

From a conversation with Honourable Nanaia Mahuta: Social workers reflect on expertise and skills for contributing to policy and political processes

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The purpose of this article is to share learning gained by a small group of registered social work practitioners who participated in a group reflective conversation, reviewing an event at which they had all been present. This article describes the event, the group reflection process and the learnings gained by the social workers.

In fulfilling social work's professional obligation to engage with human rights and social justice concerns (ANZASW, 2019; IFSW, n.d.) social workers need current knowledge of social policy and political processes. According to Aotearoa New Zealand's Social Workers Registration Board's Competency Standards, social workers must be committed to, and advocate for, social, legal and civil rights and justice and be competent in understanding and contributing to policy-making (SWRB, n.d.). According to research conducted by O'Brien (2009), while this professional requirement is clear, examples of social workers enacting practice aimed at change on a macro social policy level is not common—even though concern regarding social justice is prominent for social work practitioners.

An event primarily organised for Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students was attended by a small group of social work practitioners, some of whom accompanied their placement students. The BSW programme is provided at Te Kuratini o Waikato or Wintec, a tertiary education provider based within a provincial city in Te Ika a Maui or North Island of

Aotearoa New Zealand. The Honourable Nanaia Mahuta (Waikato-Tainui, Ngāti Maniapoto and Ngāti Manu; Minister of Foreign Affairs and Local Government and Associate Minister for Māori Development and local Member of Parliament (MP) for Hauraki-Waikato) met with the students and practitioners for a two-hour conversation. All present at the event were able to interact with, and closely observe, a senior cabinet minister who works in politics locally, nationally and globally providing an experience where personal, cultural, and political aspects of the Minister's life were brought closer to all who were present. Seated on chairs and mattresses on the floor in Te Kōpū Mania o Kiririroa's whareniui and supported by Wintec's kaumātua Tame Pokaia, the Minister (who had been briefed by tutors from the BSW programme), answered questions from students and practitioners (see Figures 1 and 2).

At the conversation's conclusion, social work practitioners present expressed excitement and renewed energy from the experience. The idea was put forward that there could be value in unpacking the experience together to distill understanding of what had been acquired from the event. Three weeks later, the five practitioners met again, this time on Zoom to conduct a collegial reflective conversation to review and consider their experiences. What follows is a discussion of points raised in that conversation—these are expanded to

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Figure 1 Classmates Watch on as Tarryn-Louise Retter, a BSW student, asks Minister Mahuta a Question

find links with social work and other theory and literature in order to extract the learning and connections made that day.

Meeting Minister Mahuta

During the 2 hours at Te Kōpū Mania o Kirikiriroa Marae the Minister shared openly about her personal and professional life. Her discussion was broad-ranging and included: her upbringing and parents' lives; thinking process regarding decisions such as when her children were ready to walk to school by themselves; pathway into politics including influences particularly by women from Māori Women's Welfare League; responding to challenges and conflict; hopes for Aotearoa New Zealand; gaining her *moko kauae*; the importance of finding your spark /super power; the importance of being present; experiences regarding the pandemic personally and within government; Te Tiriti o Waitangi; achievements within Parliament and her own community.

Minister Mahuta is aware of the publication of this article, has reviewed it, and supports its content. People appearing in images in this article have given written permission for the images to be used.

Background

The Aotearoa New Zealand's Social Workers Registration Board's Competency Standards refer to the obligation for registered social workers to be competent in understanding and contributing to policymaking in order to advocate for social, legal, and civil rights and justice (SWRB, n.d.). Social justice commentators emphasise how important it is that social workers understand and engage with structural macro change if social justice is to be gained. Bartley (2018) states:

As an act of resistance against neoliberalism, social work must reassert its position towards social justice, and this is invariably a political endeavour, which understandably scares social

workers. But as McKendrick and Webb (2014, p. 358) put it, “the decision for or against a political stance becomes a little clearer when one understands that the decision is also a choice for or against social justice”.

The need to “reassert social work’s position” is relevant, since social workers’ involvement with macro social concerns is not commonly part of the practice. This is asserted within research conducted in 2009 with ANZASW members as participants. Findings were, that while social work practitioners regard issues of social justice as being of high importance, the largest proportion of examples participants provided of social justice practice were centred around individual cases where change benefited outcomes of the individual case but was not designed to create further change (O’Brien, 2009, p. 5). A much smaller proportion of examples were provided in the research where change was affected at a broader policy and political level (O’Brien, 2009, p. 9). To translate social justice practice from a micro level to macro, O’Brien (2009) argued that practitioners must be able to provide:

... the skills, support, and resources to ensure that the practitioners’ work is converted and translated into active participation in the broader structural dimensions of redistribution, recognition, and respect (p. 10).

This area of social workers’ professional practice provides a challenge for social work educators, as noted by Fraser (2009), “Although advocacy and social action are important features of social work practice, they are not always easy to ‘teach’, nor straightforward to learn” (Fraser, 2009, p. 259). Academic staff note that students’ interest in social policy learning is enhanced when guest lecturers with direct experience of politics and policy-making meet students and share their real-life experiences. These kinds of experiences provide authentic learning, a philosophy of learning that argues students actively construct meaning

from what they are learning rather than being passive receivers of information. When learning opportunities provided are authentic and relate to the real world of what they are interested in, learners’ motivation and engagement increases. Herrington and Herrington (2007) identified value in providing authentic student-centered learning experiences “... where students are motivated to learn in rich, relevant and real-world contexts” (p. 68).

The reflective conversation

Reflective practice involves practitioners using a variety of methods to help them to become aware of ways in which one’s own background, perspectives, and ways of assuming the world works impact on how they see a situation within a holistic context (Fook, 2016). Additionally, merging a reflective practice method into a group conversation with social workers from diverse backgrounds and different fields of practice can enrich opportunities for learning since multiple knowledge can be shared and participants are enabled to share their personal and collective experiences (Bilous et al., 2018).

The use of reflective practice processes within communities of interest (groups of teachers who meet to conduct collegial discussions), have been found to be valuable in supporting and sustaining professional practice (Kuh, 2015). In a social work context, revitalisation of the use of reflective practice within a group and peer supervision is gaining support (Davys & Beddoe, 2021). The event with Minister Mahuta provided a professional development opportunity for the practitioners, and the reflective conversation held 3 weeks later, enhanced that professional development further. During the reflective conversation the process of sharing their observations and discussing meanings attached to what they noticed, further exploration and learning, occurred.

All collaborative reflective conversation participants were registered social workers from a range of social work fields. These were: a migrant women's service, a reintegration service for people leaving prison, a youth therapeutic service, and social work education. They were invited to participate in the reflective conversation and to be part of collaboratively writing up what was learned in the conversation with the possibility of it being submitted to a journal for publication.

Connaughten and Edgar (2012) cited a reflective model, developed from Borton's (1970) and Rolfe et al's (2011) earlier models, chosen to structure the discussion. The model involves using three questions: "What?", "So what?" and "Now what?" This simple format helpful for a group conversation pushed participants to think about and articulate what they were thinking, promoting awareness. Reflective sub-questions were added under each of the three questions to support discussion. Photographs taken at the event were sent to participants in advance allowing them to begin reflecting on the event with photographs as a visual prompt. Writing up the experience of the conversation involved input from all participants to ensure everyone's perspective was included and to ensure they were each comfortable with what was finally provided should it be published.

Covered in the conversation, and provided below, include the following topics: the broad ranging and inter-connected psycho-social nature of the narrative; the Minister's practice that related strongly with social work practice; the importance of not being de-railed by negativity; the importance of paying careful attention to relationships and viewing each encounter as unique; the connection between social work practice and knowledge and political work; Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its place and value for understanding identity and upholding integrity in relationships; her approach in responding to difficult conflictual

situations; the importance of knowing and returning to your *puna* or wellspring for well-being and renewal; and the value and experience of participating in the reflective conversation.

Theory and practice of social work

The inter-connected nature of the Minister's narrative ranging between inter- and intra-personal areas of her life to broad global concerns stood out to participants. She referred to her own parenting and home life, being within the government as the pandemic came into Aotearoa New Zealand and her role as Foreign Affairs Minister. This way of sharing across such wide-ranging topics resonated strongly for participants because of the way that everyday social work focuses on very personal impacts of factors often traceable to broad social political and even global factors.

Social work's definition and practice hinges on a bicultural mandate based on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and a psycho-social approach situating and examining social concerns within complex systems including whānau, neighbourhoods, employment, education, government policy and business, societal discourses, and chronological systems. While the Minister herself did not refer to social work, participants recounted themes throughout her discussions that they saw connecting strongly with social work practice. For example, she spoke about maintaining focus and awareness of what has been achieved and is to be achieved, taking small steps, and being careful not to get caught up with negativity when challenges are complex. At the same time, the Minister emphasised the importance of remaining present so as not to miss things that may be unexpected. Participants reflected that these comments could be related directly to their practice—they drew parallels with unravelling problems alongside families and communities, breaking problems into smaller parts, maintaining focus, and the importance of noticing and celebrating even small amounts

of progress. The Minister noted that it was important not to be derailed by negativity, a point reiterated by a participant quoted here: “If we get caught up in too much negativity we can lose sight of where we are headed.”

A participant saw a connection in the Minister’s discussion to *ngā takepū* (Pohatu & Tīmata, 2008). These are Māori principles and guidelines compiled by Pohatu and Tīmata (2008) promoting what is needed for developing healthy relationships. Among the *takepū*, careful attention to relationships and kaupapa are important in guiding successful relationships. The principle of *Whakakoha Rangatiratanga* refers to: “... recognising that successful engagement and endeavour requires conscious application of respectful relationships with kaupapa and people” (Pohatu & Tīmata, 2008, p. 244).

Participants made multiple connections between what the Minister shared and their social work practice. The importance of thinking critically, having flexibility and being open was relatable to key social work competencies (SWRB, n.d.). Another connection they spoke of was the importance for social workers to maintain a view where each situation encountered is unique, rather than fixed or black and white—this way of viewing human concerns has the potential to lead to dangerous, oppressive, and unethical practice.

The Minister made a direct reference to Urie Bronfenbrenner’s eco-systems theory referred to in Eriksson et al. (2018) which, she explained, aids her understanding of complex situations. She noted that the theory helps her recognise the importance of collaboration in creating change, as well as dialogue and maintaining relationships.

It was noticed by participants that the Minister’s discussion of how she works was future-focused. They commented that this resonated, as it is a familiar way of viewing problems and concerns in social work. People involved with social work services

need acknowledgment and exploration of their concerns and difficulties—but looking ahead to what may be achieved or different in the future is important also, as this approach aids in creating opportunities. Hearing this perspective within the Minister’s approach was affirming for the practitioners since it is a common and useful approach in social work.

Social work and political work

During the reflective conversation, participants shared that they could see an important relationship between social work and political work—a realisation for some as the discussion unfolded, and something that they had not seen so clearly before. One participant described their reason for attending as being because they needed to connect with social work’s broad view beyond her own field and agency—the bigger picture. On her return from the event, she described her experience to her agency colleagues:

I shared what I experienced with colleagues—it was good for me and good for them to hear.

Participants reflected that they had previously assumed that influencing and being involved with policy and politics was beyond their experience, but this assumption had been challenged by the experience. One participant summed it up when she said:

She made being involved with politics seem possible.

One participant (pictured in Figure 2), commented that social workers have direct, grounded working experience, knowledge, and ability to contribute to advising analysing and creating policy and that listening to the Minister affirmed this belief. They argued that social workers gain knowledge and expertise through working directly with whānau, family, and communities impacted by cultural, political, systemic processes.



Figure 2. One of the Social Work Practitioners and Co-author of this Article Fariya Begum, Asks about the Place of Ethnic Representation Within the Minister's Work.

We have skills we use daily to collaborate with whānau and families to create solutions to the very challenges that government policies are creating or influencing. Further, she emphasised that the important social work practice of whakawhanaungatanga (process of establishing relationships, relating well to others, Te Aka, 2022) is also key for contributing in political processes and referred to Minister Mahuta's expertise in diplomacy. In summary, the participants were recognising that the Minister had ways of working and viewing situations that were not just familiar but, in significant ways, were like every day social work practice.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

The ANZASW Code of Ethics (2019) notes that members of the Association are committed to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This is the case even though society in general in

Aotearoa New Zealand is not governed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi (ANZASW, 2019). Minister Mahuta has engaged in matters relating to the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) and Te Tiriti o Waitangi (1844) during her political career and made reference to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (1844) throughout her narrative. She stated that Te Tiriti o Waitangi promotes a strong relationship between Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti where each are confident and strong in their own identities, pinpointing a theme in Minister Mahuta's political approach. She described a hope she holds for Aotearoa New Zealand, which is a time when her daughter's Scottish friend would be confident in her Scottish heritage and also speak Te Reo Māori. This vision can be identified in a speech in April, 2021 to NZ's China Council where the Minister referred to Te Tiriti o Waitangi emphasising that Te Tiriti highlights important considerations regarding relationships between peoples and nations. Considerations include the importance of respect for nations' self-determination, customs and values which must be respected and maintained (Mahuta, 2021).

The discussion with the Minister helped reinvigorate participants' understanding of the relevance and importance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (1844) in Aotearoa New Zealand today. They could see it provided a framework for strengthening relationships between Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti New Zealanders in a global context. Some participants commented that the Minister's explanations clarified for them the place held by Tangata Tiriti New Zealanders in Aotearoa New Zealand, who do not relate to the British settler side of the original agreement. In particular, participants shared that the discussion of the Tiriti o Waitangi has provided confidence in referring to it within their work, both in direct social work practice and social work education.

Sustaining practice

Participants noted a line of questioning that students asked about more than once and

in a number of ways. The question asked was “How does the Minister maintain her mana and sense of self—given the strongly western context of parliament and global politics?” Further, they wanted to know how she has managed to be successful and not become discouraged, particularly when she is confronted by challenging dynamics and interactions. This is a theme for social work and particularly for Māori social workers where institutions that employ social workers predominantly have a strong Western orientation in their philosophies and norm-governed practices.

Participants recounted and appreciated a response the Minister provided to this query: she described a process that involved not reacting too quickly, allowing herself time, even possibly including sleeping; it is during this time that she is able to develop her understanding of the encounter or concern and then consider how she can respond. She noted the importance of maintaining and looking after relationships and the importance of dialogue—discussing and talking about concerns that have been raised.

A participant remembering the Minister’s description provided above found *tau kumekume*, another *takepū* from Pohatu and Tīmata (2008) discussed earlier, helpful in understanding the process she described. *Tau kumekume* refers to recognising that tension is always present in any endeavour or relationship, positive or negative. Noticing tension is important since it provides an opportunity for developing insight and interpretation (Pohatu & Tīmata, 2008).

Conflict and tension is often present in social work, and social workers must understand what tension is about and learn to cope with and use conflict effectively. This can involve noticing tension, learning to reflect well, managing our own reactions, and maintaining practice in assisting people who are facing often complex challenges. While in a situation there may not be space for reflection on action (Schon, 1987) and the Minister’s approach of allowing

herself space to settle and reflect in order to understand what has happened and deciding on what approach to take, relates to this principle of *tau kumekume*, where tension is used as a means for identifying an opportunity for reflection and deepening understanding.

A participant was inspired by the Minister’s description of maintaining her wellbeing through visiting her puna (well-spring). A puna is a natural source known to bring life-sustaining water from the depths of Papatūānuku (the mother of the Atua) to all of her descendants. The Minister referred to puna and wellspring as a metaphor for where she goes to keep herself sustained in the high-pressure environment and with the responsibilities of her mahi. When referring to her well-spring, she talked about immersing herself in the things that give her life, including quality time with her whānau which she had to do more of with the Covid-19 lockdowns. In social work, self-care is recognised as a professional requirement to ensure that practice is safe and ethical.

A further reflection enjoyed by participants was the Minister’s emphasis on being sure to find out and *know* your spark or superpower; maintaining an optimistic view and avoiding being cynical. Participants described feeling inspired, hopeful, uplifted and unexpectedly and powerfully restored by the event.

I was blown away and thankful. I’m still excited.

At the conclusion of the reflective conversation, participants evaluated the reflective experience. They found it had been a good experience and that, by recalling, thinking and talking about what they heard and saw, their understanding and learning developed further. Additionally, reflecting in a group meant memories were sparked by others’ recollections. Hearing the meaning other group members drew from the experience meant participants saw things in the experience that they had not noticed or valued earlier. As one participant noted:

Everyone got something different from the experience.

Participants said that the group conversation allowed them to connect with one another in a meaningful way. They found that being from different fields of practice did not impede collaboration in the conversation and, in fact, enhanced learning.

It was more rich than on the day itself.

The value of future engagement with each other was recognised. This is noteworthy as, according to Weeks (2003, as cited in Rollins et al., 2017, p. 50), collaborative activities and collective processes among social service and social work education providers are an important counter to neoliberalism. As noted in the opening of this article while social workers consider practice to address social justice concerns important, this is less often aimed at macro or at sustainable change (O' Brien, 2009). This discussion highlights the opportunity that social workers meeting to discuss, reflect and learn together in itself provides a link for enactment of broader change. Sustainable change can be created because collaborative activities increase responsiveness capacity and enable the advocacy effort needed for changing ineffective structures (Weeks, 2003, as cited in Rollins, et al., 2017).

Conclusion

During a reflective conversation between social work practitioners revisiting an event held with the Right Honourable Nanaia Mahuta, participants were able to identify that social workers possess skills, knowledge, and experience that mean that they have skills which can be used to influence policy regarding macro concerns. They were inspired by recognising the value that social work knowledge, experience, and practice can provide at a macro level and the inter-connectedness of micro and macro spheres. As a result, the participants said that

they could already see change within their practice such as thinking more about macro concerns, being proactive in connecting with politicians, and staying abreast of changes within politics and policy. Also, they spoke about a new desire to sharpen awareness of political macro concerns and to be proactive in seeking out opportunities such as speaking with relevant politicians and researching what is happening in Parliament. Participants also reflected on the confidence and reinvigoration they gained from being at the event, which deepened and extended further when they reflected on the experience as a group of practitioners.

The value and relevance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi were affirmed by participants, including how this document upholds mana and cultural identity for people within Aotearoa New Zealand. Recognition of the importance of developing and maintaining a strong cultural identity and personal attributes such as our *spark* were valuable reminders for participants. Emphasis on the importance of practice that maintains wellness within demanding difficult contexts, and knowing where to draw your renewal from, reminded participants that we have sources that restore and support us which we must continue to use.

Holding a collaborative reflective conversation between a small number of social workers from different fields provided an opportunity for renewal, connection and to gain depth of understanding of the event they had shared and why it had impacted them so positively. Through reflecting together, participants could re-connect with and re-affirm social work's collective purpose. In turn, the recharged and invigorated collective commitment becomes available as these practitioners engage with social processes and services, service users and social work students. The benefits of the experience, it is hoped, will generate ideas for other opportunities for learning between social work education and social work communities and networks.

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