

How well does social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand prepare social workers to work with people claiming welfare benefits and what could be done better?

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: A foundational purpose of the social work profession is the pursuit of social justice. From its beginnings social workers have worked with people living in poverty and experiencing injustice and social workers continue to do so. In Aotearoa New Zealand these people have eligibility for a range of welfare benefit entitlements. The Aotearoa New Zealand welfare benefit system has been subject to neoliberal reform and is judgemental, monocultural, punitive and complex. Without advocacy support, people are unlikely to access all their welfare benefit entitlements. It is therefore essential that social workers are highly knowledgeable about the welfare benefit system. This article summarises initial exploratory research that asked the question—how well does social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand prepare social workers to work with people claiming welfare benefits and what could be done better?

RESEARCH METHODS: The research used reflexive thematic analysis. The flexibility of this method allowed for a constructionist epistemology, a critical theoretical perspective and a critical ethnographic methodology. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with recent social work graduates. Each interview included realistic welfare benefit advocacy scenarios.

FINDINGS: The data strongly indicated social work education curricula do not adequately address welfare benefit issues. Consequently, social workers are unlikely to competently support people to access all their benefit entitlements. Furthermore, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding this issue. A poverty-aware paradigm and use of realistic welfare benefit advocacy scenarios within social work education are recommended.

KEYWORDS: Social work education; welfare benefit advocacy, welfare benefit scenarios; neoliberalism; poverty aware paradigm; solidarity

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A group of Aotearoa New Zealand social work academics have recommended an alternative to the current core competencies as set out by the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB). This includes “Kotahitanga: Social workers work to build a sense of community, solidarity

and collective action for social change. We challenge injustice and oppression in all of its forms including: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence” (Ballantyne et al., 2022, p. 83). The Aotearoa New Zealand welfare benefit system perpetrates acts

of injustice and oppression upon people needing to claim welfare benefit payments (Baker & Davis, 2017; Morton et al., 2014; Neuwelt-Kearns et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2010; Russell, 2015, 2017; Russell & Bradford, 2022; Stephens, 2019).

This article summarises research that posits welfare benefit advocacy has been neglected by social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research included a literature search that found no academic literature regarding welfare benefit advocacy social work course content (Russell, 2022). It has been suggested that “social workers do not consider the supplying of material assistance to be ‘real’ or ‘professional’ social work” (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009, p. 237).

The need for welfare benefit advocacy

In 2018 the Labour-led government established the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG). WEAG conducted a comprehensive review of the New Zealand welfare system and found that “Each year over 630,000 people receive payments from the welfare system” (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019, p. 5).

Table 1 provides further statistics regarding the number of people annually receiving six different benefit payments as of December 2018 (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019). This is far from an exhaustive list of all benefit payments. In reference to

Table 1. Number of People Receiving Particular Welfare Benefit Payments as of December 2018

Benefit payment	Number of people receiving this payment
Jobseeker support	134,557
Sole parent support	59,877
Supported living payment	95,317
Accommodation supplement	302,840
Disability Allowance	233,570
Unsupported child benefit/Orphan's benefit	11,547

the amount of money people receive from welfare benefit payments, WEAG found that the “level of financial support is now so low that too many New Zealanders are living in desperate situations” (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019, p. 6).

Additionally, the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG) stated:

Evidence is overwhelming that incomes are inadequate for many people, both those receiving a benefit and those in low-paid work. Current levels of support fail to cover even basic costs for many people, let alone allowing them to meaningfully participate in their communities. In New Zealand, poverty and benefit receipt are strongly associated. (p. 7)

WEAG described the welfare benefit system and associated legislation as being complex and difficult to understand. WEAG argued that the system's use of punishment/sanctions have been shown to be counterproductive. In short, WEAG recommended fundamental change to the welfare system based on *whakamana tāngata*: “at its heart our approach is about treating people with dignity” (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019, p. 6). The fundamental change WEAG recommended has yet to occur.

The current welfare benefit system is monocultural (Stephens, 2019). Gray and Crichton-Hill conducted 16 focus groups and interviews with Māori and Pasifika women in receipt of Sole Parent Support and concluded that the treatment of these women by Work and Income (W&I) staff was consistent with “the broader context of racism in this country” (Gray & Crichton-Hill, 2019, p. 5). Gray and Crichton-Hill provide a quote from a Māori woman who describes her approach to being inside a W&I office, “We don't do what's normal for our culture. When we're inside those doors we keep our culture outside. And when we come back

out you can put your culture back on" (Gray & Crichton-Hill, 2019, p. 9). This further amplifies the need for welfare change based upon the *whakamana tāngata* approach (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019).

A research project by Community Law Canterbury examining the legal needs of people on benefits used a variety of research methods including 50 in-depth interviews of representatives of relevant agencies and people receiving welfare benefits, analysis of statistical data from government agencies and community law centres, a literature review, and an online survey (Morton et al., 2014). Their study identified three key findings: first that the main problem for the people receiving welfare benefit payments was poverty linked to inadequate income. The second finding was that people applying for benefits experienced a power imbalance when dealing with W&I at both the institutional and individual case manager levels where W&I has the power to decide to approve or decline benefit applications. The third finding was that there were both positive and negative experiences of interactions with W&I. However, negative experiences and the stigma of being on a benefit overwhelmingly influenced these interactions. The research identified a glaring discrepancy between W&I's policy of people receiving 'full and correct entitlements' and people's experiences with W&I. Factors preventing full and correct entitlement included the complexity of benefit eligibility criteria resulting in people not understanding the criteria and not knowing what information to provide, a perception that case managers withhold information about entitlements, reliance on internal policy that appeared inconsistent with the legislation, and pressures on case managers. Arising from the impediments to receipt of full and correct entitlements, the research found that the "most significant enabler to receiving entitlements was to have an advocate or informed support person to help apply for benefits and/or challenge Work and Income decisions" (Morton et al., 2014, p. 9).

Research methods

Braun and Clarke (2022) viewed the positionality of the researcher as a potential resource within the research process. I have previously set out my positionality regarding my rejection of apolitical social work course content, the need to work in solidarity with people in poverty, my views on the apparent lack of a social work response to welfare benefit advocacy and the existence of a toxic culture within W&I (Russell, 2015, 2017; Russell & Bradford, 2022).

The research design included semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2013; Brinkmann, 2018) with eight social workers who had graduated from three Auckland-based social work courses between 2014 and 2021. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the research participants.

Use of semi-structured interviews allowed for use of an interview guide containing four realistic benefit advocacy scenarios and 10 questions asked of all participants. During each interview, follow-up questions were asked to further explore participants' responses providing a depth of data (Bernard, 2013; Brinkmann, 2018).

The benefit advocacy scenarios were formulated from my welfare benefit advocacy experience. The scenarios depict realistic situations and people's needs for individual welfare benefit advocacy support. They were used to at the start of each interview with the intention of establishing the participants' knowledge of welfare benefit entitlements, their knowledge of an advocacy process, and to provide an indication of their practice regarding welfare benefit entitlement issues. What the participants said, and did not say, was analysed using a social welfare law textbook (Stephens, 2019) and my personal knowledge and experience. Responses to these scenarios are a significant part of the findings section below.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data (Braun & Clarke,

2006, 2019, 2022). This is a six-stage recursive process where progress from one stage to the next is not linear necessitating returning to earlier stages to ensure the analysis answers the research question.

Stage One: data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes

Each semi-structured interview was recorded using a speech-to-text computerised transcription application (Otter.ai PRO). I corrected errors by listening to the recorded interviews and making necessary changes. Comments were added to these corrected transcripts to begin to identify relevant content as a start of theme development. Ongoing familiarisation occurred throughout the process as each interaction with a data transcript was an opportunity to further develop understanding of meaning.

Stage Two: systematic coding

Data from each semi-structured interview were entered into a spreadsheet with columns headed – Interview, Page, Line, Code, Text, Quote, Cluster, Explanatory Note, Scenario, and Question. Each interview was initially coded separately. Page and line numbers were recorded, and the relevant text was added. A quote column was used to identify potential quotes for use in final report writing stage. A cluster column was used to begin grouping data together. An explanatory note column was used to briefly clarify issues that I identified. Scenario and question columns were used to identify the relevant scenario or question from the semi-structured interview guide.

An in-depth analysis of each interview resulted in the development of over 1600 codes. From these codes over 70 clusters were developed.

Stage Three: generating initial themes from coded data

With over 70 clusters I began to develop initial themes bringing together clusters

and not including others that were not relevant to the research question (Terry et al., 2017). I repeatedly asked myself reflexive questions, for example: does this cluster assist in answering the research question? To facilitate this process, I used the spreadsheet containing all eight interviews to create further spreadsheets for each of the four scenarios and each of the 10 semi-structured interview questions. Spreadsheets were created to facilitate focus on code clusters enabling the development of initial themes, for example, ‘child focus’, ‘include advocacy’, and ‘link theory / practice’. Relevant quotes from the interview transcripts and my comments were added. I began to write brief summaries of my analysis of the data and developed three initial themes and sub-themes.

Stage Four: developing and reviewing themes

Data from the above were then cut and pasted onto sketch pads for each of the three initial themes. I brought together quotes and my comments from each participant to each of the semi-structured interview guide scenarios and questions using the filter of relevance to the research question. This active process showed consistency of responses from participants.

Stage Five: refining, defining, and naming themes

Ongoing use of a reflexive process and discussions with my academic supervisors were used to refine, define and name themes. This culminated in the development of two over-arching themes.

Stage Six: writing the report

Writing the report is a part of the analytical process and provides further opportunities to refine and define themes. The report should tell the ‘story’ of the research process and findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings and discussion

To assist in the overall analysis and discussion of the findings reference is made to pertinent literature.

This discussion will focus on findings pertaining to advocacy. Two interconnected forms of advocacy are relevant. These are collective advocacy where “people work together to advocate for systemic change to law and policy, and to reform the ways law and policy are put into practice” (Russell & Bradford, 2022, p. 12), and individual advocacy where “advocates work with individuals and families to support them in accessing the resources and other assistance they need at the interface with government agencies and other service providers” (Russell & Bradford, 2022, p. 12).

The reflexive thematic analysis process developed two overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Theme 1 is ‘individual welfare benefit advocacy is either not taught or not taught in sufficient detail’. Theme 2 is ‘what should be taught’.

Theme 1 emphasised what the participants identified as absent from their social work degree course content. This is corroborated by the analysis of responses to the welfare benefit advocacy scenarios. The analysis also discusses what the participants identified as relevant to welfare benefit advocacy, and to what extent, in their social work degree course content. Furthermore, the consequences of what was *not* taught are discussed.

Theme 2 sets out a need for practical individual welfare benefit advocacy education and posits a need to link social work theory to the practice of welfare benefit advocacy that includes both individual and collective advocacy. The use of realistic welfare benefit scenarios as a tool for use in teaching these forms of advocacy is discussed. A need for inclusion of a coherent welfare benefit advocacy process within social work education is postulated as this could enhance social work practice.

Theme 1: individual welfare benefit advocacy is either not taught or not taught in sufficient detail.

The identified gap in the literature where no academic literature relevant to the social work profession was found regarding a specific need for welfare benefit advocacy skills supports this theme. Essentially, if there is no academic literature on a topic it is unlikely to be a focus of tertiary education. Kevin, who attended the University of Auckland, states:

My education in my experience did not teach anything around the particular applications of WINZ [Work and Income] advocacy. So, I would not have been aware generally of any specific benefits, any specific payments, anything specific I should be asking for, or skills even of relating to, or talking with, or advocating for tāngata [people] in a WINZ environment.

He did not recall any reference made to the Social Security Act 2018. The lack of Social Security Act course content is significant because all of Aotearoa New Zealand’s welfare benefit entitlements are contained within the Social Security Act 2018 and regulations, programmes and Ministerial directives deriving from this Act (Stephens, 2019). Knowledge of the range of benefit entitlements and their eligibility criteria can only be gained by familiarity with the Act. The participants describe either no reference to this Act within their courses or a minimal focus on it; whereas seven of the participants referred to legislation relating to the welfare of children being taught.

Anna and Sally stated that their Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) course did not include the Social Security Act. However, Mark referred to the Social Security Act 1964 being included in a Politics of Change paper, “you were somewhat analysing legislation and understanding the politics of it without necessarily getting into the use of it.”

There was an Advocacy paper that was available for the three participants who qualified from Unitec in either 2019 or 2020. Whilst Carol did not recall the content of this paper, Margaret recalled, “we did look a little bit around entitlements and getting people what they need to work, what they needed. [...] there wasn’t a lot of it.” Regarding the Social Security Act Margaret states, “We didn’t really look at the Social Security Act itself specifically on the course.”

John, differentiating between individual and collective advocacy, states:

So, my social work course wasn’t about this, and this is the thing that pissed me off a little bit, there wasn’t enough advocacy, this is what advocacy looks like. Sys, systemic change, advocacy more look like fighting the government, you know. So, so there was systemic change. Advocacy didn’t consider your everyday battle with WINZ.

John is describing an absence of a link between social analysis and the ability to support people with their immediate needs to access all their welfare benefit entitlements.

This global definition of social work states:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, n.d., para. 1)

To be consistent with this definition there should be a theoretical basis to the actions

of social workers that has an explicit social justice purpose. Individual and collective welfare benefit advocacy offers an opportunity to enact this purpose.

Given the lack of individual welfare benefit advocacy course content, as indicated by the participants in this research, it is rather self-evident that there would be few, if any, links between social work theory and individual welfare benefit advocacy within the three social work courses the participants attended. However, there is a clear link between poverty and the welfare benefit system (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019). It is therefore useful to consider the participants’ experiences of theory pertaining to poverty and its causes.

The three participants from MIT provided differing perspectives. Mark speaks of lecturers teaching about neoliberalism, Marxism, and colonisation. Anna identifies a:

Te Tiriti o Waitangi paper, understanding the journey of the people. So, looking at history, where Māori were and where they are. And the shift of that, and how poverty is now quite prominent within Māori communities.

Anna is describing causative links between breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the prevalence of poverty within Māori communities. Whereas Sally, who qualified a year after Mark and Anna, identifies a lack of poverty-related theory, and states, “Like in our course, we didn’t really discuss much about it. It was only brought up to our attention when we did, you know, community service. So, yeah, that’s about it.” The ‘community service’ she refers to consisted of “giving out food parcels and stuff like that”. She is describing an almost total lack of any course content pertaining to the existence of poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The one participant from the University of Auckland and the four from Unitec are

clear that their courses included theory that explained why poverty exists including course content regarding major historical sociological figures and the impacts of colonisation. Karl Marx is “recognised as one of the principal moulders of modern thought” (Crotty, 1998, p. 115). However, Carol sees no connection between Marxist theory and individual welfare benefit advocacy. She expresses her frustration with Marxist theory, and questions its relevance, stating:

Yeah, Marxism, [...] you research the theories, and then you can't write an assignment on that. Whereas doing an assignment on here's your case study, what benefits would you do, or what would, where's the advocacy or where would you direct this client to, or how would this look as if this was your client?

Marx provided a critique of the exploitation and alienation inherent within capitalism (Crotty, 1998; Freire, 2017; Harrington, 2005; Marx & Engels, 2010) which could assist in explaining links to, and the motivation for, neoliberal welfare reform. Helen expresses a similar frustration to that of Carol, questioning theory arising from historical course content stating:

They reverted all the way back to the industrial, the industrial revolution and but it never – and colonisation, like they reverted back to so much historical stuff, which is, kind of, I would kind of not agree with but there are probably aspects of that have impacted today but not full aspects, you know, and so today's poverty nothing. Nothing really, [...] I don't think anyone could explain it.

Both Carol and Helen indicated that significant social theory, for example Marxist theory or a critique of colonisation has a limited influence on their social work practice. Helen indicates that the causes of poverty are inexplicable and, if so, implies that theory in general has little practical use in relation to the existence of poverty.

Most participants indicated the social theory taught did not influence their understanding of contemporary poverty nor did this theory influence their practice.

Neoliberal capitalism and its hegemonic influence has been the subject of considerable academic social work focus (Hyslop, 2016a; Keddell, 2017; Morley et al., 2017; Neuwelt-Kearns et al., 2021; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020; Timor-Shlevin & Benjamin, 2020). In contrast, neoliberal welfare reform has been the subject of very little academic social work focus (Beddoe & Keddell, 2016). The neoliberal emphasis on individual fault, resultant individual blame has influenced the current welfare benefit policy and practice (Bennett, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2010; Rebstock et al., 2011). It is significant that the participants did not make connections between the inherent exploitation of capitalism, its current neoliberal form and resultant neoliberal welfare reform. Some participants identified that neoliberalism was included in their course content, but this does not appear to extend to any in-depth discussion about neoliberal welfare reform. Consistent with this reform is the presence of a toxic culture within W&I.

Morton et al. (2014) reported “beneficiaries described the dehumanising effect of the delivery of welfare in Aotearoa New Zealand” (p. 55). They also found:

... many beneficiaries described overwhelmingly negative treatment they had received as clients of Work and Income, descriptions that were supported by representatives of community agencies. This negative treatment had a pervasive influence on their interactions with the benefit system at all levels. (p. 55)

Furthermore, they found “a widely held view amongst those that we interviewed that there is a culture of withholding entitlement information” (p. 56) and that some people would not apply for welfare benefits to minimise their contact with W&I preferring to rely upon charity. This research

is consistent with the data from the research participants.

Margaret describes how people are treated at W&I:

Oh, really poorly. I think [...] there is quite a toxic environment in, in Work and Income and it filtrates through and so even people who come into work with a, with best plans and wanting to help people get sucked into that kind of system which doesn't treat people respectfully, is judgmental, doesn't believe what people are saying.

She is suggesting that well-intentioned staff are likely to succumb to pressure to conform to a prevailing culture within W&I.

Kevin talks about a distinction he has observed W&I staff make between people deserving of welfare benefit entitlements and those who are undeserving of these entitlements. Other participants variously described W&I staff as gatekeepers, behaving as if the benefits paid were their own money, treating people as numbers, withholding information, and treating people inhumanely.

The presence of a toxic culture emphasises the need for advocacy support in an environment where there is "an inherent imbalance of power between beneficiaries and the government department that makes decisions about their entitlements" (Morton et al., 2014, p. 55).

The responses to the welfare benefit advocacy scenarios indicates the implications

of the lack of welfare benefit advocacy social work course content.

Analysis of welfare benefit advocacy scenarios

The word limits of an academic journal article preclude an in-depth discussion of all four scenarios. Each scenario is presented here along with a Table summarising the participants' responses. A more detailed discussion of Scenario 4 is presented and is indicative of the lack of awareness of issues raised across the four scenarios. Each scenario is headed with the individual welfare benefit issues raised by the scenario. It is followed by the scenario as presented to the participants. A table then summarises the participants' responses.

Tables 2-5 below set out issues pertaining to a scenario and the participants' awareness of relevant issues. Each table records the participants who made no reference to an issue. This lack of reference to an issue implies the issue would not be considered by a participant when engaged in welfare benefit advocacy. The numbers refer to each participant individually.

Scenario 1: Food grants, discretion and review of decision

"A sole parent with 4 children is about to move into Kainga Ora (Housing NZ) housing. She identifies a need for a \$450 food grant. Work and Income has approved a \$200 food grant because the sole parent has had 3 previous food grants in the past 5 months totalling \$350. As the family's social worker what actions would you take?"

Table 2. Participant Awareness of Scenario 1 issues

Issue	Fully Aware	Partially Aware	No reference to issue
Aware of food grant criteria		1,5	2,3,4,6,7,8
Aware of discretion		3,5	1,2,4,6,7,8
Aware of Review of Decision process	7	1,2,5	3,4,6,8
Would lodge Review of Decision	7		1,2,3,4,5,6,8
Would discuss Review of Decision with person			1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8

Scenario 2: Advance payments, discretion, debt repayment reduction, and temporary additional support

“You visit a family (2 parents with 5 children) at their 3-bedroom home. The parents and the children are sleeping on mattresses on the floor. You are told they are in rent arrears totalling \$4000 and have been given notice to attend a Tenancy Tribunal hearing. The weekly rent is \$680. You are also shown a letter from Work and Income stating the family owe Work and Income \$10,000 and are repaying this debt to Work and Income at the rate of \$50 per week. The parents have no paid work and receive job seeker support, accommodation supplement, winter energy payment and family tax credit.

As the family’s social worker what actions would you take?”

Table 3. Participant Awareness of Scenario 2 Issues

Issue	Fully Aware	Partially Aware	No reference to issue
Aware of advance payment criteria	–	–	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
Aware of discretion	–	–	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
Aware of potential eligibility for rent arrears advance payment	5	7	1,2,3,4,6,8
Aware of potential to reduce weekly W&I debt repayment	5	1,2,7	3,4,6,8
Aware of potential to access advance payment to buy beds	5	1,2,4,6,7	3,8
Aware of potential to apply for temporary additional support	7	–	1,2,3,4,5,6,8

Scenario 3: Accommodation supplement, child disability allowance, disability allowance, arrears payments and temporary additional support.

“A family (2 parents and 3 children) has been referred to you. One of the children who is 6 years old has severe autism. The mother works full-time earning \$1200 per week before tax. She has had the same wage for 3 years. They have been in their current house for the past 2 years and pay weekly rent of \$700. When they first moved into this house, they got a food grant from Work and Income and have received several other food grants from Work and Income since then. They receive no on-going payments from Work and Income.

As the family’s social worker what actions would you take?”

Table 4. Participant Awareness of Scenario 3 Issues

Issue	Fully Aware	Partially Aware	No reference to issue
Aware of CDA eligibility criteria		2,3,5	1,4,6,7,8
Aware of potential AS eligibility for family with paid work	7	5	1,2,3,4,6,8
Aware of potential eligibility for arrears payments			1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
Aware of disability allowance criteria	7	1	2,3,4,5,6,8
Aware of potential temporary additional support eligibility			1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8

Scenario 4: Unsupported child benefit and arrears payments

“A grandmother contacts you because she is in rent arrears with Kainga Ora [A state social housing agency]. She tells you that she is struggling with bills because she has 2 grandchildren to care for. These grandchildren have been in her care for the past year. The children’s parents live overseas and both have on-going drug abuse problems. She went to Work and Income when the grandchildren came into her care and was told to go to Inland Revenue to get financial help. When she talked with someone from Inland Revenue she was told to go back to Work and Income. She didn’t understand what she had to do and gave up trying to get any financial help for the care of her grandchildren.

As the family’s social worker what actions would you take?”

Table 5. Participant Awareness of Scenario 4 Issues

Issue	Fully Aware	Partially Aware	No reference to issue
Aware of UCB eligibility criteria	7	2,4,5	1,3,6,8
Aware of potential UCB arrears payment			1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8

This scenario focuses on eligibility for unsupported child benefit (UCB) and consequent eligibility for an arrears payment. The criteria for eligibility for UCB are contained within Section 46 of the Social Security Act 2018 (Stephens, 2019). There is a need for there to be evidence of a breakdown in the child’s family that means the natural parents are unable to care for the child and that there is an intention for the person applying for UCB to be the principal caregiver for at least one year. The Act provides no definition of what constitutes a family breakdown (Stephens, 2019).

In this scenario there is a clear family breakdown and the children have already been in the grandmother’s care for a year. Dependent upon the age of the children, as of 1 April 2022 weekly UCB rates vary from \$254.95 for children under 5 years old to \$296.42 for children aged 14 years or older (Work and Income, n.d.). This grandmother is missing out on a weekly UCB payment and is also potentially eligible for a back-dated arrears payment of over \$13,000.

Four of the participants made no reference to awareness of unsupported child benefit eligibility criteria.

UCB eligibility criteria do not include a need for any court process to establish custody (Stephens, 2019). It is my experience that W&I staff often mistakenly require this court process to have occurred and it is necessary to challenge this misconception. Anna describes her work with a grandmother who is caring for her grandchildren relating this to Scenario 4: -

Because it’s kind of relevant to a case that I’ve just picked up with a nana who’s just had her children in her care but we’re financially supporting her with food at the moment. And so that’s where the thinking of that coming through the Courts and knowing that she’s legally got custody of her grandchildren, has now set a pathway she can pursue some financial support through Work and Income. What that looks like is new to me again, I’d have to research it myself.

She gives an example of how the misconception that a Court process to establish custody is part of the UCB criteria has delayed the application process for the UCB. A social work service based on this misconception has provided food for a grandmother and her grandchildren rather

than proactively supporting her to receive the UCB. The outcome of any custody Court process should not delay payment of the UCB.

None of the participants referred to the potential eligibility of an unsupported child benefit arrears payment. This implies that an application for arrears would not be made, and a potentially substantial arrears payment would be foregone.

The above tables showing the participants' lack of awareness of welfare benefit issues contained within the scenarios, and the more detailed discussion of responses to Scenario 4 strongly indicate that the participants' social work degrees did not adequately prepare them to support people claiming welfare benefit entitlements.

Theme 2: What should be taught

All eight participants expressed their support for the inclusion of individual welfare benefit advocacy in social work education. Carol stated, "Oh, definitely need it. I think, yeah, practical advocating skills, role playing, or scenario grouping. [...] there's definitely room to improve our skills, rather than waiting until we're out in the field to develop our skills." Helen, confirmed this need, stating, "Yes, definitely yes", and added:

If I had known this prior to going into the field I wouldn't have struggled with helping the – I just learnt as I was doing the mahi, you know. So, I was learning as I was learning with my own patients on like, shit, this is, you know big. We need to be doing this now.

They are describing a need for individual welfare benefit advocacy skills to support people experiencing poverty and experiencing difficulties accessing entitlements from W&I and that welfare benefit advocacy is a significant part of their social work practice. They both indicate it was necessary to learn some advocacy skills

once employed as a social worker and it was possible to do so. However, the findings from the above scenario analysis indicates the existence of significant gaps in the participants' knowledge and the decreased likelihood of people accessing their full welfare benefit entitlements. A 'learn on the job' approach seems to be unreliable.

Anna differentiates between knowledge and voice, giving as an example of knowledge: -

Well, like for example, myself, [...] – you're not told about entitlements, or what you are entitled to with Work and Income. So, how do you know if you don't know? So, that knowledge, yeah.

She contrasts this lack of knowledge with an emphasis on voice within her course where:

It was beautiful to see the shy ones come through that had no voice. And like towards the end of year one finally find a voice and having the strength to use it, to stand proud and you know, just to speak to their truth and being able to do that.

Anna is describing an emphasis on the development of student self-confidence and self-esteem. Whilst having self-esteem and confidence are important, it is also important to build upon these to enhance social work practice. An emphasis on social work students' personal development runs the risk of perpetuating what Chereni (2016) described as the prioritisation of psychotherapy and other individualised interventions in preference to addressing structural causes of poverty. This is consistent with the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility / fault and negation of social causes of poverty. The students, once qualified and employed as social workers, are unlikely to do individual welfare benefit advocacy work because they lack knowledge of it.

Other participants also identify a need for course content regarding practical

individual welfare benefit advocacy skills. The participants who had attended Unitec whilst there was an Advocacy paper provided express a similar view. Margaret wants more on “how to work with WINZ. How to get people what they need is, is crucial. It’s basic survival stuff [...] Just more how to, [...] get things sorted.”

John states, “Definitely with WINZ more, more practical kind of, I don’t know, [...] more stuff that you use on a daily basis.”

The lack of connection between the theory taught and practical advocacy skills has been addressed in Theme 1 and is further emphasised by Margaret who stated, “what we were given was pretty good. But specific stuff that we do on a day-to-day basis, a lot of it wasn’t even touched on” and by Carol’s experience that theory taught within her course is not helpful when confronted with the W&I toxic culture that leads to declining lawful welfare benefit applications.

The inclusion of realistic welfare benefit advocacy scenarios similar to those used in this research was identified as a possible way to provide a realistic context within which to link theory and individual welfare benefit advocacy skills. Carol states:

I think that having those scenarios, or scenarios similarities of that and we worked in a group and had to facilitate it more. More practical knowledge and understanding of Work and Income would be awesome because it’s a beast. And it’s a big one.

She is identifying the difficulties people experience accessing welfare benefit entitlements as having a significant adverse effect upon people’s lives and identifies the need for “more practical knowledge” along with an “understanding” or analysis of the welfare benefit system. This need for analysis leads us back to a theoretical basis, for example neoliberalism and neoliberal welfare reform as the basis for both

individual and collective welfare benefit advocacy.

Further supporting use of realistic scenarios, Anna stated:

I’d definitely like to see some lived experience scenarios that have been, had positive and negative outcomes, whatever they are. Because there are some that we don’t really talk about the scenarios that you’ve given, the examples, there’s none of that.

Without any previous course content portraying the realities of individual welfare benefit advocacy Sally found the research scenarios to be a useful introduction.

It was good to actually see the scenarios because I know that’s something that I will be, you know, dealing with if I do want to become a SWIS (Social Worker in Schools) in the future. And these are actually the kind of real-life scenarios, so, it was actually a good eye-opener.

Use of realistic scenarios also facilitated revelations of experiences within the participants’ whānau or their own personal experiences. Whilst discussing Scenario 4 that focused on a grandparent’s eligibility for unsupported child benefit because she was caring for her grandchildren, Sally talks about being in her grandparents’ care: “they were able to get money to, you know, to help and support me with my schooling as well.”

John, in response to the question, how easy or difficult was it for you to respond to these scenarios? stated it was a “Bit difficult.” He clarified this:

I was out of home when I was about 14. I was on the independent youth benefit. That’s what it was called back then. I had nowhere to stay and if, so – I grew up within the system. So, so all

that comes into my, you know, all those experiences [...] are brought with me. And yes, hard, you know.

John goes on to state: “for me it was institutional racism, I think, that led me to social work. Like, I grew up in, in abject poverty”. Mark, when discussing Scenario 3 that included a whānau with a disabled child acknowledged he also had a disability. He went on to describe personally feeling dehumanised by interactions with W&I staff when receiving welfare benefit payments.

The participants expressed a strong personal connection to the situations portrayed in the research scenarios. This adds to the validity of using scenarios as part of any future welfare benefit advocacy social work course content.

Conclusion

Data from the participants indicate that welfare benefit advocacy, as either individual or collective advocacy, is either not taught or not taught in sufficient detail. This suggests social workers are unprepared to competently support people living in poverty and needing to claim welfare benefits. Also, they are unlikely to advocate for systemic changes. Professional social work’s commitment to social justice implies this is a valid area of social work practice.

Realistic scenarios have the potential to form the basis of social work welfare benefit advocacy education. The scenarios may also prompt discussion of a range of personal experiences that can be linked to the experiences of the people social workers support and to wider social issues.

Within social work academic literature there are numerous examples of recommendations for social work and social work education to challenge neoliberal orthodoxy (Beddoe & Keddell, 2016; Darroch, 2017; Fenton, 2021; Hyslop, 2016a,

2016b; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009; Morley et al., 2019; Morley et al., 2017; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020; Saar-Heiman et al., 2017). Welfare benefit advocacy provides an opportunity to challenge neoliberalism’s influence upon the welfare benefit system thereby linking theory to practice. A Poverty Aware Paradigm has the capacity to further clarify and solidify relationships between theory and practice.

... the paradigm’s answer to questions such as “What is the nature of poverty?” and “What are the characteristics of poor people?” Is that poverty is a violation of human rights and that people in poverty “fight” and “resist” it on a daily basis. [...] the paradigm’s answer to the question “Where should a social worker position herself ethically when working with people in poverty?” is that PAP entails social workers “standing by” people in poverty representing their knowledge and advocating for their interests in society. (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020, p. 1171)

Welfare benefit advocacy is consistent with both the above global definition of social work and the conscious acts of solidarity between social workers and the people needing their support alluded to by Saar-Heiman and Gupta (2020). Effective welfare benefit advocacy has the potential to give practical expression to the social work profession’s expressed commitment to social justice and can explicitly link theory and practice.

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