Asia-Pacific Regional Social Work Conference (19). Building on the success of the first two projects, the third project examining social work curricula for working in rural communities in contexts of disaster resulted in publication in a first-quartile international social work journal with 699 views at the date of writing this paper (2), and an online oral conference presentation (20) and a poster presentation at an Australian national conference (16).

In October 2023, the project received a research award from ANZSWWER (Australian & New Zealand Social Work & Welfare Education & Research) for achievement in *Research about Collaborations between Communities and Education Providers in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)*. The award recognises that INCInq and the inter-university teams from Australia and Ireland (University of New England, Charles Sturt University, Southern Cross University, University of Sydney, and University College Cork) use an empowerment framework, mentoring social work students to lead in their social work research using co-operative inquiry methodology, while fully supported by the academic staff. The awarding committee acknowledged that the inquiries extended the leadership, professional, research, and collaboration skills of the participating students.

CONCLUSIONS

As our research demonstrates, student-led, rural-focused co-operative inquiry is a sustainable, cost-effective

research method through the application of online technologies. It has prompted more creative and diverse student learning and placement experiences. The collaborative nature of co-operative inquiry fits well with the values of the social work profession: social justice, inclusion, cooperation, open communication, and collaboration (14,15). The international reach of the project was facilitated by technology and the upskilling of all involved, and our challenge is to harness its use in optimising educational and learning experiences. The authors assert that co-operative inquiry is a creative and innovative research pedagogy. As students have attested, it is an effective template for teaching social work research that reaches beyond the classroom into placement, thus promoting research-ready social work graduates (13) with the skills needed to engage in practice research. The process of engaging in co-operative inquiry aligns with the philosophy of Schon (11), and the practice of reflection sits well with the social work mission. It can be easily included in social work curricula.

The three student-led, rural-focussed research projects supported critical inquiry into variations in values, practices, and principles across different institutions and cultures. Co-operative inquiry is an action-based methodology where outputs have been achieved successfully with publications and conference presentations. The students state that the co-operative inquiry process facilitated and empowered them to spearhead publications and take charge of their research. The co-operative inquiry environment allowed them to be creative with this new research method and share their opinions freely. Students acknowledged the importance of support given by the academics who provided a scaffold for their ideas and a safety net if they became disheartened during the process.

As (16) evidenced in this paper, the project design can be replicated and developed to help transform ways of teaching and doing practice research. For student-led research projects to develop and thrive, they require the support of academics, researchers, and organisational funding.

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