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Closing the gap: Addressing the climate crisis through Social Work Continuing Education

Smith and Rawcliffe

Abstract

Climate instability threatens the loss of social justice and equality gains over the past half-century, making it a universal problem facing social workers today. This paper highlights a university-based social work continuing education program and an ecological justice organization partnership, focusing on the generation of group planning, process, and outcomes, with the overarching goal of mobilizing groups of social workers with the professional capacity and knowledge to summon resources for replicable and transformative ecological change.

Climate instability threatens the loss of social justice and equality gains over the past half-century, making it one of the most significant and universal problems facing social workers today (Watts et al., 2018; Dominelli, 2012). Ecoanxiety, the chronic fear of environmental doom, is an essential contributing factor to social work's absence in climate change mitigation and equitable solution-building; this sense of loss compounds the impacts of climate change (both currently and in the future), leading to avoidant and isolating behaviors (Clayton et al., 2017). While there is an acknowledgment and growing recognition that environmental issues are relevant to Master of Social Work (MSW) programs, curricula that incorporate environmental justice remain rare. Nesmith and Smyth's (2015) survey of midwestern United States social workers reports that more than half of respondents were working with clients who were experiencing an environmental injustice, defined by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as the following: "bear (ing) a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental and commercial operations or policies" (EPA, 2022, para.1). Environmental injustices are experienced not just in the midwest but around the world. Indeed, around this country, the literature purports that social workers have had little to no education regarding environmental or ecological justice and feel ill-prepared and trained to address ecological issues and injustices (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015).

This paper will explore a university-based social work continuing education program and an environmental justice organization partnership that seeks to mobilize groups of social workers with the professional capacity and knowledge to summon resources for replicable and transformative ecological change. The generation of group planning will be addressed, along with a discussion on findings, process, outcomes, methodology, and limitations.

According to Klein (1972), "A group is a statement of relationship among the person. Therefore, social systems have structure and some degree of stability, interaction, reciprocity, interdependence, and group bond. Open social systems do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of and transact with ... their surroundings …" (p. 125). The small group, as a system, is the ideal space to engage in change-making talk and behavior, specifically when addressing climate change issues. In response to the lack of coordinated education for social workers, this unique partnership was formed between a university-based social work continuing education program and an ecological justice organization. The partnership is centered on relationship building, climate leadership, coalition and community building, and social work advocacy to encourage adaptive strategic planning opportunities. These organized cohorts of continuing education scholars convened each fall annually since 2019. The goals set forth by the group have helped balance community needs and environmental activism preemptively and in response to current or past ecological dangers. The groups, formed to elevate ecological activism in social work, have been a launching pad for a growing community of eco-social work professionals.

The idea to invite, create, and engage a coordinated group approach to social work, ecological activism, and education was birthed

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from climate change itself. The program was designed to build community coalitions within the social work landscape by bridging academics and practitioners together, which, as observed by the authors, is largely absent in the social work academic and practice spheres. Creating opportunities to foster and nurture group learning expands practitioner resilience through meaningful activities and actions (Rao & Teixeira, 2020). The program's goals and activities have been designed to positively impact social work's investment and engagement in ecological justice issues.

Purposefully strengths-based and laden with opportunities to build community, one goal of the program is to mitigate the impact of ecoanxiety in individuals by promoting positive peer pressure to support changes in behaviors and attitudes around social work and the climate crisis (Rosenberg, 2011). Another goal was to create a network of social work professionals with the capacity to summon and mobilize resources, increasing hope while decreasing fear and centering people and currently available social, economic, and policy-based solutions as the impetus for saving the planet. Through the lens of an ecofeminist epistemology, utilizing a community coalition action theory (CCCT) theoretical framework, an avenue for ecological and environmental advocacy and advancement has convened.

Initially, the focus was on environmental justice, which, like social work, is a person-centric approach to understanding the world and aims to develop interventions that ensure a safe and equitable environment for all people (Teixeira & Krings, 2015). However, it became clear that the true intention of the work took on a wider scope, so the course was revised to better align with ecological justice, which is more encompassing and expands the application of justice over the entire ecological system (Powers et al., 2019).

Research Questions for Consideration

This author chose to conduct a scoping review, a research methodology that helps understand existing research without having well-defined research questions (Pham et al., 2014). A scoping review was selected to address the gap in research; specifically, there were no formal literature reviews found upon initial inquiry by this author. The purpose of information gathering was to provide an overview of the state of the research on ecosocial work and continuing education group learning experiences and specifically to try and answer the following questions: a) what are the different types of group learning opportunities that provide ecological justice education to social workers, b) what are the different types of knowledge and skills that inform these group learning opportunities, and c) what research has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs?

Methods

The authors conducted several structured searches using the above-noted research questions and Adelphi University Library and Google Scholar as search engines to locate research relevant to this study. Specifically, the following databases were used: PsycInfo, EBSCO Social Work Abstracts, PSYCArticles, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, and ProQuest Central, which includes ProQuest Education. The search had data points from 2012 to 2022 to capture a 10-year time frame, and all of the articles were limited to studies published in English.

The following search terms were used for the scope: "social work continuing education," "group learning," "social work education," "eco-social work," "ecoanxiety," "group planning," "coalition-building," "environmental justice and social work," "positive peer pressure," and "group learning outcomes." This search yielded 1,900 results. This was far too large of a pool to assess for this project, so a series of manuscript abstracts were reviewed, and ultimately, 30 (N = 30) were chosen for further review.

Before conducting the structured search, the author created a simple table in a Google document identifying concepts relevant to this scoping review, named the headers, and used those headers as the structured search items to note.

To be included in this scoping synthesis, the articles had to discuss ecological or environmental justice and social work education since this was the impetus for bringing this group of social work professionals. There were no restrictions on methodology or article type; it was clear from the beginning that there would be little research related to what the author was explicitly interested in reporting on. After screening a

number of abstracts, there remained 30 articles that the author reviewed for further interest and eligibility. Articles were excluded if they did not include a focus on social work and ecological justice, if the report was a commentary, or if it did not include recommendations. This analysis resulted in (N = 29) articles that focused on environmental, social work education, continuing education, positive peer pressure, coalition building, and ecoanxiety variations.

Results

Question 1: What group learning opportunities provide ecological justice education to social workers?

Of the literature reviewed, most discussed elective courses (that MSW students may choose to take) that are offered in CSWE-approved social work education at universities across the United States (CSWE, 2015). Some papers (n = 7) discussed the NASW position on environmental justice and social work education and highlighted self-study webinars that individuals could access (Beltrán et al., 2016). Several reports (n = 4) discussed the Grand Challenges for Social Work, which highlight the need for the social work community to answer the call to action and engage in community building and cross-discipline partnerships to strengthen the community's response and adaptation to climate change (Kemp et al., 2016). Evidence from this literature shows that environmental issues are of great concern to the authors and audiences of this material, and they see environmental justice as part of their lament of responsibility (Bowles et al., 2018).

Several studies (n = 6) discussed the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), which are determined by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015). A 2015 addition to the EPAS included a definition of environmental justice, which is as follows: "Environmental justice develops when individuals are not disproportionately affected by environmental hazards; are treated equally concerning environmental protection; and are involved in the decision-making process for environmental policies" (CSWE, 2015, p. 20). The research does not explain to which extent the curriculum encompasses this charge, and it is unknown whether social work students or professionals are being trained to engage in ecological justice work (Chonody & Sultzman, 2020). There seem to be some reports indicating that social workers practicing in the field (post-graduates) have some knowledge and awareness of environmental changes in the communities they serve. Still, it is mainly unstudied (Chonody & Sultzman, 2020). A search of online social work continuing education programs for groups engaged in environmental justice came up with 2 (n = 2) results, one of them being the partnership discussed in this paper at Adelphi University.

Research Question 2: What knowledge and skills inform these group learning opportunities?

Most articles that addressed this area of group knowledge and skill-building generally spoke about continuing education in social work and the associated competencies attached to this learning. Loya and Smith (2021) highlight the importance of enhancing competency-based skill development in continuing education, utilizing a class-like structure as best practice for accumulating knowledge. Relevancy to meeting ethical obligations and striving for competence is noted in the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2016), and opportunities to engage in post-graduate curriculum with professionals within and external to the field of social work seem to be most studied (n = 4; Strom-Gottfried, 2008). A trend in the literature notes that group learning in CE contexts seems to have little to do with educational content filling actual knowledge gaps but rather is more focused on the trends the course convener was interested in providing (Coffield, 2012).

Some gaps in the literature included issues of social justice, macro social work, workplace safety, and environmental justice (Ruth et al., 2014). A large-scale study reported by Cheetham and Chivers (2001) about professionals engaged in lifelong learning opportunities indicated that there were many types of learning mechanisms that helped them become "fully competent professionals, this point often not having been reached until long after their formal educational training has ended" (p. 248). Study participants noted the most repeated learning mechanism in this report: unconscious absorption or osmosis of learning and collaboration with peers (Nissen et al., 2014).

Research Question #3: What research has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of these group learning courses?

This last question had the least number of reports to substantiate understanding of evaluative practices, and it was clear from that fact alone that there is a gap in the literature. Three levels of effectiveness of continuing education courses for groups were identified by Rooney (1988) and spoken about in much of the evaluative literature. Those three levels are Level 1, whether theory and skills are learned; Level 2, whether social workers can practice the skills they learned in the course at the end of the course; and Level 3, whether the social worker will take learned skills and practice them back in their jobs. These survey methods are similar to a pre/post survey method but can only evaluate whether the material was taught; it is much harder to assess Levels 2 and 3 without any agency follow-up. Additional reports indicated that a lack of funding and dedicated personnel limits the likelihood of a measured evaluation in social work continuing education programs (Cochran & Landuyt, 2011).

As the scoping review found, ignoring environmental justice violates social work's ethical code; NASW (2017) asserts that the profession must intervene in global environmental inequalities (Miller et al., 2012). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) formed a Committee on Environmental Justice to update social work curricula in 2015 (CSWE, 2015). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) innovated beyond professional ethos and developed five actions to protect the natural environment and promote sustainable, environmentally sensitive development but did not release any specific recommendations or data on these initiatives that could translate into replicable programs (Bowles et al., 2018). These organizations have begun to incorporate environmental justice and climate thinking into the scope of their agendas but have yet to promote any measurable action.

While there is continued recognition that environmental justice issues are relevant to social work education, as highlighted by the University of Denver's master's level social work concentration in Sustainable Development and Global Practice, curriculums that intentionally incorporate environmental justice remain rare (University of Denver, n.d.). There is a growing momentum among social work students, researchers, institutions, and practitioners to understand the interdependence between communities and the environment better (Teixeira & Krings, 2015), and research shows that postgraduate social workers want a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of the physical environment and social work (Beltrán et al., 2016). Miller and Hayward (2014) surveyed MSW students and social workers two years post-graduate. Although most agreed that environmental issues are essential to social work, only 8% felt their master's degree programs adequately addressed environmental and ecological justice issues. Similarly, social work students and practitioners reported inconsistent or absent training opportunities in environmental justice, which left them feeling unprepared to address these issues in their practice settings (Decker Sparks et al., 2019). To address the gaps in research and support and overcome the challenge, a social work continuing education program and a social work climate justice organization partnered to develop a virtual continuing education program that brings together academics and practitioners and fills the knowledge acquisition gap that is so desperately needed, in particular, in post-graduate education.

Continuing education programs offer lifelong learning opportunities for social workers (Kurzman, 2016). They are critical to social workers' engagement with the climate crisis, especially since environmental justice remains overshadowed by other curricular objectives in BSW and MSW programs (CSWE, 2015). Virtual social work continuing education workshops are a specific and measurable way to elevate environmental justice initiatives and provide social workers training to support further the development and collaborative approach to climate change planning, mitigation, response, and recovery. A partnership between an environmental justice and social work organization and Adelphi University School of Social Work laid the foundation for social work professionals' collaborative group learning experience.

In the summer of 2019, the directors of both entities began investigating resources for social workers interested in climate justice; specifically, interrogating the literature on environmental justice, scanning the continuing education

stratosphere, and looking intently at the curriculum in social work master's degree programs. The absence was notable. Further, Adelphi had received several inquiries over the years about training opportunities related to ecological justice. The thought of bringing interested parties together in a virtual space (this was pre-COVID and not the "norm" for professional community building practices) was born. The development of a coalition is strategic and always has a goal in mind (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002). As an action-oriented partnership, coalitions often focus on mitigating, preventing, and addressing a problem through analysis, data collection, assessment, and developing an action plan to implement solutions (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002).

The impetus for this group experience was grounded in community coalition action theory (CCAT), which was developed by Butterfoss and Kegler (2002). The theory comprises 14 constructs and propositions which provide an underlying framework for understanding how a coalition is structured and worked towards practical outcomes. The constructs are:

1. Stages of development: This initiates coalition building, including formation, maintenance, and institutionalization within this construct. This stage lived within the two organizations and was a fluid process based on community need, much like consideration of the generation of a group beginning,
2. Community context: The acknowledgment of the impact sociopolitical environments, geography, and historical collaborations have on the partnership,
3. Convener group/lead Agency: The convener organizations (in the case of this case study, the environmental justice organization and AUSSW) host, recruit, and provide resources to manage the initiative. Technical assistance and support were also offered and ongoing, and the partners enlisted the participation of ecological justice leaders in the program conceptualization and implementation.
4. Coalition membership: This construct states that a successful alliance will begin with committed members, and effectiveness is measured by the expansion of the constituency (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002). Membership should be broad but include the target population. Membership was engaged through ecological justice networks managed by social work professionals and academics. Members were invited via social media, ecological justice listservs, and continuing education mailing lists.
5. Operations and process: The theoretical construct includes assumptions about group functioning, progress, fit, communication, decision making, conflict management, relationship building amongst members, member perceptions, satisfaction, commitment, and empowerment (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002).
6. Leadership and staffing: This posits that without leadership and staffing, coalitions will not move past the formation stage into action, and group leaders should be paid staff to improve engagement, assessment, and planning. The authors posit that leadership competency is related to group member satisfaction (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002). There were two defined leaders within this group with specific tasks and responsibilities related to building the community.
7. Structure: This construct addresses the rules, agreements, structures, and procedures to inform positive coalition outcomes (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002). The theory signals a collaborative decision-making ability among members to increase efficacy (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002) and the employment of a democratic approach.
8. Pooled member and external resources: This construct recognizes that pooling resources, knowledge, skills, and abilities of group members will result in the most impactful and effective outcomes (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002). Members are considered an essential resource; the flow of information and resources to one another could be linked to a commitment to the issue, longevity, and potential power to impact change (Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001).
9. Member engagement: This construct supports the idea that engaged members will participate more fully in activism; when members feel a sense of belonging, a sense of mission and vision, and a leader who emulates compassion and empathy and encourages group discourse, members remain engaged.
10. Assessment and planning: A quality coalition is associated with engaged planning, active participation, and inclusion (Butterfoss &

Kegler, 2002). This can be measured with progress reports, something this partnership has done throughout the project's phases.
11. Implementation of strategies: This construct asserts that successful implementation and action will increase the likelihood of community change, primarily if evidence-based interventions are used in this group process.
12. Community change outcomes: This construct identifies the importance of creating and actualizing implementation strategies that include attention to policy, practice, and environmental factors in addition to person and group awareness, education, and behavior change (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002).
13. Health and social outcomes: CCAT laments that improving social and health outcomes is the most crucial indicator of a community coalition working. There are not enough studies in this area to measure results over a long period, which is a sincere gap in the research (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002).
14. Community capacity: Finally, this construct refers to results; increased community engagement and capability, leadership, network building, skills, and resource acquisition create a sense of community solidarity (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002).

The case study and development of the continuing education program utilized the CCAT model as a framework for building an effective community coalition. It was used for building from the ground up, much like a group worker would do in preparation for a clinical social workgroup.

Moving through these constructs, the program started with two webinars and, from there, created a post-graduate certificate program geared towards interested parties who attended the initial webinars. The year ended with a social work and environmental justice conference, the first of its kind in the United States. Several networking events were also planned to invite and collaborate with social workers who already had investment, involvement, and engagement in ecological justice issues.

The coalition was a call to action for social workers, inviting social workers to learn about, respond to, and activate around issues related to the accelerating climate crisis, which has significant implications for the populations social workers serve. The post-graduate certificate course applies to social workers at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Each participant tailors their learning toward their areas of interest and expertise but does so through group collaboration and resourcing. Social workers learn the benefits of ensuring environmental justice is integrated into their professional goals and recognize multisolving for the traditional purposes of social work alongside positive environmental measures to multiply benefits. This solution-focused course differentiates social workers by expanding their critical thinking capacity while improving their efficacy through a community coalition group experience. The course culminates with a non-disposable assignment where participants explore possible environmental interventions for the populations they serve. This final assessment, done through a series of collaborative group exercises, encourages students to bring their learning experiences into the world by actualizing the social work concepts explored throughout the course. The benefits of the specialized certificate emphasize the value of turning obstacles into teachable opportunities for innovation that will resonate beyond the timeframe of the course.

Using lessons learned from the community, members explored conceptual frameworks (such as the CCAT model) that invited participants to consider balancing immediate professional and client-based needs with long-term environmental sustainability. The 14-week post-graduate certificate program culminated with an environmental justice conference. The AUSSW Continuing Education department and the Institute for Social Work and Ecological Justice have maintained this community coalition with a monthly newsletter and calls to action. A pre, mid, and posttest evaluation is given to all participants, and the program's design, implementation, and action are supported by membership feedback.

Recommendations

There is very little research on how social workers incorporate new information learned through continuing education programs and whether there is any evidence to suggest that continuing education coalitions, such as the one described in this case study, have any positive impact on communities (Parrish & Rubin, 2011). There are several frameworks in existence that outline a strategy for lifelong learning. The most

promising include a value- and ethics-driven community coalition approach to knowledge acquisition (Panda & Desbiens, 2010), which is well-aligned with the community coalition action theory theoretical model presented in this paper. There are infinite possibilities for the field to consider concerning environmental justice and social work. A proactive, integrated group pathway to learning and advocacy could mitigate the impact that eco-anxiety has on the individual practitioner. The American Psychological Association defines ecoanxiety as the chronic fear of environmental doom and a sense of loss that pervades collective feelings on the impacts of climate change (both current and future), creating an overwhelming feeling of desolation and despair similar to that experienced by individuals suffering from forced migration (Clayton et al., 2017). The effects of ecoanxiety serve to isolate individuals from the precarious state of the planet through feelings of anxiousness, depression, fear, and despair, which combine to prevent individuals, communities, and governments from taking serious action to combat the causes of climate change. Ecoanxiety encapsulates the problem facing social work, and coalition and community building beginning in schools of social work could address these feelings of despair by encouraging and engaging in coalition building in schools of social work, with a lifelong connection to advocacy through something like the partnership discussed in this paper.

Social work can overcome its disciplinary ecoanxiety and recognize that environmental inequalities are a complex foundation problem facing the discipline and require immediate action. Community building models could accelerate a discipline-wide, socially just response to climate change. There are many opportunities for social workers to operate in tandem with their ethics as policy influencers, climate change mitigation leaders, and community organizers. By overcoming the discipline-wide ecoanxiety, in tandem with other social workers and disciplines, social workers can transfer climate thinking across the field to confront the compounding effects of climate change on marginalization and poverty. Through the development of coalition building and active campaigning for overcoming the isolating impact of ecoanxiety, social workers will be able to invite climate thinking and protection for the populations social work aims to serve. The growing threats of climate change impact populations across the globe and compound existing vulnerabilities and social problems. Historically, these vulnerable populations have had little voice in environmental decision-making (Schmitz et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Peer working groups that engage social work professionals with climate change can build upon social work's skillset to employ harm reduction techniques by developing competency in ecological justice while building community to encourage action by social work practitioners as a tool to help mitigate ecoanxiety. Positive peer pressure is a valuable tool for social change because it capitalizes on the great human need to belong (Schmitz et al., 2012). Through the community-building efforts mentioned in this paper, positive peer pressure across social work reference networks will work to shift norms within professional circles (Bicchieri, 2017). Such validation of social work presence in ecological justice spaces supports social workers as they develop the best practices for engaging with environmental justice in different social work specialties such as child welfare, intimate partner violence, and mental health and homelessness. Through cross-sectional partnerships, group thinking, and planning, social workers have the opportunity to promote ecological justice across the discipline and shift norms to substantially protect, mitigate, and reduce the frequency and impact environmental harms have on our communities.

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