He Moana Pukepuke e Ekengia e te Waka: A choppy sea can be navigated

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Critical reflection "is a survival tool of adult life, not a process that only leaders engage in" (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 44). How does this notion relate to the co-construction of an educational environment and pedagogical practices that allow 'non-traditional', 'marginalised' and 'second chance' learners to complete a Bachelor of Applied Social Work (Bicultural) (BASW) successfully?

The answer is that the programme came from within the very community that would be served by those who completed such a degree – a multicultural community within a unique bicultural society, somewhat economically depressed, with low levels of formal educational achievement and a multiplicity of social opportunities and challenges. Consultation with this community provided the developers of this degree with a 'person description' that educational authorities would not expect to enrol in degree programmes. However, November 2009 saw 97+ percent (BASW Annual Report, 2009) of the first cohort completing their degree, with a retention rate of 94 percent. The cohort was made up of roughly one third each Māori, Pacific Islanders, and the multicultural face.

In the development of this degree, the institution was prepared to fund different ways of achieving successful outcomes for students, to allow staff to deliver the programme innovatively, and also to align itself to the lived realities and diverse worldviews of their students. Many of the students are those who until 2009 could be seen as negative education statistics. Innovation was needed to address what Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, and Tiakiwai (2003, p. 24) called the 'inequality of power relations in education.'

This paper will examine the use of a holistic approach in a programme that included contextualised, 'mana-enhancing' (Ruwhiu, 2009) academic up skilling, student 'passion' for their chosen course, their life experiences, quality social work content teaching, an educational environment that gives students

‘voice’, and the relevance of Brookfield’s (2000) notions of critical reflection. These notions of “impostorship, cultural suicide, lost innocence, incremental fluctuation, changing world” (Brookfield, 2000, pp. 14–19), as they are applied to the educative process rather than the individual, are to be discussed as a ‘best practice’ principle.

Our results demonstrate that it is possible, in a degree context, for students aged 20 and over to have the academic skills required for degree study, taught or honed when they are presented in a manner that respects their worldviews and when they are contextualised based on their real life experiences. We know that presenting social work content material in creative and culturally appropriate ways allows the students to co-construct their learning so that it becomes imbedded in them. As a result, when the students are in the field on practicum, our field work supervisors described them as “hitting the field running”. The students did so well in the field that after their first practicum in year 2, those who wanted part-time and holiday work were employed by the agencies with which they had done their practicum. The ability to learn content, write assessments or become employable led to emotional turmoil for many of these students who had little experience of formal education.

In 2006, focus groups were used to establish what challenges and opportunities prospective BASW degree students thought they might face. Apart from the expected worries about whether or not they were capable of the academic work involved in degree study the most significant issue for the students was “getting their head around the fact that they were studying for a degree!” The majority did not feel they had any right to tertiary education. Over time hegemonic discourse had convinced them and their families that they did not have the intellect or attributes required, nor did they need a tertiary education. For these students, unequal power relationships in education (Bishop et al., 2003) had for many been their lived reality and this prevented them from “participating in the global community” (Durie, 2001, p. 4).

In 2002, the strategic plan developed by the New Zealand Ministry of Education required movement towards “a knowledge society in which diversity was valued, where people had thoughts and innovations that could be world-changing”(p. 2). Many of the students we needed to attract were those for whom tertiary education was not the norm. Many were the first to continue in education and they were therefore uneasy about the reactions they might get from their friends and family. The students told us they needed our help “to visualise ourselves in this place” and for staff to “give space in your courses for our worldview to be acknowledged and heard” (Dickey, 2009, p. 51).

It was becoming clear as we developed the course and analysed the focus group data (2006–2009) that as a staff we needed to address not only academic issues but spiritual, physical, political, cultural and emotional issues too. These needed to be attended to as carefully as the content and assessment of the degree programme. A third of the students were tāngata whenua but all the students, regardless of their ethno-cultural background, needed to be ‘well’ during this educational journey. For tāngata whenua and other Polynesian peoples ‘wellness’ involves more than that which is related to the physical. To be ‘well’ in these worldviews requires that all aspects of an individual’s life be in balance: tāhā wairua (spiritual), tāhā tinana (physical), tāhā hinengaro (mental and emotional), and tāhā whānau (family) (Durie, 1994). To a greater or lesser extent the importance of this interconnectedness of human attributes has been shown to apply to all BASW students, if they were to be successful.

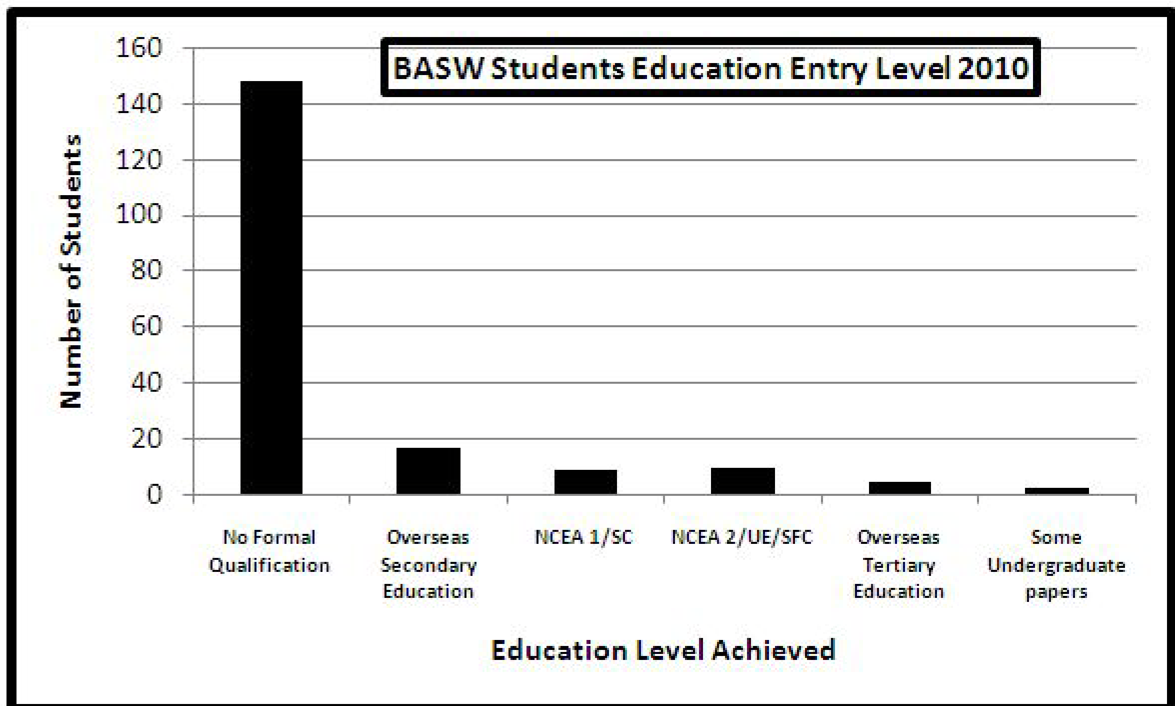
We needed a constructive way of helping the students deal with the emotional issues that were related to being in a place in which they had felt they did not belong. If they were to be successful, students

needed a vocabulary to help them describe and understand the way they felt in order to own and name their world (Friere, 1970).

The 2006 focus groups were unknowingly describing one of the strands Brookfield (2000) had identified as being “distinctive about the adult dimension of lifelong learning” (p. 2). As a bicultural degree, a holistic approach to degree study was appropriate. Brookfield (2000) contended that lifelong learning could be generalised into four strands: “the capacity to think dialectically, the capacity to employ practical logic, the capacity to know how we know what we know and the capacity for critical reflection” (p. 2). Of these four strands, it was the fourth, when it encompasses both emotive and cognitive processes, that resonated most with the cohort of BASW students as a way to maintain the balance between academic study and the emotions that at times overwhelmed them.

Some educators suggest that it is not the place of tertiary institutions to address anything but content matter that encourages thinking, worthy of the ‘academe’ in which the students find themselves. However, when one considers this cohort’s lack of experience of formal education (See Figure 1), the possibility of student stress in this context is real and, if not controlled, leads to lack of retention and success.

Figure 1



We had some difficulty with the terminology used by Brookfield (2000), in that terms like “impostorship, cultural suicide, incremental fluctuation and lost innocence” become negatively personalised in our context – a context where a person’s collective ethno-cultural identity (See Figure 2) is extremely important. We recognised that the context for the degree needed to be one in which each individual worldview and voice had a place. To accomplish this meant that we could not always accumulate Tongans, Samoan, Niuean, and Cook Islanders as ‘Pasifika’. Sometimes we needed space for gender

(See Figure 3), similar age or interest groups to meet throughout the duration of the course and talk about where their 'head' was at that particular moment.

Figure 2.

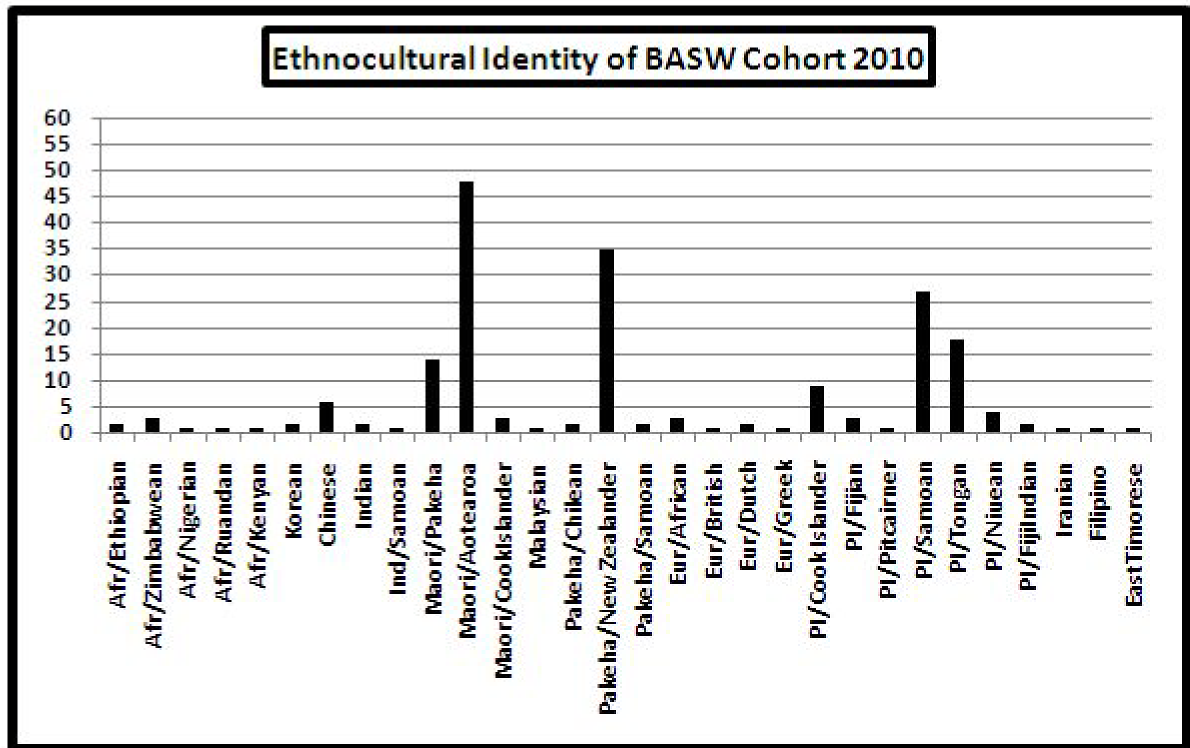
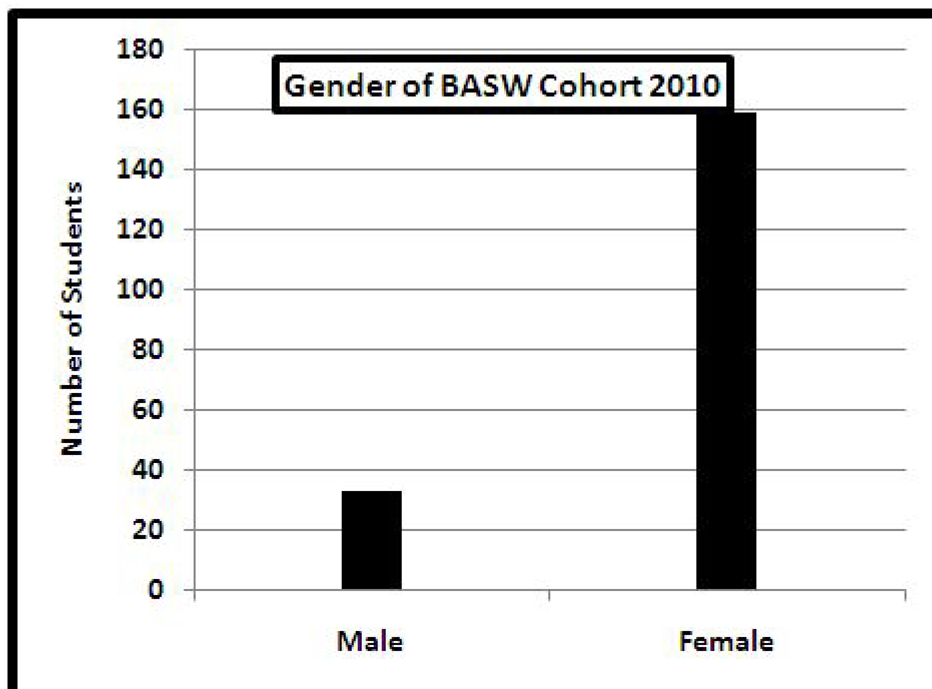


Figure 3.



Since it is so easy to personalise Brookfield's (2000) descriptors we feared that if applied to the person rather than the education system the outcome could be negative for the individual. However, if these notions are applied to the education system, we have found them to be a powerful tool for students, particularly the 'non-traditional', 'second chance' and 'marginalised', to explain their 'roller-coaster' re-entry into education and their continuation in it; that is, their right to be here, to rename, to reframe, and to own their educational experience.

When we realigned Brookfield's (2000) notions from the individual to the system, we found we could use them to enhance and strengthen the identity of each individual as the concepts gave us a 'framework' to begin a conversation on how they were managing their educational journey. We looked for descriptors that made sense in this bicultural degree.

'Impostorship' for us was better described by the following proverb, *E nohotia ana a waho, kei roto he aha*, which means *that one cannot tell from the outside what is contained within* (F. Kana, pers. comm., September, 2002). Thus, when the students explained that at times they felt they had no place in this system/process of learning they gave one poignant reason: that they often lacked inside experience of any formal learning process and therefore lacked congruence with the system/process in which they found themselves.

The second notion, the traumatic feeling described by Brookfield as 'cultural suicide', can be described by the statement, *Whanau tū mokemoke*, which suggests the feeling of *being isolated from their root cultural supports* that had surrounded the students before they became involved in the BASW programme. This process of learning separated them from the support networks that were part of their previous world.

The third thematic concept, 'incremental fluctuation' was *Tururturu a tai. Tururu a uta*. This phrase is, metaphorically, the feeling of the *surging of the tide*. As students journeyed through the system there were times when they felt they were moving forward and others when they thought they were going backwards.

Fourth is the 'changing world' or *Te ao hurihuri*, which we used as the substitute descriptor for 'lost innocence'. Here, students acknowledged that the system/process in which they found themselves expected them to interrogate those beliefs and values that until they entered the institution were considered 'truths'. For some, having to reflect on these long-held beliefs could lead to a loss of part of their identity.

Finally, the fifth notion, the importance of 'community': for Māori, community means people – *he tangata, he tangata, he tangata.* We found that very few students in the group gave their reason for becoming social workers in individualistic terms. Rather, they credited the community around them as their motivation and soon recognised that success or lack of success in their course was attributable to hard work, dealing positively with their emotions, and through interactions with their staff and student colleagues.

So, when do we make space for this critical reflection to occur? It is introduced in the students' first week on the programme. It is revisited in the fourth week when the excitement and newness of the tertiary experience is waning and the need to meet academic and personal challenges is increasing. The students told us they were in this environment to make a conscious effort to change their lives and those of their families (Dickey, 2009). They needed a way to counteract and explain the negative

thoughts and beliefs that assailed them, which, if not dealt with, would result in a loss of self-confidence. We found that the most dangerous time for a student to consider 'dropping out' of a course is during the holidays when their family life becomes their focus and, because they are tired, they begin to wonder if their study is worth the effort. Thus before holidays begin time is made for the students to reflect critically on their experience. We also provide an opportunity during the holidays, for students to come into the institution to get support either in groups or as individuals to enable them to maintain contact with the programme. This is especially important when they may be wavering over whether or not to continue their study. Between 2006 and 2009, a number of students have told us how important to their continuation in the programme were both this opportunity to reconnect with the institution and the time given to reflect critically on their emotional state.

As a result, throughout the three years, time is given for critical reflection when assessment requirements seem to be too high a mountain to climb, before they go out on practicum, and as indicated earlier.

It is not leaders exclusively who use critical reflection as a "survival tool [of] in adult life" (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 44), it is also those who will be leaders in fields in which they were not expected to have the 'human capital' (after Schuller, cited in Armstrong, 2000, p. 3) needed to participate.
For some, this journey has required them 'to navigate through a choppy sea', but with a holistic approach to them as learners they have made it to the wharf safely to start yet another journey….
No reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

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Definitions/Glossary

For the purpose of this document **'non-traditional'** learners are those who are older, have had little formal schooling, or come from families where tertiary education is not seen as an option for their children.

'Marginalised' learners are those whose ethnicity, or sexual orientation, or socio-economic status, or age, or gender or family commitments prevent them from becoming engaged in tertiary education.

'Second chance' learners are those who for one reason or another want to return to education either because they had few opportunities earlier in their life for education or who want to change their work–life direction.

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