Social Work Field Training for the Community: A Student Self-Directed Approach in the Environmental Domain in Jordan

Sahar Al-Makhamreh^{1,*}, Hana Alnabulsi¹, and Hana Asfour²

¹*Department of Social Work, Princess Rahma University College, Al Balqa Applied University, PO Box 15 Allan-Salt, Salt, Jordan*

²*University of Warwick, School of Health and Social Studies, Coventry, Warwickshire, CV4 7AL, UK*

*Correspondence to Dr Sahar Al-Makhamreh, Department of Social Work, Princess Rahma University College, Al Balqa Applied University, PO Box 15 Allan-Salt, Salt, Jordan.
E-mail: msahar@bau.edu.jo

Abstract

This article outlines innovative field training methods that foster the abilities of undergraduate social work students so that they are able to empower the local community and raise awareness of environmental issues. In this study, students were engaged in a local community assessment that sought to understand their views on environmental and community impacts of the Synchrotron-Light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME) Project on the lives of the host village's residents. A students' self-directed approach was applied for the fieldwork out of which interventions were developed (Garrison, 1997). Quantitative data were gathered by eighteen students through a survey of 361 questionnaires targeting Allan society. In addition to students' field notes, pre and post focus groups were used to collect qualitative information. Study findings highlighted the effectiveness of students' self-directed projects in cultivating culturally competent practices; ensuring sustainable development; and providing evidence-based knowledge on social work practice involving environmental issues.

Keywords: Community field training, student, localisation, ecology, environment, agents of change

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Introduction

Field training for social work students plays a vital role in preparing professionals for high-quality practice stressing on the importance of integrating theory with practice in social work and higher-education systems (Sarhan, 2005; Al-Latif, 2007; Shaw, 2011).

Weil (2008) and Kadushin (2008) have highlighted the importance of contextualising social work practice and community-based development, as well as recognising interventions as adaptable and ‘critical tools [that] frame thinking and action’ (Weil, 2008, p. 6). This brings forward the importance of fieldwork training for social work students, as it places them in the context of their work environment and gives them the opportunity to capitalise on skills required during their professional careers. This includes problem solving, teamwork and communication skills, as well as reflexivity (Regehr *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, it places students in contexts that require them to deal with different stakeholders involved in community development. Through such experiences, students are able to apply skills to address individual and community needs and participate in social change. Scholars such as Taylor and Bogo (2013) have advocated for collaborative partnerships between educators and a variety of stakeholders including ‘service providers, employers, professional associations and regulators’ in order to strengthen academic systems.

Al-Makhamreh and Sullivan (2012) have highlighted that formal university-based training and classroom teaching in Jordan fail to equip students with skills needed to overcome challenges during their fieldwork. This is particularly the case with regard to environment/ecology and social work education and practice. Jordan faces significant challenges as it lacks a professional cadre of social workers able to combat the existing knowledge deficit on environmental and ecological issues in the Arab region. Students also lack opportunities for hands-on training within their local context in research relevant to social work and the environment.

Students should be trained to be able to provide support to local groups and sustain networks within communities and organisations. A community-based perspective is currently a vital component of each national strategy that calls for sustainable development in Jordan. Rubin (1997) has highlighted the importance of a holistic model in community development that strives to empower local populations and stakeholders in order to achieve sustainable development. While various models of interventions in social work are based on ideological beliefs of agencies, they should not be imposed on the community. Nevertheless, the common denominator for all social work practice is an adherence and commitment towards social justice (Weil and Gamble, 1995).

This paper discusses the significance of a students’ self-directed approach in environmental field training based on the grounds that knowledge about social work is derived from meanings produced from interactions with the

local community and social negotiations between individuals within their surrounding environments. It also provides an opportunity for social work students to investigate the relationship of the natural environment with social work practice.

This paper argues that the use of a students' self-directed approach during field training with community enhances critical thinking and reflectivity among students (Chowa and Ansong, 2010). It also helps students to respond to local community needs concerning the environment.

The self-directed approach and environmental social work

Higher education should treat students as mature learners who are self-directed and 'learn by dealing with self-recognised problems and interest' (Hersh, 1989, p. 360). By applying critical reflection in this approach, students will need to constantly 'look into themselves', and examine how their interpretation of situations are influenced by their beliefs and how their behaviours are affected by power relations (Taylor and Bogo, 2013).

A self-directed learning model provides the learner with the freedom to choose 'what is worthwhile to learn and how to approach the learning task' (Garrison, 1997, p. 18; Levett-Jones, 2005). Garrison claims that self-directed learning fits well with adults, as most have an innate want to continue learning. The "collaborative constructivist" (Garrison, 1997, p. 19) view of self-directed learning holds individual learners accountable for their interpretations (Garrison, 1997, p. 18). More importantly, self-directed learning does not simply provide autonomy on issues that are transactional. Rather, it requires the adult learner to practise rigorous reflexivity, critical thinking and the ability to interpret complex situations.

In the Arab world, field training provided to university students is based on Western systems that fail to address cultural sensitivities of their own societies (Haj-Yahia, 1992). Sarhan (2005) has highlighted the importance of field training in higher education, viewing it as necessary to properly equip social workers for their careers. Darweesh and Masooud (2008) call for localising social work education and practice in Arab societies for them to be developed according to their distinctive cultural contexts. Such issues need to be addressed given the difference between Western and Arab cultures.

The relationship between self-directed learning in the study of social work and the environment is that a lot of focus is placed on people's interaction with their surroundings. Because of this, such a line of work is at an advantage of addressing problems that may arise from future environmental and ecological damage (Jones, 2010). Through social work, students are de facto introduced to the person-in-environment. Moreover, the focus is on 'the point of interaction', where humans interact with their social environment. However, natural or physical is rarely explored in classes or during field training (Dominelli, 2012; Borrell *et al.*, 2010; McKinnon, 2008).

With such growing concerns over health and environmental threats, social work needs to incorporate environmentalism as a pivotal focus in the social work practicum to promote sustainable human development. Both international and national social work organisations have advocated for the integration of environmental issues within the social work practicum, as problems related to health and environmental issues have predominated our period (Shaw, 2011; Sarhan, 2005; Dominelli, 2012).

Shaw (2011) proposes expanding the ‘person-in-environment perspective’ so that it includes social and physical aspects of the environment. Looking at the potential physical and psycho-social effects of environmental threats—such as pollution and global warming—provides a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of environmental and ecological threats on affected populations.

Sarhan (2005) maintains that various approaches are used in the practice of environmentalism, such as psycho-social, cognitive, cognitive social learning, problem solving, self-help and citizen participation. He identifies two main skills needed in this field. The first is known as ‘process skills’, which includes competencies required to build relationships with local communities and raise awareness on problems that concern them. It involves being able to promote active participation and empowering local communities. The second is ‘planning skills’, which is necessary for social workers specialised in the field environmentalism. This involves being able to identify and gather resources within communities from different stakeholders and implement sustainable projects and programmes.

Al-Latif (2007) claims that ‘social work and environmentalism’ focuses on social factors that have an impact on the environment. Moreover, one of the key responsibilities of social workers specialised in the field of environmentalism is to empower communities to protect their environment and raise their awareness on their environmental obligations.

In Jordan, there has been growing focus on developing the professional skills of social workers to better respond to the rapid challenges facing our environment and promote positive social change. Recently, community social workers are being encouraged to promote active citizenship on issues related to the environment and people’s community. Of great importance is the need to build the capacity of local communities so that they are able to deal with problems and assess projects and programmes that may have an impact on the environment.

Context of the study

The field training took place in Allan village. Allan is a mountainous area located north of Salt—a city about thirty kilometres north-west of Amman, Jordan’s capital. In 2010, the village of Allan comprised 361 households. Most of its residents are Jordanian Muslims, but tribal affiliation is stronger

than religious sentiment in creating a sense of community connectedness. Nevertheless, religious, cultural and tribal systems all shape the lives of Allan's community. As for the population's family structure, this is gradually changing from an extended to a nuclear family unit (Al-Nabulsi, 2010). The majority of families are of lower- to middle-income levels and rely mainly on their own land to make a living (Al-Nabulsi, 2010; Sugase, 2008).

In 2010, a needs assessment was conducted by Al-Nabulsi (2010) on Allan's local community. Findings revealed that, among the 232 sampled, 40.5 per cent of the housewives were illiterate and the rest were poorly educated. Most of the housewives worked in the village, and the majority of males were employed in farming. Around 82.3 per cent of the population owned their own homes and 94.9 per cent of the households comprised married couples. Moreover, 37.1 per cent of these households comprised families ranging from four to six persons, and 33.2 per cent were of families ranging from seven to nine persons. This indicates a high percentage of youth population within the village (Al-Nabulsi, 2010).

SESAME Project (Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East) is the first synchrotron light source in the Middle East region (Nadji *et al.*, 2008). Jordan was chosen as a host for SESAME over seven countries in the Arab region. More specifically, the Project was hosted in the village of Allan.

SESAME is a pilot initiative with a vision of becoming a leading international research centre in the Middle East that promotes international and national partnerships working towards the advancement of science, technology and economic development (SESAME, 2010). It also aims to provide high-quality training opportunities, facilities and equipment to scientists in the Arab region.

The Project was officially launched in January 2003 and is expected to be fully operational by 2015.

SESAME is anticipated to provide Jordan with a window of opportunities. Nevertheless, the Project has faced several challenges since its development, particularly concerning its integration within the host village. Sugase's (2008) case study on SESAME highlighted growing public concern on the Project's use of radiation and its resultant detrimental effects on the local community's health and environment. The local community feared their lands being tarnished by SESAME's experiments. Flakus believes that public discontent and opposition towards radiation are commonly caused by misunderstandings of its 'real and perceived risks' (1995, p. 7). He also claims that people are likely to 'respond more strongly to future threats than opportunities and benefits' (Flakus, 1995, p. 9).

Although SESAME experts recognise that there may be a possibility for radiation to deviate in their experiments, it would not be strong enough to be harmful and the process could be controlled by a 'wall shield'. However, Allan residents remained anxious about the impact of Synchrotron-light on their health and the environment (Sugase, 2008).

Findings of Sugase's (2008) study warned of the poor communication between SESAME and the local community and the negative repercussions that this may bring to the Project in the future. The host population knew very little about SESAME, which resulted in misunderstandings on the nature of the Project.

Social work undergraduates wanted to investigate local perceptions on the impact of SESAME on the health and environment of Allan.

Many students were keen on knowing more about the Project, not only because it is located within the confines of Al Balqa Applied University, but also because most were either locals or from neighbourhood areas of Allan.

This article encourages broadening the study of social work within the field of ecology and environment, so that it includes emerging concerns on environmental justice in the 'nonhuman world' (Jones, 2010). It is our hope that the students' self-directed approach in field training will facilitate developing training for social work practice that is more culturally competent and sensitive to its ecological context. Moreover, it may be a key strategy to localising Jordan's curriculum to be relevant to the needs of its population at the community level. The students' self-directed approach applied in this study reflects the particular cultural, religious and socio-economic realities faced by Jordanian social workers in the field. It provided students with an opportunity to develop their professional skills and empowered them to undertake leading roles during their engagement at the community level. Such skills are vital due to growing environmental concerns predominating in our contemporary period.

Local community field training for social work undergraduates at Princess Rahma University College

There are two levels of social work field training at Princess Rahma University College (PRUC). Level One focuses on individual case studies and Level Two on community-based training. The social work field training in this study was community-based and aimed to develop students' communication and professional skills, in order to utilise intervention models specific to local community development. Group and teamwork activities that target and respond to local needs are essential for this level of training. Students were required to present a case study related to their field placement (PRUC, 2010).

Normally, students who pass ninety credit hours in the social work programme are expected to register for this field training, which is focused on community development. Students in this study are required to finish 140 field training hours over a period of four months, with three days a week in the field (PRUC, 2010).

Preparation for field training

The field training plan was discussed during the first meeting with eighteen students and practice assessors. Each student received a copy of the training

plan with dates for each stage and expected goals to be achieved. Students were required to present evidence of their work, which was documented in their profile folder. They were asked to record reflective accounts for each day of practice. Groups had the option of choosing a subject, which was an issue of concern for the local community. Most students expressed their wishes of understanding the impact of SESAME on the local community. Within this context, 'self-directed' means that they would choose the project and work as a group utilising intervention methods. The training was supervised by PRUC's academic and practice assessors.

Commencement of field training

Field training commenced after student group discussions. As self-directed project designers, students decided first to visit SESAME. This was organised with the help of academic supervisors who were responsible for teaching and providing field training to students. Access to SESAME's site was gained through discussions with the manager, who was interested in cultivating community support for the Project.

Students—most of whom were young females—jointly identified informal leaders within the community, some of whom were relatives. Their status as 'insiders' played a significant role in facilitating and gaining the trust of the locals. Students used tribal identity and relationships with relatives to access the community. Some Jordanian studies highlight the significance of acknowledging informal characteristics when negotiating access to facilitate social work practice (Al-Makhamreh and Sullivan, 2012).

Local community training enabled students to practise their assigned tasks and leadership skills, which in turn made them more knowledgeable about group work concepts (Lam, 2004). Leadership is a powerful tool that instils a sense of commitment and social responsibility among community members so that they actively engage in development work (Weil, 2008). Scholars such as Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar and Strom (2014) have also highlighted the need for social work education and practice to foster leadership skills and a sense of activism that promotes sustainable community development.

Methodology used to build the community work

Students chose to utilise mixed methodologies in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation as well as to triangulate data (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004). The quantitative data were gathered through a survey, whereby 361 questionnaires were distributed to all families living in Allan. Survey questions were developed based on key concerns of the local population and were collected during students' home visits. Meanwhile, pre and post focus group discussions were used to collect qualitative

information from the local community. Students believed that a qualitative methodology was best suited for understanding the local community's views on the impact that SESAME had on their environment. Scholars such as Scott (2002) recognise the value of qualitative inquiry because it 'inform[s] a full range of social work interventions, from casework to counseling through to policy and service system reform, community development and social planning' (p. 926). Using qualitative research methods such as focus groups and observation allows social work students to generate rich data. It also requires students to seriously commit to practising rigour throughout the research process in order to ensure quality of data (Scott, 2002). These methods were also supplemented by students' field notes (Greenbaum, 2000). Topic guidelines were designed according to questionnaire findings and students' field notes. They focused on a more in-depth understanding of local perceptions on the impact of SESAME on their health, social life and environment. The guidelines also explored effective ways to raise the local population's awareness on the SESAME Project.

The academic field trainer only helped facilitate the focus group discussion. Supervisors also intervened solely to give advice or discuss appropriate support that matched the nature of the community work outline (Chowa and Ansong, 2010).

Students were asked to keep day-to-day field notes, for a more in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of the students' self-directed approach as well as to provide information about their reflective practice. Bogo (2008) highlights the importance of empowerment practice in students' field training, as it focuses on their 'strengths and avoid[s] judgmental, deficit-focused, and problem saturated perspectives' (p. 112).

Using a qualitative method was vital for translating ideas. It was also considered as necessary for outlining thinking and action, helping in bridging theory into practice, as well as developing actions, strategies and intervention models (Weil, 2008). For example, field notes were considered as a reflective practice that helped reveal the dimension of professional competence, as well as generate new knowledge and questions about the role of social work within the environment.

A self-directed approach supported by qualitative methods helped students to apply knowledge to real-life situations. It also gave them the opportunity to learn from their experience and understand more about tasks concerning the environment.

For example, a student mentioned:

I never thought listening and observing people as a professional is different from being a citizen who lives within the society, I think one becomes more-self aware (Student's field notes).

Conducting the focus group discussion with the locals was very helpful in understanding views of our society and deciding how to respond to their needs (Student's field notes).

I never thought that I would be able to discuss serious issues with a group of people and collect information without the help of my family. I feel much more confident in practicing social work (Female student's field notes).

The code of ethics established by the Jordanian Association for Social Work was adopted for the purpose of this study, as the PRUC is bound to it during field training. Although its adoption is not compulsory, the code is acknowledged by the Ministry of Social Development.

All potential participants were provided with an information sheet containing an overview of the study and were given the opportunity to ask questions. Participants were also required to sign an informed consent form. Supervisors highlighted the importance of students' integrity during meetings. Gender sensitivity was emphasised during practice, as Allan is a traditional society. Females, for example, are much more dependent on their families than their male siblings, which sometimes affects their independence and self-confidence. Students were keen to disseminate their findings either through discussions with the local community or in publications.

Analysis

Students analysed the survey using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). All data entered into SPSS were checked again for accuracy by groups of students. The descriptive statistics were reported alongside qualitative findings. Students also interpreted and analysed all focus group discussions. Each stage was supervised by academic and practice assessors, but did not include their input.

The qualitative data obtained from the two focus groups were audio-recorded and discussions were transcribed and analysed. Focus group transcripts along with students' field notes were coded and helped shape themes. Themes generated were re-checked and analysed according to systematic themes so as to increase validity of findings. This process enabled students to think reflectively and learn more about coding and interpreting data (Byrne, 2002; Darlington and Scott, 2002). The following study is considered as exploratory research of which findings can be used as a foundation for a better understanding of the role of social work and the experiences of local community members within their environment.

Students' field notes were not typically limited to self-reporting, but rather reflected and narrated their experiences and practices (Bryman, 2001). Authors of the article were the academic field supervisors, who helped to advise students in designing methods. Students were regularly supervised during field training and encouraged to write an article about their experience as social workers.

Findings

This section will present and discuss students' findings and then discuss their intervention model, which was developed according to fieldwork findings.

Social cultural context of Allan's society

Of the 361 participants, 56.8 per cent were female and 43.2 per cent male. The social construction of Allan's community reflected the character of a typical Jordanian society. As a conservative and patriarchal community, the women's role was perceived as supportive to men. Gender sensitivity thus played a vital role when dealing with the locals.

Students' findings illustrated that a large segment of Allan's population was young, as 31.0 per cent were between twenty-six and thirty-three years old and 26.6 per cent were between eighteen and twenty-five. According to Jordanian cultural norms, such age groups are expected to be married or remain dependent and live with their families. When asked about their educational levels, 42.4 per cent of the sample did not have a high-school education, 24.4 per cent had a bachelor's degree and 33.2 per cent were illiterate. As for the village's economic structure, most of Allan's residents depended on agriculture and worked on their own lands for an income ([Al-Nabulsi, 2010](#)).

Perceptions towards SESAME

Findings revealed that 56.2 per cent of the participants believed that SESAME was a project about generating nuclear power. Meanwhile, 38.9 per cent thought it was about scientific research on electronic synchrotron. Only a few believed that SESAME was about producing chemical products. Below are quotes from students' field notes on their views about SESAME:

I think it is [about] producing nuclear power, this will harm our lands, but they did not want to say, so we will not cause any trouble (Pre-focus group).

Our visit was very important as it raised my awareness on what SESEAME is. I thought it is all about nuclear power and [is] a big environmental hazard (Female SW student, field notes).

With regard to perceptions on the impact of SESAME on the environment, 30.2 per cent of the participants described it as a health hazard and 22 per cent thought of it as a source of cancer. Meanwhile, 19.8 per cent believed that it would be producing harmful and poisonous radiation. Below are quotes that highlight such perceptions:

The woman said to us that two girls who lived close to SESAME had cancer, what does that mean to you and others? (Male SW student, field notes)

Yes we are worried about our lands, trees and health, we don't have any idea about what is this thing in our village (Female participant, pre-focus group).

Although most of the locals had negative views and lacked a clear understanding of the Project, there were very few who believed that SESAME would have a positive impact on the village. They believed it would provide job opportunities for Allan's community and increase the number of visitors to the village.

Findings also helped build appropriate intervention methods that would be used with the local community. For example, around 37 per cent of survey participants did not visit SESAME, even though the Project was established in 2005. The most common reasons mentioned for this were that participants were afraid of the radiation, that they were not invited by the Project and that they did not feel connected with SESAME. However, gender issues might have also influenced results. Most of the women indicated that they did not normally get involved in the public sphere and that, when they did, they were required to seek permission from their husbands or older female family members.

Sarhan (2005) stressed the importance of environmental activism targeting university students as agents of change within their communities. This is particularly the case for women who play a key role within the family unit and as such have a strong influence:

I was so excited to have the chance to visit the Project, I [was] fed up of hearing stories and not knowing the truth about SASAME. They never reach out to us or invite us. As a female I need a very good reason to go out of my house and need permission from my father, if he [is] convinced then I am fine (Female SW student from Allan, field notes).

Study findings paved the way for developing an outline on social work practice on issues related to the environment. The field training highlighted the significance of social work and the role of professionals in promoting an ecologically sustainable future (Jones, 2010). The training was challenging for both supervisors and students, as the environmental domain was a new area in social work education and practice. Moreover, implementing some activities was time-consuming (PRUC, 2010; Jones, 2010). Supervisors also had to constantly remind students of the insider/outsider role, and ensure that they applied what they learned on ethics and values of social work practice, as most were from the local community. Below are quotes highlighting students' perceptions on the role of social work in the field of the environment:

I felt anxious about this, [I] didn't know if I would fit the expectations, my relatives don't like SESAME Project, but my duty as a social worker is to search for the truth and respond to their needs and voices (Female SW student, field notes).

I began to think of my role is as a social worker towards environmental issues. Maybe [it is] raising awareness first, this is what we should do (Male SW student, field notes).

Findings highlighted reasons why locals were anxious about the centre, as well as why SESEAME needs to raise the local community's awareness on the Project. Consideration of environmentalism has recently been recognised as a social movement and is currently treated as an ideology. Nevertheless, social work programmes include very few courses devoted specifically to linking basic principles of social work with ecological issues in both theory and practice. Students used the above findings when developing intervention methods that responded to local community needs.

The learning experience from utilising the students' self-directed approach

The study highlighted that adopting a self-directed approach within local communities strengthens connections between students and their own society, and develops a better understanding of local needs. Above all, it helps in developing students' sensitivity towards practice by being more culturally aware of their placement during fieldwork. According to students' experiences, it builds students' leadership skills and encourages them to be active agents of positive social change.

For example, upon completing their fieldwork, a group of students decided to continue their intervention within their local community. They also suggested working on a plan for a project between SESAME and local community centres in Allan. It was anticipated that interventions such as these that act as investments to the local community not only facilitate sustainable development, but also create greater impact in the community development process (Weil, 2008). Below are quotes that highlight students' views on their experience:

We have poor people here and according to the data we have to encourage financial and economic support [to our community]. Maybe we don't have the time to do this in the training but we will follow this up with our local committees (Male SW student, field notes).

Gathering information from the local community built my confidence and allowed me to improve my communications skills. I learned a lot about my community and how to negotiate with them. I also learned about myself and most importantly, the value of my culture (Female SW student, field notes).

Analysing field notes of students was particularly helpful in reflecting strengths and weaknesses of the fieldwork's teaching curriculum. Students' use of communication and leadership skills was clearly shown even with their limited experience in practising social work. It was hoped that this

training would prepare them for their future professional careers ([Chowa and Ansong, 2010](#)):

We sat on the ground where the woman was even though she was offering us chairs. I remembered the principle of how it is important to accept them as they are, I enjoyed this day a lot (Female SW student, field notes).

Through this method of learning, students were able to value teamwork and learn how to co-operate with others who shared similar interests. For example, students agreed to participate in a local event organised by undergraduates from another university also conducting their fieldwork. The event was an open day and marked the establishment of a local community centre for disabled children. The objective of the open day was to encourage the local community to use the centre's services. They targeted families and focused on women and children. Traditional networks were used to announce and encourage local engagement in the public event. SESAME agreed to cover the costs of the open day's activities, which was organised by an expert team.

Students were also able to employ multiple learning tools throughout the field training. They gained a sense of responsibility towards their work and learned how to work effectively as a team ([Lam, 2004](#); [Nastu, 2009](#); [Chowa and Ansong, 2010](#)). [Bogo \(2012\)](#) advocates for a holistic approach in social work higher education whereby meta and procedural competencies connect, meaning that competencies that are cognitive, self-reflective and critical are applied during the formulation of collaborative relationships ([Taylor and Bogo, 2013](#)):

Today I realised what team work means. I felt this when helping other colleagues do their tasks (Male SW student, field notes).

I felt so proud about our work when [we] managed to some extent to change some people's views ... SESEAME was not terrifying after all, [it was] not threatening our environment (Male SW student, field notes).

Through the self-directed approach, students were able to mobilise resources for their intervention. They applied several community work principles such as making the most of local resources and expertise. They decided to invite speakers from SESAME and the local community. This included one of the locals who had visited a similar project in France funded by SESAME. Students also used the university's theatre and facilities for their intervention. This goes in line with [Sarhan \(2005\)](#), [Al-Latif \(2007\)](#) and [Dominelli's \(2012\)](#) views on the importance of skills such as communication and leadership, as well as process and planning competencies for social workers in the field of environmentalism.

Another lesson learned from this field training was that students were open about their own gender values. This was highlighted in their field notes, which reflected issues on gender and generation differences. The students' self-directed project proved to be effective in allowing social work students to use the field as a laboratory for learning about their gender roles, statuses

and relationships with their own society's values (Chowa and Ansong, 2010). It could be argued that students' self-directed projects encourage tackling gender discrimination through drawing attention to marginalised voices.

Women can play an effective role in environmental awareness within the family unit. In fact, scholars such as Sarhan (2005) and Dominelli (2012) stress the importance of involving women in the development and protection of the environment. Nevertheless, there are many obstacles to their participation in the protection and preservation of the environment. These include their weak participation in the public sphere due to socio-cultural norms, the multiple roles that they play in their families and the lack of support from men to share such burdens (Sarhan, 2005). In turn, some of the key factors that influence women's participation in environmental activism include their awareness on the concept of environmental protection and the threats of environmental degradation; women's sense of social responsibility towards the community; their role in the public sphere and the extent of their knowledge of leadership within their community. According to Sarhan (2005), environmental activism is more likely to be prevalent among women who are more educated and have greater awareness of environmental risks. It is vital to acknowledge norms and traditions as key markers that define women's role in both private and public spheres within their community. It also involves applying effective approaches such as the use of religion and religious leaders to promote environmental activism:

I liked the fact that I, as a female, can have an impact on other people's lives especially older people; they respect my views, this is great (Female SW student, field notes).

The old woman was very kind with me, she even asked me if I was married; she was looking for a bride for her son. I did not get mad of this; it is our culture I understand her (Female SW student, field notes).

Some female and male students experienced anxiety, as they had to assume leadership roles in their learning process. In addition, gender differences were highlighted when most of the female students were asked to discuss this issue with their field and academic trainers. This was expected, as many students came from conservative families where females are over-protected by family members. However, gender barriers were reduced because students worked in groups on their projects (Lam, 2004):

I felt nervous, this was the first time [for me] going into houses without my family, some are my relatives. Being with the group was a good thing we support each other (Female SW student, field notes).

We had a good male group within the team, we felt protected (Female SW student field notes).

The findings above have implications for curriculum development, revealing gender issues as key factors that need to be considered in future social work practice and research in Jordan.

Discussion

Findings highlighted the advantage of using students' self-directed projects in training. The fact that placement was within their area of residence had a positive influence on students' performance and self-confidence. They felt empowered and this raised their self-esteem, awareness and feelings of satisfaction (Wilkinson and Bissell, 2005). Students felt that they were able to apply the theory that they had learned into practice. They were also able develop methods of interventions that addressed issues related to the environment.

The self-directed approach will enable students to use any independent method of learning in the future, such as self-problem-based learning in group work and student-centred approaches (Lam, 2004). The opportunities for self-experience rarely take place in a classroom-based learning environment. Thus, field training can play a significant role in informing local and international professional practice. Moreover, the self-directed approach focuses on group work, which includes other professionals, local community members and multiple stakeholders. Scholars such as Jeffries (2008) have highlighted the effectiveness of such collaborative community development interventions as catalysers of change and facilitators of grass-roots development. This in turn fits well with environmental development, which should be regarded as a concern for the community and seen as a public good. Such an approach to addressing environmental issues encourages sustainable development because it works with and empowers young people, elderly, women and the community as a whole, so that they share future decisions regarding their environment.

Community centres can be an ideal place for practising the students' self-directed approach, where a range of interventions can address complex needs on individual and collective levels (Sanders and Munford, 2006). Another lesson learned from the fieldwork was that students' training within their own communities can play a significant role in sustaining social support networks in their societies and developing cultural competence practice (i.e. being sensitive to gender, culture and religion).

The choice of qualitative research methods for the purpose of this study also allowed students to gather rich data from these marginalised voices (Scott, 2002). Moreover, students become more aware of their own environment, race, sexual orientation and gender.

This article suggests several recommendations for future social work research and practice, the first being research in the ways in which students are embedded in their physical environment. The second recommendation is to investigate how social work can address gender issues when working with the natural world and the role of cultural awareness during practice.

This article also highlights the importance of a collaborative approach that utilises a variety of professions and stakeholders when addressing environmental development.

Summary

The students' self-directed approach provides rich experience in relation to cultural competence practice (Wilkinson and Bissell, 2005). It highlights the need to acknowledge students' own values during the fieldwork process. At the same time, such efforts should be linked to traditional concerns of social work. These are often referred to as social work's 'person-in-environment' (Jones, 2010).

Applying a holistic self-directed approach in students' field placement provides them with an opportunity to practise social justice by promoting a sense of community responsibility. Students' fieldwork experiences proved to be of great value in promoting social justice and anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approaches through providing similar training opportunities to male and female students from the local community.

However, this experience raised awareness on the crucial need to re-examine the effectiveness of Jordan's education system, as it lacks vision and understanding on how field practicum serves as an essential component of the education curriculum (Lam, 2004).

This paper argues that social work field training in the environment domain can provide evidence-based practice for social work teaching and practice. While Jordan is lacking skilled social workers, this experience highlighted the important role that social work plays in promoting sustainable development. It encourages community stakeholders at varying levels to actively partake in their society as positive agents of change.

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