

Growing Partnerships: Responding to Issues of Privilege in Social Work Education in Aotearoa

David McNabb

Senior Lecturer, Social Practice
Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland
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Nga mihi kia koutou..



PhD study

- Started PhD 5 years ago with publications, now ‘towards end’(!), with the University of Melbourne
- Began with a Document Analysis of social work education standards for the international, Australia and Aotearoa contexts
- This confirmed a common equity focus, also an indigenous rights focus in Australia and Aotearoa



Methodology

- A single set of Questions was derived from the document analysis.
- The questions concerned equity related issues:
 - service user and student participation; student representativeness; indigenous rights; political action; gender and cultural equity; and equitable access.
- Twin Themes:
 - Democratising and decolonising practices within social work education (McNabb & Connolly, 2019)
- Phase 1: Social work education leaders were interviewed
- Phase 2: Social work educators were engaged.



Phase 2: Social work educators

- Research was undertaken with staff from 9 of the 19 social work Polytechnic or University programmes in Aotearoa.
- Inquiry:
 - How and to what extent was an equity focus evident within programmes?
- A diverse group of participants included: Māori, Pākehā, Pasifika and people identifying with other ethnic groups; women and men.
- A mix of focus groups and interviews were used to engage with educators based on a general invitation to participate.



Findings

- The findings included inequity themes:
colonisation, racism, patriarchy, heterosexuality, ableism and issues of representation.
- Also how an equity focus was being advanced in practice.
- The findings also noted the contextualising of themes within:
the student cohort, staffing, the curriculum and teaching, institutional contexts, and regulatory processes.



Privilege

- Privilege defined:

An invisible knapsack of unearned benefits enjoyed by dominant groups in society (McIntosh, 1990)
- Privilege ascribed to being:

White, male, middle class, heterosexual, cisgender, able bodied...



Why Privilege?

- “The major reason why social work ought to be concerned with privilege is that a singular focus on oppression ignores or overlooks the fact that oppression and privilege go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other” (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 35).
- I decided to use this theme of privilege as a primary tool for outlining my findings.



Reporting

Findings were grouped under these themes:

1. White privilege and the institutional context
2. Responsibility for addressing White privilege in the classroom
3. Broader issues of privilege
4. The impact of regulation



White privilege and the institution

There was a risk of social work programmes becoming Whitewashed and more middle class due to excluding poorer students:

“(We are) in danger of becoming middle class, because of the cost of education; and I think it’s harder for Māori, Pacific and Migrant students, to get the whole way through four years ... They’re less resilient after their third year, because of being on placement” (3).



White privilege and the institution

For Māori, experiences of institutional racism were both personal and professional:

“I’ve got to be honest; I have experienced institutional racism as a tangata whenua and Māori practitioner and lecturer. So, those challenges we feel very deeply and I think there’s a lot of work to be done there still” (7).

Pākehā academics were aware of how far their programmes and institutions had to go to become more bi-cultural:

“I’m just very mindful of, you know, Mason Durie’s organisational continuum of ... bi-cultural(ism) ... I think we’re sort of two points along from the left, as opposed to way out on the right of a truly sort of tino rangatiratanga” (8).



White privilege and the institution

Māori noted that change was required if they were to be attracted into mono cultural institutions:

“If we’re going to attract tangata whenua educators into what essentially is a mono cultural institution, we have to find ways to do that well ... Our values, our sense of cultural identity is different” (7).

One Pākehā participant identified their Treaty practice:

“my main commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi, as a social work academic, is ensuring that we grow the Māori social work-force” (3).



Responsibility for addressing White privilege in the classroom

Pākehā responsibility for teaching White privilege.

“As Pākehā we need to be able to speak into that space about Pākehā responsibility” (5).

Non Māori staff had a responsibility to support Māori but also to negotiate their responsibilities as partners:

“We’ve done the Treaty training as a team and that was quite powerful, but it ended on that day ... I think that often there’s this discourse that it's for Māori to decolonise; but it's not ... And then you have the conversation about how do you make it real” (7).



Responsibility for addressing White privilege in the classroom

Students could also struggle with courses related to White privilege:

“There’s a lot (of) conflict with the students once you bring that up (White privilege). It has created so much huge division” (10).

Migrant students faced different challenges in relating to the Treaty:

“One of the ethnic students (noted) ... we’re doing quite a lot on Māori-Pākehā Treaty based practice, bicultural practice; and ... “I’m not sure where I fit” ... and that whole really awful thing of ‘other’; Māori group, Pākehā and ‘other’” (10).



Responsibility for addressing White privilege in the classroom

- Identity was an important component of understanding and addressing White privilege, particularly for Pākehā
- Māori, as with all students could take time to identify with and embrace their heritage.
- This allowed both Māori and Settler groups to better understand their relationship to the Treaty and to bicultural partnership.



A broader context of privilege

Gender and sexuality themes were mentioned by a number of participants:

“We teach about power and all of that kind of stuff, but what’s our critical reflection on how we do that? Or, are we perpetuating that kind of structure? It’s around gender privilege” (7).

Some female participants noted the patriarchal context of the tertiary environment:

“I think gender equity across the university is an issue ... it's very much still a male environment and if you want to advance your career you have to take the male approach to career. So, that’s kind of the tension I suppose between social work and the university” (4).



A broader context of privilege

For most programmes, responding to students with disabilities required significant attention:

“We’ve had some students with different levels of disability, from minor to really severe physical, to learning challenges; and, I’ve worked quite strongly as the site co-ordinator here with our student support, right from those first stages ... So, any barriers we can cut down” (6).

Staff were aware of the privilege that they experienced as social work educators:

“For me it's probably one of the key lessons for social workers to learn is that the role can abuse the authority of the state ... If they're not sensitive to their own uses of power they're bloody dangerous. So, I'm banging on that drum from ... selection day” (7).



Regulation and privilege

The pressure on a Māori staff member to quickly complete a master's degree to meet SWRB standards was counterproductive:

“I’ve (Māori staff) co-taught this year with some of my Pākehā colleagues on courses ... that’s been for them; and, I’ve enjoyed that ... that’s put a lot of pressure on me personally to fast track (complete a Masters) ... But ... when you’ve got staff, who are doing fricking Masters, and loading them up!”
(6).



Regulation and privilege

The fit and proper requirements could be a barrier for Māori & Pasifika:

“Some of our people do have criminal records ... It's the bloody irony of study after study after study has shown that it's actually deeply racist; the justice system disproportionately convicts Māori and Pasifika for things that Pākehā don't get convicted for” (7).

There were significant mental health issues for some students, which could be exclusionary:

“So many of our students seem to be coming with quite significant mental health, anxiety, depression issues; and so, it's a struggle. Some of them just struggle through the degree, and actually get through and do well, others not so well” (1).



Regulation and privilege

The SWRB could be supporting a stronger Treaty focused approach:

“I would like the Registration Board to be looking at how bi-cultural our programme is” (6).

Concern was expressed at conservative state influence, as the SWRB is a Crown agency:

“In terms of the social justice values and principles of the profession; is it being diluted? Are we losing our agency for social change and becoming more about social control? Is that because we’re becoming more and more controlled by the state ... through regulation?” (3).



Recommendations for anti-privilege action

Teaching

- Using the concept of privilege in the curriculum; the relevance of identity for students and staff regarding oppression and privilege. Using intersectionality as a helpful tool.
- Anti-oppressive and anti-privilege practice (Mullaly & West, 2018) as a broad based critical approach in teaching.

Pedagogy

- A Treaty based approach to teaching; a commitment to mātauranga Māori links well to social work values and education policy; a relationally based teaching style that affirms identity.
- A Treaty based partnership approach addressing colonisation, and other inequities.



Recommendations for anti-privilege action

Staffing

- A more representative staff, including Māori, to advance a Treaty based approach, demonstrating partnership.
- Staff demonstrating anti-oppressive and anti-privilege practice as a team.

Programme and institutional context

- Student and staff action for, and alignment with, institutional equity goals including a Treaty focus.

Regulatory

- Challenging SWRB where student fit and proper, and staffing qualification requirements fail to achieve broader equity goals.



References

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