Ongoing benefits of a knowledge-exchange project codesigned with students

Irene de Haan, Cherie Appleton and **Jerry Lo**, University of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

ABSTRACT

While the innovative practicum project described in this paper was an emergency measure, it continues to enhance our pedagogy for preparing social work students for placement. The project was designed collaboratively with postgraduate students when their imminent placements in statutory agencies were indefinitely delayed by Aotearoa New Zealand's first Covid-19 lockdown, beginning late March 2020 and extending for 7 weeks. The prevailing uncertainty was stressful for our students, who needed to complete placement for degree completion and professional registration. As the staff team responsible for their practicum, we needed to quickly devise a robust alternative learning experience. This endeavour evolved into a codesigned, collegial knowledge-exchange project combining academic knowledge and practice wisdom gathered through students' consultation with academic and practice experts. The project's key components were focussed analysis of practice research, interviews with experienced social workers, production of a succinct "practice briefing", application of knowledge gained to a "real life" practice story, and sharing accumulated knowledge. From a pedagogical perspective, we highlight our learning about promoting professional communication to underpin collaborative work, and the usefulness of intensive orientation to practice context before students begin placement.

Keywords: Social work education; field education; knowledge exchange; Covid-19

Fieldwork placements have been held to be the "signature pedagogy" for social work education (Wayne et al., 2010). A well-managed placement provides experiential learning through opportunities to weave academic learning into relational practice so that students can demonstrate that they are developing the knowledge and expertise they will need to be competent social workers. Commonly, practicum staff teams assess students' progress in placements and are responsible for ensuring that students can apply knowledge in practice, engage in critical thinking to uphold social work's commitment to social justice, and engage in reflective practice to deal with the emotional and ethical challenges inherent in social work. This article describes a preparatory-phase placement project that emerged out of crisis, when Aotearoa New Zealand was plunged into its first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 and our final-year postgraduate social work students' imminent placements in statutory agencies were indefinitely delayed. Looking back on our teaching since that first Covid-19 "tsunami", as the experience has been characterised (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020), we see that working with our students in that context of uncertainty has reinforced our pedagogy and practice. Two

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 137–148.

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Irene de Haan
i.dehaan@auckland.ac.nz

benefits stand out: insight into the power of modelling clear, respectful communication for collaborative practice, and the usefulness of orienting students to the practice context of placements before they embark on their agency-based experience.

Navigating disruption

Aotearoa New Zealand's first Covid-19 lockdown was both sudden and restrictive. People were required to work and study from home, spending time only with those in their "bubble", a term used to denote a form of shielding from Covid-19 as a family or small group. As in other countries, this necessitated a sudden shift to online learning (O'Keeffe et al., 2022), disrupted well-established systems for preparing students for professional social work (Morley & Clarke, 2020), and severely curtailed placements in social work agencies (Davis & Mirick, 2021).

The timing of that first lockdown could hardly have been worse for the postgraduate students in their final year of our Master of Social Work (Professional) programme MSW(Prof). The previous year, these students had completed placements in nongovernment agencies. Their forthcoming final placements, in statutory agencies, were expected to function both as consolidation of learning and as a pathway into professional practice. Halfway through their second year of intensive postgraduate study, they were keen to hone their learning in a real-life setting relevant to their envisaged career, but we did not know when, or indeed whether, they would be able to do so. Planning for placements was complete. Each student had met with a practicum team member to discuss their professional interests, learning needs, and preferred career trajectory, and this discussion informed the practicum team's subsequent negotiation of a placement located in child protection, youth justice, forensic social work, probation, or physical or mental health services. Placements were scheduled for 3 days a week over most of the rest of the year. There was little scope for delay as successful placement completion was a requirement for graduation and provisional professional registration with the Social Workers Registration Board New Zealand (SWRB).

As the implications of lockdown became clearer, we needed to steer a way through uncertainty, and to manage pressure and stress. As the four-member practicum team and the director of the MSW(Prof), we held responsibility for upholding academic standards and ensuring graduates' readiness for practice. We needed to produce a viable solution to a pressing problem in an unpredictable context, while using communication techniques, notably forms of virtual interaction that, at the time, were relatively new to us. At first, we hoped that the Covid-19 situation would improve, and our students would soon be settled in the placements they were so anxious to begin. But, as time went by, we realised that we were facing multifaceted external and internal forces that compromised the viability of placements going ahead as planned. The spectre of prolonged placement postponement loomed over students, who worried that they would be unable to complete their degree in time to graduate. This caused enormous stress, especially for those under financial strain. Responding to students' numerous anxious inquiries required much time and care. Meanwhile, we heard that social work agencies were struggling to adapt to profound change in familiar work processes, including working remotely (Bennett et al., 2021). We were unsure whether students' designated field supervisors would have capacity to support them in some kind of alternative project.

Believing that it would be helpful to hear about strategies being considered by colleagues across the country, we consulted with the Council for Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand (CSWEANZ) Field Education Sub-Committee, which includes representatives of all 17 schools of social work. We found that all were in a similar state of uncertainty: waiting and hoping

that Covid-19 case numbers would reduce and social work education could "return to normal". To our surprise, our professional regulatory authority, the SWRB, offered no guidance, nor did it suggest any course of action. Unlike similar authorities in other jurisdictions (Zuchowski et al., 2022), the SWRB did not condone reducing placement hours required for eligibility for professional registration. Rather, the SWRB (2020, Section 3a) stated that "it remains the responsibility of institutes to assure the SWRB that students have developed sufficient skills and are competent to practice as a beginning social worker".

This hands-off approach exacerbated educators' stress and bewilderment. We abandoned the forlorn hope that someone would tell us what to do. Meanwhile, Covid-19 case numbers escalated, and lockdown seemed endless. Like educators elsewhere (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020), we were under pressure to quickly craft a proactive strategy. To safeguard our students' eligibility for graduation and professional registration the following year, whatever placement alternative we created had to correspond to the MSW(Prof) graduate profile, and equip students to meet "core competencies" (SWRB, 2015), requiring that social workers can demonstrate bicultural practice, work with Māori and diverse cultural groups, enact inclusive practice, promote human rights and social justice, promote social change, comprehend social work theory and practice methods and models, engage in critical thinking, practise within legal and ethical boundaries, and represent the profession with integrity. The question was: How could we engage students with these professional imperatives?

On reflection, the pressure we were under sparked innovation with potential to enhance students' placement experiences in less troubled times. While eventually the SWRB allowed some flexibility around placement, this came too late for our students given the imminence of their placement and the tight timeframe for completing their degree. Looking on the bright side, the urgency of the problem of creating a replacement placement was what fuelled the hard work we all did to create a Knowledge Exchange Project (KEP) and make it successful. That work is now paying off in unexpected ways in that we are finding uses for aspects of the project that we did not envisage at the time. KEP is an example of how a creative approach to placement can engage students in learning and enable them to demonstrate core competence standards. It is important that the SWRB not only recognises that learning and achievement of the core competence standards can occur outside traditional placement models, but also develops ways to support and endorse innovative approaches to placement.

Envisaging a knowledge-exchange project

It would be possible to present the evolution of our solution as more orderly than it really was. In fact, it was a rocky road. We had to push through our own bewilderment, self-doubt and anxiety and search deeply into our own expertise, while juggling disparate tasks to keep other courses viable, and supporting students dealing with emotional and practical issues. We were "catapulted" (McLaughlin et al., 2020) into using virtual technologies that were unfamiliar to most of us and felt unsuited to education intended to foster relational practice. But we were determined to make it possible for our students to learn what they needed to learn. We struggled with difficult questions: How long can we delay placement? If we must use alternative learning strategies for at least part of the placement time, what will be useful and meaningful? What alternative learning will meet regulations for degree completion and registration?

In early online meetings, we heard how anxious students were about missing placement, which they saw as authentic and safe orientation to professional

practice. To allay anxiety, we regularly sent out information updates while considering next steps in the absence of guidance from the SWRB, or our employer. While students were initially supportive of delaying placement, this "wait-it-out" approach became untenable as lockdown continued—we were running out of time. We considered extending placements into the following academic year, but university regulations precluded that. Moreover, we suspected that delayed placements, finishing later than planned, would be unworkable for placement providers, who commonly take leave over the long summer break. Students fretted about losing a common benefit of a successful placement, that is, a job offer. They recognised that we faced a "nightmare situation," as one student expressed our plight, but agitation was building.

At our own somewhat dumbfounded meetings at this time (involving all four members of the practicum team and the MSW(Prof) programme leader), it was clear that we were committed and determined to look after the students' interests and to supporting one another to do so. Work on the project was made tolerable, and quickly constructive, by working together closely. We resolved to set a positive trajectory by modelling professional communication and collaborative work. We deliberately demonstrated keen listening; focussed information gathering; calm consideration of options; respectful communication; relational practice; a reflective and critical orientation; and, referencing the strengths perspective that students had studied, an attitude of upholding hope. We experienced the value of "mahi tahi" a Māori concept denoting working together in a spirit of mutual support (Roguski et al., 2022). This collective orientation was a hallmark of the project.

In early staff meetings, we envisaged a KEP designed to help students learn about realities of good practice with students working in small teams, aligned to their placement field, to gather and share academic and practical knowledge and then present that knowledge, demonstrating how SWRB competencies apply in real life. To "give back" in a spirit of reciprocity, students would produce resources to share, including a video exemplar.

The staff team undertook to engage "expert practitioners" and "academic experts" who would reinforce the project. By expert practitioners, we meant social workers with the expertise needed to participate in a conversational interview and respond to questions prepared by students. Our practicum team's extensive networks enabled us to identify social workers who might be interested in this role contributing to the project. Academic colleagues understood our situation and willingly agreed to act as academic experts to guide students' selection of literature to inform understanding of good practice. We set careful parameters around the time students could ask of both sets of supporters, and made a list of student team tasks:

- Consult your academic expert to discuss key literature that underpins good practice.
- Based on recommended literature, collaboratively write a short "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper.
- Consult your expert practitioner about current practice, focussing on typical situations experienced by people who need social work support, the impact of legislation and organisational and public policy, and practice wisdom and tacit knowledge.
- Present your "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper at a symposium for placement supervisors and others interested.
- Reflect on knowledge gathered against the core competencies and produce a video exemplar applying that knowledge to a typical scenario relevant to your team's planned placements. Potentially, these videos would enhance future students' learning.

However, all did not go smoothly when we presented our plan to our students. A concurrent course required them to produce a significant research paper to be written during the two non-placement days of the week and they expressed concern about KEP requiring what they perceived as "more research" when they desperately wanted practice experience. They resisted the idea of producing an exemplar video, partly because of recent engagement in multiple role-plays focussed on learning and demonstrating practice skills, partly because of discomfort about creating a video that would be viewed as an exemplar when, as one said, they had "no expertise in acting or videography". Perhaps because of unprecedented uncertainty at that time, they wanted a sense of being in control so they could "get it right". While rejection of the first KEP outline felt like a setback, it was the catalyst for the project expanding into co-construction, collective endeavour, and an experience of mahi tahi involving experiential learning about negotiation and teamwork.

"Flying the plane while building it"

We entered a phase that we experienced as "flying the plane while building it." Veering into codesign, we held a series of online discussions with students. We brainstormed possibilities and consciously fostered a climate of respectful open-mindedness where everyone could express ideas and differences of opinion openly and assertively. Nonetheless, these meetings were occasionally fraught. Students were under intense stress. Many experienced financial strain. Some had left well-paid work to embark on the MSW(Prof). Others had started straight after undergraduate study and needed to start earning. Some were wrangling childcare as daycare centres and schools were closed. We got used to online guest appearances by toddlers, children and pets. While there has been discussion of how digital technology opens students' private worlds to view, and may encourage them to present themselves in ways that might be considered unprofessional (Wallengren-Lynch et al., 2022), we saw our students' caring for children or animals as a component of their personal story and a strand of their resilience. We reflected that responding to personal stories aligns with relational practice, an approach we were committed to promoting. Despite lockdown, some of our students caught Covid-19, or needed to look after afflicted family members. We encouraged them to demonstrate professionalism by letting us know when life got particularly tough, and by participating in KEP as much as they could. Commitment to the development of a viable project was evident in students' consistent engagement in online meetings.

Establishing clear, respectful communication for collaborative work

Our main concern at this development stage was to keep students informed while recognising their anxiety, and to create opportunities for them to communicate—with us and each other. We invited students to send us their thoughts individually, promptly responded to such communications with thanks, and encouraged them to share their views in forthcoming meetings. We deliberately led by example, modelling teamwork, and recognising each other's contributions. This process cultivated trust and collegiality amongst the staff team. Our commitment to whakawhanaungatanga, the process of establishing good relations, which is foregrounded in the Aotearoa New Zealand Social Workers (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics*, (ANZASW, 2019) cemented connectedness between ourselves, our students, and eventually, project partners.

Rewards accrued. In meetings, students expressed their views clearly and listened courteously, even when they disagreed. This considerate communication was something that we were initially unsure would eventuate, given students' stress

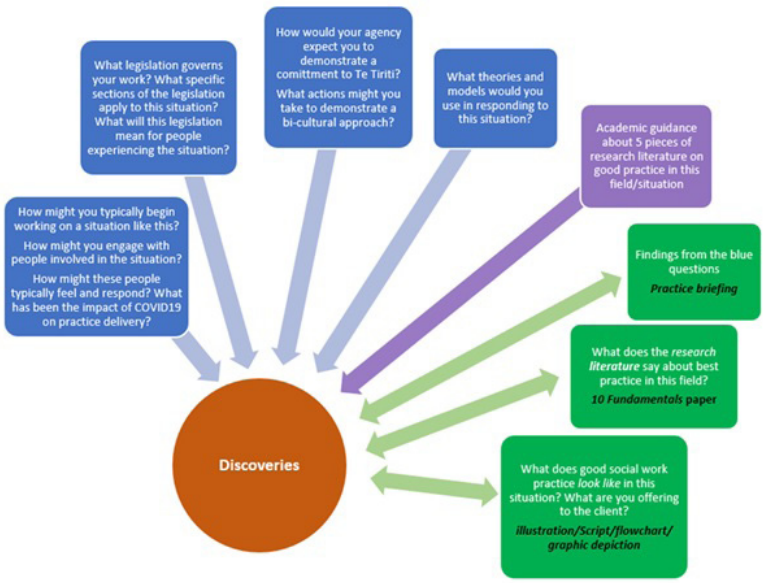

Figure 1 Knowledge Exchange Project Diagram Presented to Students

levels and differing circumstances. However, a sense of collective care seemed to snowball. We discovered that students were finding ways to support one another to cope with lockdown. Some sent us supportive messages recognising the pressure that we were under. We had evidently developed a collective culture underpinned by authentic, thoughtful communication.

As we leaned into co-design, the project morphed into shape. Commonality was evident in students' comments and suggestions. The eventual result of much online discussion and messaging was a project resembling the original version of KEP but with heightened emphasis on orientation for placement and overt recognition of relational practice. The video exemplar was removed. Instead, drawing on learning derived from the focussed literature review and interview phases of the project, as well as on learning in previous courses including previous placements in NGO agencies, students were to create a practice briefing based on interviews with practice experts. Our co-designed KEP had taken shape, and was ratified by the dean of our faculty. We were ready to get started.

Students were allocated to teams (child protection, physical health, mental health, and youth justice) according to the field of practice in which their placement had been arranged. Teams were tasked with the following work. First, they were to arrange online meetings with their academic expert and expert practitioner, whose participation had been invited and secured by the staff team. Having consulted their academic expert on a short list of relevant literature, they would review this literature to produce a two-page, field-specific "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper. In a conversational interview with their assigned expert practitioner, teams would explore typical practice scenarios and inquire into work with Māori, the impact of policy on people's lives, and the realities of working under pertinent legislation and policy, and then record their learning as a "practice briefing". Their final task was to create a strategy for relaying what social workers need to know, and do, to demonstrate competence in a particular context. Key questions were: What kind of practice do we need to engage in if we are to work responsively and preventively?; How can we as social workers enact social justice in our practice?; and How is commitment to Te Tiriti demonstrated? In an online project meeting, we presented students with the diagram in Figure 1 and talked through the work it represents. From left to right, the first four arrows relate to conversational interviews with expert practitioners, the fifth, purple, arrow relates to consultation with academic experts, and the last three arrows relate to project outputs.

Rewriting a representative practice story

When we prepared our task diagram, we had not yet developed what proved to be a powerful strategy for illuminating social work's social justice role and for highlighting the importance of engaging in relational practice to "hear the whole story". While the students were consulting academic experts about key literature, the staff team created a complex, composite narrative

called "Sara's Story" which was designed to link students' learning to practice. Based in the MSW(Prof) programme leader's work on family violence mortality reviews, and spanning several years in the life of a young mother of Māori/Samoan heritage, this story included anonymised lived experience highlighting typical experiences of women entrapped in intimate partner violence and featured interaction with social work agencies in the fields of practice in which students' planned placements were located. It was intended to both orient students to their placement's field of practice and to alert them to how social justice, well-being and safety are all compromised by practitioner bias and systemic failure to provide relevant help. Students used the story and their "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper to compile critical questions for the expert practitioners they interviewed.

Next, students rewrote Sara's story, taking a critical and holistic stance and considering how the field of practice in which their placement was situated could have supported Sara and people close to her over time, with a focus on how timely help might not only have averted her eventual murder but also reoriented her story towards wellbeing for her and her family. Exploration of culture and impacts of colonisation were crucial (McNabb, 2019). The key question underlying this piece of work was: What could social workers in each field of practice have done to help shift the trajectory towards beneficial change?

Taking flight

After the dramas and intensity of creating KEP, its implementation was relatively straightforward. When staff team members approached academic colleagues and expert practitioners, we were activating long-established networks that function in a spirit of reciprocity, and they willingly agreed to help, expressing interest in collaborating on the project. Students set to work on arranging meetings with their experts, distributing work amongst team members, doing the reading, and then working collaboratively on their "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper. Clearly, this helped them prepare for their interviews with expert practitioners, who let us know that they found these interviews engrossing, and that the students' knowledge and conduct sparked optimism about the future of the profession. Despite the time limits we had set, some expert practitioners were so engaged that their meetings with student teams lasted considerably longer than scheduled because the practitioner wanted to continue the conversation.

The information-processing phase lasted until lockdown was lifted and students were able to start their agency-based placements. KEP work continued as coursework for placement, and, during the last week of face-to-face placement, each group delivered a presentation in person at a session to which students' field supervisors were invited, as were the expert practitioners and academic experts who had supported the project. While there was scope for alternative strategies for sharing their learning, all teams chose to make a PowerPoint presentation. These were assessed and recorded, and students were encouraged to further share their presentations, within their placement agencies and elsewhere.

KEP produced results that went far beyond a stopgap. Gratifyingly, we received several unsolicited notes of thanks from students, for example, "I found this project very worthwhile and look forward to taking this knowledge into placement." We heard from colleagues who contributed to the project that the students who consulted them were organised and engaged. Academic experts were impressed by the robust work completed by students. In an email to the team for whom he was academic expert, one said, "The conceptual thinking that has gone into the project is superb." In communicating with expert practitioners, students developed expertise in courteous, collegial, professional interaction. At the end of the

project, practitioners were impressed by the quality of the information that students had collated and by the depth and scope of their questioning about the realities of practice, and they admired students' capacity to apply their learning to Sara's story. As a conglomerate story based on real events experienced by several different women, Sara's story brought students close to real-life practice, and proved to be a powerful learning tool, evoking engagement with Sara and provoking outrage at systemic failures to support her and people close to her.

When lockdown was lifted, students had completed around 150 hours of placement time on KEP and had just finished rewriting Sara's story. All successfully embarked on placement and no further lockdowns interrupted the remaining 50 days. Students' feedback at the end of practicum emphasised their learning about relational practice and the importance of clear communication. One student mentioned using his team's work on KEP to make sense of family violence situations encountered during placement. According to fieldwork supervisors, when students finally got to placement they were perceived as confident, knowledgeable, proactive, and able and willing to ask critical questions. In the words of a fieldwork supervisor, the students "hit the ground running."

We observed that KEP built student expertise in the following areas:

- protocols, conventions, and facilitation skills for online meetings; communication; presentation;
- co-design;
- teamwork and collaboration; for some students, leadership skills;
- attuned response to self-care and accountability;
- interview skills;
- knowledge of practice context and constraints, and of systemic failures;
- reciprocity, through knowledge exchange with agencies, peers, and advisors;
- practice in applying a strengths-based approach;
- deepened understanding of prevention, through identifying opportunities for beneficial change in Sara's story.

Our experienced practicum assessors found that this cohort's coursework demonstrated development of all SWRB core competencies to the standard we would normally expect, if not more so. Additionally, students demonstrated courteous, professional communication and engaged in collaborative work with a broad spectrum of people. They experienced reciprocity through recognition of the contribution of experts and gave back through sharing their own work. They learned that reciprocity, a key feature of KEP, is rooted in relationship-building within professions and communities. In facilitating dialogue about good practice and the importance of relationships, KEP was a persuasive example of integrated learning (Domakin & Curry, 2018).

Discussion

KEP evolved from a glimmer of an idea into a robust learning experience that drew on relational and networking skills at the heart of social work. It provided hands-on learning about collaborative project planning and implementation. Taylor and White (2006) argued that social work educators must prepare students for ethically managing uncertainty, long recognised as a prevailing condition of the professional context (Fook, 2013), and the process of developing KEP was a form of educating for uncertainty (Arouz, 2021). Students developed strategies for functioning constructively despite uncertainty, and staff learned how to help them do so. KEP gave us strategies for orienting students to placement contexts and alerted us to the importance of preparing students to deal with uncertainty and crises.

The collaborative and reflective practice that characterises KEP began with us, the staff team. We continue this collaboration by

working together to write this article and by including the perspectives of others involved in the project—our students, our academic colleagues, placement supervisors, and social workers who acted as practice experts for students exploring the practice realities of their placement field. We agree with Archer-Kuhn and colleagues (2022, p. 1013) who noted that "collaboration is understood to support social workers to join resources, rethink practices, become innovative, and respond to changing social problems." Like them, we see the value of sustaining the collaborative practices we developed when challenged by Covid-19. For us, this extends to deeper collaborative relationships between us as a group of educators, and strengthened links to the academic colleagues and experienced practitioners who helped us by supporting our students. The three of us who collaborated on this article gratefully recognise the contribution of two further members of the staff team, both of whom retired last year.

Discussing the process of learning teamwork, Clark (2009) recommended the use of realistic scenarios based in real-world situations. The culmination of students' work on KEP was to apply their learning to "Sara's story". As a representative narrative drawn from real-life cases, Sara's story confronted students with the complexity that characterises social work and demonstrated that when service provision is misaligned with needs, people stop seeking help and problems accumulate. Through empathising with Sara as the main actor in the story, they realised the importance of taking the time needed to understand a situation from the perspective of the person experiencing it, and comprehended that social work support must be timely, relevant, and responsive to need, rather than, as in Sara's story, routine referral to programmes with a waitlist, or to available programmes designed to resolve a different problem. Interviews with practice experts revealed that this type of transactional practice, which might be called "convenient", is unfortunately common.

Engagement with Sara's story helped maintain the broad perspective needed for social work that avoids simplistic judgments and bias, instead recognising and tackling systemic origins of adversity experienced by many of the people whom social workers aim to help, and thus reinforcing students' professional commitment to social justice. Rewriting Sara's story required students to adopt a broad, ecological lens to show how cultural, systemic, and sociolegal factors affected Sara's life. This lens deepened students' understanding of kotahitanga, a Māori concept integral to our *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019) which expresses the fundamental importance of challenging oppression and injustice and promoting collective action for social change.

While working on KEP, students developed skills that are vital for successful teamwork and collaborative work, yet often obscured by the urgency of the problem at hand. To make this experiential learning overt, we used online project meetings to recognise, and to name, such skills, including delegation, collating and reporting information succinctly, making practical arrangements, and interviewing. Clark (2009) reflected that "learning teamwork is dependent on the experience of working together, in which knowledge is created by the team itself through a social process" (p. 587) and recommended using group processing time for "promoting reflection on what is happening at the level of the team itself" (p. 586). Although we did not deliberately programme these ideas into KEP, they nonetheless were evident in KEP's evolution. We observed how experiential learning strengthens students' confidence and competence in working collaboratively.

Reflecting on KEP, we recognise the unexpected benefits of strategies developed under duress. An important benefit was that KEP kept students connected—to each other, to university staff, and to their sense of themselves as beginning social workers. When offered the opportunity

to codesign the preparatory phase of their delayed placement, they applied themselves to the tasks involved in KEP, thus acquiring experiential knowledge of how to plan and run a project. They responded to our modelling of consistent, professional communication and initiated such communication in their own ways, using digital tools to stay in touch among themselves, with staff, with experts they consulted, and eventually, with placement field supervisors. They engaged in targeted networking and experienced reciprocity and its rewards. Students' work on the project demonstrates skills development by osmosis rather than instruction.

Students' final summaries of their entire placement experience indicated that KEP established a solid foundation for beginning their agency-based placement. One such summary noted that KEP helped the writer develop key ideas that they "carried into their placement". KEP built contextual knowledge, exemplifying the "benefit of focussing on one area, or topic, allowing the student to become well versed in the theory, practice and work with a specific sector" (Zuchowski et al., 2022, p. 2884).

The following year, a second cohort of students, this time first-year, participated in a second iteration of KEP during an even worse situation, when prolonged lockdown prevented them from going on their 50-day placement at all. Halfway through this second KEP, these students completed a written exercise reflecting on their experience of the project, and their comments indicate that as they developed nuanced knowledge of practice, they became more engaged with the kaupapa, or purpose and values, of the organisation and field of practice in which their planned placement was based. Now, with lockdowns hopefully a thing of the past, we continue to adapt and use strategies we developed during the first Covid-19 lockdown to enhance student learning. Future students will benefit from changes that we were forced to make during the crises created by Covid-19, and from our learning about using a practice-based story. For example, writing the story in the first person would resonate with the idea of *telling* a story. We plan to build on KEP, first developing further first-person narratives developed in partnership with expert practitioners, then engaging actors to record the stories, so that students can practise listening.

Looking back to when we were struggling to devise an alternative emergency placement for a cohort of anxious students, we see that the development of KEP paralleled the urgency and uncertainty often experienced in social work practice (Taylor & White, 2006). Social work operates in a context of complexity and ambiguity and social workers must be prepared to deal with the uncertainty that is inherent in this context. Perhaps reflecting a tendency for social workers to resist uncertainty (Fook, 2013), our students expressed initial discomfort about our expectation that they would manage their own team process, share learning, and produce resources collaboratively. Building on Fook's argument that uncertainty is a defining characteristic of social work, Arouz (2021, p. 562) maintained that "social work education should play a pivotal part in articulating and developing knowledge to respond to uncertain circumstances". KEP helped our students learn to respond to uncertain circumstances by working well together. This bodes well for their capacity to cope with the uncertainty and crises that they will inevitably encounter during their social work careers.

Conclusion

KEP was a co-constructed, collaborative knowledge-exchange project created and implemented under pressure when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world and government-ordered lockdown and industry regulations barred our MSW(Prof) students from beginning imminent placements in statutory agencies.

The KEP experience had five phases. First, waiting to see if lockdown would be lifted quickly, or if the profession's regulatory body would provide us with solutions. Second, realising we had to come up with a solution ourselves, which we did, only to find that students were reluctant to engage with it. Third, co-designing a reimagined project collaboratively with students. Fourth, a relatively straightforward operational phase. Fifth, a reflective phase, consolidating the staff team's learning about the value of sharing responsibility for students' learning with the students themselves, and from students participating in a creative process that enhanced readiness for placement.

The uncertainty and urgency that permeated the context at the time forced us to focus on clear communication and collegial support. Our own deliberate demonstration of teamwork influenced our students' collaborative engagement in the project, which reinforced their individual and collective learning about context-specific practice and contributed to an overview of statutory social work practice. KEP demonstrated the value of thoroughly orienting students to their placement context before they venture out into the field. Establishing and maintaining a collaborative orientation and professional communication clearly has value for preparing students to function as confident, contributing social workers. Practicum coursework showed that students' learning not only met, but surpassed, our expectations. The use of a composite narrative drawn from practice experience anchored their learning, highlighted social justice as a social work imperative, and alerted students to the need for timely, relevant responses.

Like many projects that retrospectively look straightforward, KEP's development was complex. In a context of unprecedented uncertainty, KEP had to be flexible in its function as a reimagined early phase of placement. Its outcomes are nuanced and multilayered. It helped keep students connected, grounded, and focussed, and was successful in ways we did not foresee. Not only did it serve as a foundation for learning that we would normally expect students to acquire during final placement, but it was also valuable in engendering other types of learning in unexpected ways. It has since informed our pedagogy to enhance the learning of succeeding cohorts of students. Its success resulted from mahi tahi, working together on a collective endeavour, in a way that is illuminated by the Māori whakataukī (proverb) "Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa ta kitini" (Success is not the work of an individual, but the work of many).

References

Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, A. (2019). *Code of Ethics* https://anzasw.nz/wp-content/uploads/Code-of-Ethics-Adopted-30-Aug-2019.pdf

Archer-Kuhn, B., Ayala, J., Hewson, J., & Letkemann, L. (2020). Canadian reflections on the Covid-19 pandemic in social work education: From tsunami to innovation. *Social Work Education, 39*(8), 1010–1018. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1826922

Arouz, R. (2021). Approaching uncertainty in social work education, a lesson from COVID-19 pandemic. *Qualitative Social Work, 20*(1–2), 561–567.

Bennett, B., Ross, D., & Gates, T. G. (2021). Creating spatial, relational and cultural safety in online social work education during COVID-19. *Social Work Education*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1924664

Clark, P. G. (2009). What would a theory of interprofessional education look like? Some suggestions for developing a theoretical framework for teamwork training. *Journal of Interprofessional Care, 20*(6), 577–589. https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820600916717

Davis, A., & Mirick, R. G. (2021). COVID-19 and social work field education: A descriptive study of students' experiences. *Journal of Social Work Education, 57*(sup1), 120–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1929621

Domakin, A., & Curry, L. (2018). Partners in practice: Developing integrated learning opportunities on the frontline child and family social work qualifying programme. *Child & Family Social Work, 23*, 171–179.

Fook, J. (2013). Uncertainty the defining characteristic of social work? In V. E. Cree (Ed.), *Social work: A reader* (pp. 29–34). Routledge.

McLaughlin, H., Scholar, H., & Teater, B. (2020). Social work education in a global pandemic: Strategies, reflections, and challenges. *Social Work Education, 39*(8), 975–982. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1834545

McNabb, D. (2019). A Treaty-based framework for mainstream social work education in Aotearoa New

Zealand: Educators talk about their practice. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work, 31*(4), 1–17.

Morley, C., & Clarke, J. (2020). From crisis to opportunity? Innovations in Australian social work field education during the COVID-19 global pandemic. *Social Work Education*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1836145

O'Keeffe, P., Haralambous, B., Egan, R., Heales, E., Baskarathas, S., Thompson, S., & Jerono, C. (2022). Reimagining social work placements in the Covid-19 pandemic. *The British Journal of Social Work*. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac124

Roguski, M., Grennell, D., Dash, S., de Haan, I., Cram, F., & Gulliver, P. (2022). Te pou: An Indigenous framework to evaluate the inclusion of family voice in family violence homicide reviews. *Journal of Family Violence*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-022-00459-6

Social Workers Registration Board. (2015). *The SWRB ten core competence standards*. https://swrb.govt.nz/practice/core-competence-standards/

Social Workers Registration Board, (2020). *Short to medium-term flexibilities in response to COVID-19 levels three and four*. https://swrb.govt.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/PRS-adjustments.pdf

Taylor, C., & White, S. (2006). Knowledge and reasoning in social work: Educating for humane judgement. *British Journal of Social Work*, *36*, 937–954.

Wallengren-Lynch, M., Dominelli, L., & Cuadra, C. (2022). Information communication technology during Covid-19. *Social Work Education*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2022.2040977

Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2010). Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *46*(3), 327–339. https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2010.200900043

Zuchowski, I., Cleak, H., Croaker, S., & Davey, J.-B. (2022). It's up to you: The need for self-directed learning for social work students on placement during COVID-19. *The British Journal of Social Work, 52*(5), 2875–2893.