ORIGINAL ARTICLE
MIXED METHOD RESEARCH

Student strategies for surviving social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Barbara Staniforth[1], **Sonya Hunt**[2], **Liz Beddoe**[1] **and Kendra Cox**[1] (Te Ure o Uenukukōpako, Te Whakatōhea, Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Porou)

[1] University of Auckland | Waipapa Taumata Rau

[2] Registered social worker

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: There is a growing literature reporting on the stressors facing social work students as they move through their social work education. This article reports on part of a study of student hardship that asked Aotearoa New Zealand social work students about the strategies that they utilised to maintain their wellbeing, and to offer their advice to future students.

METHOD: A mixed methods study incorporating a survey (*N* = 353) and 31 semi-structured interviews was conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2019. Participants in the study were then current students or new graduates in their first two years of practice at the time the research was conducted.

FINDINGS: Student participants reported various strategies used to support their progress through their social work study. The survey results indicated a strong reliance on relational supports with peers, family/whānau and friends. Qualitative themes were developed, including: individual, relational, institutional, cultural and societal supports reported by the students. Participant advice to future students added an intrapersonal attribute of self-knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS: While it is important to learn from the students about the strategies and supports that were useful in sustaining them and enhancing their resilience, the importance of considering structural challenges and the need to resist neoliberal policies and conditions are also critical.

Keywords: Social work students, wellbeing, resilience, resistance, social work education

Students in Aotearoa New Zealand tertiary education face increasing challenges, as where once tertiary education was heavily subsidised by the state, neoliberal shifts have reduced government commitment to funding post-secondary education (Roper, 2018). This shift, in concert with rising costs of living, and the widening wealth gap have meant that many students are forced to work to subsidise themselves and their families, while undertaking their studies, with some students engaged in concurrent full-time work, full-time study and family responsibilities. For students enrolled in professional programmes, such as social work, where a critical component of the learning is done through practicum, students are faced with either not working and suffering significant economic hardship, or in working in addition to their full-time placements (which are usually carried out in a 9am–5pm, Monday–Fridays structure), resulting in no time for themselves and their families, with a major negative impact upon their own wellbeing.

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CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Barbara Staniforth
b.staniforth@auckland.ac.nz

These conditions have been explored in recent research projects in Aotearoa New Zealand and the impact on students has been reported (Beddoe et al., 2023; Cox et al., 2022; Meadows et al., 2020). This article follows from a recently published article (Beddoe et al., 2024) within the same research project that focused on the challenges to personal, relational, and social wellbeing reported by participants in response to questions about their social wellbeing. Drawing on the same dataset, we used a strengths-based lens to identify what this same group of students identified they had done to maintain their wellbeing while studying. We also considered advice they offered to future social work students.

This article first considers some of the extant literature about student coping, and resilience. The methodology of the study and data analysis will be provided, followed by quantitative results of the research survey, and then a thematic presentation of the qualitative data.

Background and literature review

The hardships of social work students have been documented in detail in Beddoe et al. (2024) as well as others (Bartley et al., 2024; Beddoe et al., 2023; Cox et al., 2022; Hulme-Moir et al., 2022; Meadows et al., 2020). Students, however, have been found to utilise a range of strategies to survive and manage challenging impacts on their social, spiritual, mental and physical wellbeing, and have recommendations for future social work students to prepare for wellbeing stress. We begin by briefly reviewing previous research that reports on strategies utilised to bolster or maintain social work student wellbeing.

Wellbeing and student strategies

Both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies used by social work students have been noted in several studies (Collins, 2008; Collins et al., 2010; Yun et al., 2019). Adaptive coping strategies involve both informal and formal social support and include family, friends, peers and religion or spirituality. Having personal techniques for active coping and positive framing include exercise (Wiese et al., 2018), spirituality (Hope et al., 2014) and managing sleep patterns (Pilcher & Ott, 1998). Butler et al. (2019) considered six domains of self-care (physical, professional, relational, emotional, psychological, and spiritual), arguing that attention to the full range of life domains is required in maintain wellbeing. The Aotearoa New Zealand Whare Tapa Whā wellbeing model developed by Durie (1998), described wellbeing as a house requiring balance between the domains depicted as walls, founded on connection to the whenua/land, and also supports the importance of consideration of a holistic perspective in maintain wellbeing and is commonly used in Aotearoa.

Formal support includes supervision, assistance from line management, lecturers, tutors, and student peers and counselling, although many students have also reported not engaging in formal counselling for fear of being judged (Bartley et al., 2024). Some behavioural and mental disengagement strategies were identified as unhelpful or dysfunctional and could reduce efforts to deal with a stressor, increase helplessness, including excessive drinking, drug taking, wishful thinking, and inappropriate sleeping, self-distraction, denial, venting and self-blame (Collins, 2008; Yun et al., 2019).

Curriculum to strengthen student protective mechanisms and wellbeing

A common theme in the literature is the consideration of developing wellbeing-enhancement strategies within social work education curriculum. Developing self-care strategies and building protective mechanisms are all important in helping to cope with the stress and hardship of being a social work student and to maintaining wellbeing and a healthy professional quality of life (Grant, 2014; Grant et al., 2015). Grant et al. (2015) identified a wide

range of innovative teaching, learning and support initiatives to build student resilience. These included intra-personal skills development through techniques such as improving self-awareness, managing emotions and enhancing reflective skills, time management, personal organisation, mindfulness and cognitive behavioural strategies. They also advocated seeking/receiving support from a range of sources including peers, educators, supervision, and the teaching organisation.

Strategies recommended in other studies include managing empathy, mindfulness (Shannon et al., 2014), emotional literacy, time management, peer coaching, mentoring, reflective writing (Lohner & Aprea, 2021), reflective supervision, strengthening sources of support to moderate the effects of stress, and pursuing work–life balance (Adamson et al., 2014; Anleu-Hernández & Puig-Cruells, 2024; Collins et al., 2010; Grant et al., 2015; Hitchcock et al., 2024; Meadows et al., 2020; Wilks & Spivey, 2010).

Resonating with these international studies, an Aotearoa New Zealand study found that social work students utilised a broad range of strategies to address challenges and demands of their social work programme (Meadows et al., 2020). These included focusing on key milestones and the endgame of their studies; relaxing the expectations they held about how they should perform in their studies and in other aspects of their life; assembling a toolkit of strategies for managing their self-care and wellbeing; and accessing support and mentorship. Meadows et al. (2020) identified systems of support at micro, meso and macro levels including family and whānau; wider community and peer networks; the social work programme and its staff; practicum educators and the practicum team; professional supervisors and broader support from the institution where they were studying and government (re financial support). Many students felt that they "needed a layered system of support to sustain and enhance their wellbeing" including both whānau and wider community (Meadows et al., 2020, p. 56).

In Beddoe et al. (2024), we outlined the impacts of study on social wellbeing. The focus of this article is to identify the strategies and resources that the participants in this research drew upon to survive the challenges to their wellbeing while studying, and their recommendations for future students. The data were drawn from the quantitative survey data, the qualitative responses to the relevant open-ended questions in the survey, as well as from qualitative interviews. This research received ethical approval from the Auckland University Human Participant Ethics Committee.

Study design

The original research that this article is based on sought to answer the question: "What are the financial and social impacts of study on the wellbeing of social work students in qualifying programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand?" The 2019 study utilised a mixed methods approach of an anonymous online survey and semi-structured individual interviews. Participation in the research was open to all undergraduate and postgraduate students studying in Aotearoa New Zealand qualifying social work programmes, as well as students who had graduated within the past 2 years.

The Council for Social Work Education (CSWEANZ), agreed to forward the survey invitation to schools of social work with a request to those institutions to then forward the invitation to their current students. The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) promoted the research along with posts on professional social media pages such as Facebook and LinkedIn that enabled us to reach recent graduates.

The survey included a range of topics relating to demographics and student study modes, caring responsibilities, financial matters and various aspects of health and wellbeing. The questions most relevant to this article canvassed student views on their use of a range of supports available to them,

using a Likert scale response, as well as an open-ended question that asked respondents to explain what strategies they employed to get through their degree. We also asked them to offer advice to future social work students about how to maintain or enhance wellbeing while studying. These questions produced 3,000 words in text response to augment the interview data.

The online Qualtrics survey was conducted for 3 months in 2019. In total, 353 social work students or recent graduates completed the survey questionnaire. The survey included a question asking if the respondent was interested in participating in a further individual interview. From responses to that question, 31 phone or online, semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews were all transcribed for analysis.

Findings

This section first outlines the study sample of both the survey and the interviews and then explores the themes developed out of the research. Recommendations from the participants offered to future students are also explored.

To enhance readability and ensure clarity of meaning, the participant transcripts have, at times, been reduced with ellipses or paraphrasing and this is noted with square brackets [xxx]. Meaning of participants' words have not been intentionally altered

Table 1. Survey Participant Demographics

	n	%
Age		
Under 20	6	1.7
20 to 24	111	31.4
25 to 34	110	31.2
35 to 44	68	19.3
45 to 54	52	14.7
55 to 64	5	1.4
65 or over	1	0.3
Gender		
Female	323	91.5
Male	28	7.9
Gender diverse	2	0.6
Current Student/Recent Graduate		
Current Student	267	75.6%
Recent Graduate	86	24.4%
Currently studying Full-time / Part-time (current students)		
Full-time	216	80.9%
Part-time	49	18.4%
Not Ascertained	2	0.7%
Spent most time studying Full-time / Part-time (recent graduates)		
Full-time	72	83.7
Part-time	14	16.3

in any way. Pseudonyms for the qualitative interview participants are utilised. All other quotes that are not attributed to pseudonyms, are drawn from the open-ended questions in the survey.

The survey sample

All participants were either enrolled in completing a social work qualification or had recently graduated. More women than men responded to the survey (93%) which is consistent with the demographic profile of social work. Not all participants provided their qualifying degree but of those who did, 82.7% ($n = 282$) were undertaking an undergraduate degree while and 17.3% ($n = 59$) a postgraduate social work qualification. In total, 82% ($n = 288$) were (or had been) studying full-time and 18% ($n = 63$) were (or had been) studying part-time. Nearly two-thirds of the participants (64.3%) were aged under 35, while six participants identified as being 55 or older. Demographic results from the survey are presented in Tables 1 (age, gender and study status) and 2 (ethnicity).

Respondents were able to choose more than one ethnicity, and their answers were prioritised according to the government guidelines (Te Whatu Ora, 2024). These results are presented in Table 2.

Qualitative interview sample

Among the 31 interview participants, 28 identified as female and three as male. The majority (25) primarily identified as Pākehā, while four identified as Māori, one as Cook Island Māori, and one as Samoan/Pākehā. Age distribution showed that 11 participants were between 45 and 54 years old, six were aged 35–44, seven were 25–34, and another seven were 24 years old or younger. The participants represented 12 different tertiary institutions, with 14 attending university schools of social work, and 17 enrolled in other programmes. Most (25) were full-time students, while six were studying part-time.

Selected quantitative results from the survey are presented first to provide background, followed by the information provided through open-ended questions in the survey as well as through the individual interviews. These qualitative data were combined in NVivo. Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-stage model of thematic analysis was used to develop the themes described. These themes aligned with the research on student wellbeing discussed above and can be described as a constant balancing act of three dimensions: personal, relational and societal.

Survey quantitative results

Survey participants ($n = 353$) were asked to what degree they utilised 12 separate, positive strategies to help cope with the impact of studying. These strategies were support from peers, friends, family/whānau, university and placement staff, supervision, sport and exercise, involvement with marae and other cultural activities, political activism and volunteering and religious or spiritual practices[1].

Peer, friendships and family/whānau support was considered, always, often or sometimes helpful by a majority of the survey participants. Around 58% of survey participants found peer support always or

Table 2. Prioritised Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Frequency	M	SD
NZ/European	218	25.4	8.5
Māori	67	30.65	9.26
Pacific	28	28.59	10.68
Asian	19	21.79	7.62
Middle Eastern/Latin American/African	8	25	11.64

Table 3. Areas of Support for Students

Positive strategies	Never (%)	Seldom (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
1. Peer support (*n* = 326)	7.1	11.7	23.0	22.1	36.2
2. Friends outside university (*n* = 327)	7.0	11.0	20.8	27.5	33.6
3. Family/whānau support (*n* = 331)	3.3	11.2	16.6	21.1	47.7
4. Support from lecturers/ placement staff (*n* = 326)	15.0	23.0	27.9	22.7	11.3
5. Supervision on placement (*n* = 307)	23.8	13.0	26.1	22.5	14.7
6. Other supervision (*n* = 299)	56.2	13.0	10.7	13.4	6.7
7. Sport / Exercise (*n* = 320)	20.9	24.1	27.5	17.2	10.3
8. Involvement with marae, hāpori, hapu/iwi (*n* = 300)	82.0	9.0	5.7	2.0	1.3
9. Other cultural activities – music, arts, groups (*n* = 313)	52.1	19.8	14.4	10.5	3.2
10. Political activism (*n* = 46)	100	0	0	0	0
11. Religious or spiritual practice (*n* = 317)	53.0	7.9	11.7	12.9	14.5
12. Volunteering (*n* = 319)	42.0	12.9	21.0	16.0	8.2

Note: [1]Valid percentages have been utilised for the quantitative survey data.

often helpful, and a further 22% found it sometimes helpful, while just under 19% found it seldom or never helpful. Well over half of the participants felt friends outside of university were always or often helpful (61%), with a further 21% finding them sometimes helpful. Family/whānau support was similarly very important in terms of social wellbeing with almost half (48%) of participants finding this support always helpful and a further 21% stating it was often helpful.

Programme lecturers and placement staff were viewed as providing less support than peers, friends and family/whānau for wellbeing with only 34% finding them always or often supportive, and around 28% finding them sometimes useful, while about 38% found them seldom or never useful.

Supervision while on placement provided support to varying levels to over 63% of students but provided no or little support to around 37% of the students, however some students may have not yet undertaken their first placement. Around 20% of participants always or often received support from other supervision while nearly 70% seldom or never found or received support from this, although most students would not be engaged in other forms of supervision.

Sport and exercise provided benefits often or always to nearly 28% of the participants with a further 28% sometimes finding it a helpful coping strategy. Forty-five percent of participants never or seldom utilised sport or exercise as a coping strategy.

Other strategies including involvement with cultural activities including marae, other cultural activities; political activism and volunteering; and religious or spiritual practice had much lower uptake as coping strategies by participants. Over 90% of participants never or seldom utilised involvement with marae, hāpori, hapu/iwi as a coping strategy (67 of the 346 respondents identified as Māori). Further, 72% never or seldom found other cultural activities including music and arts helpful coping strategies, but around 25% sometimes or often did find them useful.

None of the survey participants found political activism helpful as a coping strategy, but 45% did find volunteering was sometimes, often or always helpful. Finally, over 60% found religious or spiritual practices never or seldom helpful, but around 40% utilised these sometimes, often or always to support their wellbeing. In Beddoe et al. (2024) we reported that study demands often curtailed student participation in social activism and volunteering activities.

Qualitative data results

In Beddoe et al. (2024), we reported the range of deleterious impacts of financial hardship and workload stresses for social work students. In this article we explore in greater depth the strategies utilised by the participants to enhance their wellbeing. These strategies have been described through personal, relational, institutional, cultural and societal themes.

Personal: Star charts and healthy habits

The participants maintained or enhanced their social wellbeing by seeking balance in their lives through utilising different techniques for selfcare such as mindfulness, relaxation exercises, self-awareness and acceptance, self- affirmation and development, and valuing their own world view. One survey participant commented on the particular significance of self-care for social work students as they began to understand the complexities of the profession:

> Being a student is challenging, being a social work student has a unique range of challenges, combined with everything else that is happening in life. .... I have become really aware of the importance of self-care. Sometimes self-care means stuffing your face with chocolate, going for a walk or just recovering enough [so that] you can face the next day.

Other self-care techniques mentioned included meditation, reflection and mindfulness:

> Regularly checking-in with myself and where I am at, so I could make some changes to help support myself better, a meditation app has been a godsend.

> I found reflection invaluable to make sense of the impact of competing demands and feelings of guilt that I carried.

> Mindfulness-gratitude. Knowing this is temporary, reading novels not textbooks, focusing on [my] positive future, combatting negative/unhelpful thinking patterns.

Time-out and systems of rewarding oneself were utilised although students acknowledged that it was not always easy to prioritise this:

> Getting sun on my face, breathing fresh air, taking time to go to schedule intentional 'nothing' days to give my brain space are all very useful … I also have a star chart where I give myself a star every day that I did what I intended.

Physical wellbeing is connected to self-care and different ways to enhance physical wellbeing were discussed, including sleeping and eating well, drinking appropriately, taking breaks and undertaking exercise and other physical activity. "A big one for me was cooking and eating healthy meals". Two participants acknowledged the role of drug and alcohol consumption with Bella stating that she maintained, "Healthy habits: I don't drink, I don't do drugs, you know that kind of stuff". Maria commented on the flip side, "Don't drink every night. I saw a lot of classmates do that. Definitely not a good idea".

While exercise was important to many participants, study was often prioritised over exercise:

> My issue was not about the cost of activities/sport, but more about the lack of time. I exercised less while studying due to shorter hours in winter/autumn and the pressure of study/assessments. I consciously chose to put more hours in reading and researching than exercising as I wanted to have the best grades I could.

Jade did not separate her physical self-care strategies from study, commenting that:

> I think the strategy was changing my mind-set. Realising that this is a part of study and it helps me be more productive by taking an hour out and going for a walk or for a run.

Other activities and hobbies were also discussed as stress-management strategies including making time to listen to music and having daily positive experiences. Janet spoke about:

> The self-care side of things for me is probably more going and doing stuff. I am a creative sort of person so going and making things or painting or cooking or baking.

Planning and prioritising

Participants reflected on the personal effort and hard work required to keep studying. They described skills of organisation which included establishing and keeping routines and time management as well as needing to define what was most important at any given time.

> Recognising when you can't take any more on at the moment and being able to weigh up the value of a lecture versus the pay of a shift at work helps me to structure my week and minimise my stress.

Linda saw time management as "prevention rather than cure. Make sure that I'm working to a deadline instead of getting extensions for assignments and then stressing out." Practical tips such as the following were recommended for wellbeing:

> I'm quite structured, so I have made a plan of what I want to achieve during those days. I've just altered my gym schedule and things like that to suit. I've made a planner of weekends and times that I'm free, so that I can make sure that I try and see people or family especially as much as I can. (Natalie)

Participants described making conscious decisions about where to focus in order to achieve their goals and enhance wellbeing. Sometimes this involved giving up on non-study activities, "I often have to prioritise study commitments over socialising, but I do see this as a necessary sacrifice to reach my end goal."

Saria utilised her organisational skills through multi-tasking and prioritising assignments:

> I feel like I am well organised. Although I worked full time, one of the jobs I had was working night shift, so when it was quiet, I could actually do some study.

Participants described their determination and managing the impact on their wellbeing from study requirements by reducing study and other commitments, resetting their academic expectations and focusing on their qualification end-goal. "There was a time when I did think about taking a year-long hiatus from my studies [but] I decided not to, because I just wanted to get my degree done" (Saria).

In relation to assignments, Joce described that she now focused on "getting them done as opposed to getting them done to the best of my ability". Sam had also reduced his expectations and stated, "[I'm] reducing the amount of energy I'm putting into the study. I've been an A student, … but I'm realising that there's a cost to that. Maybe I can just back down a little bit."

Almost all participants in this study had paid work commitments while studying, and most reduced paid work at pressure-point times:

> I'm starting to reduce my involvement in certain things … I'm part of a consulting group, they're ringing me with offers but I'm saying "nah I'm good". (Sam)

Participants described what maintained some of their determination to keep studying. Sandra recounted that her passion for social work outweighed stresses from being a student because she viewed social work as a vocation "I think that my education journey has given me more than just my student loan, you know, it has changed my life".

Remembering the why was also a strategy utilised by Doreen:

> It's a profession focused degree and I passionately want to be a social worker. That will get me out of bed on the hard days, when I'm up studying till 2 am for an exam the next day.

Relational: You can't do this alone.

Quality relationships with others were important for maintaining and enhancing the wellbeing of participants. A range of personal relational supports including those with whānau, family, pets, friends, and church were described by the students.

Sally received weekly support from her parents:

> My parents have my son on Friday nights after school, so Friday night is like my night, I get to look after me. I get to eat pizza, I get to go home and sleep or go out with people from work, or go out with friends, or go to the movies.

Esme (and others) emphasised the importance of being honest with themselves and those supportive of them in order to obtain the help required:

> When I was in a really low place, I tend to give up all of those good things that are actually quite helpful, so just getting back into some self-care has been really important, and trying to balance life a wee bit more, and communicate more openly with my whānau about what I need.

The participants detailed formal (such as study groups and tutorials) and informal support from student peers, which helped with social wellbeing and academic performance. This support was both face-to-face and on-line. Participants, including Jack, commented on the usefulness of weekly tutorials in forming supportive friendships:

> … it is really nice to have the same group of people to meet with every week and we can talk about assignments [which is] quite helpful and I really enjoy it.

Study groups, both formal and informal, were invaluable to many participants academically and enhanced social connection:

> [Our] mature students group formed a study group and before exams we would do regular study groups together and split up the workload … We were always messaging each other about stress and things. (Saria)

Specific student services including Māori and Pasifika support services, learning services, disability support, tertiary scholarships, and student advocates were important and utilised by participants:

> I highly recommended the [Pacific support service] which was first introduced last year when we started. We formed a strong peer support group which helped me tremendously throughout.

> The campus I studied at was a whānau environment with great student support services. They at times, fed me, provided

> second hand clothes, financial emergency support, part time work.

> One other thing that I found really helpful. … learning services … you can take an assignment and they will read it over and give you feedback. (Jack)

Positive, constructive relationships and communication with any of the lecturers, tutors and placement staff were also reported as being helpful to manage stress and navigate academic life:

> My tutors have been very supportive around self-care and show a lot of empathy, understanding and grace in regard to managing study, stress and normal life. The cool thing is actually I find my lecturers to be incredibly supportive. (Kate)

Health services including therapy and counselling, available through the Tertiary Education Institute (TEI) or privately, were accessed by participants for managing the impact of study and to enhance their wellbeing.

> Regular contact with mental health professionals [is] important for myself, so without weekly psychotherapy I don't know if I'd still be enrolled in the course.

It is estimated that around one third of social work students come into social work predominantly as previous or current social service users (Humphrey, 2011). Participants who fitted this pathway spoke of needing to be vigilant about their wellness:

> I came into study with three years recovery from alcohol addiction, so I maintained my recovery throughout and sought help as needed

Others, including Maria, reflected on the impact of the content of the social work programme and the value of counselling for her:

> There were definitely bits of the degree that pinpointed bits of trauma that I'd experienced and triggered me. [I] went and got a psychologist and had that every week for the rest of study. I started that probably six months into the degree.

Seeking balance in order to enhance wellbeing was pursued in a variety of ways by the participants. Cherie noted that engaging in te reo Māori language classes was one of her many enriching activities which she utilised to ensure she did not over fixate on her study:

> I've got a million and one things on. I'm studying te reo Māori, and I volunteer for a charity and I run a couple of sports teams, so I'm full to the brim. But I've done that with the knowledge that I've also got to keep my study under control as well.

While some of the interview participants reported that they reduced or ceased their involvement with social justice work due to time-pressure (see Beddoe et al., 2024), some participants utilised volunteering as a method to enhance balance and social wellbeing.

> My biggest love is social justice and helping people. So, for a lot of my university life, I was involved with organisations like World Vision … They had a programme if you raised a certain amount of money some would get put into your development fund and then you could use that for opportunities like paying for flights to go on a self-development course. That was a huge opportunity for me. (Callie)

Volunteering also had the added benefit of being a conduit for relational supports as well building a sense of hopefulness as described by Janet:

> I do things like volunteer tree planting ... It always makes me feel good and then I'm with people who like the same

> thing, and those sorts of things put a lot more spring in my step when everything is getting a bit much, just having a day off and going and planting trees … is beautiful.

Advice to future social work students

In the interviews we asked participants: "What advice would you give to a student of your age and life circumstances when starting a social work degree?" Recommendations included the importance of knowing oneself but also expecting their values and beliefs to be challenged, getting prepared for the financial cost of studying with less time to earn money, as well as the need for robust personal self-care plans and routines. Participants also suggested the need for having good personal organisation and planning skills, developing realistic academic goals, seeking support and finally remembering their passion for entering social work.

While there were many practical suggestions, participants also talked about the centrality of social work students understanding and knowing themselves while also expecting self-perceptions to be challenged:

> One [piece of advice] would be for that person to examine themselves and to really think about why they are going into [social work], and secondly to expect that the degree itself will influence you in unpredictable ways which are unforeseen because it is so broad and you learn so many different things about yourself that it can be really challenging. (Ben)

Being self-aware included acknowledging and seeking support for past trauma, while at the same time valuing their past:

> They need to make sure they are going to have enough support to deal with their own trauma. But also, they need to be really careful that they are looking through a strength perspective as well to see that can actually be an asset to someone in that they can understand and relate to a person in a way that perhaps someone else might not be able to. (Callie)

Advice for school leavers was often more specific and focused on really knowing themselves "ko wai au – who am I?", while also valuing their stage in life:

> Probably I would say take a gap year. It is sort of something I kind of wished I had done and I just take that time for yourself and just learn a bit more about yourself. (Stella)

> Don't let people [push you] down because you are young or you look a certain way because you might seem young or like you haven't had a lot of life experience, you have something to offer. (Callie)

Similar advice to mature students was also around valuing who you are:

> Being a mature student is a great asset to academia in general, the wealth of experience and knowledge outside of textbooks into the classroom. (Saria)

Participant advice included the importance of having excellent personal and relational supports and self-care plans in place:

> Finding that something that really helps you be able to stay calm and centres you and keeps you grounded whether that is spending time with friends or family or doing some kind of physical activity I think is super, super important. And not neglecting that, even if you don't feel like doing it so much that day. (Joce)

Their advice centred around being organised and establishing best locations for study:

> I would say keep on top of the reading, because it really helps to prioritise that. And in terms of practical things … draw up a table and start summarising your readings as you go, in order to have the

> time to do your essays at the end, because they all come at once. (Delia)

The participants encouraged future students to be open about their needs and seek support from their cultural contacts, personal relationships, student peers, staff and student services, and remembering the concept of *short term pain for long term gain*:

> For a Māori student I would say draw on your culture as a support. I would also say choose an institution to study at that really supports Māori students and has a whānau kaupapa. (Ellen)

> The first thing you need to do is when you go on the first noho or get together … is get your own Facebook page, get that support going as soon as possible, make connections because they are the people that are going to get you through. (Erica)

> Just to make sure that you're not too whakamā about approaching your whānau and just anybody for help, any kind of support person, lecturers, just ask. (Linda)

Preparation for future loss of income was strongly recommended, particularly when on placements as reported in Bartley et al. (2024).

> I guess to prepare as best as you can, and in the times when you may get offered a weekend's work or something buy your staples [and] don't go out for lunch. Spend that money on topping up your tinned tomatoes. (Jill)

Finally, they were hopeful, and encouraged future students to focus on the end-goal of qualifying and holding onto their passion for social work:

> I think when you're a tertiary student, the thing is, life happens. You just have to go with it sometimes. … [Remember] "Cs get degrees." … If you get time, you can go back and pick up your reviewer's marks and comments and you can learn from there. Pick your battles, don't sweat the small stuff. (Natalie)

> Expect the unexpected. You have to be prepared to be adaptable and have tenacity and focus to get this degree. Constantly remind yourself the reasons that you're doing [it] and that it's your passion to do it that keeps you going. (Doreen)

> I would encourage them that time in a sense actually really does go fast. It seems like yesterday that I started and every time there were challenges and times where I thought my goodness I don't know if I am going to make this, … something would happen that would encourage me to keep going. I would remember about what I am trying to achieve, where I am going, the people I am going to be able to help, the job security, the better life I can provide for me and my daughter. All the money I had invested so far and I don't really want to waste that. (Millie)

Discussion

In line with the literature on wellbeing explored above, the student participants developed and attended to a range of personal internal strategies to maintain and enhance their wellbeing and resilience (for example, Coffey et al., 2014; Collins et al., 2010). They identified what worked for them in terms of self-care including regular exercise, rest, and time out from academic demands. Having paid employment and caring responsibilities however, meant that self-care was often sidelined, but participants attempted to compartmentalise this and promised themselves they would attend to self-care once a period of high demand had finished. Students engaged in planning and considering their priorities, and maintaining a vision of achieving their qualifications for motivation.

It was clear that individual coping strategies at personal levels were not enough and interconnected systems of support, including relational and social strategies, were required to ensure wellbeing aligning with earlier studies (Collins et al., 2010; Gair & Baglow, 2018; Grant et al., 2015; Koo et al., 2016; Meadows et al., 2020). Relational supports were the most widely supported strategies emerging from the survey data, and the interview participants cited support from whānau/family, friends, church, cultural groups and time with pets, being instrumental to their wellbeing.

This research highlights challenges for social work educators to support student wellbeing. The TEIs provided or supported a range of supports including peer groups, tutorials, student services, health services, teaching and placement staff mentorship and supervision but this was variable. Literature clearly demonstrated the necessity for TEIs to provide an emotional curriculum and a range of tools to support students to cope with the stress of their study (for example, Grant & Kinman, 2014; Lawrence, 2021; Lohner & Aprea, 2021; Moore et al., 2011). While the findings in this article largely focus on students' personal coping strategies, it is clear also that addressing systemic or structural issues, such as lack of financial support, could be enacted to improve student wellbeing (see for example, Bartley et al., 2024).

There is also a deeper engagement with critique required. We enlist the concept of resistance, in counterpoint to traditional arguments for resilience, in order to explore some of the complex dynamics in the space of maintaining and promoting student wellbeing. In a recent scoping review, Cherry and Leotti (2024) have explored the concepts of resilience and resistance within either strengths-based perspectives or within the dynamics of neoliberalism. Cherry and Leotti (2024) described the process where an internalisation of a neoliberal discourse where acts of individual risk/resilience may in fact serve to promote the neoliberalist status quo: "Our findings demonstrate how acts of resilience can harbor elements of resistance, subtly challenging the status quo even within the act of adaptation" (p. 18). Critical reflection suggests that as educators we should push against promulgating the status quo by overly focusing on individual resilience resting within the person. Resilience requires interconnected systems of support at individual, team, institutional, organisational (placement) and societal levels. Social work educators and supervisors need to encourage ongoing critical reflection to fight against the internalised neoliberalist agenda that may encourage us to engage in resilience that is counterproductive and limits opportunities for collective action. This also requires links to be made to issues of structure, beyond the everyday sphere of practice.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Penehira et al. (2014) explored the resilience/resistance dynamic in a similar vein, with the view that resilience discourses for Indigenous people risk assuming "an acceptance of responsibility for our position as disadvantaged individuals" (p. 96) and negating the state's responsibility of colonisation. They encourage questions such as "Who benefits from this re-naming, reframing and re- positioning?" (p. 97). A study with high-achieving Māori and Pacific students identified three broad social factor themes that contribute to Indigenous students' educational success (Mayeda et al., 2014). These were: family and university role modelling and support; Indigenous teaching and learning practices; and resilient abilities to cope with everyday colonialism and racism.

It is important to place social work education and the profession of social work in its macro context and recognise the wider negative influences of structural reforms and funding decisions for the tertiary sector (Beddoe et al., 2023; Staniforth et al., 2022) and the intersecting goals of key players including professional associations and regulators (Gair & Baglow, 2018; Meadows et al., 2020). Campbell et al. (2024) have discussed the importance of critically analysing concepts of resilience to avoid simplistic, individualistic explanations

and to include ecological approaches that embrace social as well as individual coping systems used by social work students. At a societal level, responsibility for the impact of policy decisions on student wellbeing also sits with professional bodies and academic or government councils, TEIs and those responsible for recognising qualifications as well as funders of education and education policy makers.

While students engaged in numerous acts of resilience, it is important to not lose sight of the role of resistance in maintaining wellbeing. Educators sometimes label student resistance as the students lacking in motivation or being "problematic". It may be better to listen to the feedback of their students in regard to assessments, inflexibility of placement arrangement and other institutional pressures (Campbell et al., 2024) in order to support wellbeing.

Conclusions

This article has explored data from a mixed methods study from 2019, with a particular emphasis on exploring strategies used by students in Aotearoa New Zealand to attempt to maintain wellbeing throughout their social work studies. A similar study has been conducted in 2023 which reveals conditions for students throughout the Covid 19 pandemic.

The students in this research project revealed the many strategies they used at individual, relational and cultural and societal levels. While there is important learning to be taken from these experiences, it is perhaps even more important to shift our focus away from placing all of the responsibilities on students, and recognising the institutional responsibilities of tertiary education providers, and the structural responsibilities of governments to provide adequate resources for students.

Poipoia te kakano, kia puāwai. Nurture the seed and it will blossom.

(Source unknown) (Moorhouse, 2020 p. 49)

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Note

[1]Valid percentages have been utilised for the quantitative survey data.

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