Preparedness for practice: New social workers and the core competence standards.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Social Work

Massey University, Manawatū, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Scott Taylor Moore

2023

Abstract

This thesis examines how newly qualified social workers (NQSW) perceive their readiness to practise social work measured against the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) core competence standards. The research also explores what additional skills, knowledge and training they think they need to assist them in their social work role. The findings were evaluated using the literature from both Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. In general, the literature indicated that NQSW do think that their education has prepared them for practise, with some studies expressing concerns about the working environments that they are graduating into. Graduates need to be supported once in employment and their profession requires a lifelong, learning, journey, and they should not be expected to begin practice with advanced skills.

A qualitative methodology informed by a social constructionist framework and critical theory was used to explore the research questions. The data was collected using semi structured interviews with nine NQSW. Thematic analysis was employed to process the rich data and identify themes that assisted in addressing the research questions. There are limitations to the study: it is a small sample size, and the participants self-selection may influence the findings. There were demographic limitations too as the research did not gather specific data regarding, age and disability, or if they were from urban or rural environments. Another limitation related to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions at the time of the interviews which required the use of online interviews for some participants.

The research findings support previous studies, where participants generally expressed a positive view regarding how their study had prepared them to practise social work. Field education placements remain a significant strategy for contributing to the sense of preparedness of NQSW. The findings highlight the wide range of perceptions regarding competence after graduating and a NQSWs journey from education to employment. It captured the sense of preparedness of NQSWs and how this is affected by the skills, knowledge and training gaps in their practice and also by the teaching and the learning of the competence standards. Preparedness was also found to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of graduate support programmes to assist in transitioning from academia to employment was also noted.

A recommendation from this study is that there is benefit in more longitudinal studies to be completed into the field of readiness to practise in Aotearoa New Zealand. Due to the modest size of the study, it would be beneficial for a larger study to be undertaken using a larger sample size. Future research could capture additional demographic data that includes participants' disabilities, caring responsibilities and if they are practising in a rural environment. Consideration of how NQSW might develop greater awareness of macro level social work was also a recommendation from the research. Due to the varied awareness of the competence standards by participants and the different curriculum in higher education institutions, a capabilities framework, rather than core competence standards, might be a more reliable measure to assess the perception of readiness of NQSW.

Acknowledgements

This master's journey identifies a large cast of support people. I am grateful for the Massey collective: Course co-ordinators, indefatigable librarians, and support staff. Any expectation I held was besieged and overwhelmed by their efforts. My first post graduate paper was with Senior Professional Clinician Helen Simmons, subsequent papers were co-ordinated by Dr. Nicky Stanley-Clarke, Lecturer Ange Watson, Prof Kieran O'Donoghue and Associate Professor Polly Yeung.

Dr. Vincent Wijeysingha and Associate Professor Kathryn Hay were my supervisors. I am indebted to them for their guidance. They provided steady awhi (support) and encouragement. When we started, I had known Kath for 27 years and Vincent for 2 weeks. Kath had been my tutor during my undergraduate degree and since that time has become a prolific academic with a sterling reputation. Vincent is a kindred spirit. He has the innate ability to unlock academic concepts with the clarity and ease that the Rosetta stone deciphered the hieroglyphics. All the interaction we had was filled with grace, humility, and regular laughter. I am grateful for such an informed and dynamic duo.

I am also grateful for the support of The Salvation Army and Jigsaw Whanganui, who provided financial support, demonstrating a commitment to education and the value they place in social work as a profession.

I acknowledge JTM's selflessness in the support that was shown and JEV who provided a savviness in her understanding of the concepts covered, both generous people with incredible minds. I would also like to thank my three daughters; Trinity, Sienna and Danielle who never fail to dazzle, challenge and impress. I am proud to be their dad.

A final acknowledgement to the staff of Mudducks Café, on the banks of the Whanganui awa. Their piccolos and flat whites kept Sunday afternoons humming as I decorated their tables with laptops, books, readings, highlighters, and carrot cake. Salute!

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Glossary

Awhi	A Māori word meaning to support, embrace, cherish.
Kaupapa Māori agency	An agency using predominantly Māori principles.
Manākitanga	Displaying hospitality.
Māori	Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.
Pou	Structure or symbol of support, metaphoric post. Something that strongly supports a cause or is a territorial symbol, such as a mountain or landmark, representing that support.
Tāngata whenua	The people of the land.
Tautoko	To support, verify, advocate, or accept and agree with.
Te Ao Māori	The Māori world.
Te reo Māori	The language of Māori within Aotearoa New Zealand.
Wānanga	Māori higher education institution.
Whakawhanaungatanga	Intrinsic and deep connection with others.
Whānau	Māori concept of family that encompasses both nuclear and extended family. The foundation of Māori social, economic, and political society.

Chapter One: Introduction

The newly qualified are the practitioners of today, the supervisors and educators of tomorrow and the managers and employers of the future.

Maggie Kirby-Barr (Sharpe et al., 2011)

This thesis studies the perceptions of readiness to practise social work by newly qualified social workers (NQSW). The first years of employment for a newly qualified practitioner are recognised as critical in the process of becoming a professional in whatever field chosen by the graduate (Grant et al., 2017). Therefore, having a good understanding of the sense of preparedness that NQSW have and the skills and knowledge that they feel useful is beneficial research for our profession.

New social work graduates venture into a profession that has had intense public scrutiny and attention. In 2013 at the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) anniversary conference, the then Minister for Social Development and Employment- Paula Bennett, raised concerns about the present and future social workforce coming through the universities and tertiary institutes (Beddoe, 2014). In addition, the then Children's Commissioner, Dr. Russell Wills, raised concerns about perceived deficits in crucial areas of practice, such as family violence and child protection of social work graduates in New Zealand (Radio New Zealand, April 2, 2015). The intensity of the public gaze is not unique to Aotearoa New Zealand and a perusal of research shows that around the world the social work profession has also been at the centre of similar media scrutiny (Grant et al., 2017; Hunt, 2017; Moorhead, 2019). This is the social work environment that NQSW graduate into. Therefore, there is value in capturing their sense of readiness and what skills, training and knowledge they may require in order to be more prepared for such a challenging profession.

This chapter sets out the research aims and objectives and explains the reason behind the chosen study. A definition of key terms, and the outline of the thesis structure is presented.

Research aims and objectives

The aims of the research project were to:

a) Identify how prepared NQSW perceive themselves to be, measured against the SWRB core competence standards.

b) Explore which of the core competence standards NQSW believe they need more skills, knowledge, or training in.

The objective of the study was to understand how prepared newly qualified social workers perceived themselves to be for practice and the measure used for this is their sense of competence regarding the SWRB core competence standards. Exploration is also made regarding the skills and knowledge they felt they needed more support with to assist them in their social work role.

The research methodology to gather perspective and insights from the participants was a qualitative research design. Nine NQSW were recruited and interviewed. The data that they provided was analysed for themes and patterns.

Researcher's interest in the topic

The research topic has its genesis in 1998 when the researcher was also a NQSW, employed as a Probation Officer assisting the Rotorua District and High Courts. At that time the perceptions of my own readiness were mixed. I felt competent in some things, less competent in others, but had a general feeling that my four-year social work degree had equipped me to do the job. I had completed two placements, one in Community Corrections, which had become paid employment in the third year of my degree and one in Adult Mental Health in my final year. Both experiences had provided opportunities to put theoretical knowledge into practice and I had been fortunate to have had the guidance and wisdom of two experienced and supportive placement supervisors.

As I started my first day in my new role in Rotorua, I thought about how my graduating colleagues were faring in their own fields and I asked myself if they were also asking themselves what training, skills and knowledge they needed more support with? Sometimes I reworded this into a 'strengths' perspective. What did I think prepared us best for our professional journey? At that time there were no set competence standards to attain, and registration was an infrequent topic in social work circles. When I considered my own situation, I felt I had been prepared to critically evaluate a situation and had brought with me an awareness of who I was, and the need for cultural sensitivity with service users, their families, and the communities that I worked with. However, I felt that my micro skills were in their infancy, and I was keen to develop the basic assessment and rapport building skills, which are vital for all social work fields.

My social work qualification has allowed me to practise in several different countries within many fields of practice. The subject of 'preparedness to practise' has remained of interest to me and was reignited when I started my masters in 2015.

The Enhancing Readiness to Practise (ER2P) project, undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand by five social work academics between 2016-2019 has been useful for this research and has provided insight and guidance. While other research has been undertaken regarding preparedness to practice (Bates et al., (2010); Grant et al., (2017); Howard et al., (2015); Joubert, (2020); Moorhead, (2019); Moriarty et al., (2011), but this research is unique in the use of the 10 core competence standards as a measure. In each interview undertaken I travelled back to my own professional beginnings, and I valued the conversations that I had with the participants of this study. I hope this

research is useful for future generations of social workers and the academics and supervisors who train them.

Definition of key terms

There are several abbreviations and key terms that are used within the thesis and for purposes of clarity they are defined as follows:

Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW)

Professional organisation that governs social work within Aotearoa New Zealand.

Field education-placements

A part of Work Integrated Learning (WIL). Also known as 'practicum' or 'placement. Previously referred to as 'Fieldwork'. It is a core component of social work education within Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas.

Graduate Programme

A supportive programme to assist newly qualified workers develop skills, knowledge, and capabilities. This may include reduced caseloads, more supervision and involvement of mentors (Keen et al., 2016).

***Newly qualified social worker* (NQSW)**

For the purposes of this research a NQSW is a social worker who has completed their qualifying social work education within two years of their participation in the study (Ballantyne et al., 2019).

Social Work Registration Board (SWRB)

Social Work board in Aotearoa New Zealand that regulates and is responsible for ensuring the safety of the public from social workers, monitors and is empowered by the Social Workers Registration Act 2003, s. 99 (1)(f) to recognise qualifying programmes for the purpose of registration (Ballantyne et al., 2019).

New Zealand Council for Education and Training in the Social Services (NZCETSS).

Educational and regulatory body which provided the initial accreditation and approval for social work courses.

Nga Tikanga Matatika: Code of Ethics

The code of practice provides an ethical framework for social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Oranga Tamariki

Statutory child protection authority in Aotearoa New Zealand

Professional Capabilities Frameworks

A capability framework sets out how individuals and organisations need to adapt, grow and continuously improve to achieve the highest standards of practice (Ballantyne et al., 2019).

Te Kai Awhina Ahumai (TKA)

The professional body that regulates Diplomas and Certificates in Social Work, Youth Work, Counselling, Community Work and Iwi/Māori Social Services.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

The Treaty of Waitangi is the founding document in Aotearoa New Zealand and was first signed in 1840 (Williams & Oliver, 1992).

Thesis structure

The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter one has provided the background to the study topic and the key aims and objectives of the research. Key terms are explained and also an overview of how the researcher's interest in the topic was created and sustained and then put to action 25 years after the initial idea.

Chapter two is the literature review. The background literature regarding newly qualified social workers preparedness has been drawn from research undertaken from around the world, although there is a particular interest in the research from within Aotearoa New Zealand. The sections within this chapter cover the journey of the social work profession and the development regarding competencies and capabilities. It also reflects on key learning methods to develop preparedness within NQSW using field education, whilst studying and graduate support programmes after graduation. The impact of COVID-19 on preparedness is also addressed.

Chapter three relates to the methodology-how the research was organised and conducted. This chapter also looks at the theoretical underpinnings of the research that have informed the analysis. A qualitative methodology was chosen, and the nine recruited subjects were interviewed. The data was then analysed using a thematic analysis, (Braun & Clark, 2016).

Chapter four presents the findings. There were six themes identified and they related to the gaps in the NQSW knowledge and skills, how the competence standards were taught and how they were learnt. The research also documented the impact that COVID-19 had on the NQSW sense of preparedness since 2020 and the importance of the transition from academia to employment.

Chapter five discusses the thematic analysis, which was evaluated in the context of the literature.

Chapter six is the concluding chapter and provides a review of the research questions, the methods that were used to gather the data, suggestions for future study and a reflection on the research process. It concludes with implications for the social work field and recommendations.

Chapter Two: Literature review

Introduction

This chapter presents the existing literature relating to the preparedness to practise of newly qualified social workers (NQSW). It also looks at the wider social work context that contributes to preparedness, both during social work education and after graduation when starting in employment. Many studies from a plethora of countries have produced rich research in the field of preparedness to practice social work, but particular emphasis is given to insights from recent Aotearoa New Zealand projects. The first section of this chapter looks at the development of social work as a profession in Aotearoa New Zealand and the development of measures to determine readiness for practice, such as the competency and capability models. Enabling NQSW to be prepared for practice is a process that occurs both during their study and after they have graduated. The key pedagogies that contribute to preparedness within education, namely field education-placements are examined and then the transition from academia to entering the workforce, with the expectations that accompany this and the support programmes designed to assist the new graduate. The impact that COVID-19 has had on NQSW who have studied over the past three years is reviewed, including how the restrictions have produced both negative and positive consequences for NQSW and to their perceptions of readiness. The final section considers the perceived gaps in research within this field of study and the uniqueness of this research.

To access the literature the researcher has utilised several databases including Discover, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Literature was searched within libraries and online sessions with librarians who assisted in providing effective search terms and research advice. There were several terms used to assist the search and it produced journal articles and academic textbooks written within the past 12 years. This was a parameter included to provide relevance to the literature obtained. Perusing the reference list of relevant research was also undertaken to expand the search. Searching for ‘preparedness’ and ‘social work’ on Google scholar produced 17,616 results and ‘newly qualified’ returned 62. To narrow the number of items, searching was made more specific to the study and excluded anything that was not peer reviewed. Items that were identified from searches were pasted into a word document that continued to grow as ‘preparedness to practise’ has accrued more research within the profession during the past 12 years worldwide.

A matrix model, a research tool to enable storing and comparisons of similar literature (Nolfi, 2020) was used to organise the literature. Information, thoughts, and reflections were captured within a study journal. This study journal allowed the researcher to reflect on the material and give a sense of order and priority to the information. It also provided an opportunity to capture new thoughts or themes when they became evident and before they disappeared under the streams of information that were uncovered during the research process. The study journal also recorded topics and themes that had evolved during the research and writing process.

The development of the social work profession in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The professionalisation of the social work profession has been an international phenomenon that has seen rapid development during the last decade (Acienė & Mačiulskytė 2014). Social work is a global profession, with professional organisations in 129 countries (Lei et al., 2022). This section provides an understanding of why there are set standards in place to give structure to the profession. The requirement to demonstrate competency in the 10 core competence standards is due to the professionalisation of the social work field. The mandatory registration of social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand is relatively new and only came into effect in February 2021 (Banks, 2021; Ministry of Social Development, 2023). To be registered and work as a social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand the prospective worker must demonstrate that they are competent in the 10 core competence standards. This first section considers the literature regarding the social work profession and how the core standards evolved.

Professional social work bodies have participated in the professionalisation of social work (Hunt, 2019). Nash and Munford (2001) provide an overview of the journey the profession has made within Aotearoa New Zealand. This includes the inception of early professional associations which placed social work education high on its list of priorities, to the formation of the Department of Social Welfare in 1972 and why it was established. Nash and Munford (2001) described that there was tension around who has the right to define social work and how social workers would be prepared for practice. Hunt et al. (2019) described the development of the New Zealand Council for Education and Training in the Social Services (NZCETSS). This educational and regulatory body which provided the initial accreditation and approval for social work courses was replaced in 2000 by Te Kai Awhina Ahumai (TKA) which introduced a diploma and unit standards for practitioners.

Celebrating 50 years of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), McNabb (2014), maps out the development of professionalisation and the implementation of standards. Whilst there have been many pioneers in the development of the profession, he identifies the social work pioneer, Merv Hancock, as proposing standards and the competency assessment system to promote self-regulation. McNabb (2014) asserts that having the standards affirmed and supported social workers by having “national profession-based standards for self-regulation as an alternative to the state regulation of many other professions” (p.3). He also noted that the ANZASW have enshrined a commitment to the Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The SWRB 10 core competence standards, Ngā Tikanga Matatika (The Code of Ethics) and the policies of the SWRB have all been created with an active bicultural foundation. Cultural awareness is an important factor within social work in Aotearoa New Zealand and developing a strong cultural awareness within the social work curriculum is vital for NQSWs who will be engaged in working with Māori whānau. The ANZASW provides the foundation for social workers and promotes the professions, values; beliefs; ethical considerations; practice standards; and compentence standards required by practising social workers (ANZASW, 2015). Banks, (2021) describes the commitment to bicultural

awareness and practice as being distinctive and that it rejects a monocultural perspective by drawing on the values and concepts of Tāngata Whenua. Accreditation of the social work programmes within the Higher Education Institutions within Aotearoa New Zealand was initially entrusted to the New Zealand Social Work Training Council (NZSWTC) who set the first professional standards and from this, the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) was created, and the 10 core compentence standards were established (see Appendix A).

Competencies and capabilities

Competence-based approaches, whilst common in the social work field abroad are viewed with scepticism due to a perceived limiting of the profession to an over reliance on accountability and procedure-driven forms of practice (Leung, 2007; Wilson, 2013). The literature informs that there is value to the social work profession, the institutions, and all other stakeholders in developing a form of measurement to determine if the theoretical knowledge obtained from a course of study is adequate for achieving the requirements of 'real-world' situations (Grant et al., 2017). Langins and Borgermans (2015) writing from within the European context determined that "using a competency-based system ensured safe and high-quality outcomes for individuals and populations" (p.10). There is a need to determine graduate readiness and also to protect the public from unsafe social work practice and this has created the development of professional competence standards. The competence standards consist of the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and self-efficacy that professionals need to carry out their work (Kang et al., 2013; Mulder, 2014). Langins and Borgermans (2015) argue that competency-based systems improve performance and standardise education programs. Competence standards have been used in other countries such as Canada and the United States of America where, similar to Aotearoa New Zealand, the North American Council on Social Education identified 10 core competence standards of social work practice (Simmons et al, 2008).

Competencies are also visible within other professions such as teaching and nursing. Competence models are seen as an effective means for professional practice and guide the evaluation and development of professional and practice-based learning programmes (Drisko, 2014; Mulder, 2014). The literature brings an awareness of a variety of methods to determine competence (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). As the primary way NQSW are initially prepared for social work practice is through the higher education qualification process, the social work curriculum, therefore, has a significant effect on the professional development of new graduates. The competencies of health and social care professionals create a basis for high-quality care and services (Soares et al., 2019).

There has been an ongoing debate as to what is an effective tool to measure readiness, and this includes the widely debated subject regarding competencies and capabilities (Bates et al, 2010). The question is asked by various stakeholders regarding whether competencies are the best measure to determine readiness and examines alternate approaches employed, like a framework of capabilities. Burton (2019) conducted an 18-

month research project on the Professional capabilities framework (PCF) in the United Kingdom (UK). The professional capabilities framework was introduced in 2010 following research into front-line social work practice in England. A task force overhauled the system and introduced the framework. Burton's findings regarding the suitability of using the professional capabilities frameworks were positive, and the implementation of a capabilities framework was heralded as bringing a "trusted and resilient backbone for the social work profession" (p.50). The framework embedded the values and aspirations for front-line practice and provided "an increased interface with international social work" (p.48). Joubert's (2020) work supports professional capabilities frameworks over competencies and argues against using competency models as they encourage a reduction of complex professional skills to a "tick box approach to assessment" (p.3). Joubert (2020) also asserts the UK has professional standards within the social work profession and the provide established, or normative, behavioural conduct for social workers which are described as "threshold standards necessary for safe and effective practice" (p.3). The capabilities act as a guide to day-to-day practice and assist social workers when confronted by ethical dilemmas. Earlier work by Jayaratne et al. (1997) agreed that social work needs to have specific guidelines, or practice standards, and this supports the findings of Howard et al, (2015) who concluded that "a core set of capabilities can be clearly and consistently identified to indicate the work readiness of social work graduates" (p.18).

Enhancing readiness to practise project (EnhanceR2P)

The Enhance R2P was government funded research within Aotearoa New Zealand (Ballantyne et al., 2019). The study was a collaborative research project undertaken by academics from five higher education institutions (Ballantyne, et al., 2019).

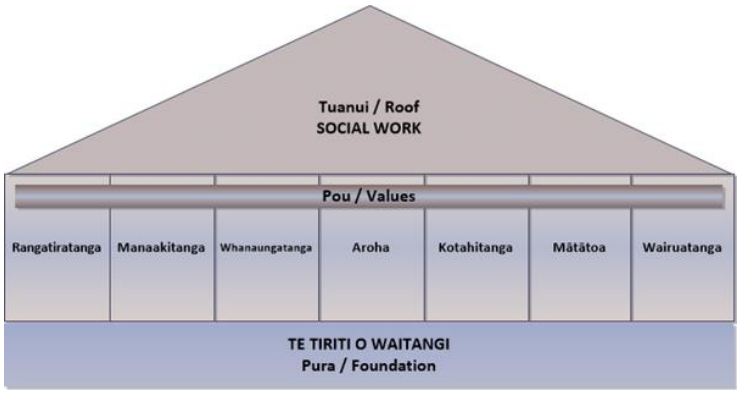
The aim of the project was to develop a professional capabilities framework using "evidence-informed, industry-agreed" (Ballantyne, et al., 2019, p.4) research that could inform and guide the learning experiences for social workers both during and after they graduated. The authors assert that if research is not undertaken "the nature and quality of social work education would rely on ill-founded, anecdotal comments by policy actors" (p.4), which is less than optimal for student outcomes.

The second phase of the Enhance R2P project was described as a "cross country comparative aspect study" (p.48), which replicated an English study by Sharpe et al. (2011). NQSW were asked how they felt their degree programme had prepared them for their present job. They found 68.9% of the participants felt "very" or "fairly well" prepared for their present job (Ballantyne et al., 2019, p.28). This was in comparison to the UK study where, 78% felt "very" or "fairly well" prepared (Sharpe et al., 2011, p.143). Overall, there was satisfaction in terms of NQSW's preparedness that was reflected in the interviews with managers and professional supervisors too (Ballantyne, et al., 2019, p.29). Another aspect that was captured in phase two of the Enhance R2P was the participants' perceived knowledge gaps. These were identified from the research as: "1. child protection, working with Māori, mental health conditions, rights of the child and family violence". (Ballantyne et al.,2019, p.38). The findings agreed with their

English colleagues in that there are limitations from “snapshot research” (p.51) and future research of a more longitudinal approach was needed.

Ballantyne et al. (2022) identified that capability frameworks have greater utility and are a more holistic approach to professional development). Its review of the frameworks encouraged looking at the principles or values that underpin practice. Furthermore, guidance of Tāngata whenua was sought in the project to develop the underpinning values and suitable language was used which embraced Te Ao Māori within the capabilities, which brought value and awareness of the Māori world view. This demonstrates how they might evolve to be embraced within Aotearoa New Zealand and the conclusion from their research is that “rather than using competencies a professional capability framework can guide and inform learning experiences” (p.88). The seven values (see figure 1) developed by the Enhance R2P project have subsequently been utilised as the pou (structure or symbol of support) for Nga Tikanga Matatika, The Code of Ethics in the ANZASW, see figure 1.

Figure 1: Seven Values used as the pou for Nga Tikanga Matatika



Note. Image was obtained from https://www.anzasw.nz/code-of-ethics/

The conclusion reached by the Enhance R2P project is that the SWRB should consider adopting the capabilities framework instead of continuing to use the 10 core competence standards and review and develop this framework with the industry’s stakeholders to ensure its ongoing relevance (Ballantyne et al, 2019).The arguments between the use of competencies and capabilities are that competence models are seen as setting out a minimum standard of competence by reducing complex professional skills, knowledge and decision making processes into quite simplistic units or activities and have been described as tick box exercises (Ballantyne et al., 2019; Finch, 2010; Joubert, 2020) This has raised concerns that some concepts like anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice are removed from focus (Jayaratne et al., 1992; Joubert, 2020). However, capabilities are seen as more holistic and a better fit for purpose (Ballantyne et al., 2019). From an English perspective, Banks (2021) also favours a capabilities approach. She sees capabilities as being more holistic and useful, based on professional development and principles and more connected to what “people are actually able to do and be, to live a life that is worthy of the dignity of a human being” (p.147).

Perceptions and preparedness of NQSW

NQSW graduates venture into a profession that can have intense public scrutiny and attention. The intensity of the public gaze is not unique to Aotearoa New Zealand with international research showing that around the globe the social work profession is often at the centre of media scrutiny. This scrutiny is often negative and emotive (Ballantyne et al., 2019; Grant et al., 2017; Hunt, 2017; Moorhead, 2019; Yu et al., 2016). Consequently, developing a professional identity is an important consideration for NQSW as, it is argued, it contributes to a sense of preparedness (Sacristan & Lalane., 2022). Trede (2012) and Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018) support this and assert that there is little attention paid to professional identity and that graduating from a university course does not create a professional identity in itself. Within social work education there needs to be an investment in developing identity as much as encouraging curriculums to invest in the acquisition of skills and knowledge (Harrison & Healey., 2016; Moorhead, 2019). Professional identity is actively constructed during social work education, training, and ongoing work experience (Moorhead, 2019) and has been described as a rite of passage (Bradley, 2008). Bruning (2021) writes how supervision contributes to the development of a NQSW professional identity and posits that students integrate their professional identity into a practice framework, which has various influences including: "educators, student peers, field education, and structures like professional bodies and regulatory frameworks" (p.10). The shared understanding of what underpins being a social worker and doing social work is also described by Webb (2017) as a social work professional identity.

Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) researched newly qualified Probation Officers from the UK who had graduated with a Diploma in Social Work. They explored their sense of preparedness for the role they were starting. Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) research produced findings that 85% of NQSW felt "quite well", or "very well" (p.17) prepared for practice in general and these findings are frequently referred to by subsequent researchers and their work has established a benchmark in the field. They attributed the NQSW sense of preparedness to a combination of factors such as the employment they were in prior to study (which had been unqualified social work type roles) and the content of the social work course they had undertaken. Their findings were supported by the subsequent study by Grant et al. (2014). However, Grant et al. (2017), assert that the findings of Marsh and Triseliotis are now difficult to use as a comparison, because later studies capture the experiences of NQSW who have completed a social work degree qualification since 2003 rather than a social work diploma. This assertion that the earlier research was no longer relevant has been counter-challenged by Joubert (2020) who argues that "the study remains relevant despite the passage of time" (p.4) and described it as the first major work of understanding the realities of practice in court and child protection. Since these studies in ascertaining preparedness, the topic has been researched by many others: Ballantyne et al., (2019); Bates et al., (2010); Grant et al., (2017); Howard et al., (2015); Joubert, (2020); Moorhead, (2019); Moriarty et al., (2011).

Joubert's (2020) research concluded that NQSW expressed a satisfaction with the social work course that they had attended. Whilst the majority of their participants purport to hold positive views of their sense of preparedness, Swedish research by Tham and Lynch (2019) disagreed with this prevalent view. However, they focussed on transition into practice, rather than the sense of preparedness. They found NQSW expressed themes of unpreparedness, being unorganised, or even "chaotic perceptions of the workplace and uncertainty about the future" (p.400). In 2021 they completed additional research in this field and captured findings which included that those working in statutory social services expressed greater dissatisfaction with the organisational culture and work practices (Tham & Lynch 2021). NQSW dissatisfaction was associated with budget cuts, the climate of managerialism and not enough time for meeting with clients. The practitioners also reflected that their social work education had not prepared them for the complex realities of practice (Tham & Lynch, 2021).

Grant et al. (2017) found Scottish NQSWs appeared confident and "professionally prepared to tackle complex issues" (p.501). However, a response to the study, made by Joubert (2020) levels criticism for an overreliance on self-selection, with no follow-up interviews to explore key themes. Yu et al. (2016) sought to answer the question of whether NQSW prepared by engaging with field supervisors supervising NQSW. Thus, the views of what preparedness was like was based on the field supervisors' expectations of completing direct tasks, like assessments and verbal and written communication so it is limited as to its usefulness. Manthorpe et al. (2014) are UK researchers who interviewed the social work managers and found that workplace contexts placed a considerable bearing on whether NQSW felt prepared, or are ready, to practice. The workplace contexts that they described were "supportive teams, flexible working conditions and celebrating achievements" (p.108). The Enhance R2P project, phase 1 (Ballantyne et al., 2019) found most NQSW stated that they felt ready for practice, but with "widespread anxiety about the perceived pressures of working in some social service environments" (p.37). What was discovered was that students identified "inadequate coverage of bicultural practice and working with Pacifica" (p.36).

The Enhance R2P researchers obtained the permission of the English researchers to use their questions and modified them for the Aotearoa New Zealand context such as "working with Māori and Pacific peoples" (Ballantyne, 2019, p.4). As a point of difference in the literature the research by Sharpe et al. (2011) sought to examine topics that an NQSW perceived to be lacking from their curriculums they found that these were child protection, mental health conditions, drugs and alcohol, communicating with children and the rights of the child (P.116). The employers of the NQSW in the English study had a different list, theirs were; preparing reports, child protection, refugees and asylum seekers, child development milestones and mental health conditions (p.118). Ballantyne et al, (2019) in comparison found, working with trauma, dealing with hostility, aggression, or conflict, the legal basis for social work interventions, assessing risk, and local services and resources that might benefit the service users or carers.

UK research of Bates et al. (2010) involved NQSW and included the line managers of the NQSW. They found that NQSW 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their degrees provided them with the "right knowledge, understanding and skills for their current post" (p.158). Scandinavian research by Petersén (2022) expresses a concern that extensive job turnover is a pressing concern within social work, which has an impact on the NQSW perceptions of readiness once they are employed. She states that in Sweden between 2017-2017 a third of all social workers resigned from their jobs causing considerable dislocation and inconsistency for service users and agencies. The research is unique in that it supports studying the whole career of a social worker, rather than just the initial preparedness and it adds to the understanding of the subject by examining the reasons that NQSW might leave the profession. Petersén (2022) found social workers were leaving due to problematic organisations and negative work environments. This has been observed in Aotearoa New Zealand too with Beddoe et al. (2020) finding that students and educators have concerns about the environment NQSW are graduating into. They identify factors such as working with reduced resources, increased poverty, and housing insecurity and NQSW having to manage high caseloads. Another research that produced more negative outcomes was from Australia. Healy and Meagher (2007) found child welfare workers and employers are ambivalent about the value of social work programmes as preparation for statutory child protection practice and argued that the social work profession needs more specialist content to prepare graduates for practice in specialist fields of social work, particularly in statutory child protection work (Healy & Meagher, 2007).

Pithouse and Scourfield (2002) produced early research from Wales. Whilst it is acknowledged that it was undertaken twenty years ago the resemblance to the present study is that it is the only other study which measured preparedness using core competence standards. However, the six competencies in use in Wales at the time were quite different to the SWRB 10 core competence standards. They are abbreviated as: communicate and engage; promote and enable; assess and plan; intervene and provide; work in organizations; develop professional competence (p.36). The participants identified that their qualification and training had prepared them to achieve the competence standards. Interestingly the NQSWs working in childcare gave more negative responses than other groups in the study (Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002). They considered they did not have enough skills training specific to their field (p.24).

What supports a NQSW sense of preparedness?

Literature regarding the journey from academia to the workplace depicts a daunting and difficult journey, with the first year after qualifying widely recognised as being extremely important for social workers (Grant et al., 2017; Tham & Lynch, 2019). Moriarty et al. (2009) undertook a scoping review of literature relating to the transition from student to practitioner amongst social workers, nurses and other allied health professionals. The uniqueness of this study was that it specifically investigated the aspects that were seen as beneficial in the process of transition. From their research they identified key factors that contribute to the transition. These were having a clearly

defined induction period at the start of the employment, regular and consistent professional supervision, and an ongoing commitment to the professional development of the NSQW.

Beddoe et al. (2020) affirms the importance of supervision to support preparedness and states it is a "core element in career-long competency and professional development for social workers" and they argue that this is why it is mandated by professional bodies (p.17). Similarly, Agllias (2010) stated quality supervision made a difference to the NQSW and the service users that they are working with, and they needed support from experienced social workers in their workplace in order to be prepared. However, Agllias (2020) found NQSW held unrealistic expectations regarding how busy their work environment would be and NQSW were also surprised at the limited supervision they received. Agllias (2010) argued that there is a role for higher education institutions to provide more interdisciplinary experiences for students and that the academic faculty need to be attuned to the realities of current social work practice and, using this knowledge to prepare undergraduates for the possible situations that they might experience upon graduating. Carpenter et al. (2015) provides research which supports the findings of Agllias (2010). Their findings revealed how formal supervision and other supports impact retention and sense of preparedness.

There is some agreement in the literature on which skills are important for students, McCafferty et al. (2020) outlined the results of a project which identified categories of social work skills. These skills are also required by NQSW and they included: communication, self-reflection, critical thinking, social work process, application of theory, and cultural practice. This is supported by the research of Hunt et al. (2017), who observed that when organisations invest in structured individualised induction, quality supervision, ongoing professional development and effective mentoring, the payoff is new graduates feel valued and emotionally equipped to withstand the pressures of practice.

Field education placements

There are various nomenclature to describe the period of time that students spend in workplaces experiencing authentic meaningful learning opportunities and integrating theory with knowledge. These include field education, placements, practicum and work integrated learning (Hay, 2020; Zuchowski et al., 2023). Qualified, registered, social workers provide supervision of students and support placements as field educators (SWRB Programme Recognition Standards, 2017). A key pedagogy in the teaching of the social work curriculum is the use of field education placements (Chilvers et al., 2021). The literature is united in describing the usefulness of placements to assist students to become competent social workers (Butler-Warke & Bolger, 2020; Chilvers et al., 2021; Hay et al., 2019; Joubert, 2020; Orrell, 2011; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2016; Zuchowski et al., 2023). Tham and Lynch (2017) highlighted the advantage of undertaking placements in the area where NQSW were to be employed, "students who had obtained employment in their field placement agencies or in the same field as their placements described themselves as more prepared" (p.403).

Placements are central to social work education and their benefits are undisputed (Fronek et al., 2021; Hay, 2020). McSweeney and Williams (2018) support the value of placements and sees them as integral to the sense of readiness of NQSW and for developing practice competence and developing the NQSW's professional social work identity. They describe the placement experience as where the student social worker can "develop practical skills and apply theoretical knowledge" (p.2). Placements allow students to meet competence standards whilst in a supported environment. In UK research Bates et al. (2010) identified an increased benefit for students completing placements within statutory settings due to the added value of participating in assessments and legal undertakings within the statutory sector in order to "experience fully the processes involved in undertaking statutory tasks" (p.161).

Social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand has used field education since the 1970s and it is central to the social work education curriculum (Chilvers et al., 2021; Hay, 2020). The national guidelines on field education describe it as the cornerstone of the curriculum for practice development (ANZASW, 2016). All social work students learning in a higher education institute within Aotearoa New Zealand undertake a minimum of 120 days of work integrated learning in two different organizational settings (SWRB, 2017). By way of comparison, it is worth noting that within the degree programme in England it was increased to 200 days (Bates, 2010). The results are that emerging social workers who have completed supportive and well-managed placements are more likely to transition from academia into the workplace with a greater perception of readiness (Beddoe et al., 2018; Grant et al., 2017; Hay, 2020; Howard et al., 2015). Chilvers et al. (2021) describes how social work students in Aotearoa New Zealand need to demonstrate the core competence standards during their placements and it is an integral part of the tertiary journey. The contribution of social work field education placements to students developing a sense of preparedness in their learning is significant and directly relevant to the present research with many of the participants within the study commenting about the value that they received from their placement experiences. Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018), found that the placement experience also promotes professional identity and assists students transitioning from student to social work practitioner. It is described as the experiential component to integrate classroom learning into practice situations (Chilvers et al., 2021; Orrell, 2011; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2016).

Transitioning

Transitioning from academia to employment is a challenge (Bates et al., 2010). The need for NQSW to be ready to 'hit the ground running' is a notion which has been challenged by UK researchers Jack and Donnellan (2010) who argue that the qualifying education completed by the new graduate is a foundation and the potential of the graduate is still very much developing. They see the employers as failing to recognise this and creating unrealistic expectation on NQSW. Joubert (2020) agrees and describes the process of moving from academia into the workforce as that of a 'journey' rather than an 'end product'. Keen et al. (2016) adds that it is a "journey of development" (p.1). Rawlings

(2012) proffers that "there is a fundamental distinction between those who view qualifying education as a development process and those who view it as an end product" (p.1351) and argues for the implementation of graduate support programmes to assist the transition. The expectation of fully formed and functioning practitioners reflects the tension observed within tertiary institutions that educate, and the prominent employers who are wanting their new recruits to be primed to slot into their agencies and organisations and be instantly active and effective with the complexities of cases about to confront them. Research by Healey (2009) depicts emerging graduates who are generically skilled, adaptive, and ready for critical thought and inquiry and can be adaptive to many fields of practise and settings but not specifically prepared for each role. Grant et al. (2018) supports this view and state that generic social work education should produce NQSW who can practise in diverse fields, and in a manner that reflects social work values (Bradley, 2008; Osteen, 2011). Adding to the conversation regarding NQSW expected to "hit the ground running" is the insight provided by Australian researchers Stewart and Feilding (2022) who observe that the social work employment landscape, which new graduates are stepping into is characterised by uncertainty of employment and lack of organisational support.

Graduate support programmes

Supporting graduates transitioning into employment is an important step in their becoming ready for practise (Bates et al., 2010). A key strategy in the preparedness of NQSW are graduate support programmes, these assist the newly qualified graduate in their transition from academia to employment and graduate support programmes have been developed in in some countries including Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZASW, 2023). Moorhead, (2019) describes the support and inventive strategies that can assist transitional challenges which are confronting for graduates.

An early form of this was the structured, early-career programme developed in England called the Early Professional Development Pilot Programme (Carpenter et al., 2013). This was a programme which provided time for the NQSW to attend and complete professional development and have access to more supervision to cater for the beginning practitioners needs. Another programme is the 'Assessed and Supported Year in Employment' (ASYE). The ASYE is a UK programme that gives NQSW the opportunity and support to consolidate theoretical learning and put it into practice in a safe manner (Baines, 2020; Carpenter et al., 2010; Grant et al., 2017). The ASYE was commissioned by the Department for Education in the UK and Baines (2020) reports that it has proved positive for new practitioners in terms of confidence to practice and job satisfaction. Because of the programme's success some areas in England are making it mandatory to complete (Baines, 2020). The purpose of the ASYE is to develop the skills, knowledge, and capability of NQSW and strengthen their professional confidence. The programme provides access to regular and focussed support during the first year of employment and encourages time for reflection, a probationary period, good induction, and reduced workload (Keen et al., 2016).

In Aotearoa New Zealand the ANZASW has created its own graduate support system, New Graduate Support Programme (NESP) (ANZASW, 2022). New graduates are paired with experienced mentors with a focus on peer support and discussion about challenging topics central to social work. The intention is the same as the UK in that it is hoped that the programme will support graduates in their transition. They also provide webinars held throughout the year to supplement learning. Graduate programmes are also provided by key employers, Oranga Tamariki (State managed child welfare services in Aotearoa New Zealand) and Te Whatu Ora (State health services in Aotearoa New Zealand) in some areas. Programmes such as these were recommendations from the Enhance R2P project to support the transition of NQSW (Beddoe et al., 2018).

COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 has been significant for both students and NQSW over the past three years (Alston et al., 2021; Chilvers et al., 2021; Zuchowski et al., 2023). The pandemic demanded a rapid response from social work educators to implement online learning, support students remotely and tested how they could provide students with the field education component of their course. Jaquiery et al., (2020) in their research regarding social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic state that their research was important as it documents a shared traumatic experience and through adversity as educators, they were now more prepared to respond to challenging situations and social work remained adaptable to change and steadfast as a profession. The delivery of health and welfare services during the pandemic had a significant impact on students, staff, placement providers and service users field education with the result that many placements had to be offered remotely (Zuchowski et al., 2023). Whilst some universities already delivered teaching online, it was increased significantly (McFadden et al., 2020). Placements were varied with some ending early or being deferred (Fronek et al., 2021). Alternate approaches were developed to provide NQSW with experiences to provide them with the learning opportunities such as remote placements (Crisp & Hosken, 2016), online direct practice placements (Sarbu & Unwin, 2021) and telehealth approaches to placements (McFadden et al., 2020). The term chosen in the recent research by Zuchowski et al. 2023 which best represents the emphasis on the use of electronic interaction is e-placement (p.2). This refers to projects, research and direct practice placements undertaken remotely and supported by online and other communication technologies (Bentley-Davey et al., 2020; Zuchowski et al., 2023).

Zuchowski et al. (2023), an Australian study, suggested that placements had restricted students opportunities to observe direct social work practice within agencies. This has implications for their overall learning. Research by Fronek et al. (2021) involving social work educators in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the United States of America, offered insight into the recent impact on students due to COVID-19. The way it has affected students was variable and anxiety that students might have experienced was influenced by the field they were in, expected interactions with clients, perceived risks and previous epidemic experiences and the extent their country was affected (Fronek et al., 2021). There was a need for field education faculties to “adapt rapidly and provide

extraordinary levels of support" (p.7). Alston et al. (2021) found the pandemic necessitated a reframing of social work practice to manage and assist students. The detrimental impact to students of having restricted face to face lectures and more online teaching was raised ten years prior to the pandemic by English research by Bates et al. (2010), who looked at the effectiveness of the new UK social work degree structure, which had adapted to a syllabus that used more online teaching, rather than 'face-to-face' methods. They found that the pedagogical methods such as lectures and tutorials were favoured over e-learning, workshops, and seminars. A mixture of didactic methods and the "opportunity for face-to-face discussion appear to provide an ideal approach to learning for NQSW" (Bates et al., 2010, p.158). This 'face-to-face' option has been severely lacking for students over the past three years because of COVID-19 safety measures.

Gaps in the research

The literature review has identified that NQSW generally see that their education has prepared them for practice. However, a shortfall in the research is the limited number of longitudinal studies undertaken. Since the pioneering work by Marsh and Tresiolitis (1987) research in the field has flourished, with useful studies having been undertaken worldwide and particularly relevant research within from Aotearoa New Zealand. What makes the present study unique, is that there have been no earlier studies utilising the SWRB core competence standards as measures of preparedness. There has been research on the skills, knowledge, and training gaps, but this study adds a further insight with a particular focus on the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

Chapter summary

This chapter has reviewed the literature relating to newly qualified social workers preparedness to practice social work. It has looked at the history of social work as a profession within Aotearoa New Zealand and how it is regulated, including the discussion regarding competencies and capabilities. Following this was a review of the factors that contribute to new graduate's sense of preparedness, both when they are still in education, placements, and also when they became employed, such as graduate support programmes. These pedagogies are instrumental in preparing a NQSW and the programmes assist with transition into employment. Finally, the impact that COVID-19 has had over the past three years is examined. The review of the literature has highlighted that there is a need for ongoing research in this field and that more longitudinal research would give depth to the field and especially that which captures the voice of the graduate, the education providers and line managers or supervisors. This will broaden our understanding of the factors that contribute to and bolster the sense of preparedness of NQSWs. The final section considers the perceived gaps in research within this field of study and the uniqueness of this study. The following chapter will explore the methodology chosen to research NQSW preparedness to practice.

Chapter Three: Methodology and methods

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology, aims and purpose of the research and identifies the strategies employed during the research process. The aim of the research was to uncover, through the voices of the participants, their sense of preparedness to practice upon graduation by reflecting on their perceived competence related to the Social Work Registration Board's (SWRB) 10 core competence standards (see Appendix A). The epistemology is explained and the theoretical perspectives that shaped the analysis is explored. The processes, strategies and the criteria used to recruit the participants is considered and how the data was collected. An explanation of the use of thematic analysis for analysing the data in order to extract key themes and the trustworthiness of the research and the positionality of the researcher are provided. Finally, the ethical considerations including confidentiality and privacy are discussed and the perceived limitations of the study detailed.

Research aims

The research question was designed to explore how newly qualified social workers perceive their preparedness to practice social work measured against the Social Workers Registration Board's (SWRB) 10 core competence standards.

The aims of the research project were to:

a) Identify how prepared newly qualified social workers perceive themselves to be, measured against the SWRB core competence standards.

b) Explore which of the 10 core competence standards newly qualified social workers believe they need more skills, knowledge, or training in.

The objective of the study was to describe and explain how prepared NQSW perceived themselves to be for practice. To do this the measure used was their sense of competence regarding the SWRB core competence standards. Additionally, participants of the study were asked about what skills and knowledge they thought they needed more support with to assist them in their social work role. The purpose of the study was to better understand the sense of preparedness of NQSW and identify the strategies, knowledge and skills that might contribute to improving their sense of preparedness. Whilst there is a growing body of research regarding preparedness to practice, this research differs in that it seeks to explore the NQSW's sense of preparedness to practice in Aotearoa New Zealand when compared with the SWRB core competence standards.

Theoretical perspectives

Theoretical approaches, such as critical or feminist theory, can enhance the research project as these frameworks have philosophical foundations, which have been established (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). This research used social constructivist and critical theories with an interpretive approach. Social constructivist researchers understand the

world through the cultural and historical context that the participant has experienced (Cresswell, 2013). An existence of multiple realities is accepted as people interpret their experiences differently. The different constructions are known as discourses (Burr, 1995). A discourse is a set of concepts, meanings and understandings that create a narrative (Bowden, 2019). Banks, (2021) describes the social constructivist approach in social work as based on a notion that there are no set objective realities. Therefore, the rationale for choosing this theoretical perspective for the research was that the experiences of each participant was unique and each NQSW described a different journey. Taken together, these individual journeys created a multiplicity of discourses that, when referred to the research question, offered a credible explanatory narrative.

Additionally, this research also draws upon critical theory. Critical theory searches for the wider political interests that the discourses serve (Agger, 2013; Bowden, 2019). With its foundations in Marxist thought, critical theory identifies apparent tensions within capitalist societies and the oppressions within societies, in particular the working classes (Agger, 2013; Cole, 1948; Gray 2018). Structural relationships are examined and questioned in relation to power and emancipation (Smith, 1999). Critical theory considers how to ameliorate structures, processes, and institutions by a constant analysis of existing, social, political, and economic arrangements (Fook, 1993; Shaw, 1994). It seeks more equal resource distribution and a fairer society, and this is achieved by raising consciousness and promoting transformation (Agger, 2013; Lietz, 2009). Banks, (2021) describes macro theories such as those that have a commitment to structural social change by using various terms including "'anti-oppressive', 'emancipatory', 'critical' and 'transformatory' and 'green' social work" (p.60). Critical theory marries well with social work values of social justice, human rights and emancipatory practice (Bowden, 2019). Critical theory informed the methodology by encouraging a reflection of the macro analysis and practices identified within the competence standards. Further, it deconstructs the presenting issues by reflecting on the structural or political pressures that might influence obtaining the core competence standards.

In summary this interpretive research used both social constructivist and critical theory as the conceptual framework to seek meaning from the data obtained from NQSW who were interviewed regarding their own sense of competence, when measured against the SWRB core competence standards. This framework was employed to interpret and understand the NQSWs sense of preparedness, with the critical theory lens to explore the competence in promoting social change and having a structural awareness within their social work practice and the skills and deficits in their social work education.

Epistemology

There are two dominant perspectives in this acquiring of knowledge within the western world, commonly referred to as 'positivism' and 'interpretivism' (Bryman, 2012). Positivism asserts that the world is ultimately knowable, predictable, and observable and able to be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Interpretivism is a post-positivist, or post-modern, perspective that has a philosophical view dating from the middle of the

20th century (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Within this study the researcher has used an interpretivist view. This view differs from positivism in that it sees that participants can create meaning and knowledge that is not observable or testable (Harper, 2012). It was appropriate to use an interpretive epistemology in this research as the study posits that NQSW's experience of the world is subjective. NQSW construct a meaning from their experiences and the explanation of the research material that has been obtained by the participants is an 'interpretation' by the researcher.

Methodology

There are also two main methods of research, namely qualitative and quantitative. In this research qualitative or quantitative research might have been employed, or it may have used a combination of both strategies as they each have their strengths and weaknesses. They are distinct from each other in more than just the data that they collect (Engel & Schutt, 2016). Quantitative research seeks through measurements to test a hypothesis and obtain conclusions (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). Quantitative methods commonly include surveys and experiments, and the data can be treated as numbers or attributes that can be ordered in magnitude. This method of research emphasises data collection, measurement, and the use of statistics. In contrast, qualitative research relies on linguistic, rather than numerical data and privileges meaning and understanding over numbers and statistics (Braun & Clark, 2016; Carey, 2012; Elliot & Timulak, 2005).

Qualitative methods such as; participant observation, interviews or focus groups are designed to capture the experiences of participants. Words or stories are collected as the data and the interpretation of these get analysed (Bowden, 2019; Bryman, 2012; Engel & Schutt, 2016). Qualitative strategies represent a "family of methods" which originate from a variety of traditions (Padgett, 2008, p.1) and enables researchers to seek more context and detailed descriptions to increase understanding of situations and experiences (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). Qualitative methods enable researchers to study social practices and processes and explore the reasons for the outcomes observed (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Qualitative research is often exploratory, proceeding without an explanatory theory, but rather it seeks to inductively arrive at a theory that helps explain the observed behaviour (Berg & Lune, 2012; Todres & Holloway, 2010).

The predominant methodology that has been used in previous studies regarding preparedness to practice of NQSW has been qualitative. For example, the Enhance R2P study primarily used online surveys (including qualitative questions), focus groups of NQSW and qualitative interviews with NQSW and manager/professional supervisors. Sharpe et al, (2011) used a similar methodology, with the addition that they interviewed two samples of NQSW who had graduated in different years. There are strengths and weaknesses in using qualitative methods (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). The strength is that it is flexible and not rigid and welcomes subjectivity and a range of perspectives and realities of the participants. However, a potential weakness is that the data obtained relies on the researcher's ability to not influence the research with their own values and bias (O'Leary, 2017). Upon careful consideration of the relative merits of different

approaches, this research chose a qualitative, interpretivist approach because it best suited the research topic.

Research design

The chosen method for conducting this research was semi-structured interviews that would be analysed thematically. Interviewing is the most common form of data collection in qualitative research and semi-structured interviews are the most common of the interviewing styles (Carey, 2012; Jamshed, 2014). The interview was considered the best method for data collection in this study as it provided space and freedom for subjects to share their experiences and tell their story, without the constraints that surveys impose, and focus groups have. Another advantage of the semi-structured interview is that it allows discussion about themes not originally included in the questions (Carey, 2012; Esterburg, 2001; Patton, 2014; Walliman, 2016). This provides an opportunity for researchers to explore participants perspectives, concerns, and the assumptions that might underpin them on wider, more nuanced topics. This was the experience within the study where participants raised different topics when responding to the prepared question. It enables the participants to get closer to express their subjective thoughts as they are not so constrained (Bryman, 2012). This is important when researching a topic that could result in vastly different and varied experiences and the participants may also come from diverse backgrounds. Rubin and Rubin, (2005) describe semi-structured interviews as “extensions of ordinary conversations” (p.12).

Another advantage of choosing individual semi-structured interviews was that it allowed greater confidentiality for the participant. This could not have been achieved if using a strategy like a focus groups. Focus groups were also discarded as a chosen method of data collection due to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions and restraints of time and money. Surveys, on the other hand can be too impersonal and do not allow the interactive discussion that can (and did) occur between the researcher and the participant.

An interview guide was developed to help the interviewer focus the content of the interview without imposing too much structure. The preparation and compiling of the actual interview questions was developed with deliberateness. This was achieved by discussion with thesis supervisors and by reviewing social work research textbooks. The final Participant Interview Schedule (see Appendix B) was a list of 10 interview questions that were compiled from those sources and inspirations. Thematic analysis was then employed to find the themes within the data.

Recruitment and criteria of participants

Participants were recruited through a process of purposive sampling which involves deliberately seeking participants specific to the research topic rather than a random sample (Braun & Clark, 2013; Bryman, 2013). This was required so that the participants had the relevant experiences in order to respond to the interview questions. The criteria for participation in the research was that participants needed to have graduated from an initial social work qualifying programme within two years of the start of the study

(January 2021). This excluded anyone who may have obtained registration via the experience pathway, section 13. The determination to use this qualifying' criteria was also the definition of NQSW as used in the Enhance R2P study (Ballantyne et al. 2019. p.5). The choice of using these criteria stemmed from the relevance of the Enhance R2P project and also enabled a standardised description of NQSW. The number of participants to be interviewed was initially proposed to be six. Todres and Holloway (2010) caution against using larger samples so as to avoid "…depth and thoughtfulness in the analysis being sacrificed" (p.183). The criteria chosen by the researcher was hoped to obtain data that could generate findings that go beyond the research sample, so the sample needed to be broad enough that it captured the important aspects and variations of the topic studied (Elliot & Timulak 2005). Rich, and meaningful data can be obtained using fewer participants (Bryman, 2013). The recruitment of the participants created more difficulties than envisaged initially. However, at the completion of the recruitment phase there were nine suitable participants that were available for an interview. The motivation for having nine participants was that the researcher perceived there was a wider set of discourses within the NQSW community, and it captured more insights and data saturation was reached at having nine participants. An unexpected and additional advantage from the bigger sample size was that different higher education institutions were captured in the study.

Strategies for recruitment

In the initial planning stages of the research, it was decided that the recruitment of participants would start by using 'word of mouth' and 'snowballing' techniques. This was relying on the researcher's own networks and also where research participants offer to recruit other participants (Gardner, 2009). This was deemed to be the easiest and most effective manner of recruitment and was to be initiated first. The back-up plan, if required, was to advertise using the ANZASW's social media, specifically their Facebook page. The criteria that the participants needed to meet was detailed in the information sheet, which was sent to each potential participant (see Appendix C). Thus, the first step in recruiting was the placing of a simple message on the researcher's personal Facebook site (see Appendix D). The message encouraged any Facebook friend who was, or knew, a NQSW to email the researcher. Simultaneously, conversations were made within the local social work community, whom the researcher was already interacting with.

Initially, the proposed timeline for interviewing participants was that they would have been interviewed before December 2021. However, by January 2022 there were no participants yet confirmed. The inability to have a set number of participants organised early demonstrated that the researcher held an unrealistic expectation that the recruitment process would be more straightforward than it was. Whilst the personal Facebook message had generated conversation, it had proven ineffective in securing any actual participants. The same was true of the word-of-mouth approach within the local social work community. It had generated four 'possible' participants, but when attempts were made to contact them, only one replied to the messages and attempted

phone calls and as they hadn't worked since graduation, they did not meet the criteria. This increased the pressure on the researcher to broaden the strategies and move to plan B. A decision was made to start advertising through the ANZASW website (see Appendix E).

In order to advertise with the ANZASW research platform a membership was required. This was obtained, and an advertisement was prepared with the help of ANZASW co-ordination staff. Copies of the ethics approval letter (see Appendix H), the information sheet (see Appendix D) and the consent form (see Appendix F) were then sent to the ANZASW co-ordinator, and the information sheet formed the basis of the advertisement. Shortly after submitting the ANZASW advertisement, the first participant was recruited from the local social work community by 'word of mouth' and they were interviewed. This participant then identified four other possible participants from their own networks and emails were sent to them (a demonstration of the snowballing technique in action). Soon after that the ANZASW advertisement produced its first participant. However, due to various factors they were not able to complete the interview.

There were delays in obtaining the participants. The timeline had now reached the middle of March 2022 and there were still only four confirmed participants, with only one interviewed. Further communication was made between the researcher and ANZASW and the advertisement was 'promoted'. This meant that NQSW enrolled in the ANZASW graduate support programme were emailed directly. This quickly became the most effective method of recruitment. Within one week of the email being sent, five potential participants emerged, four were suitable and one not eligible as they were yet to be registered. Then a possible participant, identified by personal social media, who had been approached in December 2021 resurfaced, and was interviewed. Of the others, one met the criteria, but worked in the same team as the researcher so was excluded, two potential participants had graduated with relevant qualifications, but one was registered, but not yet employed, and one was in employment, but had yet to register. Three other possible participants were contacted but did not reply.

From all the recruitment approaches seventeen possible participants were identified. Of those, nine were eventually selected as they met the criteria most closely and they had signed and returned the consent form. Once this had been completed, they were emailed, or phoned, and interview times were agreed upon.

Diversity of participants

The study involved participants from throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. They all met the criteria in that they had qualified within two years and had been registered with the SWRB. An unexpected outcome of advertising using a national body, such as the ANZASW, was the participants diversity. They had quite varying demographics and employment histories. Firstly, they had obtained three different qualifications; seven had bachelor's degrees and two had completed Master of Social Work (Applied) degrees. They had obtained their qualifications in five different higher education

institutions, and they were employed in statutory and non-statutory agencies. Seven of the nine participants identified as female with the estimated mean age of thirty. This was similar in comparison to the Enhance R2P project where “83.2%” of the participants were female (Ballantyne et al., 2019, p.6).

Data collection

To gather the data the researcher had three choices of how the interviews were to be administered: face-to-face, phone or online interviews. The online interviews could use platforms such as, Zoom, Teams or Messenger. Face to face interviewing provides an easy opportunity for building rapport by use of manākitanga (hospitality). However, only one of the interviews was undertaken face-to-face. Providing a drink and offering biscuits allowed connections to be made in a relaxed manner with less formalities. The location chosen by the participant was a comfortable interview room in the agency where the researcher is based. The participant chose the interview location as they felt they were less likely to be disturbed there. This was the only interview undertaken face to face.

The advantage of a phone interview, much like online systems, is that it could be undertaken in any location convenient for the participant and it does not involve travel. The disadvantage is that only the voice and tone is available for researchers to gauge participants responses to questions. With online interviewing both participant and researcher can share audio and visual communication, and this allows the researcher to interact with the participants and see their reactions in ‘real time’, ascertaining facial mannerisms. Eight remaining participants had the technology to undertake online interviews. Initially the main factor for using online interviewing was their geographical location. However, following the first two interviews COVID-19 restrictions were introduced and there was a directive by Massey University to only interview using online methods.

There were advantages in using online interviewing. Firstly, it provided greater flexibility with the time of the interview and where the interview is held. Six of eight interviews were held in the participants’ own homes, which may have contributed to creating a relaxed atmosphere conducive to good rapport building. The remaining two were held in the participant’s workplaces. Other than occasional technological glitches the online ‘Zoom’ system enabled the participant and the researcher to connect and the interview questions responded to. The advantage of using Zoom became more apparent in the later interviews when the researcher started to adapt and maximise the technology used, such as screen sharing. This allowed the participants to have a copy of the SWRB core competence standards on their screen to assist with recall during the interview, which proved beneficial. With the onscreen clock it was easy to keep a track on the time the interview was taking. An unused potential was the recording function of Zoom. However, this was not used as the recording device was the researcher’s phone. Factors that impacted on the interview included the quality of the computer, wi-fi or phone that was being used. Camera angles and back-lighting also impacted on the quality of the

experience as when these were evident the experience of both researcher and participant improved.

It is unknown if there was any discernible difference to the data obtained in the face-to-face interview and the online interviews. The interviews were all completed between the 23rd of February and the 31st of March 2022, and they were recorded on the researcher's Samsung Galaxy Android phone. The interviews lasted for between 15 to 55 minutes with an average length of 32minutes. Audio Transcription & Secretarial Services, a transcription service was employed to transcribe the interviews. The transcription providers signed a pre-prepared confidentiality agreement that assured privacy and confidentiality for the participants (see Appendix G).

The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed specific questioning and comprehensive answers to be explored. While the researcher thought to obtain the best responses from the participants the interviews needed to be more informal, it was also obvious that it needed to be more than just an unstructured conversation (Longhurst, 2003). Initially the interview questions were not shared before the participant, in order to create more spontaneity. However, there was merit to the participants having familiarity with the questions as the 10 core competence standards are not memorised by NQSW and any possible anxiety regarding the questions might be lessened by having access to the questions before the interview started. Therefore, the competence standards were shared with participants before the interview.

Data analysis

Data analysis is the most complex phase of qualitative research (Thorne, 2000). Thematic analysis is an organised purposeful manner of filtering data and managing data in this manner by way of careful analysing counters what Herbert (1990) states can occur when it is not strategic, "mindless trawls bring in mindless results" (p.51). A thematic analysis was used to better understand and extract key themes and seek meaning from the data, (Alston & Bowles, 2018; Carey, 2012; Padgett, 2017). The analysis of the data collected can be viewed as broadly following the six phased framework provided by Braun and Clarke, (2006). In phase 1, the researcher familiarised themselves with the data, reading and re-reading and also listening to the audio files. Phase 2, was where the initial codes or themes were generated. During this phase an initial list of codes, or list of ideas, about what is interesting within the data was created and written down in the research journal. The next phase was searching for broad themes and reviewing and defining these. They were grouped in a thematic map. In phase 4, these thematic maps were reviewed and refined, and patterns were established. Phase 5 was where they were named and further defined, and the essence of each theme was more developed. The final analysis involved the writing up of the research.

During the initial data analysis stage, it was difficult to determine any patterns or themes emerging. This perhaps reflected the volume of thoughts and reflections provided by the participants, all of which was interesting. However, identifying patterns and themes

became more obvious as the process of the thematic analysis progressed. Spending time 'in' the data by reading and rereading the transcripts notes, listening to the recordings and checking the documents helped to ensure that the analyses was based on a "deep understanding" of the data (Padgett, 2017, p.149). This immersion into the data by regular reading and rereading the transcripts provided a rich level of analysis and reviewing the data assisted in identifying patterns (Williamson et al., 2018).

The data analysis process was lengthy and there was regular reflection by using the research journal throughout the analysis phase.

Trustworthiness

It is important to ensure that there is trustworthiness, or confidence in the truth value of the findings obtained by the research (Barusch et al., 2011). Critics of qualitative methods ask how one can trust the findings within research where standards are shifting and subject to diverse interpretations (Padgett, 2008). Because of these concerns qualitative researchers need to have strategies to garner trustworthiness. The strategies utilised by the researcher were threefold. Firstly, the researcher became very familiar with the data by listening to the recordings and checking the transcriptions against the recordings to enhance the trustworthiness. One of the interviews the researcher manually transcribed themselves. Secondly, maintaining a close audit trail by keeping a detailed written account of the research procedures in a research journal, allowed the researcher to refer to any progress or development in the study. Additionally, the researcher was able to engage in various forms of supervision. Thesis supervision with Massey supervisors detailed the planning out of each step in the process and the researcher also undertook regular peer supervision with another researcher, themselves engaged in qualitative research.

Lincoln and Guba, (1985) assert that to achieve trustworthiness in research there are four concepts that need to be achieved. These are credibility, transferability, auditability, and confirmability. There is a need to be aware of how the research procedures might influence the credibility of the data and how applicable or useful to theory, practice and research is its transferability. Within this study there was regular reflection on the research procedures within supervision. Auditability refers to how the research procedures are documented; this will allow someone outside the project to follow and critique the research process. This research was recorded in the study journal or supervision notes. Confirmability, refers to the ability of others to confirm or corroborate the findings (Drisko, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was applied to the research by detailing the process undertaken and comparing it with similar research in this field. However, the criticism of the subjective nature of qualitative research stands and so social constructivism and critical theory produced the researcher's insights and attitudes to the findings, which were neither positivist nor empirical, but embedded in the participants experiences. Therefore, they were transferrable and credible on those criteria.

Positionality

Shenton (2004) states "steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher" (p. 72). This is where the awareness of researcher positionality is important. Positionality describes the researcher's acknowledgement of their position relative to the research and what might influence the data being collected and its interpretation (Stewart-Withers et al., 2014). The researcher brings into the research their collective known self. These are the things that guide and shape us and how we interpret and experience life. We are products of our past and the experiences that have shaped us, no one is a *tabula rasa* or enters anything with a blank slate (Jorgensen, 2001, p.6397).

For this study, the researcher considered their own position to be that of a fourth generation, Pākeha (Māori word for European New Zealander), middle-aged, heterosexual, New Zealand male, a father of three daughters and has worked in various social work fields, predominantly in Aotearoa New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The researcher has a strong affiliation to the ethos of critical social work theory, which informs his practise. How prepared newly qualified professionals are for practise has been an interest and conversation point for the researcher since 1998. It was important to acknowledge this positionality and how it might influence how the information was collected and to check the impact on the participants during the interviews. This was achieved by utilising reflexive practice. Stewart-Withers et al. (2014) express an importance for the researcher to use reflexivity to manage their positionality. Reflexivity is crucial in assisting the researcher's objectivity and like the tools to develop trustworthiness, the use of a research journal and discussion within supervision contributes to this. Reflexivity is a process that unfolds throughout the entire process of research. It is "a critical part of managing research reactivity and bias" Lietz and Zayas, (2010), p. 193. The journalling process provoked opportunities to carefully reflect on the research experiences as they occurred, and this captured and prompted deeper considerations that were raised and discussed within supervision. Positionality of the researcher was a discussion topic examined during thesis supervision. This was expanded on and explored in detail.

Because of the conversational nature of the semi-structured interview, the researcher was aware of trying not to bring in their own biases that might influence the direction of conversation. However, sharing genuine curiosity in how participants related to the research questions within the preamble of each interview included a narrative regarding how the research topic had evolved and a brief overview of the researcher's work history. This was provided to build relationship rather than as an attempt to influence participants' perspectives.

Prior to the research starting the researcher completed postgraduate social work papers, which built a framework of learning that assisted in firming and forming the thesis idea. Using a study journal captured many aspects of the process and the evolution of thought that occurred. Each chapter and each stage produced different

challenges and learnings, new words and concepts. The interviews with the participants renewed interest in the development of the social work identity and transported the researcher back to 1998 when the thesis topic was initially considered. At that time the researcher was a newly qualified social worker, working as a Probation Officer, in Rotorua. His perceptions of readiness at the time reflect those captured in the study (although there were no set competence standards to attain then). There was a sense of competence in some things, less competence in others, but a general feeling that the social work education, including two placements, had equipped him with the necessary skills to do the job.

Ethical considerations

Ethical principles are essential to uphold when undertaking research or engaging in any professional practice and they guide how research is undertaken (Alston & Bowles, 2018; Banks, 2021). This research was guided by the principles of Massey University's Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants (Massey University, 2023). In this section the ethical aspects of the study are reviewed and discussed. An ethics process was completed according to Massey's policies and a low-risk ethics notification was submitted (see Appendix H).

Consent and risk

The researcher is a registered social worker who adheres to the SWRB Code of Conduct and the Professional Code of Ethics. Additionally, as a member of the ANZASW the researcher has a responsibility to be mindful of ethical concerns relating to research. This includes identifying and forward planning to manage ethical dilemmas and issues that might arise. All stages of the research were discussed and planned with supervisors, with strict adherence to the protocols of Massey University research. The supervision was provided by two experienced academics who provided consistent ongoing supervision throughout the thesis process. A potential conflict of interest was identified during the recruitment phase when a possible participant was excluded because they were employed in the team that the researcher managed. The researcher also has their professional supervision, which is compulsory as a social worker practising within Aotearoa New Zealand and an integral cornerstone of reflective practice (Weld, 2021). This provided a space for the researcher to critically reflect on matters regarding their employment and academic journey.

The researcher carefully considered the nature of the study and the methods to be employed and felt confident that there would not be any negative repercussions, or ethical concerns raised from the study and no discomfort was likely for the participants. However, to minimise any risks all participants were advised that if they should choose to not continue with the research, that was entirely within their rights. This information was provided to the participants in the information sheet (see Appendix K) at the beginning of the process. This sheet outlined the research process, and the participants were reminded again prior to the commencement of the interview. This agreement between the participant and the researcher identified how the data would be gathered

and used as well as participant rights and protections (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2012).

Confidentiality and privacy

The confidentiality and the privacy of participants is an important part of the researcher's ethical obligations (Ryan et al., 2007). In this research the confidentiality of the subjects was of primary concern, and this was protected by ensuring each participant was given a pseudonym, so that only the researcher could identify them. Additionally, any other personal identifiers such as practice settings, place of study and geographical location was also removed from the findings.

A copy of the recording and transcript was offered to the participants so that they could make additions or corrections prior to the data undergoing thematic analysis. Only one participant requested this, and they made no changes to their transcript. The information, including the consent forms, interview recordings, and transcripts were kept in a secure, password-protected format, available only to the researcher and supervisors. In accordance with standard research practice the recordings that were made will be destroyed after five years using approved document destruction services.

Limitations of the research

In 2022 there were 3,500 social work students enrolled on recognized programmes within 17 different higher education institutions; five universities; nine polytechnics; two wānanga (Māori higher education institution) and one private training establishment (ANZASW, 2022). Therefore, interviewing only nine subjects is a limitation of the research due to its small sample size. However, qualitative research does not aim for generalisations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and useful research can be obtained in smaller samples. The study might also be limited by the participants self-selection or engagement with the research. It is possible that due to the nine participants inherent motivation to engage in the research they are different to the subject population. Were it possible to obtain participants in a more random manner, it might have created different themes and data. There were demographic limitations evident in the study, for example there was no collection of information regarding participants disabilities. The alienation of the disabled community from research has been well documented (Sullivan, 2009). Additionally, the research did not gather specific data regarding age of the participants, or whether they were providing care for others or if they were in rural localities, as they were not seen to be directly relevant to the focus of the research. This extra demographic information would be useful for comparative studies and would also gently address the limited inclusion in research for these underrepresented groups.

Another limitation related to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time of the interviews which required the use of 'Zoom' online interviewing. Using technology to record interviews is inevitable, and it causes less recording error, but the more that it is used the more opportunities for error (human or mechanical) to occur. An android

phone was used as the recording device and for one participant the audio file was accidentally deleted.

Due to the unsettled state ushered in by COVID-19 the researcher had a sense of not wishing to create any inconvenience to participants. Whilst conducting the initial interviews the researcher felt internal pressure to complete the interviews in a brisk manner, to lessen the inconvenience. This possible limitation may have impacted the research negatively. The participants had voluntarily offered their time, during an already pressured period. This sense of inconveniencing improved as the study continued and after discussions were had with supervisors.

Chapter summary

This chapter outlined the methodology and identified the strategies, theoretical perspectives and methods employed during the research process. This research project sought the perceptions of NQSW regarding their sense of preparedness to practice social work. An interpretive, qualitative research method was chosen, and this was informed by both social constructionist and a critical theory lens. Recruitment was completed after some setbacks and nine participants selected. Data was obtained using semi-structured interviews and the obtained data analysed using a thematic analysis. The researcher's positionality was explored, and the chapter concluded with ethical considerations including confidentiality and the final section relates to the perceived limitations of the study. The next chapter will look at the results of the study.

Chapter Four: Results

This chapter presents the results of the research obtained from semi-structured interviews with nine (n=9) participants. The chapter begins with an overview of the participants' demographics and their social work qualifications. The results of the thematic analysis are then explored. The data revealed five themes including: knowledge of the competence standards, the teaching and learning of the competence standards, which competence standards required more learning, the impact of COVID-19 on NQSW preparedness and the transition from study to employment. In general, NQSW described having a positive view of their sense of preparedness to practise social work, but the attainment of the competence standards was variable.

The Participants

The nine participants interviewed for this study reside across Aotearoa New Zealand and for their ethnicity identified as Māori or Pākehā. The demographics are detailed in Table 2. Whilst age was not specifically captured in the forms within the study, they were predominantly mature students. This was ascertained because only two of the participants began their qualifying programmes directly after completing high school, while the others had entered social work tertiary study at a later age. Seven of the nine participants identified as female, one male and one nonbinary. The participants had graduated with three different types of social work qualification (see Table 1) and they had attended six different tertiary institutions within Aotearoa New Zealand.

To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms have been used and these were alphabetised to match the chronological order of each participant's interview. Three specific limitations were recognised. Firstly, there was only one Māori participant. Capturing the voice of Tāngata whenua within Aotearoa New Zealand would be beneficial to record their sense of preparedness in future studies because it enriches the data and provides insight for future studies. Additionally, a weakness of the demographic information captured was that disabilities that participants may have had were not specifically recorded. However, one participant proffered that they were autistic, and that because of this the disability field was interesting to them.

Disability is generally relevant to the study as people with disabilities are included within the NQSW community. Lastly it would be useful to have ascertained whether participants were based rurally, or from urban centres. The large rural community within Aotearoa New Zealand has its own uniqueness that appears to be overlooked in research (Hollis-English & Selby, 2015). Greater diversity would be good for the study as it recognises populations that might be missed from research, and it also provides more detail for subsequent researchers. A broader range of ethnicities is also more reflective of the growing multicultural population of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Table 1: Participants' demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Current role	Ethnicity	Qualification	Gender
A. Amy	NGO	Pākehā	Bachelor of Social Work (Hons)	Female
B. Belle	NGO	Pākehā	Bachelor of Bicultural Social Work	Female
C. Cas	Statutory	Not stated	Master of Social Work (Applied)	Female
D. Dan	Statutory	Pākehā	Master of Social Work (Applied)	Male
E. Emma	NGO	Māori	Bachelor of Social Work	Female
F. Fay	NGO	Pākehā	Bachelor of Social Work	Female
G. Gail	Statutory	Not stated	Bachelor of Social Work	Female
H. Holly	NGO	Pākehā	Bachelor of Social Work (Hons)	Female
I. Isla	NGO	Pākehā	Master of Social Work (Applied)	Non-binary

Theme One: Knowledge of the competence standards

The participants held widely varying perceptions of their confidence in the competence standards. Whilst some participants were quick to identify competence standards that they felt they could achieve, others struggled. The varied response by the participants regarding their awareness of the core competence standards may indicate confusion about the competency framework as a valid measure of competency. It may also indicate the different approaches that the tertiary institutions had regarding inclusion of the competence standards in their curriculum.

Table 2: The competence standards that participants felt knowledgeable on.

Competencies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Amy	☑		☑	☒			☒		☒	
Belle	☑	☑		☑	☒			☑	☒	☑
Cass	☒							☑	☒	☑
Dan	☒	☒	☑	☑		☑	☑			
Emma	☑	☑	☑	☒	☒	☒	☒	☑	☑	
Faye	☑		☑	☒	☒	☑	☑			
Gail	☒	☒	☑	☒	☒	☑	☒	☑		
Holly	☒	☒		☑		☑	☑		☑	☑
Isla	☒	☒	☑	☑		☑	☑			

Note. 'Most' is presented as a ☑, and 'least' as ☒

Table 2 illustrates the variety of responses to the question of knowledge and attainment of the competence standards. The table highlights how variable participants were in their perceptions of competence with noticeable gaps with some of the competence standards. No participant expressed confidence in achieving Competency five, which is the ability to engage in practice that promotes social change. Additionally, only two participants expressed confidence in Competence standards two and nine, practising social work with different ethnic and cultural groups and competence to practice within legal and ethical boundaries. Belle reflected:

> [Which competence standards did I feel] less prepared [to achieve]? I think number five. To me that is more about policy and dealing with a bigger picture and I've not had a lot of experience with that. Yes, I would say that would probably be the hardest one for me.

Other participants also shared difficulties in achieving the competence standards that critically analyse policies, systems and structures that impact upon people, groups, communities and wider society. Participants said they did not have much exposure to theoretical underpinnings like radical social work or critical theory, where structural analysis is encouraged and the macro level for change is the focus.

> I feel a little bit more blurry I guess on them about promoting human rights, economic justice. Also promoting social change, just because for me those feel like a lot more macro and I think a lot of the work I do it feels more micro. You're working with people in their environment and that doesn't feel like social change (Gail).

Additionally, a competence regarding legal and ethical boundaries (competence 9) also appeared to have had less coverage and Cass stated:

> [Competence 9], to practice within legal and ethical boundaries of the social work profession'. All of that was just I didn't really know what it would look like in practice so it was hard to see what it would look like, understanding legislation, that didn't really align with me (Cas).

The results indicate that NQSW are graduating with little perceived competence to work at achieving structural change. Most appear to view their role as primarily relating to working with individuals, or whānau (family), rather than addressing structural inequalities. One participant said that her confidence in the more theoretical competence standards, or ones that related to working towards human rights and social and economic justice, was only due to having completed a placement in a research field. Fay said: "Maybe if I went into a different work situation, I would have had more opportunity to do it [address structural inequalities]. I would love more around how do you make that bigger systemic change".

Participants, however, voiced an interest in developing greater structural awareness and addressing systemic or structural issues. Developing skills that would assist in changing policies and changing legislation was highlighted as an area for ongoing

development. Fay shared her thoughts regarding addressing the wider structural systems:

> I'd have loved more around bigger systemic change. How do you bring about more change? It is difficult and it's crazy but my big heart, and I guess my drive and motivation for going into social work, was that bigger picture social justice. Not so much trying to fix anything for an individual but actually what is wrong with the system and what can we do about the system and see systemic change.

Tertiary institutes have created a syllabus that is designed to meet the micro and macro needs of the social work profession, and this includes working for structural change. While the competence standards indicate the importance of social workers understanding and addressing micro and macro issues the NQSWs expressed less confidence in the latter area. In particular, the participants expressed gaps in learning about addressing structural change.

Theme Two: The teaching and learning of the competence standards

This section considers how the competence standards were taught and learned. There appeared to be limitations to the NQSW as to what the competence standards implied or their direct relevance to practice. Considering that these are the measures required for registration to determine social workers' ability to practise, the participants held widely differing levels of awareness of the competence standards. Some participants expressed their concerns about the difficulty for an institution to teach such a broad subject like social work, which has so many fields of practice and such a wide range of service users. Alternatively, some participants stated that the competence standards were included in their course work and connected to almost everything they did in their study.

> Pretty much all our assignments were linked to it [core competence standards] in one way or another. Definitely, throughout placement, learning was linked back to the core competence standards (Fay).

Others were unsure how many competence standards were there, and they appeared to be a 'distant memory' rather than a habitual set of standards that will be referred to over the course of their professional working lives. Amy commented, "I haven't really had any look at them or anything to do with them, I know there were nine".

Field education placements were a significant contributor to participants' readiness to practice. Placements were mentioned by all participants and their contribution to the learning journey is reflected in related studies of NQSW transition to employment. The placement experience appears to directly contribute to NQSW sense of preparedness, or if it was absent, then the contrary.

> I actually didn't feel overly prepared because I had only had one placement [due to COVID-19 restrictions]. I think it would be ideal if you could have multiple placements and get a really good understanding of social work before you actually go into the field (Cass).

Placements also assisted participants in applying theory to real practice and provided a safe environment for learning to practise social work with different ethnic and cultural groups. Many students obtained employment due to the placement they had completed. The research captured how placements directly contributed to the participants' sense of preparedness to meet the core standards.

> I think probably some of my best training that I've had has been through the kaupapa Māori [An organisation that operates using predominantly Māori principles] placement (Fay).
>
> All of our placement-related stuff, a large amount of it came back to SWRB competencies. (Dan).

For some participants the value of placements was only evident upon completion of their study. Participants acknowledged staff who assisted within their placements and the value of the field education within the degree, but the actual value was something that might not have been appreciated whilst they were studying.

> I was thinking at the time we moaned about why was it a four-year degree? But looking back now having those two separate placements were probably the most important for preparedness (Fay).

This section explores the perceptions of NQSW to learn the competence standards and the concerns they shared regarding this. Several participants raised concerns regarding how their course of study needed to cover such a broad subject such as social work. The participants were aware that qualifying social work programmes had only a set amount of time to provide educational opportunities that would cover such a broad range of subjects to cater for students hoping to work in a wide variety of fields. For some participants there was a sense that because of this, there was a need to be self-directed in researching some topics themselves. Dan said, "There is not enough time to learn all this stuff at university".

> You've got four years and people can go into so many different specialities. Working out how to get adequate coverage in that time is pretty hard. (Fay).

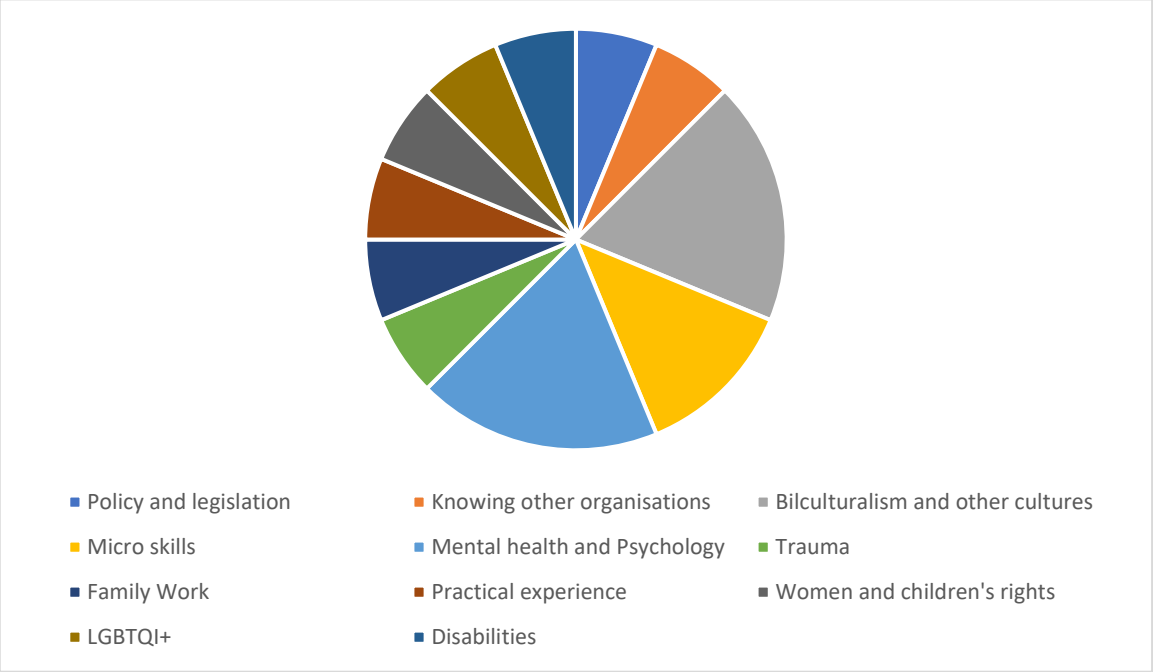
This section considered the way the teaching of the competence standards influenced the perceptions of readiness of the participants. The value of their field education placements was identified by all the participants and the learning of the competence standards was a theme that was raised by participants. They identified that their social work education needs to teach such a broad ranging subject.

Theme Three: Which competence standards required more learning

The research exposed a pattern of gaps in the study experience of NQSW about the competence standards. Whilst participants acknowledged that there were a range of skills, knowledge and training gaps in their learning that they would like to have addressed in order to be more prepared for practice. As the pie chart (Figure 2) shows

there was a range of skills and knowledge areas identified as missing from the participant's education.

Figure 2: Skills, knowledge and training identified as missing, according to their perception of readiness to practice



The blue and the yellow segments represent what is missing according to the participants. They stated that they want more skills in bicultural/cultural diversity and mental health and psychology. Additionally, participants felt that they would like more support and opportunities to work with different cultures, other than Māori and that their experiences were somewhat by chance on occasion depending on the quality of the placement that they had.

Let's look at some different cultures… I think that would have been quite helpful. We touched a little bit on Pasifika cultures, but not much. You learn so much about working with Māori, which I know exactly why, but I just feel we didn't touch much on working with other cultures (Gail).

For some participants where they were living or studying gave them a reduced opportunity to engage with Māori or other ethnicities. This reduced their perceptions of preparedness regarding competence standards one and two. With the refugee and asylum seekers work that is now visible in Aotearoa New Zealand, social work is operating in an increasingly global environment (Nash et al., 2006).

My third-year placement was with an [NGO] working within a mental health addiction support agency and then [in the fourth year] with a [Christian NGO]. They were brilliant but even within that there's only so much that they can do to address the Core competence standards. I probably had very little if any interaction with Māori or a

diverse range of cultures just because that clientele wasn't coming through at the time when I was there (Holly).

Isla indicated that developing specific skills on completing assessments for her clients would have been useful to improve a sense of preparedness to practice. Further, two other participants expressed that they would have liked more teaching on engagement skills, such as interviewing and assessment skills. Fay also thought that different practical tools (such as assessment and micro counselling skills) would have been helpful for her practice.

There is a notable proposition detected within the participants' interview feedback that the course content was not able to prepare NQSW for working with other cultures and that the training for their bicultural awareness was also limited. Whilst the first competence standard relates to working with Māori and the social work profession's commitment to practising in a bicultural manner. However, the second competence standard pertains to working with different ethnic and cultural groups in Aotearoa New Zealand and from the perspective of several participants this receives less attention in the social work curriculum. Gail said: "You learn so much about working with Māori, which I know exactly why, but, I just feel like we didn't touch much on working with other cultures".

Participants appeared reluctant to express competence in practicing in a bicultural manner. However, a participant described feeling well-equipped for working with Māori, but less prepared for working with other cultures. This perhaps reflects a caution regarding not wishing to be seen as being overconfident regarding a topic which has so many nuances and protocols, especially for a person who identifies as a Pākehā from Aotearoa New Zealand. Dan said: "I think there's a real issue around the bicultural part of it. For me that has been one of the biggest areas of discomfort". Whilst discomfort is not the same as not being taught a subject, it indicates that they were being taught. However, what was being taught was making them feel uncomfortable. Additionally, Gail stated:

> I think I'm competent, but I just feel nervous about confidently using them [bicultural knowledge and skills] in practice. Because I worry about how it could be received, I guess as tokenistic. (Gail).

A concern raised by a participant was regarding their tertiary provider's commitment in promoting or teaching bicultural awareness. They acknowledged that the social work education provider was aware of the need to develop a strong bicultural awareness, but were unsure how much of a commitment they actually made towards ensuring this was an established aspect within the social work programme they were teaching.

> I've become a little bit suspicious and cynical about just how bicultural these institutions actually are... They've got to say that they're bicultural. They've got te reo next to an English name. They've got all of this cultural stuff as it exists on paper. Just to what extent do they actually think it's important? How much time

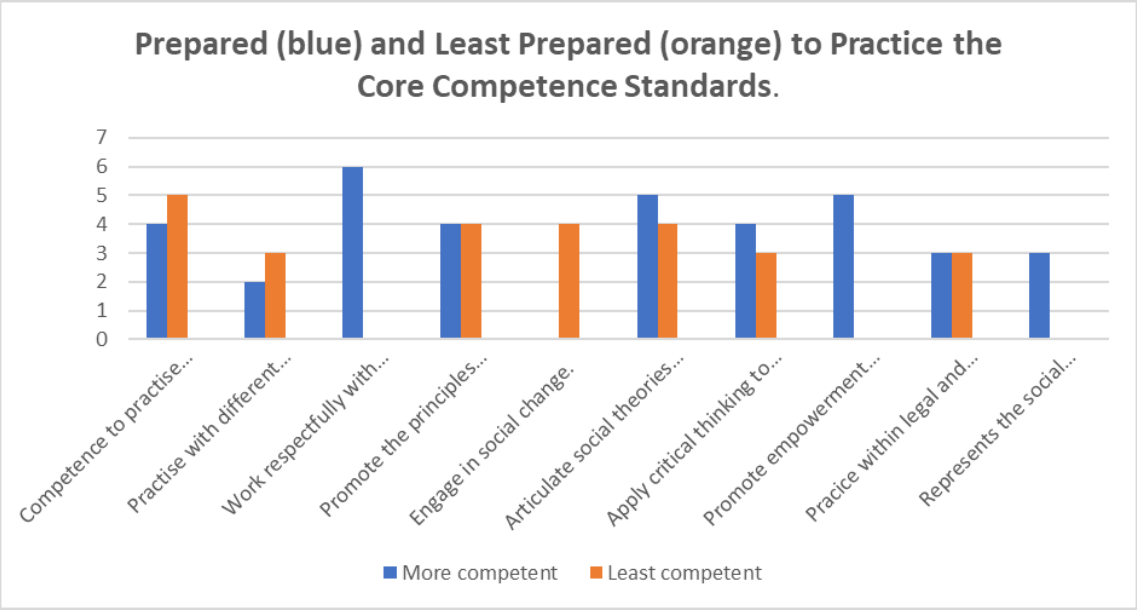
and how much resource are they going to put into teaching predominantly Pākehā social workers the bicultural skills? (Dan).

NQSWs sense of preparedness measured against the core competence standards

Most of the participants general view was that they were prepared for practice, and they identified more competence standards that they felt competent in, than not. The top three competence standards that they felt most prepared to achieve were: Competency 3. To working respectfully and inclusively with diversity and difference in practice; 6. To understand and articulate social work theories, indigenous practice knowledge, other relevant theories and social work methods and models and 8. Competence to promote empowerment of people and communities to enable positive change. The three that they were least prepared to meet were: 5. Competence to engage in practice that promotes social change; 2. Competence to practice social work with different ethnic and cultural groups and 9. The competence to practice within legal and ethical boundaries of the social work profession.

They had differing thoughts about the use of the core competence standards, and this was expressed in their comments to the question regarding their familiarity with the core competence standards within the interview. The feedback that some of the NQSW gave in relation to the competence standards was positive with expressions that they (the core competence standards) were referred to regularly to prompt them to complete their continuing professional development (CPD) Log. Two participants said that you just include them as a normal or natural part of your work. One said it is integral to what we are [as social workers] as registration is compulsory. Another participant described them as absolutely crucial for their whole training and another subject said that they used them in all of their assignments, and this concluded with a final assignment which detailed how they met the competence standards in their placements.

Figure 3: Prepared and least prepared competence standards



The perception of preparedness or not being prepared to for the competence standards was mixed. Figure 3 is a bar graph displaying the competence standards that the participants perceived they were either most competent in (blue), or least competent (orange) to achieve. There was a considerable variance in response and the participants identified more competence standards in which they were 'most' competent in, compared to 'least' confident to achieve. That is, on average each participant identified more of the 10 competence standards, which they perceived they were competent to achieve, rather than a lesser amount which they felt less prepared to achieve. This indicates that participants displayed some confidence in their preparedness. However, it neither supports, nor opposes the use of the 10 core competence standards as a measure of competence of NQSW.

Participants were able to hold mixed perceptions, where they reported seeing themselves as both 'most' and 'least' competent to achieve a specific competency. The wording of the standards might produce a mixed response. For example, Competence 9, The competence to work within the legal and ethical boundaries of the social work profession. A participant may feel an affinity with working in a legal framework, but not within the broad definition of ethics. Additionally, Competency 6, (competence to understand and articulate social work theories, indigenous practice knowledge, other relevant theories, and social work practice methods, and models). A participant may be confident in part of the competency, but not the other.

> Is it really bad that one of my top three is also one of my bottom three? Very second to the bottom is the "legal and ethical boundaries" just because it's just probably the ethical part (Amy).

More participants identified Competency 1, competence to practise social work with Māori as the competency they thought least prepared to meet (5 from n=9). Whilst at the same time nearly half of the respondents stated it was the one they felt most prepared to meet (4 from n=9). There was quite a variance between their expressed experiences. Some described a strong familiarity and awareness of the core competence standards.

> I guess for every practising social worker we have to demonstrate that we are competent and that we understand, and our practice meets those ten things [10 core competence standards]. It's linked to our professional development. We have to provide evidence that we are engaging in professional development that meets those ten competence standards. It's pretty integral to what we are, right? (Dan).

Other participants were less confident in meeting the competence standards and there was a varied response regarding their personal awareness of the competence standards. One participant reported not really looking at them or having anything to do with them, since graduating. Gail said: "I could probably tell you a few [of the competence standards] off the top of my head, but definitely not all of them. I could give you the gist, I think. I have done a lot of referencing to them in a lot of assignments".

> I think it's [core competency standards] something we look at and is gone over every year in our studies but as far as my recall of it if I was to try and talk to you about it off the top of my head, I think I would be lacking to be honest (Holly).

An interesting dimension recognised by some participants was that the core competence standards affirmed the social work professional identity, describing the standards as being like boundaries. Participants working in multi-disciplinary team (MDT) settings, where the role of the social worker might be blurred or not specific, the competence standards are helpful in promoting the value of the profession. Dan stated, "I think it's really good to be able to have all that [10 core competence standards] to fire back to them and to be able to articulate them".

A participant described confidence in her preparedness when measured against the competence standards due to her social work education regularly reflecting on them.

> I think I felt relatively prepared. I felt like I could articulate how I had been meeting them [10 core competence standards] and I felt like I could continue in that. There are some that you feel more confident in. Some you feel a bit less confident, but overall, I think I felt like I've been looking at these for the last four years. I've been preparing myself to be able to meet them and I have been prepared by our tutors to be able to meet them, so I felt pretty good. (Gail).

The participants identified competence standards that they required more support to attain, and they stated there were more skills, training and knowledge that they needed to be more prepared for practice. The participants demonstrated a considerable variance in their responses.

Theme Four: The impact of COVID-19 on NQSW preparedness

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted globally. Governments implemented various restrictions in order to reduce the transmission of the virus and this impacted tertiary institutions who had to comply with the restrictions such as reduced social distancing and limited numbers within buildings. This impacted NQSW who studied between 2020 and 2022. Participants described various factors in their academic journey and sense of preparedness to attain the competence standards due to COVID-19 restrictions. Because of the regulations and restrictions that were required for the well-being of staff and students the tertiary institutions altered their teaching and placement opportunities were managed in such a way that they complied with the restrictions. For Gail that meant:

> It was all for me around practical experience and that was lacking because lockdowns… You have all this information, knowledge and skills and you want to put it into practice, but we just couldn't. That's probably the main thing that has impacted my own feelings about my competence to practice.

Participants described the detrimental impact of the pandemic-related restrictions on their tertiary experience. This included reduced preparedness to meet the competence

standards because of the reduced opportunity for placements and also the different teaching strategies due to lockdowns.

> I think over the last two years with COVID and stuff that's been even more significant in the way they've had to teach, but for me, that would be a major one. It kind of pissed me off too. It's like we are social workers. Social workers are meant to sit in a room with people. Whakawhanaungatanga (make deep connections with people). Try and build relationships with somebody on zoom. It's not the same. (Dan).

In contrast, some participants found aspects of the restrictions beneficial. One described attending a block course after the lockdown and how grateful staff and students were for the newly returned freedom. They believed that this created a deeper working relationship with their lecturers and in turn this contributed to a more positive learning experience. Allowing them to enjoy their block courses and describe a sense where they were more prepared to achieve the competence standards due to the more appreciative interaction with staff and NQSW.

Additionally, some participants described themselves as more suited to the remote learning that became the accepted norm.

> I am introverted by nature so I found it great being at home. I was able to incorporate exercise and stuff while I was listening to lectures, and I do better outside of large groups of people. It wasn't too bad for me. For some of my uni friends and colleagues, they struggled being extroverts and needing that social interaction (Holly).

Participants had concerns that social work education providers might continue to use remote learning practices, due to its perceived affordability. They feared this might be at the detriment of the students' academic experience.

> I think with Covid and stuff I really hope that for programmes like ours, which was largely distance taught, it doesn't give the universities and these training institutions, like: "We can do this cheaper by doing X, Y, and Z" [a reference for further remote learning] (Dan).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a worldwide impact, and the restrictions on placements and the reduced class time for social work students between 2020 and 2022 has also impacted on their perceptions of readiness and their actual academic experience.

Theme Five: Transition from study to employment

Transition describes the journey that NQSW make from studying in their tertiary institution to commencing employment. The participants' perceptions of the transition was mixed. NQSW had varying understandings of preparedness for practice and what the transition would be like, and how much their course of study had prepared, or not, prepared them. Some of the participants described feeling assured that their course of

study had been full and complete. Belle said, “My whole education was pretty thorough, what we learnt was really comprehensive and covered little bits of everything. I think we had a really good basic grounding”.

Participants expressed open confidence from the learnings they had attained within their academic journey and Holly also stated, “I find it hard to identify any gaps because I feel like the degree programme was so thorough”.

Conversely, participants expressed concern about the transition from study to employment and how this had been for them. Amy described it as, “A baptism of fire’. Some of the participants expressed thoughts that their social work education would never be able to prepare them fully and that, as a profession, they would need ongoing learning to maintain mastery within such a complex profession. One participant stated that when he started employment it was like, “You’re not in Kansas anymore”. He felt overwhelmed and exposed to the complexities of a busy workplace. He was grateful for the ongoing support offered by graduate programmes, assisting the transition. Dan expressed caution about overconfidence when starting employment:

> You’re in a profession where, like teaching, or any other major profession really, you are obligated to continue to learn and if you are not receptive to that, if you think you come out of your four-year degree, or your two years master’s degree, and you’re feeling really confident and you’re feeling really good, like you know stuff, I would actually say you’re dangerous (Dan).

An additional factor that impacted the participants transition from study into the profession was their directly and indirectly observing and reflecting on a social work profession which they have observed as undervalued. Eve said, “You’ve got to work with agencies or services that may not specifically value your degree or your opinion. It makes it a bit harder to do some of the things with people”. This caused additional pressure in her transition into employment.

Participants also have had challenging transitions into workplaces where they encountered negative opinions. Dan said: “I think social workers as a profession, people criticise us and look at us as this group of ‘basket weaving do-gooding liberals”.

The realisation for some participants that there is a requirement for ongoing support as new practitioners transitioning is one of the key reasons behind the establishment of graduate support programmes. This was identified as a factor in improving NQSW sense of preparedness. The support programmes pair NQSW with experienced practitioners and provide support, mentoring and a forum to safely discuss practice matters. Three of the participants were involved with such programmes. Gail commented that, “It is helpful to discuss with other new graduate social workers as well as our mentors who have been social working for longer”. Isla also valued having the input of more seasoned social workers sharing their experiences.

NQSW were aware that there is not a seamless process from academia to employment and that they might not be expected to be ready straight from graduating. Some

participants were also aware that they would encounter various eventualities, which their study will not have prepared them for and having the additional support that a graduate programme provides can offset this. The graduate programmes have been regarded as helpful for transitioning and have provided the participants opportunities to ask questions of experienced social workers, continue their learning and provide support to adjust into their social work roles.

Chapter summary

This chapter presented the results of nine semi-structured interviews with NQSW who have been employed in social work positions since graduation. The participants were interviewed to ascertain how newly qualified social workers perceive their preparedness to practice social work measured against the Social Workers Registration Board's (SWRB) 10 core competence standards. Additionally, they explored which of the 10 competence standards they believed they needed more support with, and what skills they would like more competence in. The transition from academia into the workplace has created many opportunities and experiences that have shaped the responses by the participants. The data revealed five themes including: knowledge of the competence standards, the teaching and learning of the competence standards, which competence standards required more learning, the impact of COVID-19 and the transition to employment. The following chapter is the discussion, the findings are considered within the relevant literature.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter explores the findings from the thematic analysis and reflects on these in the context of the literature. The aim of this research was to better understand the sense of the preparedness to practise of NQSW, when measured against the SWRB 10 core competence standards within Aotearoa New Zealand. There is a growing body of literature related to NQSW preparedness and this has assisted in developing a better understanding of the findings from this study. To add to the research on this topic it was important to understand whether the findings disagreed or extended the scholarship of the research field. The data presented several different viewpoints, and this discussion examined the results in relation to the literature from a social constructionist and critical point of view. They informed the analysis by seeking to understand the constructs of preparedness by the NQSW and also attempted to understand how the NQSW attained, or did not attain, competence standards that are aligned to working as change agents at a more macro, or structural, level. Generally, the participants in this present study held a positive stance regarding their sense of preparedness, and this is reflective of previous studies (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Ballantyne et al., 2018; Bates et al., 2010; Grant et al., 2017; Joubert, 2021 and Sharpe et al., 2011).

The uniqueness of this research is that it used the SWRB core competence standards as a measure of preparedness to practice of NQSW. The study is distinct to the Aotearoa New Zealand context of professional practice, adding another dimension to the literature because of how social worker preparedness is assessed. It is now mandatory for NQSW to demonstrate competence in the core competence standards upon entry to the profession, following achievement of an initial social work qualification. People with experience in the social service field, but without a formal social work qualification, can also apply for registration. However, this latter cohort was not the focus of this study.

From the findings five themes were identified: these relate to the knowledge of the competence standards (including which skills, training and knowledge the participants want more training in); the teaching and the learning of the competence standards; how the competence standards were taught; and which competence standards required more learning in order to achieve them. The study also explored the impact that COVID-19 has had on NQSW sense of preparedness to meet the competence standards and the expectations and transition that NQSW experience when moving from study to employment. This chapter discusses these themes in the context of the relevant literature.

Knowledge of the competence standards and whether they were achieved

The first theme that was identified in the participants' feedback was their widely varying perception of knowledge of the 10 core competence standards. This addresses the key research question of how prepared NQSW perceived themselves to be measured against the core competence standards and what skills and knowledge did they need more support with.

Participants expressed doubt about their preparedness to achieve some of the competence standards. There were occasions within the present study where participants asserted and doubted their competence with the same competence standard. One participant asked the interviewer if it was really bad that one of the competence standards that she felt most competent to achieve, was also one she felt least prepared to achieve. This apparent confusion regarding the attainment, or not, of the competence standards is perhaps reflective of what is examined in the research by Yu et al. (2016) where they describe the problems of self-efficacy and relate this to the way social workers might construct their awareness of what being prepared for practice is and how this construction can be changeable. Yu et al.'s (2016) insights suggest that while the competencies are an official measure of preparedness, NQSW may not regard them as such, or may have other measures of their own.

There was a lot of variances in participants views regarding their attainment of the competence standards. Whilst some participants were quick to identify competence standards that they felt they were achieving, others struggled. Howard et al., (2015) captured data that supports the varied responses from the participants of the study. One of the participants in the research by Howard et al. (2015) claimed that whilst some new graduates need "way too much parenting", others appear to believe that they know everything and readily make decisions that are "way outside what you want them to be making" (p.16). Frost et al. (2012) found that NQSW were all conscious of both their incompetence and inexperience in many respects. This was reflective of the participants of the present study. A commonality, by omission, was that none of the participants expressed competence in engaging in practice which promotes social change (Competency 5). In relation to the research question, it demonstrates that in regard to these specific core competence standards, the NQSW within this study were not prepared to practice.

NQSW in this study were hesitant in expressing competence in knowledge regarding working in a macro fashion involving addressing structural change. This finding conflicts with several participants expressed interest in working as change agents at a macro level. One participant said [in relation to working at the macro level] that other than once writing to a select committee whilst at university, they had never looked at that type of structural work again. This apparent limitation for opportunities, within their education, to work at a structural level reinforces research by Aravelo (2021) who decries the lack of radical or critical social theory in practice. He states that social work that focusses on addressing the economic and political structures within Aotearoa New Zealand is rare. He notes a lack of exposure in studying macro causes during the participants' time at their Higher Education Institutes and several participants from the present study concurred with this. Other participants said they felt less prepared for practice to promote social change, and another said that she wanted to know how to make that bigger systemic change. This does appear at odds with the literature which showed a "radical declared curriculum" across a vast majority of Higher Education Institutes (Ballantyne et al., 2016, p.23).

Social work education has been challenged for not promoting greater structural awareness. International research identified that in the UK, the Diploma of Social Work placed more emphasis upon what they described as 'discrete' competence standards and not the understandings of structural deprivation (Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002). Aravelo's (2021) critique of the education system within Aotearoa New Zealand describes student's having very little exposure to radical social work paradigms, which would create greater awareness of structural change and identifies educators as impacted by outside influences that created tension between, "getting students ready for contemporary social work practice, that is 'work ready', as opposed to getting the students ready to be 'change agents'" (p.113).
If social work education focuses on the micro tasks and skills required for individualized assessments, it gives employers and state-run institutions, and not the academics, influence over the curriculum (Morley et al., 2017).

The findings indicate that participants were more aware of micro, rather than macro skills. This focus on the micro, invariably moves away from the social work profession's commitment to social justice (Goode et al., 2021; Morley et al., 2017). The present study has identified that NQSWs attainment of the competence standards which reflect structural change is minimal, with no participant expressing competence in those specific competence standards. Social workers are called to be change agents and challenge structural and institutional oppression (Goode et al., 2021). Not addressing structural change may risk preserving systems of oppression and negating the profession's values (Aravelo 2021). A concern that is raised is that a focus on individual-level interventions or micro engagement risks preserving societal and political conditions which furthers the disparities faced by members of marginalized communities (Corley & Young, 2018). Reorienting the social work profession to confront oppressive structures and dismantle systems that promote discrimination begins with the education of social work students. Goode et al. (2021) found that NQSW shared a desire to increase their awareness to actively engage in confronting oppression and in social justice advocacy, which mirrors the findings from this study. O'Brien (2011) states social justice ideas are actively drawn on in case work, but are less utilized at the macro level of change**.** This raises concerns about the ability for NQSW preparedness to practice based on the core competence standards**.**

The wide variance of participants views regarding their attainment of the competence standards, identifies a question as to whether the competence standards are in fact good measures of readiness to practice of NQSW. There was such a broad range of awareness and use of the competence standards from the participants in the study. There was an over identification of one of the competence standards, Competency 3 in that all participants stated they had attained competence in this competence standard. This is the competence to work respectfully and inclusively with diversity and difference in practice. Of the 10 core competence standards participants said that they have the most competence in this one. Whilst not inferring that the participants were not genuine in their identification of this standard, or that it is important to operate in an inclusive manner, it is that this particular competency overshadowed others possibly

due to its wording and in particular the term 'inclusive'. Whether the competence standards are suitable as measures is questionable when considering the ranging experiences of the participants and their own mixed views about what competence standards they feel they have attained or not. It further brings into doubt the use of the core competence standards as suitable measures. This supports the findings from the Enhance R2P project (Ballantyne et al., 2022) who concluded from their research that a professional capability framework, rather than a set of core competence standards, can better guide and inform the learning experience of NQSW.

The teaching and learning of the competence standards

Teaching and learning of the competence standard in the different tertiary institutes that the participants had attended appeared to be variable. There appeared to be a wide variance in the participants understanding of attaining the competence standards, or their direct relevance to practice. The participants had attended six different tertiary institutes and provided mixed views as to the seeming importance of the competence standards to their day-to-day practice. Some were not sure on exactly how many competence standards there were, whilst others stated that everything in their course work had been connected to the competence standards. A key finding identified by all participants of the study was the way that their placements enabled them to integrate theory into practice.

The variance of NQSW perceptions of their competence was captured within the Enhance R2P study by managers/professional supervisors who held criticisms of NQSW regarding their abilities as social workers and expressed views about the variance between tertiary institutions. They capture the remark: "All degrees in social work are certainly NOT equal" (Ballantyne et al, 2019, p.30). This was when discussing the standard, quality, and variance of NQSW and the researchers assert that the NQSW vary "widely and wildly" (p.30) dependent upon the quality of teaching and standards their Higher Education Institute has set.

Joubert's (2020) findings also reflect about a range of views as to the extent to which their participants' academic learning had prepared them for practice. NQSW preparedness to practice is supported by their field education placements, which the participants found was the most effective element in their social workers' education. Frost et al. (2013) also found that the differences between students' views could be tentatively explained by the fact that they have undertaken dissimilar education experiences. The participants within the present study were also from different Higher Education Institutes, which impacts on their sense of preparedness to practice.

Some participants said that they felt like they had been looking at core competence standards throughout their entire education and had been preparing themselves to achieve them for four years, so felt confident. Another participant said that the papers and the knowledge gained within their Higher Education Institute really covered all the competences well and was thorough. However, due to her placement within an organisation that had little if any interaction with Māori or a diverse range of cultures,

this left them with the perception that they were not prepared for practice based on the competence standards. In the UK research of Bates et al. (2010) their participants described feeling well prepared in their ability to respond to cultural differences and the participants who felt unprepared believed this was due to their high workloads when they became employed.

Due to the generic nature of the participants' qualifying programmes, which are approved by the SWRB, the NQSW were taught broad subjects, but not specialist knowledge. Participants suggested that their study was too broad and some believed there was no real clinical or real mental health training. Although some participants did acknowledge that they could not expect to be taught everything that they may want to learn. It is argued by Grant et al. (2018) that generic social work education should produce newly qualified social workers who can practise in diverse fields, and in a manner that reflects social work values. Healey (2009) asserts that emerging graduates are generically skilled, adaptive, and ready for critical thought and inquiry and can be adaptive to settings but not specifically prepared for each role. The participants of the present study commented that they did not expect their social work education to prepared them for each different field of practice and they voiced an awareness that they had a responsibility for learning specialist knowledge. Bates et al. (2010) supports this and states that within the first year of practice, specific role training and informal learning are of critical importance and NQSW are seen as lifelong learners (p.155). This assists in increasing an understanding on how NQSW might perceive their preparedness for practice, as there is an expectation that they will continue in their sense of preparedness over time.

Teaching the competence standards within the social work curriculum is achieved by using a blend of educational strategies such as attending lectures, tutorials, classroom, online learnings and field education placements (Harden, 2001). Many courses now use a mixture of mediums to teach social work education. As the participants were studying during the period that COVID-19 forced education providers to adapt their teaching to adhere to the restrictions so more online learning was used.

One participant stated that their most profound learning of bicultural practice was attained whilst she was on placement and another participant claimed that his placement experience was linked to the competence standards. Field education has been identified within the study as a key factor in NQSW sense of readiness to practice and this is supported by national and international literature: (Bates et al., 2010; Beddoe et al., 2018; Grant et al., 2017; Hay, 2020; Howard et al., 2015). Chilvers et al. (2021) also describes how social work students in Aotearoa New Zealand need to demonstrate the core competence standards during their placements and that it is an integral part of the tertiary journey. They are also taught about the professional codes of conduct and ethics. It further enforces the importance of field education in preparing them for practice. Participants in the study expressed the value of their placement experience and Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018) assert that their research participants valued it to

enlarge and enrich the image of the social worker and professional identity development.

Additionally, and perhaps epitomizing a smooth transition from study to employment is where NQSW become employed by the agency where they undertook their placements. Several participants from the study had obtained their employment in the agency where they earlier completed their placement. This is supported by literature regarding the additional 'employability' that NQSW have once they have completed a placement in a particular field. Howard et al. (2015) captured the response of a line manager that advised that "recruitment begins with field placement," (p.13) and that they often employ graduates who had completed a placement with their agency. Enhance R2P (Ballantyne et al., 2019) also identified that more than 30% of the participants had gained employment following a placement in the agency. This highlights the value and the importance of placements within the social work programmes. Research by Barton et al. (2005) claim "60%" (p.301) of NQSW were employed by the agency who provided the placement, and the benefits are that the NQSW has been trained in the agency and are familiar with the resources in the agency.

The competence standards are described within the Enhance R2P Phase One as "abstract and complex in nature" (Ballantyne et al, 2019, p.25). Participants within the Enhance R2P study found it hard to match the curriculum documents to the standards, due to the imprecision of the competence standards and found that this in itself became an important finding for the Enhance R2P study. This confusion again brings into question the relevance of using the core competence standards as valid measures for preparedness.

The way the NQSW themselves undertook the learning of the competence standards also impacted on their attainment of the competence standards. The findings showed that some of the participants expressed concerns about studying social work, due to it been so broad with many fields of practice within and so many specialisms covered by the title 'social work'. This was also what was identified in report one of the Enhance R2P project (Ballantyne et al., 2019), where educators identified that there was insufficient time to meet all educational needs in what they described as "an already crowded curriculum" (p.31). Participants expressed concerns about the amount of the course to be covered. However, other participants stated that they felt their course of study set them up well for their current social work role and felt prepared to practise. The learning of the competence standards highlights the differing views of how the 10 competence standards are attained. One of the participants expressed competence to work with Māori, not because of her study but because "I am always around Māori, so I know how to engage with them and interact". This also connects with the research by Bruning (2021), which captures that NQSW have many life skills and experiences, which contributes to their wanting to be a social worker in the first place, but also how they develop their professional identity by merging their individual identity and social work identity during their period of tertiary studies.

Participants' accounts showed variations in their views about how academic teaching prepared them. Participants views were that they were learning for life and not relying on their social work education to provide all the knowledge that they required. One participant said that there was always a place for more learning and that she thought it was her own responsibility to research specific things she was curious about. Additionally, in their learning of the competence standards one of the participants said that they enjoyed their supportive workplace, which gave them a sense of confidence and this notion of the workplace context affirming their competence is reflected by Manthorpe et al. (2014) who asserted that the workplace had considerable bearing on whether NQSW felt appropriately prepared, or not, for their work. A participant felt that she was not prepared to practice based on the competence standards, but that it was more her sense of confidence and when she went back to reflect on what learnings she had obtained from her studies, she decided she was more confident.

With field education featuring as such an important part of preparing NQSW readiness to practice social work, when this learning is reduced it has an impact. Placements provide authentic meaningful learning opportunities (Bates, 2010; Fronek et al., 2021; Hay, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the placement opportunities experienced by participants, which lead them to feel less prepared and missing out on direct client experiences. Fronek et al. (2021) details the disruptions that the pandemic caused with the health and wellbeing of students and clients taking priority, some agencies that provided placements closed immediately and others adjusted to the restrictions. "Anxiety was particularly high for those students expecting to graduate after completing placement" or had family overseas (Fronek et al., 2021, p.4). Because of the disruptions, to what is a key pedagogy in learning social work, some NQSW from the present study felt less prepared to practise social work because of the impact of COVID-19.

Which competence standards required more learning

The study considered the competence standards that the NQSW felt most competent to achieve and also the competence standards that the participants felt less competent in achieving. Most of the participants' general view was that they were prepared for practice, and they identified more competence standards that they felt competent to achieve, than not. The top three competence standards that they felt most prepared to achieve were: 3, working respectfully and inclusively with diversity and difference; 6, understanding and articulating social work theories, indigenous practice knowledge, other relevant theories and social work methods and models and 8, competence to promote empowerment of people and communities to enable positive change.

The three competence standards that they were least prepared to meet were: 5, the competence to engage in practice that promotes social change; 2, the competence to practice social work with different ethnic and cultural groups (there was a recognition from participants that they required more bi-cultural teaching and opportunities to work with people of different ethnicities) and 9, the competence to practice within legal and ethical boundaries of the social work profession. There are similarities here with

the research by Bates et al. (2010) that found 25% of participants did not feel prepared with social work law and critical perspectives (p.161).

The participants were also asked about the skills and knowledge that they felt they needed, or would like to have more training in. Like other themes that have been identified the participants' perceptions were very mixed. There was a similarity in the findings from the present study and those found in phase two of the Enhance R2P study. There were two topics that were the same, or similar, in both studies: working with trauma and services and resources available locally. Topics that were also listed in both studies were: Working with Pacific peoples; Engaging effectively with people with special communication needs (disabilities), working with Māori and lastly family and whanau dynamics.

There is agreement in the literature that generic skills or capabilities are necessary for social workers employed in many different fields of practice for their work readiness (Howard et al., 2015). As NQSW venture into varying fields, having more specialist skills for the discipline they are now working in is pragmatic. Consequently, several participants found that they wanted more knowledge regarding mental health. This is covered in phase two of the Enhance R2P when they posited that if there are identified gaps in the knowledge in specialist topics, like mental health, should this be met by changes to the pre-qualifying programme, or is it best addressed in post qualifying education? Of note the subject of mental health is captured as a key course type offered by a small number of tertiary providers in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ballantyne et al., 2019). Participants perceptions of competence to practice was lessened because they thought they needed these skills in their practice.

In Grant et al. (2017) their participants expressed confidence in their social work education generally, but when more specific questions were explored, they were less confident in having attained the specific skill or knowledge. This is reflected in the findings of the present study. Participants asserted that they needed more skills, knowledge and training regarding specific subjects related to their employment. Participants stated that they would like to have more awareness of working with broader, more diverse service users and ethnicities. Several wanted to know more about mental health and the subjects like psychology. Basic micro skills regarding interviewing and assessment were listed by more than a third of the participants. There are parallels with the findings from Bates et al. (2010), where a quarter of the participants identified needs in "assessment, report writing, record keeping time management, case management and contracting" (p.166). These findings are also evident within Grant et al. (2017) where 29% of the participants said that their education hadn't prepared them for "these more technical tasks" (p.494).

The impact of COVID-19 on NQSW preparedness

COVID-19 has impacted upon NQSW who studied between 2020 and 2022 in both negative and positive ways and this has affected their sense of preparedness to practice (Zuchowski et al., 2023). The findings support what the available literature indicates

about COVID-19's impact both on their academic journey and sense of preparedness. Alston et al. (2021) states that the pandemic "necessitated a reframing of social work practice" (p.1). Much change occurred and many aspects of people's lives and livelihoods changed with conditions worsening for people already on the margins of society. This impacted on the NQSW who were on placements within agencies managing through these uncertain times. The regulations and restrictions that the pandemic forced altered social work teaching methods in Aotearoa New Zealand (Fronek et al; 2021). This has seen more social work courses using remote teaching methods, reducing in-class learning contact courses and changing field education placement opportunities. There were also limitations imposed for vulnerable clients who were more susceptible due to ill health (Alston et al., 2021; Fronek et al; 2021). Additional to the impact on the NQSW academic journey, there has been a negative impact on the work environment that NQSW have started their careers in due to the pandemic. This has been reported as increased client needs, including a rise in health issues, homelessness, and financial concerns and all these factors impact on how social workers manage their professional lives (Alston, 2021). This was observed by participants who were impacted by the changes and lost opportunities to engage in practical learning, which might have bolstered their attainment of the competence standards.

It is evident that the changes arising from the COVID-19 pandemic impacted both those who educate and those who receive education. Many participants struggled with using online platforms for their learning experience. Hesitancy in using e-learning is expressed by Bates et al. (2019) saying e-learning is not a preference for learning social work and "'face to face' discussion appears to provide an ideal approach to learning for newly qualified social workers" (p.158). Fronek et al. (2021) also identified the negative impact on students who lacked technological skills. This is supported by participants who stated that online learning was not conducive to promoting learning environments where questions, discussions and interaction could be easily fostered.

The direct impact on the NQSW academic experience acknowledges that it was both a negative and a positive experience. Participants who were introverted fared better outside of large groups of people and enjoyed the reduced face-to-face interaction, or the expectation to be social and attend lectures. It was also identified that there was a benefit to the educators as the pandemic promoted the need to adapt and embrace technology, learn new skills rapidly and left educators in the position of 'learners' too, McFadden et al. (2020). With high transmission of COVID 19 numbers continuing to be reported when the research was being written there is no doubt that the impact of COVID-19 will continue to influence the journey for professionals in many fields of practice worldwide and this impacts their sense of preparedness. On a positive note, following an end to the restrictions a participant described forging closer relationships with staff and fellow students when the restrictions ended, as both groups shared an appreciation for returning to pre COVID-19 normality with classroom lessons and block courses. Crisp et al. (2021) also identified positive experiences from the changed approach to social work education due to COVID-19. The pandemic impacted both negatively and positively on NQSWs education and readiness to practice.

The transition from study to employment

The transition of NQSW from academia into their social work professional roles can be daunting. One of the participants thoughts regarding her transition into employment, was that whilst she felt prepared to practice social work based on the competence standards, she was not prepared to practice in the environment that she graduated into. Australian researchers, Stewart and Feilding (2022) observe that the social work employment landscape is now characterised by uncertainty. Transition can be complex and the first year extremely important (Grant et al. (2014). A good sense of preparedness is pivotal to the NQSW as they venture into what is likely to be their first professional role. There appears to also be a gap identified by the present study regarding the transition from academia to employment and captured in the comment by one participant who thought their social work educators had not given her an idea of what it was really like out in the workplace.

There has been an expectation in previous studies that NQSW were expected to "hit the ground running" (Jack & Donnellan, 2010). This has been captured by participants in the present study who felt like they were experiencing a baptism of fire when they started their employment. Joubert (2020) described this experience of transition in their research as "a hard clash with reality" (p.40). Another participant from the present study quoted from, The Wizard of Oz and said, regarding the start of his employment "We are not in Kansas anymore". It captures the difficulties that NQSW experience when transitioning. Jack and Donnellan (2010) acknowledged the pressure that NQSW are under to be able to work at a high level with a full case load soon after graduating. The notion of being ready to immediately manage complex cases and have a full caseload is challenged and the assertion that a qualifying education needs to be viewed as a foundation, rather than expecting students to be fully ready or complete, having just left their study. This was expressed by participants in this study and further reflects research by Joubert (2020) and Rawlings (2012) who suggested that becoming work ready from academia is a journey, rather than an end product and there should not be an expectation on NQSW to have unrealistically challenging expectations. The findings support what has been said about the change from student to qualified social workers. The participants in the study did not think that employers expected them to be fully formed social workers on qualifying, instead they saw themselves as on a journey of development. This is supported by Keen et al. (2016) who promote the idea that newly qualified graduates are on a journey of developing.

In Beddoe et al. (2018) educators and students voiced concerns that some employers have expectations that NQSW would be competent and confident in all fields of practice. Educators and students within their study were clear that this was unrealistic and went on to state that due to social work being so diverse it was not possible to know everything across the sector. These sentiments were shared by the participants from this present study. What was evident in the findings was that many of the NQSW were engaged in graduate support programmes, which they had found useful for their transition.

Graduate support programmes support and use inventive strategies that assist NQSW transitioning from academia to employment (Keen et al. 2016). The findings from the present research revealed that participants were benefitting from the programmes. The programmes which participants were involved with included the New Entry to Specialty Practice (NESP) programme, a supportive programme for new graduates starting within mental health and addictions fields in Aotearoa New Zealand. There was also the graduate programme offered by Oranga Tamariki (Child services). Participants were also enrolled in the programme organized by the ANZASW. Therefore, a third of participants from the study were currently accessing graduate support to assist in transition. Within the literature there are explanations and definitions of what these programmes provide, and the findings were that the reduced caseloads and provided opportunities to access mentors to assist their transition. The details of what is included within the graduate programmes have been reported on by various researchers in this field, for example, Beddoe et al. (2018) and Manthorpe et al. (2014) described the programmes as providing the optimum level of support for a NQSW. The findings in the present study have captured deep appreciation from participants that are actively involved in such programmes. The central advantage of the programmes is having a supportive mentor who has experience in the field that the NQSW is working in. This allows support to consolidate the theoretical learning and have an opportunity to discuss various relevant topics in a safe and supportive manner (Baines, 2020; Carpenter et al., 2010; Grant et al., 2017). One participant from the research has found the ANZASW programme has been helpful for them with their learning about cultural matters. The programmes assist NQSW preparedness to practice and to achieve the core competence standards.

Joubert (2020) proffers that employers have a vital role in helping in the transition. Participants in this present study agreed and described how employers have assisted with the transition. The expectation on NQSW to be fully formed and functioning practitioners, reflects the tension observed within Higher Education Institutes that educate, and the prominent employers who are wanting their new recruits to be primed to slot into their agencies and organisations and be instantly active and effective with the complexities of cases about to confront them. Additionally, the findings from UK managers of NQSW in the study by Manthorpe et al. (2014) gives insight into what varied expectations there are from people currently in the field. They state that, “To become a competent practitioner took between six months, to those who thought it was two to three years”, (p.101). This seeming difference reflects the varied considerations and thoughts regarding becoming a fully qualified and competent social worker and supports the view that it is not expected that NQSW will be “hitting the ground running” straight from study. What the findings from the present research supports, reflecting the positive feedback obtained by participants, is greater access to graduate support programmes for NQSW within Aotearoa New Zealand.

Chapter summary

This chapter discussed the findings of the research on the identified themes: Which skills, training and knowledge NQSW felt were lacking in their study, the teaching and

learning of the competence standards and their knowledge of the competence standards and whether they were achieved or not. The impact that COVID-19 has had on NQSW perceptions of readiness and the transition from study to employment. The participants produced varied findings, which was both supportive of existing literature and occasionally at odds. This might be expected when considering the varied demographics that the NQSW participants brought to the research. They were from six different tertiary institutions, they had obtained three different qualifications, they were diverse in gender, age and location within Aotearoa New Zealand. Their differences continued into their professional roles where they were employed in statutory and non-statutory roles in many different fields.

The key characteristics of the findings are that this study provided a unique insight into NQSW preparedness as it has chosen to use the core competence standards as a measuring stick for determining preparedness. This is a point of difference from other research in preparedness to practice. As the core competence standards are integral for mandatory registration within Aotearoa New Zealand, it would be useful for future studies to replicate the research for comparison. The penultimate section looked at the impact of COVID-19 on NQSW sense of preparedness. It was not just the academic experience that was affected, but also the workplaces that the new graduates began their social work in that have been impacted by the global pandemic. The final section focused on the transition that NQSW experience as they leave academic study and begin employment and the use of graduate support programmes to assist in their transition.

This research fits in with previous research on the topic of NQSW preparedness with the participants in general viewing their social work education as having prepared them for practise. However, there was a broad variance in response as to the participants thoughts about if they have attained, or not attained, the core competence standards. The findings certainly affirm the value of field education as a key pedagogy in teaching social work and the findings also support the value of supporting NQSW in transition by using graduate support programmes.

The following chapter summarises the key findings of the research and focusses on the implications for the various communities: the educators, newly qualified social workers and the social work profession as a whole. Several implications and recommendations are considered and the opportunities for further research are proposed.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

This chapter summarises and reviews the research question, methodological approach and study design that was utilised for this study. There is a summary of the key findings, and the implications and recommendations arising from this study are presented, including the identified strengths and limitations. The last sections provide recommendations for future research, which have been garnered from the findings of this study and a reflection of the research process.

Research aims

The aims of the research project were to identify how prepared NQSW perceived themselves to be when measured against the SWRB core competence standards. The research also explored which skills, knowledge, and training NQSW would like more support with to help them in their social work role. The objective of the study was to identify their perceptions of readiness to practice using the core competence standards.

Methodology

The research method used a qualitative research design. Nine NQSWs, who had graduated from six different tertiary institutions were interviewed. The obtained data was rich and varied and was analysed for themes and patterns. To guide and interpret the study a social constructionist and critical theory conceptual framework was used. NQSWs have their own interpretation of their experience, shaped by their own unique cultural and historical experiences. The discussion section compared the study's findings with relevant literature sourced from Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas.

Summary of the key findings

The key findings that were identified relate to gaps in the NQSW knowledge and skills, how the competence standards were taught and how they were learnt which brings into doubt the usefulness of the core competence standards as measures of preparedness to practise. It also identified the impact that COVID-19 had on the NQSW sense of preparedness and the transition from academia to employment and what assisted in this transition.

Skills and knowledge gaps

Identifying the perceived knowledge gaps of the NQSW yielded data that matched other research recently undertaken within Aotearoa New Zealand. The participants expressed that they would have liked more knowledge and skills in working bi-culturally, working more inclusively with diversity of other ethnicities, genders, and people with disabilities. Several participants wanted to know more about mental health and the subjects of psychology. Also, basic micro skills regarding interviewing and assessment were requested. Other topics that participants felt they would like more knowledge in was grief and loss, policy and legislation, an awareness of other organisations and their roles

(and benefits to service users), intergenerational trauma, working with whānau (including perpetrators, survivors, and children), and women and children's rights. This allowed participants to consider skills and gaps beyond the core competence standards. A gap in the participants perception of competence, directly related to the core competence standards, was that none of the participants expressed competence in practice that promotes social change. That none of the participants considered themselves prepared to meet that competency indicates a problem with structural awareness and confidence in addressing the macro issues of social work.

Teaching and learning the competence standards

There was considerable variance between how the competence standards were taught and how the participants learnt them. Some participants' academic journey was closely tied to the competence standards and their final academic project detailed how they met each specific competency, so these participants expressed competence in meeting the core standards. Other participants were unsure exactly how many there were and their awareness of them was minimal. This reflected the diverse range of social work schools that the graduates had come from.

COVID-19

A key finding from the study was that COVID-19 impacted participants in various ways, both positively and negatively. Government regulations to control the spread of the pandemic created change in how the social work curriculum was taught. Social work schools moved away from classroom learning and employed more online teaching. This was identified by some participants as problematic for teaching a subject like social work, which has social interaction at its centre. However, the biggest impact appears to be the effect on placements or field education placements that occurred. Participants expressed frustrations about missed opportunities for them to practice what they had learned in their classrooms and in their readings and attributed this to reduced competence in meeting the core standards. There was also the impact that COVID-19 had on the work atmosphere that NQSW entered once employed. There was a perception of additional hardships that the pandemic has caused service users and communities. However, whilst there were many negative implications of the pandemic, some participants benefited from the changed environment. These participants preferred online learning, reduced contact hours and less social interaction. Additionally, a participant observed a deeper working relationship between educators and students once the restrictions ended and programme normality resumed. There appeared to be a shared sense of appreciation that they were now able to enjoy standard activities again which they identified as benefiting their education experience.

Transition from study to employment

The transition from academia to employment for NQSW is an important and well researched topic. The key findings from this study were that NQSW may be unsure of what this journey entails, but they are not expected to 'hit the ground running'. The notion of being ready to immediately manage complex cases and have a full caseload

was challenged. Many of the NQSW were actively engaged in a graduate support programme to assist them in their transition and provide an environment to consolidate theoretical learning in a safer and more supportive manner and they found these useful. The graduate programmes were offered by leading social work employers within Aotearoa New Zealand and the ANZASW. They are similar to the graduate programme, 'The assessed and supported year in employment' (ASYE) now offered in the UK.

Strength and limitations

One of the strengths of this study was the uniqueness of using the SWRB core competence standards as measures of preparedness. This provided a point of difference in the questions and brought a focus on the specific competence standards that are required to be met by NQSW graduating in Aotearoa New Zealand. The variety of the participants who were interviewed was also a strength as they represented six tertiary institutions and had graduated with four different qualifications. Considering it was a relatively small study, this provided a healthy sample of the available social work schools and the qualifications available within the country. Perhaps due to this variety, there was a varied response as to their expressed sense of preparedness to practice social work based on the core competence standards. The proximity of the study to the pandemic is also a strength and it allowed the capturing of the thoughts of participants as they were living through such a unique moment in history. The interpretivist methods use to obtain the information appeared well suited to the subject and the interaction with the participants using semi-structured interviews also obtained useful data.

A limitation of the study was its modest size and the participants were not a random sample, but people who had responded to the advertising, or were contacted by word of mouth, and agreed to participate. Therefore, it is possible that those who did respond were in some sense self-selected and more motivated than the wider population of NQSW making generalisability not guaranteed. To mitigate this there was consistency in the interviewing process. The criteria for participation was also intentionally restrictive in order to focus on the experiences of NQSW who has recently completed a social work qualifying programme in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Another limitation, also identified by Grant et al. (2017) in their research, was the use of self-rated responses by participants regarding their preparedness. As there is no objective standard for how preparedness can be measured and by not having observed practice, the findings are reliant on participants own perceptions.

The impact of COVID-19 has arguably been both a strength and a limitation to the study. It had a clear impact on the experience of the participant's journey. However, as has been discussed this was both negative and positive. Undertaking research during a pandemic provides some interesting and unique challenges. There have been few recent pandemics that have caused such a widespread impact as that of COVID-19. The study has captured the voice of NQSW within Aotearoa New Zealand who have studied, graduated and now transitioned into employment during the time of a pandemic, replicating the study later would provide a useful comparison.

Research recommendations

There are several recommendations that have been identified from the research. Measuring NQSW readiness to practise against either a set of competence standards, or a capabilities framework, would be useful for comparison in future years. This research is relevant within the social work field due to the current conversations about competence standards versus capability frameworks. Recent research encourages the use of a capabilities framework to replace the core competence standards system and this research supports that. There would be benefit from conducting a longitudinal study into the field of readiness by NQSW. Longitudinal studies appear to provide so much more depth, it would be useful to reinterview the participants to capture their perceptions of readiness after a year into their social work roles. This would add quality and depth to the research.

Additionally, a larger study to be undertaken using a wider sample size, capturing a greater representation of the NQSW community is also recommended. Future research that captures broader demographic data, including the rural social work community, and disabilities would be valuable. A significant rural community exists within Aotearoa New Zealand and the implications for rural based NQSW who are isolated from peer support and wider agencies and resources is unknown and invites more research. Additionally, including data about disabilities that participants may have, or if they have caring responsibilities, would be beneficial to groups marginalized in research.

Re-wording the study questions to approach the research using a strengths-based lens would also add to the literature. Enquiring of the NQSW as to the skills, knowledge and training obtained from their social work education that most assisted their preparedness to practice would provide a refreshing lens to the subject. Additionally replicating a question used in the Enhance R2P study, “How well they felt their degree programme prepared them for their present job?” (Ballantyne et al., 2019, p.28). The question would have added value to the current study.

Promoting and encouraging NQSW to explore the role of social workers to be social change agents and consider macro structural analysis is another recommendation. The research highlighted how this was not a competence perceived by the participants to be achieved by them.

Conclusion

In conclusion this final chapter has reviewed the work of this research study. The research questions have produced rich data and provided additional insight into the sense of preparedness of NQSW in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study has highlighted the variance of NQSW perceptions regarding competence after graduating when using the core competence standards as measures and there is ambivalence regarding the value of the competence standards as measures of readiness. The themes that have been identified relate to the gaps in skills, training and knowledge and understanding of the competence standards, the teaching and the learning of the competence standards, the impact of a pandemic on the social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand and it

has highlighted the importance of providing support, such as graduate support programmes, to support the transition from academia to employment. The findings have supported previous studies, which have identified that placements, within social work education, remain significant educational strategies contributing to the sense of preparedness that NQSW perceive of themselves. It expands on the findings from other literature and favours the use of a broader more encompassing capability frameworks, over what are seen as narrow set competence standards to measure preparedness.

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Appendices

Appendix A: SWRB 10 core competence standards

The competence standards apply to all competence processes that are set and approved by the SWRB. The requirements of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003, the International Federation of Social Workers definition of social work and the ANZASW standards of practice have informed the SWRB in determining these standards.

These competences standards are to be read in conjunction with the SWRB Code of Conduct and the ANZASW Code of Ethics. These standards identify minimum standards of practice for the social work profession in New Zealand. They are not intended to describe all of the possible knowledge and practice skills required by social workers. They are the 'core' competences for social work.

THESE COMPETENCE STANDARDS ARE DEMONSTRATED BY THE SOCIAL WORKER AS THEY ENGAGE IN PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES, WHĀNAU, AIGA, GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS WITH WHOM THEY WORK.

A COMPETENT SOCIAL WORKER'S PRACTICE MUST DEMONSTRATE THE FOLLOWING IN ALL PRACTICE CONTEXTS:

1. Competence to practise social work with Māori

The social worker demonstrates this competence by:

- **demonstrating knowledge of the Treaty of Waitangi, te reo Māori and tikanga Māori;**
- **articulating how the wider context of Aotearoa New Zealand both historically and currently can impact on practice;**
- **Te Rangatiratanga: Maintaining relationships that are Mana enhancing, self-determining, respectful, mindful of cultural uniqueness, and acknowledge cultural identity.**

- **Te Manaakitanga: Utilising practice behaviours that ensure mauri ora by ensuring safe space, being mana enhancing and respectful, acknowledge boundaries and meet obligations.**
- **Te Whanaungatanga: Engaging in practice that is culturally sustaining, strengthens relationships, is mutually contributing and connecting and encourages warmth.**

2. Competence to practise social work with different ethnic and cultural groups in Aotearoa New Zealand

The social worker:

- **Acknowledges and values a range of world views including divergent views within and between ethnic and cultural groups;**
- **Understands that culture is not static but changes over time;**
- **Demonstrates awareness and self-critique of their own cultural beliefs, values and historical positioning and how this impacts on their social work practice with their clients from other cultural backgrounds;**
- **Critically analyses how the culture and social work approaches and policies of their employing organisation may compromise culturally safe practice;**
- **Demonstrates knowledge of culturally relevant assessments, intervention strategies and techniques;**
- **Engages with people groups and communities in ways that respect family, language, cultural, spiritual and relational markers.**

3. Competence to work respectfully and inclusively with diversity and difference in practice

The social worker:

- **demonstrates knowledge of diversity between and within different cultures, including ethnicity, disability, social and economic status, age, sexuality, gender and transgender, faiths and beliefs;**
- **demonstrates sufficient self-awareness and is able to critically reflect on own personal values, cultures, knowledge and beliefs to manage the influences of personal biases when practising;**
- **can respectfully and effectively communicate and engage with a diverse range of people.**

4. Competence to promote the principles of human rights and social and economic justice

The social worker:

- **understands, has a commitment to, and advocates for human, legal and civil rights, social and economic justice, and self-determination;**
- **understands and challenges mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and also has the knowledge, skills and an understanding of how to appropriately leverage those which enhance power and privilege;**
- **respects and upholds the rights, dignity, values and autonomy of people and creates an environment of respect and understanding.**

5. Competence to engage in practice which promotes social change

The social worker:

- **critically analyses policies, systems and structures and understands how they impact on people, groups, communities and wider society;**
- **advocates the need for social change to provide equity and fairness for all;**
- **collaborates with others to generate new knowledge that will contribute to the improvement of peoples' lives, communities and wider society;**
- **contributes to policy making to make systems and structures responsive to those who use them.**

6. Competence to understand and articulate social work theories, indigenous practice knowledge, other relevant theories, and social work practice methods and models.

The social worker:

- **demonstrates a critical understanding of specific social work theories and other relevant theories and integrates this into bi-cultural social work practice;**
- **demonstrates an understanding of human behaviour and integrates this into social work practice;**
- **demonstrates an understanding of and is able to utilise a variety of social work practice methods, models and interventions whilst drawing upon a wider theoretical framework;**
- **critically reflects on practice and utilises relevant theories and methods of practice.**

7. Competence to apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments

The social worker:

- **can distinguish, appraise and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including new information and communication technology, research based knowledge and practice wisdom;**
- **engages in research-informed practice and practice-informed research;**
- **demonstrates the ability to work autonomously and make independent judgments from a well-informed social work position and seeks guidance when necessary;**
- **demonstrates effective oral, written and electronic communication.**

8. Competence to promote empowerment of people and communities to enable positive change

The social worker:

- **is compassionate, empathetic and respectful and seeks to understand others to adequately assess their needs;**
- **demonstrates resilience and the ability to manage interpersonal conflict and challenges that arise in social work practice;**
- **facilitates and promotes clients' active participation in decision making;**
- **effectively collaborates and engages with others and works in partnership with clients to gain access to resources;**
- **reflects on their own social work practice to enable people to realise their potential and participate in their communities.**

9. Competence to practice within legal and ethical boundaries of the social work profession

The social worker:

- **adheres to the SWRB Code of Conduct, any workplace code of conduct and the professional Code of Ethics;**
- **identifies and manages ethical dilemmas and issues that arise in practice and seeks supervision or guidance;**
- **recognises and responds appropriately to actual or potential conflicts of interest;**

- **demonstrates an understanding of relevant legislation, policies and systems which govern practice and performs any statutory duties with diligence and care;**
- **upholds the right to privacy and confidentiality of personal information and informs clients of the situations where the information may need to be disclosed;**
- **keeps clear and accurate records and ensures these records are made at the same time as the events being recorded or as soon as possible afterwards.**

10. Represents the social work profession with integrity and professionalism

The social worker:

- **demonstrates active promotion and support of the social work profession, acts with integrity and ensures accountability;**
- **attends to professional roles and responsibilities with diligence, timeliness and care, acknowledges that social work positions carry power and uses authority responsibly;**
- **behaves in a professional manner, maintains personal and professional boundaries and is accountable for all actions and decisions;**
- **knows the limits of their own practice and experience, practices appropriate self-care and seeks advice where necessary;**
- **actively participates in supervision, continual professional development and career-long learning.**

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- **behaves in a professional manner, maintains personal and professional boundaries and is accountable for all actions and decisions;**
- **knows the limits of their own practice and experience, practices appropriate self-care and seeks advice where necessary;**

- **actively participates in supervision, continual professional development and career-long learning.**

Appendix B: Participant Interview schedule

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HEALTH
TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

Newly qualified social workers' perceptions of preparedness to practice social work.

Participant Interview Schedule

1. What social work qualification do you have and when did you graduate?

2. Can you briefly tell me about the work you do?

3. Can you describe for me your familiarity with the SWRB's Core Competence Standards?

4. Could you share your thoughts on how prepared you felt you were to practise (based on the standards) immediately after graduating?

5. Could you share your thoughts on how prepared you feel now to practise (based on the standards)?

6. Please describe the standard or standards you currently feel most prepared to practise.

a. Could you list them in order of preparedness?

7. Do you feel you are less prepared to practise any of the standards?

a. Could you list them in order?

8. Do you feel the standards are important or useful for your practise?

a. Could you expand on why or why not?

9. When recalling your social work education, what knowledge, skills, or values would you like to have had more learning in?

a. [Could you explain why?]

b. Are there any competency standards that you think these knowledge, skills, or values link with?

c. Do you feel you need more support from your agency, training providers, the SWRB, or ANZASW to achieve these?

10. Do you have any final comments about your preparedness to practice based on the competency standards?

Appendix C: Personal Facebook message posted 21st of November 2021

“Hey there, Facebook community, do you know any newly qualified social workers who have graduated since February 2019 in New Zealand?

I'm seeking research subjects for my Masters. All very official and I have completed the Massey University's ethics process. If you know someone who meets this description can you please ask them to email me at: Anthony.Moore.2@uni.massey.ac.nz.

Thanks

Scott

Appendix D: Information sheet

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HEALTH
TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

Newly qualified social workers' perceptions of preparedness to practice social work.

INFORMATION SHEET

Tēnā koe,

My name is Scott Taylor Moore. I am a postgraduate student at Massey University completing research for my Master of Social Work. I am currently undertaking a project researching how newly qualified social workers perceive their preparedness to practice social work measured against the Social Workers Registration Board's (SWRB) 10 core competence standards (https://swrb.govt.nz/practice/core-competence-standards/).

The aims of the project are:

a) Identify how prepared newly qualified social workers perceive themselves to be, measured against the SWRB core competence standards.

b) Explore which of the 10 standards newly qualified social workers believe they need more support with and which they would like more skills or knowledge in.

If you graduated with a social work qualification within the past two years, are a SWRB registered social worker, and are currently working in the social services in Aotearoa New Zealand, I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. I attach the interview schedule for your information.

Participation in the research is likely to take no more than two hours. This is estimated as follows: 15 minutes for contacting you and setting up the interview; approximately one hour for the semi-structured interview; and approximately 30 minutes to review the interview transcript, if you wish to. The interview will be conducted by myself, either face-to-face or by online via Zoom or other platform. You are welcome to indicate your preference for this.

The interview will be recorded, and a transcript made of the recording. After transcription, the recording will be destroyed. A copy of the transcript will be provided to you so that you may make additions or corrections, if you wish. Your transcript will be destroyed after five years in accordance with standard research practice. I will ensure that all information you have provided, including the consent form, interview recording

and transcript will be kept in a secure, password-protected format that is not accessible to anyone other than myself and my research supervisors.

Your identity and any other identifying elements such as your town, tertiary education institution, and current or former employers will be anonymized to protect your privacy and confidentiality.

The data from the project may be used in publications and presentations, however, you will not be identified in any format.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question.
- withdraw from the study until two weeks after you receive your transcript;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name and other identifying elements will not be used;
- be given access to the thesis when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz".

Please contact me if you have any questions about this project or if you would like to participate in the study. My contact details are below.

If you would like to contact my research supervisors:

Dr. Vincent Wijeysingha,

Phone: 06 9516503,

Email: v.wijeysingha@massey.ac.nz

Assoc. Prof. Kathryn Hay,

Phone: 06 9516518,

Email: k.s.hay@massey.ac.nz

Thank you for considering my request.

Scott Taylor Moore BSW (Hons), Anthony.Moore.2@uni.massey.ac.nz

Appendix E: ANZASW advertisement

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
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TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

11th November 2021

To whom it may concern.

Invitation to participate in research on newly qualified social workers' perceptions of preparedness to practice social work.

My name is Scott Taylor Moore. I am a student at Massey University completing research for my Master of Social Work. I am currently undertaking a project researching how newly qualified social workers perceive their preparedness to practice social work measured against the Social Workers Registration Board's (SWRB) 10 core competence standards (https://swrb.govt.nz/practice/core-competence-standards/).

The aim of the project is to:

a) Identify how prepared newly qualified social workers perceive themselves to be, measured against the SWRB core competence standards.

b) Explore which of the 10 standards newly qualified social workers believe they need more support with or would like more skills or knowledge in.

I hope this research may contribute to generating a greater understanding of the sense of preparedness newly qualified social workers have regarding meeting the core competence standards. It is intended that this research will provide insight for tertiary providers, the SWRB, and Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW).

I would like to interview SWRB-registered social workers currently in practice who graduated within the past two years. I am requesting your kind assistance to distribute the attached Information Sheet and Interview Schedule to social workers in your organisation who meet these criteria.

Participation in the research should take no longer than two hours and can be outside of work hours. The data from the project will be used for my Master of Social Work thesis and, potentially, publications and presentations. The Information Sheet outlines the procedures for protecting the privacy and confidentiality of participants by ensuring strict anonymity.

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

My research supervisors are:

Dr. Vincent Wijeysingha, Phone: 06 9516503

Email: v.wijeysingha@massey.ac.nz

Assoc. Prof. Kathryn Hay, Phone: 06 9516518

Email: k.s.hay@massey.ac.nz

Yours sincerely,

Scott Taylor Moore,

Email: Anthony.Moore.2@uni.massey.ac.nz Phone: [redacted]

Appendix F: Participants Consent Form

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HEALTH
TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

Newly qualified social workers' perceptions of preparedness to practice social work.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read, or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet attached as Appendix I. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.
3. I wish/do not wish to have data placed in an official archive.
4. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix G: Transcribers confidentiality form

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HEALTH
TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

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Newly qualified social workers perceptions of readiness when compared to the SWRB core standards

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I (Full Name - printed)

agree to keep confidential all information concerning the project on newly qualified social workers perceptions of readiness when compared to the Social Work Registrations Core Standards.

I will not retain or copy any information involving the project.

Signature: ..... **Date:** .....

Appendix H: Low risk ethics confirmation letter

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Dear Anthony Taylor Moore,

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as Low Risk.

Your project has been recorded in our database for inclusion in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low-risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

If situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your ethical analysis, please contact a Research Ethics Administrator.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director - Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 ext 86015, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz. "

Please note, if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish requires evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again, answering "yes" to the publication question to provide more information for one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Brian Finch Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics) Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand T 06 951 6841; 06 95106840 E humanethics@massey.ac.nz; animalethics@massey.ac.nz; gtc@massey.ac.nz