Whānau Pūkenga—Survive, normalise, flourish: Peer support for Indigenous academic social workers

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Indigenous and minority groups experiences of barriers in the academy are well documented (Calhoun, 2003; McAllister et al., 2019; Mercier et al., 2011; Walters et al., 2019). Therefore, it is no surprise that Tangata Whenua academics encounter challenges in the Aotearoa New Zealand university setting. There are systems and processes that do not align with Māori worldviews and can be tokenistic. Globally there is a need for decolonisation, growth and inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and liberatory spaces in the academy (Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015; Ruwhiu, 2019; Walters et al., 2019; Zambrana et al., 2015).

APPROACH: In these environments it is essential that Tangata Whenua academics can support each other to flourish through the power of the collective. In 1993, Tangata Whenua academics teaching social work at Massey University formed a peer support group, now recognised as 'Whānau Pūkenga'. This article focuses on the advent of this peer support model and how it has changed over time. Key issues are discussed that highlight how this model enhances the experiences of Tangata Whenua academics and students to contribute to a robust social work programme. Discussions are framed around the themes *survive, normalise* and *flourish*. In this article 'Māori' and 'Tangata Whenua' have been utilised interchangeably. Tangata Whenua is the preferred term because it acknowledges our Indigenous connection to the whakapapa whenua, whakapapa tangata.

Keywords: Indigenous; peer support; academic; social work; Tangata Whenua; Māori

Tertiary education and the foundations of social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand have been primarily based on imported, Western perspectives. It is now a requirement to practise biculturally and be competent to work with Tangata Whenua and the expectation is that this is integrated into social work education and practice. Tangata Whenua academic personal and professional identities are often integrated which is an asset to the academy, but can create additional roles and responsibilities (Burgess, 2017; Ruwhiu, 2019) leading to 'brown-face burnout' (Hollis-English, 2012, 2016; Moyle, 2014). Therefore, the retention and support of Tangata Whenua academic staff must be a priority to honour the obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and to deliver a robust social work programme that meets community expectations and the requirements of the Social Workers Registration Board (McAllister et al., 2019). Traditionally, Tangata Whenua academics can find working in predominantly Western

tertiary institutions challenging. Indigenous and minority group experiences of barriers in the academy are well documented (Calhoun, 2003; McAllister et al., 2019; Mercier et al., 2011; Walters et al., 2019). Decolonisation, growth and inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and liberatory spaces need to be prioritised (Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015; Ruwhiu, 2019; Walters et al., 2019; Zambrana et al., 2015).

Considerations need to be made for who teaches decolonisation and indigenisation frameworks. Particularly how they are delivered to a Tangata Tiriti (non-Māori) audience and how tauira Māori are supported, especially if they are in the minority when discussing and exploring their culture, and their colonisation and racism experiences. Tangata Whenua academics play an important role in the delivery of this content, assisting tauira through sometimes difficult learning and transitions. This is especially important in a social work applied programme. Tangata Whenua academics have additional responsibilities due to the Social Workers Registration Board requirement for Kaupapa Māori and bicultural content, teaching and learning to be threaded throughout the programme. Therefore, we argue that Tangata Whenua academics need to support each other in a collective capacity by utilising a peer support model.

This article introduces a group called 'Whānau Pūkenga', four Tangata Whenua academics in the School of Social Work at Massey University. It will include a history of how this peer support group was formed and how it has been maintained. Personal and collective experiences are shared including how challenges have been navigated and successes celebrated under the themes, survive, normalise and flourish. This article provides insights and guidance to promote cohesion and collective wellbeing between Indigenous academics as they negotiate similar spaces. A glossary of terms is provided.

The whakapapa of the 'Whānau Group'

The Massey University social work programme was established in 1975 by Merv Hancock and Whaea Ephra Garrett (Te Āti Awa) (Dale et al., 2017). From the beginning it was envisioned that the course and content include Māori topics and strive to graduate bicultural social workers, capable of working effectively alongside Māori. The importance of attracting Māori and Pacific students was recognised as vital for the social work profession for meeting the needs of the social service user demographic (Dale et al., 2017).

In 1993, a group of Māori academics teaching in the social work programme came together to establish what they called the 'Whānau Group'. It was a mutual support group that offered leadership and advice to the school regarding Māori content in the curriculum, and other concerns and needs. The group offered support to, and focused on, the retention of tauira Māori. Key members of the Whānau Group over time included: John Bradley, Vapi Kupenga, Rachael Selby, Wheturangi Walsh-Tapiata, Dr Leland Ruwhiu, Hayley Bell, Justina Webster and Gail Bosmann-Watene.

Rachael Selby worked at Massey University for many years and mentored and advocated for other staff in the school and university-wide. Rachael retired in 2016 handing the leadership responsibilities to Dr Awhina Hollis-English who had started in a social work lecturer position in 2010. In close succession came Hannah Mooney, Dr Paulé Ruwhiu and Ange Watson who also joined the school bolstering the number of Tangata Whenua staff. In 2017, the Whānau Group consisted of these four Tangata Whenua academic staff, and while we were in different academic positions and a couple of us were having children, we were lucky to be a consistent group which enabled us to strengthen our collective impact and responses. We worked closely together to support each other at the beginning of our academic careers, sharing

similar experiences and insights with each other. We were naturally drawn to one another and would get together to consider what we needed to be successful and fulfilled in our roles and to consider how we could make a difference to our school and ultimately to the tauira who would be working with whānau Māori. We requested a regular time to come together outside of the university to wānanga at the marae as Māori, in a Māori space, and to discuss key personal and professional issues. This was supported by our Head of School, Professor Kieran O'Donoghue.

Establishing Whānau Pūkenga

In 2017, during our first wānanga, the Whānau Group took time to reflect on our name and our role in the school. We decided to rebrand and instead called ourselves 'Whānau Pūkenga'. We retained the kupu 'Whānau', as this acknowledged the whakapapa and founders of the group including all the work completed before us. We also believed that we modelled the qualities of a whānau, we respected each other as more than colleagues and felt deeply connected. The term Pūkenga was added to recognise the knowledge and expertise of the group members, skilled and versed in social work teaching and practice, drawing on our different strengths and experiences as Tangata Whenua social work practitioners and academics. The term also recognises the group's role in supporting the School of Social Work whereby we are often called upon for advice and leadership regarding te ao Māori.

As is a natural part of a workplace, whānau have come and gone from the group over time. Awhina left Whānau Pūkenga and Massey University in 2018. In 2019, Marjorie Beverland joined (leaving when she completed her PhD) and, in 2022, Deacon Fisher became a part of the roopū. The hope is that Whānau Pūkenga, regardless of membership, will continue to flourish well into the future.

Surviving, normalising and flourishing

Historically, it has been challenging for Tangata Whenua to establish themselves and flourish in a Western tertiary university setting. In a recent study, Staniland et al. (2020) purported that there continues to be an underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in all levels of higher education. They found that Māori academics struggle with lack of fit in sometimes hostile environments and that they strategically navigate a way through these environments and carve out the spaces that work for them. In addition, the majority of Whānau Pūkenga began our social work careers in practice fields, not necessarily with the aim of entering academia. We aspire to do more than just 'survive'. We want to normalise te ao Māori in the university setting and thrive and flourish in our respective careers. This section explores the 'surviving' theme.

Surviving

Many tauira Māori and kaimahi Māori feel out of their depth in Western university settings. It can feel like an uncomfortable, foreign environment because the systems and processes are not their own, do not fit with Māori paradigms and can be tokenistic. Whānau Pūkenga regularly discuss the challenges of Western, monocultural, hierarchical, patriarchal university systems and ways to navigate these spaces in order to learn how to 'play the game' and retain our authentic selves. The 'game' here refers to the dominant structures, systems and processes that dictate success in academia. Whānau Pūkenga are playing the game our own way through peer support and strategic planning, by connecting with Māori and academic mentors to enhance our career pathways, and through synergetic relationships with our Tangata Tiriti colleagues. These have provided the foundation for us to ground ourselves within the school and across the university.

Normalising

As mentioned, research has shown there is a need for decolonisation, growth and inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and liberatory spaces in tertiary education (Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015; Ruwhiu, 2019; Walters et al., 2017; Zambrana et al., 2015). The Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) outlines the long-term strategic direction for tertiary education (Tertiary Education Commission [TEC], 2020) and the TEC claims the focus should be on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and mātauranga Māori and tauira Māori should be able to succeed as Māori, while protecting their language and culture in a tertiary education environment (TEC, 2020). In a bold move, Massey University declared themselves a Te Tiriti o Waitangi-led institution in 2018, "This necessitates the embodiment and enactment of the principles and provisions of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the embedding of Indigenous Māori knowledge, values and belief systems in curriculum design and implementation" (Severinsen et al., 2023, p. 1). The policy has set the scene for these to be enacted and delivered.

The university should be supporting tauira Māori to succeed through utilising Māori worldviews in teaching and learning. If the content is informed by mātauranga Māori and the teaching is delivered by a Māori lecturer, with the appropriate knowledge and skills, then students are able to relate to the content and the person delivering the content (Curtis et al., 2015). Our social work programme aims to enhance the identity of Māori social workers who are working in important roles in their communities. Whānau Pūkenga have been passionate and committed to normalising te ao Māori in our own teaching, research and learning and within the School of Social Work. We do this by bringing our own 'flavour' of being Māori, delineating between bicultural and Kaupapa Māori teaching and learning content, encouraging the wider team to grow with and alongside us, having opportunities to wānanga and meet regularly for personal and professional development, supporting kawa and tikanga, and providing assistance to tauira Māori as well as Tangata Tiriti students.

- **Bringing our own 'flavour'**

Bringing our own flavour involves Whānau Pūkenga bringing our authentic selves to the university setting, bringing our te ao Māori worldviews with us, and being unapologetically Māori. It also recognises our unique positioning; that we come with our own knowledge and stories from our personal, whānau, hapū and iwi lens, and professional experiences.

- **Difference between bicultural and Kaupapa Māori**

Whānau Pūkenga developed a Kaupapa Māori and Bicultural policy in 2017 to provide guidance for the School of Social Work. We realised it was important to define and distinguish between the bicultural and the Kaupapa Māori teaching and content within the social work curriculum. In social work the term 'bicultural' is regularly utilised when referring to things Māori with the aim being that social workers should be able to practise from their own cultural positioning. We argued that bicultural refers to a partnership between Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti. This, on its own, does not include Kaupapa Māori and mātauranga Māori (te ao Māori derived content, teaching and learning), therefore this needed its own acknowledgment, separate to bicultural definitions. The policy delineated who should teach in these spaces. Tangata Whenua should exclusively teach Kaupapa Māori content whilst all staff can teach bicultural content, teaching from their own cultural position, worldview and lens. The policy also covered the need for consistent messages about te reo Māori use across teaching and marking (use of macrons or double vowels, encouraging kupu Māori use without direct English translations), and school commitment to rangatiratanga, whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga

(for example, through whakatau and whakamutunga processes for tauira). An example of Tangata Whenua staff teaching Kaupapa Māori is when Whānau Pūkenga take third-year Bachelor of Social Work students and first-year Master of Applied Social Work students on noho marae for three days as a compulsory part of the two degrees.

• **Encourage our team to grow with and alongside us**

Whānau Pūkenga continues to encourage the whole team, individually and as a collective, to participate in things Māori, particularly in areas that impact the whole school. When we developed our policy, we presented it to the management and colleagues. We wanted to give feedback on our progress, check in with them, and gather the team's thoughts, ideas, and commitment regarding the policy. We called this process 'working at the border' as coined by Dr Leland Ruwhiu, one of the original members of the Whānau Group, "Being prepared to work at the border involves negotiating an equitable, safe space for interactions to occur, in order to enable a sense of real communication, to be clear about one's bottom lines, and to act to elevate the importance of co-constructing the rules and tools of engagement" (L. Ruwhiu et al., 2016, p. 84). One of the policy items was to have a whole school wānanga, as we were clear about what we wanted, but we wanted others to contribute and feel part of any plan going forward. The wānanga was to be held at Te Rangimarie marae in Rangiotū. To prepare for the wānanga, we have contracted an external facilitator so that Whānau Pūkenga can be part of the team and not facilitate. The team were sent a pepeha and mihi structure and encouraged to participate in a mihimihi process with a final day that is focused on future planning. A key aim of the wānanga is to discuss Massey University's Paerangi Framework and plan for implementation in our school. Paerangi is a Māori-centred, teaching and learning strategy (Massey

University, 2019). Severinsen et al. (2023) argued that teaching staff who integrate these Māori concepts and a Māori perspective of "best educational practice" enhances the learning experience of tauira Māori and non-Māori students (p. 1).

• **Wānanga and meet regularly**

School management support Whānau Pūkenga to hui regularly (usually monthly) to kōrero regarding many kaupapa for example, school matters, curriculum development, student and te ao Māori initiatives. We may have a question or request from a colleague to contemplate, we discuss this collectively and provide our response following this, rather than having to manage such requests individually. We are clear that this collective approach is our preference in order to avoid 'brown-face burnout' (Hollis-English, 2012, 2016; Moyle, 2014) and the feeling that we are talking on behalf of all Tangata Whenua. It also capitalises on all of our strengths. Whānau Pūkenga wānanga at least once a year (with the possibility to grow to twice a year). These usually take place at Te Rangimarie marae in Rangiotū where we have held wānanga for three days to revitalise, rejuvenate, and strategise from a te ao Māori perspective. Some of the planned activities have included inviting Tangata Whenua academic mentors, Rongoā pūkenga, discussing topics such as Matariki, maramataka, and local manawhenua knowledge of Rangitāne. It is also a space and place of togetherness, to practise te reo Māori, to waiata, kai tahi and moe tahi.

• **Support for tauira Māori**

For tauira Māori to succeed in tertiary education it is fundamental that they receive whānau and financial support, have strong relationships with lecturers and tutors, have access to peer and tuākana support and culturally safe spaces and havens where a whānau environment allows for supportive group work (Theodore et al., 2017). There

also needs to be access to strong Māori leadership and role models and culturally appropriate curriculum and teaching practices (Theodore et al., 2017). For tauira Māori, education is a collective endeavour, not a personal one (Curtis et al., 2015; Greenwood & Te Aika, 2008). Tauira Māori want a better life for themselves and their whānau, and positively contribute to hapū and iwi developments.

Historically, Māori and Pacific students have been underrepresented in university study (Coxon et al., 2002) and have faced challenges in participation, retention and completion, particularly when compared to Pākehā students (Curtis et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2011). They have lower completion rates in bachelor and postgraduate qualifications compared to other ethnic groups (Ministry of Education, 2019). In general, Indigenous students have high rates of attrition and the lowest rates of participation and success across university programmes (Garvey et al., 2009; Madjar et al., 2010). In recent years, more tauira Māori are enrolling in university and this growth impacts current Tangata Whenua staff workloads when there are not similar increases in the number of Tangata Whenua academics to support tauira Māori (McAllister et al., 2019).

It is important for tauira to have supportive Māori lecturers and to see themselves in these positions. This has played an important role for us (Whānau Pūkenga) and our development over time, as undergraduate tauira, Māori social workers and then moving into academic positions. Other support systems that aided us included belonging to Māori support groups and Māori scholarship programmes that encouraged connection through whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and collective learning. Whanaungatanga encourages tauira to form support networks that enhance not only their spiritual and social lives but also their academic performance (Macfarlane et al., 2019;

Waiari et al., 2021) and is vital to tauira Māori success in university programmes (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019). Ako involves reciprocity of learning between teacher and student and recognises students' knowledge and expertise in what is brought to the learning environment (Berryman et al., 2019).

Whānau Pūkenga supports tauira Māori in the School of Social Work in numerous ways through study planning, pastoral support, provision of research supervision, social work placement support, and so on. One example is that we have set up hui at least once a semester to practise whakawhanaungatanga across all year levels, inclusive of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. This allows for the tuakana-teina model of support whereby the more experienced students can tautoko the newer students, develop peer relationships, and create a whānau model of support that enhances reciprocal learning (Curtis et al., 2015; Greenwood & Te Aika, 2008). It provides opportunities for the Tangata Whenua staff in the school and other support staff to introduce themselves and kōrero about the mahi that they do and ways they can assist tauira. We also include coordinators of scholarship programmes, for example, Te Rau Puāwai Māori bursary programme attending to discuss their entry requirements and application details to help tauira be successful in their applications. Appropriate support systems are crucial in university settings for tauira Māori to succeed (Theodore et al., 2017). Tertiary education environments that foster whanaungatanga, ako and tuakana-teina mentoring will assist tauira Māori to achieve academically.

• **Support for Tangata Tiriti students**

All staff have a role to support all of our students, however Whānau Pūkenga and other kaimahi Māori also play an important role supporting Tangata Tiriti students through the programme and to prepare for practice. As mentioned, Whānau Pūkenga

must assist with exploration of Kaupapa Māori issues, teaching Te Ao Māori concepts, and application and reflection of these in social work practice. In addition, kaimahi Māori tend to take the lead exploring concepts such as white privilege, stereotyping, bias and racism. In the future it would be good for this to be a shared responsibility for both Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti, recognising the importance of challenging our biases and anti-racist practice in social work.

Some challenges

We often reflect on the work we are undertaking regarding whether it is over and above our usual work expectations. This leads to discussions about whether we continue to do a task, change it or choose not to do it. This is not an uncommon issue for Māori, particularly those working in 'mainstream' organisations. As mentioned earlier, Hollis-English (2012, 2016) and Moyle (2014) discuss the concept of 'brown-face burnout' where kaimahi Māori have additional expectations placed on them that could lead to workplace stress and burnout. This is one concern about a 'Te Tiriti-led' aspirational space, whilst it is an exciting commitment, often this is led by Tangata Whenua staff and not always recognised or adequately supported. This makes the peer support model essential as we support each other to discuss and decide on boundaries and guidelines for practice. For most activities we have continued to do the additional work because we are committed to the bigger picture of all Māori flourishing in university settings. An example of this is putting the Kaupapa Māori and Bicultural policy together. This was not requested of us, but we created this initiative because we saw the gap. It is our responsibility to be kaitiaki of the tikanga in the school and we take this role seriously.

An early challenge was moving from working quite individually, as is the structure of the job description, to working more collaboratively. As mentioned earlier

in the article, as individuals we would be asked for cultural advice and input and to sit on committees or groups, often being the lone Māori voice. This was problematic, adding to workload, and leading to feelings of isolation and discomfort when making significant decisions on behalf of 'all Māori'. This created an unsafe environment. We regularly discussed the need to have more than one voice present in all spaces, although recognising that this also adds to the workload as there are fewer of us. While we have a Kaihautū of our roopū, we work as a collective and we value the strength of our collective influence. Our key mātāpono is 'working together'. We have started to make leeway on this, and fewer people are approaching us as individuals now.

Flourishing

Looking forward to the future, we want Tangata Whenua staff and students to flourish in the university environment. Whānau Pūkenga will continue to provide ongoing support and advice in the School of Social Work to ensure that te ao Māori perspectives are authentically integrated and 'normalised'. This means that Māori perspectives are fully realised so that we do not have to think too much about them. We will continue to provide robust support to each other and encourage each other to grow personally and professionally. We are committed to supporting our students, in particular, our tauira Māori. We want to produce well-rounded, critical thinking, reflective social workers who can work effectively alongside whānau Māori.

In addition, we have moemoeā for ourselves as individuals and as a collective in order to flourish. For some of us, our moemoeā is to develop our capacity to learn and speak te reo Māori and increase the use within the School of Social Work. One of us is developing research and writing post-PhD and three of four of us are currently pursuing PhD completion. Exciting developments include leading out our 'all-of-school' wānanga and building on Massey

University's Māori principle-based teaching and learning strategy, Paerangi. We have also established a wider peer supervision group of Māori social work academics working across four universities in Aotearoa. This developed further after Whānau Pūkenga presented on the importance of peer support for Māori in the university setting at an Indigenous social work conference in 2022. An issue was identified whereby some Māori social work academics are on their own in their programmes and therefore need to reach further afield to join a collective.

We have discussed the need for Māori academic mentors to support us to further our careers in academia. It is beneficial to have ongoing advice regarding our roles in teaching and research by mentors who have knowledge and understanding of the university systems and processes. Our current school leadership provides reciprocal support and endorses our aspirations wholeheartedly. There are also wider university initiatives that align to our school commitments, promoting Te Tiriti o Waitangi and retention of all tauira Māori.

Conclusion

This article has presented the necessity and value of a peer support model for Tangata Whenua social work academics, Whānau Pūkenga. Insights have been shared of our journey through the concepts, survive, normalise and flourish. Massey University aims to be Te Tiriti o Waitangi-led which requires that Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori knowledge, values and beliefs are integrated into the curriculum. Whānau Pūkenga plays a major role in this implementation and therefore requires reciprocal support to normalise this approach in the School of Social Work. The overall aim is for a robust social work programme that delivers effective social workers for the benefit of our communities, whānau, hapū and iwi. It is essential that Tangata Whenua academics are supported in order to avoid 'brown-face burnout'. In turn, tauira Māori

will be supported to flourish and succeed. Regardless of whether the support is there, find your people! If they are not within your school or team then look outside. Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini. The strength is in the collective.

Glossary (most taken from *Te Aka, Māori dictionary online*)

Ako – to learn, study, advise

Aotearoa – Māori name for New Zealand

Hapū – sub-tribe

Iwi – Tribe

Kaimahi – worker/staff member

Kaihautū – leader

Kai tahi – eat together

Kaupapa Māori – Māori approach/topic/practice

Kōrero – to speak, discuss

Kupu – word

Māori – Indigenous to Aotearoa

Manaakitanga – respect, generosity, care for others

Manawhenua – local Indigenous peoples, jurisdiction over land or territory – power associated with possession and occupation of tribal land

Marae – courtyard – the open area in front of the wharenui, where formal greetings and discussions take place. Often also used to include the complex of buildings around the marae.

Maramataka – Māori lunar calendar

Mātāpono – principles

Matariki – Pleiades cluster of stars, Māori new year

Mātauranga Māori – Māori knowledge

Mihi – to greet, thank

Mihimihi – speech of greeting

Moe tahi – share sleeping space together

Noho marae – Stay at the marae

Paerangi – name of the Massey University teaching and learning strategy, Paerangi means horizon.

Pākehā – New Zealander of European descent

Pepeha – sharing connections to people and places that are important to you

Pūkenga – skilled, versed in, lecturer

Rangitāne – Manawhenua in Te Papaieoa, Palmerston North

Rangatiratanga – The right to exercise authority, autonomy

Rongoā – Māori medicine

Roopū – group

Tangata Tiriti – non-Māori, people of Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Tangata Whenua – Indigenous people of the land

Tauira – student

Tautoko – support

Te Ao Māori – The Māori world, Māori worldview

Te Rangimarie – name of Rangitāne marae utilised for noho and wānanga

Te Rau Puāwai – Māori bursary programme at Massey University

Te Reo Māori – the Māori language

Te Tiriti o Waitangi – te reo Māori version and different from the English version (The Treaty of Waitangi)

Tuakana-Teina – the relationship between an older (tuakana) person and a younger (teina) person

Waiata – song, to sing

Wānanga – to meet and discuss, forum, educational seminar

Whakapapa – ancestry, genealogy

Whakapapa tangata – ancestral lineage

Whakapapa whenua – land ancestral lineage

Whakamutunga – to conclude, end

Whakawhanaungatanga – the process of establishing relationships, relating well to others

Whakatau – to welcome

Whānau – family group, extended family

Whanaungatanga – a relationship through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging

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