

Simulation-based Learning in Social Work Education

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The intention of this research pilot is to explore the prospect of integrating simulation-based learning (SBL) into the Bachelor of Social Work programme at Whitireia and WelTec (Whitireia). SBL uses scenarios that are developed to be authentic and reality based so that students have an opportunity to practise skills prior to encountering real-life situations. This research aims to investigate the efficacy of SBL in improving social work students' preparedness for real-world practice and developing core social work competencies. The study will involve students in the second year of the Bachelor of Social Work programme as they will have completed sufficient coursework to match the simulation's learning objectives. Two core competencies mandated by Aotearoa New Zealand's Social Workers Registration Board (n.d.)—working with diversity and promoting empowerment—and three paper learning outcomes will guide the simulation design. This study will examine how SBL increases social work students' confidence, observe their readiness for practice, and investigate the integration of theoretical knowledge through practical application. This study will contribute to the growing body of international research on simulation in social work education, with implications for broader curriculum development and field education strategies while also adding an Aotearoa context.

KEYWORDS: simulation-based learning; social work education; social work research; Social Workers Registration Board core competencies

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BACKGROUND

Nursing and paramedic students at Whitireia and WelTec (Whitireia) are engaged in various forms of simulation throughout the entire three years of their education. To foster students' knowledge acquisition, learning activities must be engaging, target students' prior knowledge, provide educational scaffolding, and provide students with the opportunity to reinforce their learning through practice and demonstration (Boud & Prosser, 2001). Simulation-based learning (SBL)

is well placed to meet these learning needs and is widely used in healthcare education (e.g., nursing and paramedicine) (Fulton et al., 2019).

SBL, as a form of experiential learning, engages students in solving complex problems within controlled, safe, and supportive environments, and complements traditional pedagogical practices such as lecture-based learning, case studies, role-playing, and exams and assessments. It provides a dynamic, interactive learning experience that enhances

understanding and retention (Lateef, 2010; Shaw & Switky, 2018). SBL provides authentic scenarios based on clinical practise, allowing students to practice profession-related skills such as critical thinking, communication, and teamwork before interacting with real clients (Baile & Blatner, 2014; Lee et al., 2021; Shaw & Switky, 2018). Simulation typically includes preparation, briefing, simulation activity, debriefing, reflection, and evaluation (Nestel & Gough, 2017). A pre-simulation briefing helps to prepare and orient learners for the upcoming simulation experience. Debriefing is crucial for learning as it allows students to discuss and reflect on their actions during the simulation (Kolbe et al., 2013).

SIMULATION-BASED LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Most social work degree programmes employ role-playing as a teaching strategy, where students assume specific roles within a scenario to apply their practice knowledge (Banach et al., 2020). However, role-play has significant limitations, such as a lack of authenticity and context, and students' potential reluctance to participate in 'acting' (Kinney & Aspinwall-Roberts, 2010). Consequently, traditional approaches to teaching clinical skills, including peer-to-peer role-play, may not adequately prepare social work students for the complexities of real-world practice (Shlonsky et al., 2024).

Including SBL in the social work curriculum could be the answer to better preparing social work students for practice. Yet, only recently has SBL become more prevalent in social work education worldwide (e.g., Asakura & Bogo, 2021; Egonsdotter & Israelsson, 2024; Hitchcock, n.d.; Keeney et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Shlonsky et al., 2024; Tortorelli et al., 2021).

The increasing popularity of SBL in social work education internationally is shown in a recent scoping literature review, which located 52 published articles focused on simulation in social work education (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). Around a third of these articles focused on simulation in Interprofessional Education (IPE), where social work educators collaborated

with tutors from other disciplines to design a simulation activity, and students worked in interprofessional teams to care for a client.

SIMULATION IN SOCIAL WORK IN AN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

The use of SBL in social work education in the Aotearoa New Zealand context is not well documented; however, in one example, Price et al. (2022) report on students' evaluations of a SBL activity in an IPE project. However, in this research simulation was not the focus of their study. As in the case of Australia (Jefferies et al., 2023), there is a paucity of literature in Aotearoa. This suggests that both Aotearoa and Australia would benefit from exploring and integrating SBL to ensure readiness for practice.

Traditionally, the 'authentic learning' aspect of social work education has been associated with students' field placements. However, this approach has been critiqued for lacking scaffolding and the reliance on "learning acquired from written case studies in class, rather than a genuine environment that replicates real-world exposure to complicated issues" (Jefferies et al., 2023, p. 3). A recent national study found that completing the 120 days of unpaid field education necessary for registration caused financial stress for many social work students (Beddoe et al., 2024). Social work programmes struggle to secure student placements due to competition, high workload of social work supervisors, and insufficient funding (Hay, 2018). Incorporating SBL as a routine component of field education could potentially prepare, support, and supplement students' learning alongside real-life placements (Jefferies et al., 2023). SBL has the potential to address limitations in field education placements for our social work students.

BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK AT WHITIREIA AND WELTEC

The Bachelor of Social Work four-year degree programme at Whitireia employs role-playing activities in the curriculum. Given the limited authentic context and the stated benefits, the

research team is interested in incorporating SBL into the curriculum to better prepare students for practice and to facilitate the development of core social work competencies (Shlonsky et al., 2024).

Whitireia is the only polytechnic in Aotearoa with a dedicated simulation team and is recognised by Laerdal as a leader in the simulation industry, demonstrating best practice education principles for a simulated learning environment in an undergraduate setting (Laerdal, n.d.). This Whitireia team designs and runs simulations at all levels of health programmes offered, using various modalities to prepare students for clinical practice. This team is research active, with publications on topics including work simulation and human factors and the impact on patient care and safety, educators' experiences with using simulation for learning, using simulation to engage students in paediatric scenarios, the effectiveness of VSIM (web-based virtual simulation) for nursing students, and implementing augmented reality in nursing labs. The researchers will leverage this existing expertise at Whitireia to support this study.

Considering the critique of the use of role-play mentioned previously, the researchers are interested in exploring how the inclusion of SBL into the Bachelor of Social Work programme at Whitireia can better prepare students for practice and facilitate the development of core social work competencies. A SBL activity specific to the social work curriculum will be introduced into the programme. The purpose of this study is to pilot the use of SBL as a method of programme assessment. This project will be based on a pilot study conducted by Boston University School of Social Work (Collins, 2018), which, in turn, was based on the work of Bogo et al. (2014). The simulation will be conducted with a second-year cohort at the beginning of the academic year, when students have the necessary knowledge, skills, and proficiency to match the learning objectives and learning outcomes.

Learner-centred simulation provides educational scaffolding and in the social work programme is designed to align with learning objectives and outcomes and align with the Healthcare Best Practice Standards (INACSL Standards Committee et al., 2021). Two social work practice competencies mandated for professional practice by the Social Workers Registration Board will be used to guide the design and use of the simulation activity. These include Practice Standard 3: "Competence to work respectfully and inclusively with diversity and difference in practice" (Social Workers Registration Board, n.d., p. 1), and Practice Standard 8: "Competence to promote empowerment of people and communities to enable positive change" (Social Workers Registration Board, n.d., p. 2).

CONCLUSION

Simulation is emerging as a valuable pedagogical tool in social work education, offering a range of benefits such as increased student confidence, improved preparedness for real-world scenarios, and the opportunity to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application. It supports diverse learning styles, allows targeted development of specific competencies, and fosters immersive, hands-on experience where students can refine their critical judgement and client-centred engagement skills. By bridging the gap between classroom learning and practice, simulation promotes contextual learning and deepens student understanding of ethical dilemmas, systemic issues, and diverse client needs. This research will contribute to the growing body of knowledge internationally and will address the gap in the current literature by exploring the use of simulation in social work education within an Aotearoa context, where limited research exists. By offering evidence-based insights, it aims to inform curriculum design and teaching methodologies that are responsive to local practice realities.

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