Awareness, Attitudes, and Actions About Environmental Southern Appalachia

Deborah Thibeault
Clem Jamie
Donna Cherry

Abstract*: The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires social work programs to integrate environmental justice into their programming. The purpose of this study is to determine if undergraduate and graduate social work students at a southern Appalachia university had an increase in awareness, a shift in attitudes, and a rise in action related to environmental justice since starting their program. This study also sought to identify where students felt environmental justice content would best fit in the social work curriculum. Participants completed a semi-structured focus group or an open-ended survey answering identical questions. Findings indicate the need for social work educators to provide students with clarification of environmental conservation and environmental justice; an understanding of the breadth of environmental justice across the micro, mezzo, and macro-levels; and the opportunity to have direct practice experiences and reduce feelings of being overwhelmed by the enormity of environmental justice. Participants endorsed the importance of environmental justice content in the curriculum.*

Keywords: *Environmental justice; environmental conservation; social work curriculum*

The person-in-environment perspective, a pillar of social work, dates to the early days of the profession. Shaw (2013) explains that the broad view of person-in-environment expects that social workers take a holistic approach, looking at the physical, social, and natural environments and the client's connection with each. The broader context of person-in-environment was prevalent in early social work. However, the last century led many social workers to focus on the social environment and social relationships (Chonody et al., 2020; Hawkins, 2019; Shaw, 2013) which Shaw (2013) describes as a "narrower conceptualization" (p. 4). Naranjo (2020) claims, "social workers have generally been silent on serious issues that threaten the well-being of humans and our continued survival" (p. 448). As environmental issues and injustices continue to rise, drastically impacting vulnerable populations, social workers have come to understand the importance of environmental justice work in the profession (Dominelli, 2014; Gray & Coates, 2015; Hawkins, 2019; Naranjo, 2020). Nesmith and Smyth (2015), view environment justice as two-fold: first that "the burden of environmental hazards or degradation is shared equally across all demographic groups or communities," and second, "there is equal inclusion in decision-making processes that result in environmentally related policies and actions" (p. 485).

The social work profession has formally prioritized the importance of environmental justice which is evidenced across social work organizations. The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) list of social justice priorities includes environmental justice and

Deborah Thibeault, PhD, LCSW, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN. Jamie M. Clem, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor of Instruction, School of Social Work, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL. Donna Cherry, PhD, LCSW, Professor, Department of Social Work, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.

provides many resources on environmental justice and climate change (NASW, n.d.). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has a Climate Justice Program designed to educate social workers about climate justice, advocate for environmental justice and sustainability, and fund projects to combat environmental injustices (IFSW, n.d.). What's more, addressing the "changing environment" has been identified as one of social work's Grand Challenges (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare [AASWSW], 2022; Uehara et al., 2013); and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) began recognizing its relevance by integrating environmental justice into two of the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) competencies in 2015 (CSWE, 2015): Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice, and as a bullet point in Competency 4: Engage in Policy Practice. Further, the CSWE 2022 EPAS have now integrated environmental justice into Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior; and it is noted under three Educational Policies: Program Mission, Generalist Practice, and Signature Pedagogy: Field Education. Social workers have a responsibility to play a role in addressing environmental injustices.

To assist educators with incorporating and increasing content about the physical and natural environment, the CSWE released the *Curricular Guide for Environmental Justice* in 2020. In addition, programs can review recently published manuscripts to determine how to best meet this environmental justice educational requirement. These studies focus on students' "perspectives," "perceptions," and "attitudes" about environmental justice (Chonody & Sultzman, 2022; Nesmith & Smyth, 2015; Sparks et al., 2019). Building on past research, this study goes further by examining students' *awareness* (i.e., what they know), *attitudes* (i.e., what they think and feel), and *actions* (i.e., what they do) about environmental justice. Additionally, researchers collected feedback from participants about where environmental justice content best fits within the curriculum, given their experience in the program. This enabled participation in the "development and delivery of the explicit and implicit curriculum" as outlined in the 2022 EPAS Standard 4.1 Student Development (CSWE, 2022, p. 24).

Literature Review

In previous studies social work practitioners endorse the importance of environmental justice. Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001) surveyed NASW members in New Mexico (n = 61). The majority (70%) reported that environmental issues were important to social work but only 46% addressed environmental justice in their practice, citing lack of education as a barrier to its inclusion. Similarly, 90% of NASW respondents in a California study (n = 373) by Shaw (2013) supported the inclusion of environmental justice in practice but only 32% reported receiving any education on this topic. Finally, in a study of 373 licensed practitioners in a Midwestern state, 92% reported that they had a client facing environmental injustice and felt that environmental justice should be integrated into social work education to better prepare graduates for practice (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015).

Given that environmental justice issues may surface when practitioners are working with clients, the importance of including environmental justice in education is recognized by the profession, and it is therefore important to understand how and where to integrate

environmental justice into the social work curriculum. Chonody et al. (2020) contend that the first step is to understand social work students' attitudes about the environment. However, it is suggested that attitudes and actions can only be shaped when awareness is present; thus, the first step is to understand social work students' awareness. This perspective mirrors the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) or Stages of Change framework which posits that behavior change involves progress through six stages of change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination (Prochaska et al., 1993).

The first stage of TTM (*preparatio*n) is defined by lack of awareness of the negative consequences of behavior. Consistent with this stage, Chonody et al. (2020) found, while graduate and undergraduate students (n = 724) only mildly to moderately believed that environmental issues are pertinent to practice, students who showed greater concern were influenced by taking a university course that included environmental injustice. Faver and Muñoz (2013) similarly found that students who felt moderately informed on the environment (2.69 on a 4-point scale), held moderately high levels of concern for the environment (3.07 on 4-point scale). Findings suggest that providing education on environmental issues is an effective intervention to address lack of awareness and move students to awareness and concern, where they are considering changing their behavior (*contemplation).*

Awareness about the environment may or may not translate into commitment to action. The TTM framework acknowledges that, even with knowledge, there may be ambivalence in attitude or intention to address the issue, especially during the contemplation stage, which is often related to a lack of self-efficacy. Sparks et al. (2019) found that students reported difficulty in understanding what environmental justice is and how environmental justice is connected to people. Identified barriers included feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude, breadth, and complexity of the problem; a lack of personal connection between environment and environmental injustices; and a lack of understanding of dynamic feedback loops between environment and people. Similarly, Chonody and Sultzman (2022) reported that students primarily defined "environmental justice" within the context of general environmental harm; and only 15% connected this term with oppressed and marginalized populations. These themes illustrate the need for social work educators to not only provide environmental justice content (increasing awareness and concern) but help students make connections to gain self-efficacy (resolving ambivalence). Consistent with the TMM framework, heightened awareness of environmental issues and injustices may shape (or clarify and reify) social workers' attitudes which, given growing self-efficacy, can help them shift to *preparation*, where they have made a commitment to change and then to *action* with, or on behalf of, clients and client systems.

Although the *Curricular Guide for Environmental Justice* (CSWE, 2020) holds value for its recommendations for placement about environmental justice across the social work curriculum, this study is designed to include input of students by exploring the topic with study participants as a method to see where in the program they were exposed to environmental justice. Soliciting feedback about the placement of environmental justice could be useful in deciding the most appropriate time and place to introduce or reinforce these concepts. In addition to this approach aligning with the CSWE 2022 EPAS, this

student-focused approach provides participants with the ability to actively engage in program development and learning outcomes. By seeking input from participants, they are more likely to feel invested during their time in the program and after they graduate (McCuddy et al., 2008).

The Institutional Review Board-approved objectives of this study are: a) to determine if students in the [BSW and MSW] social work program have had an increase in awareness about environmental justice issues, b) to determine if students' attitudes about environmental justice and conservation shifted since enrolling in the social work program, c) to determine, if awareness and attitudes have shifted, if students are taking action to support the shift, and d) to determine students' level of interest in environmental justice and where students feel environmental justice would fit best in the social work curriculum.

Methods

Both Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students from one university in southern Appalachia were recruited to participate in this qualitative case study. The university represents a medium-sized, teaching-focused institution, with a high proportion of traditional students. It is considered a commuter campus, with most students being from the region. Recruitment criteria included participants graduating with a social work degree in 2020 or 2021 from any of the four campus locations where the programs operate. A recruitment announcement along with incentive information (a drawing to win a $35 gift card to an eco-friendly merchant) was made in social work classes and emailed to upcoming graduates. In accordance with university's institutional review board guidelines for protecting human subjects, participants were provided a consent form that clearly described the study expectations, potential benefits, and possible risks.

Sampling and Recruitment for Focus Groups

Focus groups were originally planned to be program and location specific and to take place in-person during the last month of the semester, immediately after a class, where food and refreshments would be provided as incentive. During the spring of 2020, however, the COVID-19 pandemic began; and university activities shifted online. The scheduled focus groups for 2020, therefore, were postponed until after graduation, moved to an online video conferencing platform, and were open for either BSW or MSW students. The number of participants who agreed to these interviews was significantly less than researchers anticipated. It is suspected that moving from in-person to online had a significant impact on participation. This led researchers to continue to gather data for an additional academic year.

Sampling and Recruitment for Survey

Despite moving from in-person to online focus groups, students reported that scheduling limitations and increased burden imposed by COVID-19 (for example, childcare, caring for loved ones, or being sick themselves) limited their participation. Therefore, researchers created an electronic open-ended, qualitative survey containing the same six questions that were asked in the focus groups. Criteria for participation and recruitment replicated that of the focus groups: BSW or MSW students in their final semester received an announcement during a core class as well as an email. Using a survey provided an opportunity for more students to participate because they could do so individually, from home, and in their own time instead of during a specific focus group session.

Study Questions

Study questions were designed to be as broad and non-directive as possible. The following research questions were used in the focus groups and surveys:

1. What does environmental justice mean to you?
2. Since being in the social work program do you feel you have had an increase in awareness about environmental justice issues? If so, explain.
3. How have your attitudes about environmental justice and conservation shifted since enrolling in the social work program?
4. If awareness and attitudes have shifted, how have your actions changed to support the shift?
5. What is your level of interest in environmental justice?
6. Where do you feel would be the most appropriate place or places in the social work curriculum to cover environmental justice?

Data Collection

Five focus groups were held via Zoom, lasting on average 60 to 90 minutes (about one and a half hours). Participants could select whichever group fit their schedule. To help ensure confidentiality, the meeting was closed, and only pre-registered participants were provided with the meeting link.

Two of the three investigators were present during focus groups. Investigators took turns asking the six open-ended questions (above). The five focus groups consisted of seven BSW and 11 MSW participants. An additional 19 participants (10 BSW; nine MSW) completed the open-ended survey.

Focus groups were recorded on the Zoom platform which provides a transcript of the session. The only identifying information retained was the participants' program level (BSW or MSW) and campus location. Although data were collected remotely, it was intended for results to be compared by program location. However, findings were similar across program locations and therefore aggregated and presented together. Participants who wanted to be considered for the incentive drawing also provided their email addresses

for later contact. Email addresses were not connected to focus group responses. Transcriptions, contact information, survey results, and data analyses were all stored in a password-protected electronic file and shared only between investigators.

Data Analysis

The purpose of phenomenological research is to explore a specific experience, then attempt to describe that experience from an individual's perspective (Lester, 1999; Wilson, 2015). This study was guided by the phenomenological approaches to analysis as outlined by Hycner (1985). According to Hycner (1985), following transcription, researchers should review the data and bracket or suspend meanings and interpretations. Next, researchers delineate units of meaning relevant to the research question. Hycner (1985) recommends verifying the units with a research team to ensure adherence to bracketing or the suspension of assumptions, then eliminating redundancies. From there, clusters of units or themes can be developed and modified based on context and summarized as general themes or those unique to specific interviews.

Using Hycner's (1985) guidelines, first, each interview was transcribed. The transcription was provided from the Zoom platform and was crosschecked and revised for accuracy by the lead researcher. Written responses on the electronic surveys were downloaded into Excel and reviewed. Despite a difference in data collection methods, responses on five of the six questions were very similar, therefore it was decided to combine responses from the virtual interviews and electronic surveys so they could be analyzed together. For the question where responses differed, responses were analyzed and reported separately. Next, each investigator independently reviewed responses and developed units of meaning. Similar words and phrases used more than once by participants were grouped together to develop categories of themes. Outliers were identified and noted. Next researchers collaboratively examined the raw data and units of meaning. Patterns were identified across the combined interviews and surveys, themes were developed, and redundancies were eliminated. After discussing the observed patterns and categories of similar concepts, researchers agreed on the themes that emerged.

Findings

During data analysis, researchers discovered that participant responses to the questions were similar among both collection methods. The only difference was how participants answered the first question "what does environmental justice mean to you?" Focus groups provided examples of environmental injustice, while survey participants attempted to define it.

Awareness, attitudes, and actions fell within two domains: environmental justice and environmental conservation. When attempting to define environmental justice, researchers first went to the CSWE's (2020) definition in the *Curricular Guide for Environmental Justice*, which starts by addressing equitable environmental protection and participation. Further in the definition, however, CSWE (2020) touches on environmental conservation,

> Environmental justice occurs when all people equally experience high levels of environmental protection and no group or community is excluded from the environmental policy decision-making process, nor is affected by a disproportionate impact from environmental hazards. Environmental justice affirms the ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, respect for cultural and biological diversity, and the right to be free from ecological destruction. This includes responsible use of ecological resources, including the land, water, air, and food. (p. xvi)

While environmental justice and environmental conservation have some overlap, they are distinct. To have clarity between the two, researchers utilized the following definitions when reviewing the data. *Environmental conservation*, according to the *Journal of Geography & Natural Disasters* (n.d),

> is the protection, preservation, management, or restoration of natural environments and the ecological communities that inhabit them" (para. 1). They also state that conservation "include the management of human use of natural resources for current public benefit and sustainable social and economic utilization (para. 1).

Environmental justice is the idea that "(1) the burden of environmental hazards or degradation is shared equally across all demographic groups or communities, and (2) there is equal inclusion in decision-making processes that result in environmentally related policies and actions" (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015, p. 485).

While conservation is important to the sustainability of the planet, it is not the same as environmental justice. Therefore, for each study objective - awareness, attitude, and action - the overall findings are presented, followed by environmental conservation and environmental justice themes, with the understanding that there is some overlap.

Awareness

Participants began the study by answering, "what does environmental justice mean to you?" This is the only question where participants' approach to responding differed between the focus group and the survey. All survey participants attempted a definition of environmental justice in answering this question. Each focus group touched on environmental justice having to do with equitable burdens and provided examples of environmental injustice. Each focus group presented cases of environmental injustice such as the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Flint, Michigan water crisis, and discussed how the examples impact marginalized populations the most. Some participants shared personal experiences with environmental injustice such as having health issues due to water contamination in their community. During these conversations, participants identified their privilege and impacts that marginalized communities experience due to environmental issues. An MSW student explained, "We've come to see how that impacts different communities based on the color of their skin and sometimes their income level and things of that nature."

Participants were asked, "Since being in the social work program do you feel you have had an increase in awareness about environmental justice issues? If so, explain." When

developing this question, researchers did not include asking about environmental conservation, as the intention was to begin with a broad question to understand students' awareness and knowledge about the subject. Eighty-four percent of survey participants and 72% of focus group participants expressed an increase in awareness about the environment and environmental issues since starting the social work program. One participant explained that before coming into the program they "saw only the tip of the environmental justice iceberg." "The MSW program and the professors have brought [environmental justice] to my attention." Another participant said, "I think the majority of the education has come from the MSW program."

Three participants out of 19 from the survey and six participants out of 18 from the focus groups noted that the exposure they received was limited, and they did not feel an increase in awareness. Eight participants from the focus group expressed that though they reported an increase in awareness, it was slight and acknowledged they would have liked more education and exposure to environmental justice. "Throughout my whole four years in the BSW program, I only got exposed twice."

Three MSW participants stated their awareness about environmental justice did not increase during the program. These were all advanced standing student participants who came to the MSW program from another institution. Furthermore, participants expressed there was a lack of required learning about environmental justice. While they were able to explore it in assignments where participants were allowed to select a topic, these assignments did not inform those who were not already interested in environmental justice.

Environmental conservation: Participants discussed sustaining the planet and the human population. They provided examples of individual tasks they do, or can do, such as reusing materials, recycling, paying attention to food waste, and changing their eating and driving habits. These themes revolved around sustainability and protecting and preserving the planet, which fell into the definition of conservation. Participants discussed individual pro-environmental behaviors; however, they did not discuss any other areas that fall under the scope of conservation, such as management or restoration.

Environmental justice: When participants in the focus groups were asked about environmental justice, they provided examples of environmental injustices they have seen in the media. They discussed being more cognizant of how government and the corporate world play a role in issues that create environmental injustices, needing to combat environmental issues through advocacy and policy efforts, and recognizing that environmental justice is social justice. By contrast, survey participants provided a statement defining environmental justice. Themes from these statements included "taking care of the planet" and "everyone having equal rights to basic needs."

Attitudes

Participants were then asked, "How have your attitudes about environmental justice and conservation shifted since enrolling in the social work program?" Participants across the focus groups and most surveys reported caring more about the environment than they did when they first came into the social work program. Seventeen survey participants

expressed having a shift in their attitudes about environmental justice. Of these, 30% of participants' remarks were related more to environmental conservation; 16% of participants specifically identified issues relating to environmental justice. For example, one participant said, “I guess in a way, like I do feel more influence. To get up and say stuff and do stuff on a macro level. I feel like my attitude about conservation has really changed.” Two survey participants were the exception and reported not feeling a shift in their attitude about environmental justice. One said, “I have always cared about the environment!...It was just how my mom raised me.”

Environmental conservation: When researchers explored participants’ shift in attitudes about environmental justice, each focus group presented issues that pertained to environmental conservation. Two survey participants mentioned conservation when asked about a shift in their attitude. Each focus group noted the importance of conservation to save the planet, and that they could do more to educate friends and family members. One participant explained that when people mentioned recycling and conservation efforts in the past, they thought, “here we go again.” This participant reported they now listen to others and investigate what they can do for the planet.

Environmental justice: While no survey participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the topic of environmental justice, some participants in the focus groups did. One participant summarized, “Yeah, it's, it's definitely something I'm interested in, but it's also, to me...this big concept, you know, this insurmountable mountain...” Both focus groups and survey participants expressed interest in making a difference, feeling empowered, and understanding that although movement may be slow, action needs to be taken. One focus group participant reported, “And so I feel like now that I've gone through this program, and I am seeing it creeping up into my backyard. It's like, hey, we need to do something about this… That’s where I’m at.” And a survey participant described, “I have been more passionate in environmental justice, and it makes me want to spread awareness and be more involved.”

Participants expressed that they understood this is not just something they “should” do, but that it is an obligation as a social worker. Two participants explained that by learning about environmental justice issues, they could be less judgmental of people who lack resources and now look at the systemic issues that impact them. For example:

> *I am a lot more aware, and I was never really judgmental before but definitely less judgmental now seeing people that don’t have access to resources and why that may be. I think we just assume that they are lazy, that’s why they don’t have a job and stuff like that.*

Action

When asked, “If awareness and attitudes have shifted, how have your actions changed to support the shift?” participants shared about past, present, and future actions. Three focus group participants (16%) and two survey respondents (11%) expressed that, while being in school, it was unrealistic for them to make significant changes in personal habits or to be involved in macro efforts relating to the environment. Ten focus group participants

(56%) and five survey participants (26%) discussed considering changing personal behaviors. One group used the "planting the seed" adage to describe what the social work program has done for them when it comes to environmental issues, and what they need to do when they go into the field.

Environmental conservation: Action themes that emerged started with discussing personal habits that can make a difference, such as using eco-friendly products, reusing, repurposing, and recycling. Four focus group participants (22%) and six survey participants (32%) noted how they began implementing these changes since being in the social work program; and one focus group participant and two survey participants, a total of 8%, mentioned needing to begin or to do a better job with environmental conservation. Examples included, "I started recycling and I pretty much only buy secondhand clothes now...and I have switched almost all of my skin care, cleaning products, laundry to cruelty free options." Additionally, one participant voiced that she and her husband have explored converting their home to solar power and purchasing an electric vehicle.

Environmental justice: Participants reported understanding they have a responsibility as social workers to work toward equitable resources and environmental justice. All groups discussed the importance of advocacy and education. One participant explained that because of the social work program she is now able to "identify it" and can talk with others about environmental justice and conservation. Participants also explained the action they have taken. One participant reported that since being in the program they began attending local council meetings to hear about what is going on in the community. One participant mentioned making donations to the Water Protectors for the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement. Another participant, who was involved in environmental activism in their home community to address pollution from the local pork plants, explained their efforts to address environmental issues:

> *I'm vegan ...I was telling people, if you want to make a dent towards them, you're going to have to stop financing your own genocide. Stop buying pork products because if you're telling them on one hand you don't want them to do this to you, but you are at the same time giving them the resources to kill you, what you're saying really doesn't mean anything. So, that's the reason why MLK always spoke about economic boycotts.*

Participants lumped environmental justice and conservation together and identified it on micro or mezzo levels. Furthermore, most participants expressed that prior to the program they mistook environmental conservation for environmental justice and did not recognize that, while there is overlap, the scope of environmental justice goes beyond conservation. For instance:

> *I think if I were to hear the term environmental justice and how it related to me before the Master's program, I would be like, 'I like recycling and I try to use reusable bags when I go to the grocery store,' it was more like, 'what are some small things that I can do' and like vote for people that want to protect water ways and clean the air. I saw it as more of like, it reflected personal decisions that I could make. I didn't think of it on a macro level in terms of how it was affecting large groups of people…*

Interest

Prior to discussing curriculum placement participants were asked, "What is your level of interest in environmental justice?" For focus groups participants, only one out of 18 participants expressed a lack of interest in environmental justice. All other students expressed a high interest since being in the program. Participants in the survey varied and most answered the question using a scale of one to ten, or "medium" or "high." Using the language of "medium" (scale ranging between 4 and 7), and "high" (scale ranging 8 to 10) 32% of participants expressed medium interest, 58% of participants expressed high interest, and 10% expressed no interest. One participant who expressed no interest explained, "To be honest, it's something I don't think about until a need arises for either me or my client."

Curriculum Placement

Lastly, participants were asked where they felt environmental justice should be embedded into the curriculum. Nine participants reported that content should be embedded throughout the curriculum. One explained that, like cultural diversity, it should be included in all courses. Six participants stated that it should be a stand-alone core course. All participants agreed the topic of environmental social work and environmental justice should be required in the curriculum.

Participants in the undergraduate program identified the following as courses that should highlight environmental justice: Interviewing and Recording, Policy, Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Practice with Communities, and Research. Participants also suggested "planting the seed" early by including content on environmental justice in their required pre-social work courses such as Cultural Diversity and Professional Values and Ethics.

MSW traditional standing student participants suggested incorporating environmental justice into Policy and Research. Advanced standing student participants recognized that these courses are not part of their curriculum because they have already taken them during the undergraduate program. Many advanced standing participants also noted how they either completed their BSW long ago (prior to the environmental justice requirements) or attended a program that did not discuss it. One participant explained:

> *I have become way more inclined to view the social work profession as obligated to social justice. It no longer appears to be just an interest or concentration that social workers can have, but rather it is a duty to have environmental justice at the forefront of the profession.*

This university's MSW program has a clinical concentration. Because of this, participants stated that to ensure that environmental justice is included in the curriculum, case examples should be embedded in practice courses and a macro assignment could be provided in Advanced Practice with Human Service Organizations. Participants emphasized the need for environmental justice content to be included in both MSW concentration and foundation-level courses.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study, and findings should be interpreted within their context. First, demographic information was not collected. Researchers are, therefore, unable to describe the sample in terms of race, gender, age, or other features beyond their program status.

The only criteria for participation in the study was being a social work student in 2020, who graduated from the program, and in 2021 were scheduled to graduate. It is important to note that it is possible that participants in the study already had an interest in environmental justice. For example, several participants revealed they had taken an elective focused on environmental justice. This means their responses may have differed from participants who did not take the said elective. Similarly, while investigators indicated that participation in this study would not impact their grades- and investigators committed to the integrity of maintaining this ethical obligation- it is possible that participants hoped it could earn them favor with faculty in the future. The informed consent explained the benefits and risks of participating in the study which did not identify grades or future favors, yet simply identified the benefits as an increase in awareness about the natural environment and social work skills, as well as assisting the department. The risks were identified as minimal with the only potential risk being loss of confidentiality for focus group participants due to lack of control of what members of the group share outside of the group.

The interview questions used in this study were drafted by the lead researcher, who has expertise in teaching about environmental justice, and finalized by the research team. They were designed to capture information about students' "awareness," "attitudes," and "actions"; and therefore, used that verbiage specifically. While this may offer initial evidence for face validity, the questions were not previously validated or tested for reliability. During the data analysis, researchers recognized that responses from students vacillated between justice, conservation, and sustainability. CSWE's *Curricular Guide for Environmental Justice* (2020) provides a definition of environmental justice where conservation and sustainability lie within environmental justice. However, researchers recognized the need to pull these apart to examine the data. In hindsight, it would have been better to conduct the study with questions pertaining to each area such as asking participants, "what's the difference between environmental justice, conservation, and sustainability?"

All researchers were faculty members in the programs being studied. Although the original plan was for the BSW faculty to conduct interviews with participants from the MSW program, and the MSW faculty to conduct interviews with participants from BSW program to decrease the likelihood of skewed answers from participants, the need to adjust recruitment and interview methods changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Two researchers were present for each interview. In some cases, participants may have had one or more of the researchers as an instructor or advisor. Similarly, participants may have known other participants in the group, if they were from the same location or program. While the closed format of the group was decided on intentionally as a method of enhancing feelings of safety and openness, we cannot rule out the possibility of social

desirability bias. Researchers agreed that since participants had graduated or were close to graduation, and that the questions were related to the program in general and not specific courses taught by the researchers, participants would be less likely to provide biased responses.

When the university suspended in-person operations due to COVID-19, it required shifting to an online video conferencing platform. While this shift did provide the opportunity for some students to participate, because of constraints associated with the pandemic, other students were still not able to attend virtual interviews. Researchers therefore opened another avenue for data collection, an electronic qualitative survey, where respondents were asked identical questions and allowed to type their responses. Surveys were anonymous and completed individually. While the questions and response options were identical, it may be possible that participants responded differently depending on the data collection methodology. For example, survey participants may have been less likely to be impacted by the professor/interviewer and other participants than focus group participants. There is also less opportunity to gain clarity or to ask follow-up questions in surveys (Jain, 2021).

Social Work Implications

This case study was conducted with students immediately after graduation or in their final semester. The purpose of this research study was to explore the environmental awareness, attitudes, and actions of graduating undergraduate and graduate social work students and to what extent their social work education played a part in their growth. Data analysis led to the identification of three main issues: (1) clarification of environmental conservation vs environmental justice; (2) an understanding of environmental justice at micro, mezzo, and macro-system levels; and (3) the opportunity to have a direct practice experience and reduce feelings of being overwhelmed by the enormity of environmental justice concerns.

Environmental Conservation vs. Environmental Justice

The CSWE prioritizes environmental justice in the EPAS competencies. Consistent with prior research (Chonody et al., 2020; Faver & Muñoz, 2013), students who have educational opportunities to learn about the importance of environmental issues respond with greater understanding (awareness) and concern (attitudes). Some of these concerns appeared to be related to socialization into the social work profession and accepting that environmental justice is part of the scope of being a social worker. Some participants appeared to move from awareness to attitude and action quickly during their social work education. Participants who noted minimal action explained that they do have a sense of responsibility to environmental justice and that they would explore how to act once they enter the field.

An important finding in this study was that participants often confused environmental conservation and environmental justice. This was shown by the type of conservation examples provided in response to the prompt, “what does environmental justice mean to

you?" Notably, this blurring of concepts and definitions is also problematic in prior writings where environmental issues and environmental justice are often discussed interchangeably. The lesson learned for social work education is that students (and faculty) may already think they are aware while not realizing they lack precision of what environmental justice means. That said, it is critical for social work programs to have environmental justice embedded in the course curriculum and for social work programs to build environmental justice into their faculty development. Much like one of limitations of this study where it was suspected that participants joined the study because of their interest in environmental justice, while students who did not have an interest chose not to participate, faculty members who do not have an interest in environmental justice may not attend trainings that would increase their knowledge. This echoes previous research on the predictors of integration of environmental justice concepts into social work curriculum, where faculty familiarity and knowledge of environmental justice significantly predicted the likelihood that it was infused into teaching (Strayer et al., 2022).

Environmental Justice at the Micro, Mezzo, and Macro-Systems Level

Most participants in this study reported a high level of awareness, positive attitude, and were already taking some degree of personal micro-level environmental conservation action, as well as advocating to others to do likewise. These participants had already attained self-efficacy in their actions. However, comments suggested some participants were experiencing environmental conservation fatigue before starting the program. For these participants, the conversations and exposure during the program brought a new level of awareness which, in turn, revitalized their attitudes and actions. This phenomenon is important to remember and is consistent with the sixth stage of change (maintenance) in the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) where it is important to reinforce habit change and self-efficacy (DiClemente & Velasquez, 2002). Commitment to conservation and having a sense of environmental conservation competence may be an important precursor to moving students to understand that conservation is an act that falls within the realm of environmental justice. Therefore, environmental conservation must be discussed in the curriculum.

Participants reported micro-level action as environmental conservation (i.e., recycling, repurposing, switching to solar energy), and viewed mezzo and macro actions as environmental justice examples (i.e., Dakota Access Pipeline, climate justice). Possibly because focus groups defined environmental justice by example and not by definition, their ability to see environmental justice issues as micro, mezzo, or macro is compromised; and they do not see the possibilities for environmental conservation and justice across all levels. Few participants had awareness of environmental justice issues in their own backyard and focused mainly on issues that were in the national news. The issues were "out there" and not close to home. This is consistent with findings by Sparks et al. (2019), who found that students struggled to both understand what environmental justice is and how it connects to people. Educators must be able to help students understand that environmental justice spans across all levels and recognize how this global issue impacts regions, communities, families, and individuals; along with how the environmental action of an individual can impact families, communities, regions, and the globe.

Overwhelmed by Environmental Justice Practice

Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of environmental justice issues and reported feeling helpless to act. Although they were effectively made aware of, and experienced a cognitive attitude shift, their affective attitude shift also included a sense of overwhelm, thwarting movement toward action. This reaction is similar to that of community samples in climate change studies, where helplessness leads to ecological anxiety and even grief (Ojala et al., 2021; Soutar & Wand, 2022). While large events and media may be effective in gaining the attention of students, environmental justice education needs to address the micro to macro spectrum so that students can appreciate how environmental justice takes place in every community. They may also benefit from seeing themselves as partners with their clients, where they disseminate knowledge, raise awareness, and encourage their clients to identify their needs and solutions (Heflinger & Christens, 2006; Wu et al., 2022).

Further Research

During this study, the need for further research was recognized and a pre/post quantitative validated survey was developed to be given to students during a core course in their first and last semesters in the program. Researchers also identified many areas which could be further explored such as students' views about environmental issues that impact marginalized populations, students' firsthand experiences with environmental injustices, and exploring student changes in awareness, attitudes, and actions throughout the program rather than only upon entry and exit. This type of study can be done in social work programs across the globe. Additionally, it would be helpful to the social work profession to conduct studies for social workers in the field to determine their level of environmental justice awareness, attitudes, and actions. A comparison of social workers who entered the field from the various EPAS would help to see if social workers across the profession have prioritized environmental justice. Lastly, comparing this study with similar studies, from the same and other regions, could provide a sense of where our program strengths and areas for growth lie. It may also shed light on how geographic location can impact students' views of environmental justice. For example, this study was based in southern Appalachia which is known for its unique environmental and conservation issues of coal mining and mountain-top removal, which are both important to the economic livelihood of the local communities and, by contrast, has led to high rates of health problems.

Environmental Justice in Social Work Curriculum

Participants' opinions about the placement of environmental justice in curriculum varied widely (required vs elective course, cross-curriculum immersion, etc.), yet all endorsed the importance of environmental justice education. Lee et al. (2022) reviewed pedagogies for teaching social justice and found the most utilized approach in social work education was "real or simulated 'experiential learning' to increase students' direct and/or indirect exposure to diverse lived experiences and to have students critically reflect on their

privileges and biases through teaching methods" (p. 774). Activities that fall within experiential learning include, "IGD [intergroup dialogue], talking circles, inter-/intra-group journal writing, online discussion boards, guest speakers, simulated vignettes, role plays, community-engaged activities on site, and simulated online community building gaming" (Lee et al., 2022, p. 774). Other writers have made suggestions for and referenced resources for course outlines (Bartlett, 2003; Lucas-Darby, 2011; Sparks et al., 2019) or placement into existing courses (Faver & Muñoz, 2013) or field education (Hayward et al., 2013; Rogge, 1993). Holbrook et al. (2019) articulate frameworks and application strategies for micro, mezzo, and macro practice, and field education practicums. They also propose a train-the-trainer approach to prepare social work educators and field instructors. Additionally, the *Curricular Guide for Environmental Justice* (CSWE, 2020) addresses the integration of environmental justice across the generalist social work curricula and the nine generalist-level competencies of the CSWE EPAS. Resources and practice suggestions are provided to address awareness, attitudes, and actions.

A foundation for educating social work students about environmental justice is ensuring that students understand the overlap between environmental justice and environmental conservation; as well as how they span across the micro, mezzo, and macro practice in social work (Naranjo, 2020). After reviewing the work of the Red Campus Sustentable (a professional organization whose mission is to promote sustainability in higher education), Naranjo (2020) claims, "sustainability is an area in which social workers can collaborate and suggest community strategies" (p. 450). To understand sustainability, social work students must examine and consider how individual behaviors impact the world and its species.

Other examples on how to integrate environmental justice into the micro to macro spectrum in the social work curriculum is in field education. Experientially, students might connect their education to the direct practice of environmental justice through working with clients (Beltrán et al., 2016) and/or as part of a class project. At the micro level, for example, students can learn about the environmental hazards of mold and advocate or mediate with property owners on behalf of vulnerable families who may not have the resources to act on their own behalf (Anderson et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2021). Mezzo-level policy education can include sources found on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Environmental Justice webpages, such as *Environmental Justice in Your Community* (EPA, 2024) and the *Environmental Justice Video Challenge for Student*s (EPA, 2023) which encourages mezzo-level practice wherein students work with communities to identify and develop strategies to address local environmental justice issues. Beltrán et al. (2016) also suggested similar but less elaborate mezzo-level class project practice ideas, such as partnering and participating with a river cleanup coalition.

Conclusion

In recent years, environmental issues have highlighted how vulnerable people disproportionately experience consequences of environmental problems. The COVID-19 pandemic, a public health issue, brought to light how environmental conditions differentially impact marginalized communities, poor communities, and communities of

color, as evidenced by higher rates of infection and where disease prognosis is often worse (Powers et al., 2021). It has also been documented that marginalized communities access medical care, including vaccinations, at lower rates than their counterparts putting them at higher risk (Baah et al., 2019). At the same time, problems associated with the climate crisis are devastating communities already experiencing hardships.

The Social Work Code of Ethics calls social workers to serve and advocate for marginalized people and their needs (NASW, 2021). As the social work profession becomes increasingly aware of the complex relationship between environmental health equity, economic insecurity, and environmental justice, it is crucial for social workers to pay attention to, and develop strategies for, working with people experiencing these issues (Watson et al., 2020). As CSWE (2020) notes, social work curriculum, therefore, should lay out a pathway for students to critically consider and understand the nuances of environmental conservation versus environmental justice and how to work with clients directly experiencing environmental injustice. Similarly, there may be ways to provide direct practice opportunities for students to work with environmental justice across the micro, mezzo, and macro-systems levels, which can improve self-efficacy and reduce feelings of being overwhelmed. Infusing social, economic, and environmental justice into all levels of social work practice is needed when so many clients are impacted by injustice every day.

References

American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare. (2022). *Create social responses to changing environment*. Grand Challenges for Social Work.

Anderson, M. E., Zajac, L., Thanik, E., & Galvez, M. (2020). Home visits for pediatric asthma-A strategy for comprehensive asthma management through prevention and reduction of environmental asthma triggers in the home. *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care*, *50*(2) 1-10.

Baah F. O., Teitelman A. M., & Riegel B. (2019). Marginalization: Conceptualizing patient vulnerabilities in the framework of social determinants of health- An integrative review. *Nursing Inquiry, 26*(1), 1-9.

Bartlett, M. (2003). Two movements that have shaped a nation: A course in the convergence of professional values and environmental struggles. *Critical Social Work, 4*(1), 107-130.

Beltrán, R., Hacker, A., & Begun, S. (2016). Environmental justice is a social justice issue: Incorporating environmental justice into social work practice curricula. *Journal of Social Work Education, 52*(4), 493-502.

Chonody, J. M., & Sultzman, V. R. O. (2022). An exploratory study of students' perceptions of environmental issues as social work practice and their understanding of environmental justice. *Social Work Education, 41*(4), 514-536.

Chonody, J. M., Sultzman, V., & Hippie, J. (2020). Are social work students concerned about the environment?: The role of personal beliefs. *Journal of Social Work Education, 56*(4), 809-824.

Choi, S., Powell, T. M., Muller, J. M., & Lux, E. A. (2021). Exploring the disproportionate impact of disasters: Social service providers' perceptions of factors increasing vulnerability among hurricane survivors. *Families in Society, 103*(3), 314-327.

Council on Social Work Education [CSWE]. (2015). *2015 Educational policy and accreditation standards*. Author.

CSWE. (2020). *Curricular guide for environmental justice*. Author.

CWSE. (2022). *2022 Educational policy and accreditation standards*. Author.

DiClemente, C. C., & Velasquez, M. M. (2002). Motivational interviewing and the stages of change. In W. R. Miller & S. Rollnick (Eds.), *Motivational interviewing: Preparing people for change* (pp. 201-216). The Guilford Press.

Dominelli, L., (2014). Promoting environmental justice through green social work practice: A key challenge for practitioners and educators. *International Social Work, 57*(4), 338-345.

Environmental Protection Agency [EPA]. (2023, May 17). *Environmental justice video challenge for students*. Author.

EPA. (2024, February 6). Environmental justice in your community. Author.

Faver, C. A., & Muñoz, J. D. (2013). Environmental concern and action: A view from the border. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 23*(3), 345-355.

Gray, & Coates, J. (2015). Changing gears: Shifting to an environmental perspective in social work education. *Social Work Education*, *34*(5), 502-512.

Hawkins. (2019). Sustainability, human rights, and environmental justice. *Critical Social Work*, *11*(3), 1-15.

Hayward, R. A., Miller, S. E., & Shaw, T. V. (2013). Social work education on the environment in contemporary curricula in the USA. In M. Gray, J. Coates, & T. Hetherington (Eds.), *Environmental social work* (pp. 246-259). Routledge

Heflinger, C., & Christens, B. (2006). Rural behavioral health services for children and adolescents: An ecological and community psychology analysis. *Journal of Community Psychology, 34*(4), 379-400.

Holbrook, A. M., Akbar, G., & Eastwood, J. (2019). Meeting the challenge of human-induced climate change: Reshaping social work education. *Social Work Education, 38*(8), 955-967.

Hycner, R. H. (1985). Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data. *Human Studies, 8*, 279-303.

International Federation of Social Workers. (n.d.). Climate justice program.

Jain, N. (2021). Survey versus interviews: Comparing data collection tools for exploratory research. *The Qualitative Report, 26*(2), 541-554.

Journal of Geography & Natural Disasters. (n.d). Environmental conservation. Longdom.

Lee, E., Toula, K., Hu, R., Greenblatt, A., & Logan, J. (2022). Pedagogical methods of teaching social justice in social work: A scoping review. *Research on Social Work Practice, 32*(7), 762-783.

Lester, S. (1999). *An introduction to phenomenological research.* Stan Lester Developments.

Lucas-Darby, E. T. (2011). The new color is green: Social work practice and service-learning. *Advances in Social Work, 12*(1), 113-125.

Marlow, C., & Van Rooyen, C. (2001). How green is the environment in social work? *International Social Work, 44*(2), 241-254.

McCuddy, M. K., Pinar, M., & Gingerich, E. F. R. (2008). Using student feedback in designing student-focused curricula. *The International Journal of Educational Management, 22*(7), 611-637.

National Association of Social Workers [NASW]. (2021). *Code of ethics.* Author.

NASW. (n.d.). Social justice priorities.

Naranjo, N. R. (2020). Environmental issues and social work education. *The British Journal of Social Work 50*(2), 447-463.

Nesmith, A., & Smyth, N. (2015). Environmental justice and social work education: Social workers' professional perspectives. *Social Work Education, 34*(5), 484-501.

Ojala, M., Cunsolo, A., Ogunbode, C. A., & Middleton, J. (2021). Anxiety, worry, and grief in a time of environmental and climate crisis: A narrative review. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, *46*, 35-58.

Powers, M., Brown, P., Poudrier, G., Ohayon, J. Cordner, A., Alder, C., &Atlas, M. (2021). COVID-19 as eco-pandemic injustice: Opportunities for collective and antiracist approaches to environmental health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 62*(2), 222-239.

Prochaska, J. O., DiClemente, C. C., Velicer, W. F., & Rossi, J. S. (1993). Standardized, individualized, interactive, and personalized self-help programs for smoking cessation. *Health Psychology, 12*(5), 399-405.

Rogge, M. E. (1993). Social work, disenfranchised communities, and the natural environment: Field education opportunities. *Journal of Social Work Education, 29*(1), 111-120.

Shaw, T. V. (2013). Is social work a green profession? An examination of environmental beliefs. *Journal of Social Work, 13*(1), 3-29.

Soutar, C., & Wand, A. P. (2022). Understanding the spectrum of anxiety responses to climate change: A systematic review of the qualitative literature. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(2), 1-23.

Sparks, J. L. D., Combs, K. M., & Yu, J. (2019). Social work students' perspective on environmental justice: Gaps and challenges for preparing students. *Journal of Community Practice, 27*(3-4), 476-486.

Strayer, S., Joseph, R., & Stoeffler, S. W. (2022). Predictors of integration of environmental justice in social work education: A cross-sectional student of faculty in the United States. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *42*(1), 94-111.

Uehara, E., Flynn, M., Fong, R., Brekke, J., Barth, R. P., Coulton, C., Davis, K., DiNitto, D., Hawkins, J. D., Lubben, J., Manderscheid, R., Padilla, Y., Sherraden, M., & Walters, K. (2013). Grand challenges for social work. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, *4*(3), 165-170.

Watson, M. F., Bacigalupe, G., Daneshpour, M., Han, W. & Parra-Cardona, R. (2020). COVID-19 interconnectedness: Health inequity, the climate crisis, and collective trauma. *Family Process 59*(3), 832-846.

Wilson, A. (2015). A guide to phenomenological research. *Nursing Standard*, *29*(34), 38-43.

Wu, H., Greig, M., & Bryan, C. (2022). Promoting environmental justice and sustainability in social work practice in rural community: A systematic review. *Social Sciences*, *11*(8), 1-22.

Author note: Address correspondence to Deborah Thibeault, Department of Social Work, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN, 37614. Email: thibeault@etsu.edu