

The most important thing I learned in practice

Awhina Hollis-English, (Ngāti Porou, Kahungunu ki Wairoa, Te Whānau ā Apanui, Whakatōhea)

When I was invited to talk at this symposium, I couldn't say no. It was the opportunity to come back to where I trained, to talk to future Māori social workers, and to see the lecturers who inspired me and shaped who I am today. There's absolutely nothing better than that.

When I was invited to do this keynote talk, they said, "Just talk about the stuff you learned when you were a social worker" ... and I was like, "Did you know I've never actually been employed as a social worker?" My life and journey mirror those of many social workers in that we do not always take an employment opportunity that's simply called 'Social Work,' but we take our training and apply these social work skills to many roles, both in our professional and personal lives. So today, I will reflect upon the 'stuff I've learned' as a social work student and how I've grown, both in my career and my personal life.

I started out studying 20 years ago at Victoria University, where I met my husband and had a wonderful time making life-long friendships, but not doing what I should have, which was study. We moved to Dunedin and I decided to find a degree that would suit my personality, so I enrolled in a paper called "Working with People." I had no idea it was a social work paper. The first assignment I did was one of those self-reflection ones: asking questions like 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I come from?' I got my first ever 'A grade' and knew I'd made a good choice.

I've never seen myself as an academic person. At school I struggled with maths and didn't even do science. I couldn't spell and my 7th form English teacher didn't think I should bother with the bursary exam.

But I got enough grades to attend university and I was partly naive enough, partly pig-headed enough, to know that I could do it if I worked hard.

In this reflection I will address three simple ideas:

1. **Teka tae noa kia reka** – fake it till you make it
2. **Te whakakoha rangatiratanga** – the gift of time and being in the moment
3. **Kia mau ki to ukaipo kia mau hoki ki to whānau** – keep a hold of your roots

Teka tae noa kia reka – fake it till you make it.

When I got into social work I had the opportunity to reflect upon my upbringing. I'll share a bit about myself before explaining my first key point.

My brother and I were raised by our mum and dad in the 80s and 90s. I was oblivious to a lot of the financial struggles and historical trauma my parents were dealing with, like many of our people have. My father—who grew up on the East Coast, tūturu Ngāti—had very limited access to education and employment opportunities and, having been kicked out of home when he was 14, he was forced to make his own way as a kid in Wellington, using his own wits and grit and with limited support from some kind relations. My father didn't learn to read until my brother and I were learning to read, so I was brought up not really realising what a challenging life he had led, until I did my social work degree and started really unpacking how these things can affect us.

The strength that my father has is matched by that of my mother, who is the 10th of

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CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Awhina Hollis-English
awhinaenglish@gmail.com

14 kids, in an Irish Catholic Pākehā family and grew up in Taita and Naenae. My mother's upbringing was similar in some ways to my dad's, but also very, very different. I won't go into it, it would take forever! But I learnt through these two people that, while culturally and historically they are very different, they somehow make it work.

My mother learnt how to make a wonderful situation with very little money, no family support around us as kids but a lot of creativity and imagination in place of money and toys. While dad focused on working hard in his job to provide for us. Te Ao Māori was always important to my Pākehā mother; she did a reo Māori degree and bought me Ranginui Walker's *Ka Whaiwhai Tonu Mātou* as a 21st present. So I was really lucky to have parents who instilled the importance of our whakapapa and taught me the value of hard work. Whakapapa and hard work carried me through my social work degree and gave me the strength to keep going.

At the time I started studying, in my mind I always had this nagging, relentless voice that I wasn't yet 'enough.' In later years, when I interviewed Māori social workers for my research, I heard this same reflection all over the country – a pervasive sense that "I'm not Māori enough," "I'm not fluent enough," "I'm not old enough," "I'm not young enough," "I'm not smart enough." All of these intelligent capable people feel that they're not enough, just like I did. I remember thinking – well who is saying this to us? Who is putting these voices in our heads that we're not enough? These insecurities mean nothing to the whānau we are working with as social workers, they don't care whether we got an A or a C in our essays, they just want us to do our jobs and do them well.

These insecurities drove me further into studying and are perhaps why I went on to do a Masters and PhD while still in my 20s. Now, looking back, I felt: "I'm not old enough, I haven't had kids, I haven't had the life experience." Looking back now, having had kids and a fair chunk of life

experience, I no longer think young people must read all the books before they 'work with people,' or that social workers must have kids before they can support a whānau. While it is my inclination to read that book so I am better prepared, my studies gave me the lens through which I can appreciate my achievements and the strength of character to ignore the nagging voices who might make us doubt our self-worth.

In my generation (I'm an Xennial) it's common to hear people throw around the label "Plastic Māori." Our parents moved to urban areas, Whina Cooper told them to marry Pākehā and Te Kōhanga Reo was yet to be established in small towns (I missed it by a few years). There was a lot of language loss and disconnection from intergenerational supports, so we struggled along, culturally isolated within nuclear families. My dad took us home to Waipiro every summer, but I didn't like the road between Napier and everywhere-on-the-East-Coast, so much of my childhood memories are of feeling carsick on the dirt roads with no seatbelts and lying sick on someone's couch when we arrived, with all these beautiful Aunties and Uncles coming to give me a kiss and ask "How are you, my dear?"

We need to stop calling people (or ourselves) Plastic Māoris. One of the things I feel really strongly about is that we are enough. We are enough. If you feel like you're not fluent enough, that is just an internal voice telling you that. That's not enough to hold you back from making a difference in the world.

Teka, tae noa kia reka is a phrase that has been quite influential in my life: it means, "fake it till you make it." It's not about being a fake person, it's about combatting those insecurities, and knowing that with the knowledge, skills and values gained through our studies and our whakapapa, that we "got this," we are enough.

So "teka tae noa ki a reka", fake it till you make it. If you do, then all of a sudden, you'll realise you're actually making it.

Te whakakoha rangatiratanga – the gift of time and being in the moment

In my 30s I became a lecturer at Massey and I started having kids—everything changed for me, as you can imagine, it does. As a lecturer, you have the luxury and the purpose to reflect on the application of theory to practice. Being a lecturer is very theoretical, while being a parent is very practical. I found that the process of applying theory to practice to be a useful tool in my 30s as I endeavoured to juggle all that life threw at me.

When Taina Pohatu developed Ngā Takepū for Te Wananga Aotearoa (and for social work in general) I was inspired, and like many of my Māori social work colleagues, I began to engage with Takepū so that I could use it both in my life and my teaching. Being a Māori social work lecturer is not just about teaching students about Māori social work, it's about living and breathing our research and content because we love it; it's so closely connected to our identities and our interests. My colleagues and I decided to live and breathe Ngā Takepū so we could be better at teaching it to our students.

Te whakakoha rangatiratanga was probably one of the most significant of his takepū for me as I was a new mum, coming to terms with this new role. *Te whakakoha rangatiratanga* is about engaging in a way that is really focussed on the other person, being in the moment, giving the gift of time and respect and making that relationship real and completely genuine.

As I worked on it and on myself, I realised that I was doing a hundred million things and not being present in the moment, especially with my kids. I'm very much a 'doer', shall we *do* this? Ok, we've done it! Then, I'm thinking about my children, am I present with my children? Am I focussing on them? I challenged myself to apply social work theories to my own personal life and to use the skills and knowledge I've gained

to try and build a happy life for my kids, one that honours their rangatiratanga and also allows for my own values to be present in everyday life.

I would challenge every social worker, especially Māori social workers, to allow yourself the time and space to apply our models and theories to yourselves, these are our taonga, we can use them, apply them to our own lives in order to better enrich them.

Kia mau ki to ūkaipō kia mau hoki ki tō whānau – keep a hold of your roots

We have three children. My oldest is eight and youngest is four, in between is my daughter Ramari who is six. When I was pregnant with Ramari, I contracted a virus called cytomegalovirus (CMV) that passed to her through the umbilical cord and resulted in severe brain damage. Cytomegalovirus caused a variety of damage to her brain and body, microcephaly, epilepsy, spastic quadriplegia cerebral palsy, she is non-verbal and non-ambulatory. It's the type of virus that can sneak in there and do a little or a lot of damage or not be passed on to the baby at all. We consider ourselves lucky that she made it out alive and has a rich and fulfilling life given all that CMV threw at her.

Having a medically complex child thrusts you into the health system in an 'all or nothing' type of way. We have had multiple paediatricians, occupational therapists, speech and language, orthopaedics, physio, the list goes on, but most importantly today, social workers. I've given up work so that I can take on this new role as a parent of a medically complex child and I've taken my training and social work experience into this new role. I've clung to my social work knowledge, I've needed my communication skills, advocacy skills; I've leaned on my values and beliefs in ways I never thought possible. And I hold my social work training closely, knowing it has helped me be a stronger mother and better advocate for my children.

Looking back at my social work training and the knowledge I've gained about whānau strength and resilience helped us shape our own whānau. We moved back home to be surrounded by grandparents and connections. Strengthening those relationships with people we love and who love and care about us has also helped build up our own whānau. I've learnt as a social worker, as a mother and of course as an academic, that children thrive in an environment where they are surrounded by love and loved ones. For me personally I needed to learn to say 'no' to new employment opportunities and to say 'yes' to self-care, and to take the time with my children. I learned that our whānau need to have access to Māori social workers; that our taha Māori is key to us feeling whole and that, even though we can have amazing medical specialists, sometimes we need a Māori practitioner to acknowledge us and sit with us.

A difficulty I've found in my own career and in my research is that Māori can often burn out. One of my research participants called it 'brown face burn out' and while I don't necessarily have a brown face (I get pretty pale in winter!) it is easy for Māori social workers to take on the caseloads of many Māori whānau, as well as being in a position where we support our managers and colleagues with their cultural education. Alongside that, we will guide our workplace with improving its bicultural practices through mihi whakatau and karakia. We will also be trying to support our Marae, attending hui, mowing lawns and doing dishes at tangi. As we get older we will be caring for our parents and our mokopuna if we are lucky enough.

As Māori social workers, we gain our strength from these connections. We strengthen them when we are struggling, we lean on them in the tough times and we give back to them when we can. For many Māori social workers, myself included, it is

the additional workload that 'fills our cups' and helps us feel the energy needed to do the day-to-day mahi. For me, it is the colleagues and my own whānau and whakapapa that gives me strength so that I can then give to others. Supervision—good Kaupapa Māori supervision—is so, so important for us. Alongside this, especially when we are young and new Māori social workers, are role models.

Throughout my studies and various jobs I was lucky enough to have Māori role models to learn from and who guided me. This was particularly important to me when I lived away from my roots. As young Māori social workers we must gravitate towards people who are open to sharing their practice with us and we reciprocate however possible. I've had many mentors so far and hope to have many in my future. Being open to opportunities and humble enough to know that there is so much more to learn are key characteristics I live by. Now in my 40s I hope to be in a position where I can continue to learn from mentors and in turn, inspire others to pursue their dreams.

Finally, I just want to say to you that, just because I have a PhD, I'm not any cleverer than anyone else. As Māori social workers, we want to make a difference in the world for whānau, hapu and iwi, however that change might look, we want to build up our people, strive for positives. Having the knowledge that my tipuna are behind me and supporting me along the way has been hugely motivating as well as knowing that something I write or say might inspire someone, particularly a Māori student, to work hard to achieve their goals. I'm the first one to say, if I can get a PhD then anyone can! Through our connections with our roots, our whakapapa, we gain the strength needed for our profession and for challenging times. We gain strength again through giving back to our communities and valuing our matauranga Māori by implementing it in our practice and in our day-to-day lives.