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TEACHING HOPE THROUGH SURVIVOR STORIES

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Joanna Cobley

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the integration of social justice, resilience, and wellbeing within health and wellbeing education. Framed as a reflective piece, it examines the pedagogical use of survivor stories to foster emotional resilience and critical engagement—particularly when addressing complex topics such as family violence. Drawing from teaching practice in a Level 4 Health and Wellbeing programme at Ara Institute of Canterbury in Ōtautahi Christchurch, the reflection centres on the use of a historic survivor story, retold as narrative, to connect past and present issues. It advocates for a shift from didactic teaching to storytelling as a means of promoting reflective practice and professional development. This narrative approach empowers students to engage meaningfully with course content and apply the resulting insights in their future roles as support workers.

The article also considers the challenges of teaching sensitive material within the course Contemporary Issues in Health and Wellbeing (HWC1400), which critically examines six pressing social issues in Aotearoa New Zealand. Grounded in a social justice and action-oriented framework, the course encourages students to explore policy, strategy, and legislation, and to reflect on their role in addressing societal concerns at a micro, meso, and macro level. The article concludes by encouraging other educators to adopt narrative approaches to deepen student engagement, foster self-awareness, and support development of a resilient, socially responsive workforce.

REFLECTIONS ON AN IDEA: WHY USE SURVIVOR STORIES FOR TEACHING?

This reflection focuses on the use of a historic survivor narrative to cultivate hope and resilience in students. Teaching about social justice—especially in relation to family violence and sexual violence—requires equipping learners to process difficult content and bear witness to others' experiences (Harms, 2015, cited in Connolly & Healy, 2018). Survivor stories play a vital role in recovery, allowing individuals to re-author their experiences and shift from victimhood to survivorship (Connolly & Healy, 2018). These narratives offer hope and are widely used in education and mental health settings to highlight the transformative power of storytelling (Te Pou, 2025; Te Pou & Ministry of Health, 2021; Tuhiwai Smith, 2023; Tutagalevao & Mariner-Solomon, 2024).

Reflective practice enhances professional development and student learning (Zalipour, 2015). In the context of this course, it involves aligning personal insights with curriculum goals and drawing from educational literature. Initially delivered through a didactic storytelling method, the teaching approach now evolves toward participatory pedagogy (Jack, 2013)—including pre-story context, post-reading reflection, group discussion, and activities exploring historical causes and effects. This method is designed to empower students to apply narrative tools in both learning and practice.

This reflection was prompted by informal student feedback to the teacher (and author) in 2023 following a session on family violence that revealed embodied responses—the students' facial expressions, tone, and posture underscored the emotional weight of the topic. Yet, students also expressed appreciation for the theme of hope and acknowledged how the experience strengthened their coping skills and resilience. Their reflections affirmed the importance of retaining such topics in the curriculum and served as a motivator for this teaching reflection.

Programme and course context

This reflection is situated within the Contemporary Issues in Health and Wellbeing course, part of the NZ2992 Certificate in Health and Wellbeing (Ara Institute of Canterbury, 2025; New Zealand Qualifications Framework, n.d.). The qualification prepares students for entry-level support work. The course HWCI400 introduces six critical social issues in Aotearoa New Zealand: crime and restorative justice, disability, family violence, housing poverty, poverty and inequity, and racism and discrimination. Using a social justice/action framework, the course examines each issue through historical and contemporary lenses, guiding students to understand current responses via policy, strategy, and legislation. The aim is to provide students with a broad understanding of these issues and their implications for support work.

Teaching with a social justice lens

Many graduates of the certificate programme continue into social work degrees, making it valuable to introduce foundational social work literature. Social justice is central to social work in Aotearoa and Australia (Nipperess, 2018), and involves activist teaching approaches (Hargreaves, 2019; Hytten, 2017) whereby educators can facilitate discussions on micro- meso- and macro-level actions to address inequities (Harms & Maidment, 2018). Adopting the three 'm's in the HWCI400 classroom provides a framework for students to better understand the roots and impacts of social problems such as family violence on different levels. This micro-, meso-, and macro-level framework is also intentionally used to help students develop empathy and apply their learning beyond the classroom. For example, some actions they might take include:

- Micro level: Supporting clients and whānau to navigate services.
- Meso level: Advocating against new alcohol licensing in vulnerable communities.
- Macro level: Submitting feedback on legislation such as the Crimes Legislation (Stalking and Harassment) Amendment Bill (New Zealand Parliament, 2024).

Teaching with a social justice lens also means prioritizing student wellbeing (Te Kāwanatanga, n.d.a). Educators must prepare students for confronting difficult topics and explain the purpose of applying a justice-oriented framework. For example, HWCI400 Lesson 1 introduces students to defining social issues, identifying affected populations, and exploring historical and contemporary responses. As noted above, the course outcome ensures students understand the legal, policy, and ethical dimensions of support work in New Zealand.

WHY STUDY FAMILY VIOLENCE?

Family violence and sexual violence have a long history in Aotearoa New Zealand. With high reported rates today, this form of family harm remains a significant social issue that impacts individuals, families (including children), and the wider community.

Defining family violence

Family violence encompasses a range of abusive behaviours, including intimate partner violence, elder abuse, child abuse, dating violence, stalking, and violence towards other family or whānau members, such as child-to-parent violence (Te Kāwanatanga, 2021). Also referred to as domestic violence or family harm, the term family violence is used here to reflect current legislation in Aotearoa (Ministry of Justice, n.d.). At its core, family violence involves an abuse of power and control, expressed through physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and economic means (Te Kāwanatanga, 2021). Both men and women can be victims and perpetrators of family violence and sexual violence. Research also highlights how children exposed to domestic violence face a higher risk of becoming both a bully and a victim of bullying (Auckland Coalition for the Safety of Women and Children,

2020; New Zealand Family Violence Clearing House, 2007). Sexual violence, defined as any sexual behaviour without freely given consent, also includes exposing children under 16 to sexual material (Te Kāwanatanga, 2021). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Government policies and strategies addressing family violence and sexual violence focus on prevention, risk minimisation, and victim support. The overarching goal is to create safe homes and communities, with ongoing efforts to achieve this aim (Te Kāwanatanga, n.d.b).

Historical context and legislative evolution

In Aotearoa New Zealand, support for those experiencing violence has evolved alongside legislative reforms. For example, the Society for the Protection of Women and Children (SPWC), later known as the Home and Family Society, was established in Auckland in 1893, with branches in Wellington, Dunedin, and Christchurch. The SPWC focused on legislative advocacy, successfully lobbying to raise the age of consent to 16 in 1896 and supporting the criminalisation of incest in 1900 (Tennant, 2007). However, some changes took longer, such as recognising marital rape as a crime, which was only enacted in 1985 (Swarbrick, 2018). The SPWC also provided legal aid to women in cases of disputed paternity and prosecuted instances of cruelty, seduction, or excessive violence against women and children (Tennant, 2007). Their strategy included data collection for advocacy and encouraging women to share their survival stories. Despite legislative advancements, family violence and sexual violence remain pervasive social issues in contemporary New Zealand (Te Kāwanatanga, 2021).

Contemporary policy initiatives

To address these challenges, the sixth Labour government, supported by the Greens and Te Pati Māori, launched *Te Aorerekura*, a policy aimed at reducing family violence and sexual violence. Replacing the decades-old *Te Rito: New Zealand Family Prevention Strategy* (Ministry of Social Development, 2002), *Te Aorerekura* emphasises education and advocacy as guiding principles for systemic change. It aims to provide a “guiding light” for individuals on their journey towards recovery, or “toira” (Te Kāwanatanga, n.d.b). In late 2024, the coalition government released the *Te Aorerekura Action Plan 2025–2030*. This revised policy prioritises victim support, prevention strategies, and enhanced collaboration between agencies and communities (Te Kāwanatanga, n.d.b; Te Puna Aonui Business Unit, 2024). Reinforced by legislation such as the Family Violence Act 2018 (Ministry of Justice, n.d.), the policy underscores the message that family violence is not okay. Through these initiatives, New Zealand continues to strive for safer homes and communities, recognising that deep, systemic change is essential for long-term progress.

TEACHING WITH STORIES

From a teaching perspective, stories help make learning relevant and practical (Honeyfield & Fraser, 2013; Jack 2013). For example, an excerpt from a children’s story book provided a useful tool for teaching first year nursing students to consider the meaning of becoming older (Jack, 2013). Jack (2013) advises teachers to provide students with the pedagogical purpose of such an activity before embarking on the storytelling exercise. Humans create meaning by crafting narratives. While the individual is still central, there are transformative possibilities in the collective survivor story (Richardson, 1990). Collective experiences reassure us that we are not alone (Richardson, 1990). Survivor stories are designed to evoke hope. Being able to appreciate the power of hope is an essential skill within the social support space (Te Pou, 2025; Te Pou & Ministry of Health, 2021). Hope means that those people who experience harm can seek a safe place for refuge and recovery, and that those who use violence against others feel empowered to seek help (Tennant, 2007). Therefore, teachers as facilitators can enable students who plan to work in this field, and who may have experienced family violence and/or sexual violence, understand that support networks are already in place. For example, survivor case studies are used in New Zealand police force training practices to help new recruits better understand the complexities of family violence (Te Kāwanatanga, 2021; Stuff, 2021).

The method of teaching through storytelling is also widely used in Ara's Certificate in Health and Wellbeing programme (Ara, 2025). In the context of HWC1400, drawing from the historic survivor story enables teachers to facilitate a student discussion on the cause and effect of family violence from the safe distance of a different time and social context. It also provides scope to plant the idea that learning from history can lead to change today. The challenge that teachers face is that classroom situations change depending on the student cohort. The story of Ada Wells was selected for discussion in this course because of the teacher's experience teaching about feminist politics in Ōtautahi Christchurch around 1890. Christchurch was the hub for feminist politics in New Zealand during the late nineteenth century (Pickles, 2020).

ADA WELLS: A TRAILBLAZER IN SOCIAL JUSTICE AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Ada Wells (1863–1933) was a pioneering figure in Christchurch, New Zealand, whose life and work were deeply influenced by her experiences as a survivor of domestic violence. Her advocacy for social justice, women's rights, and community welfare left an indelible mark on the city and the nation (Fogarty, 1993; Sharfe, 1987).

Early life and education

Born in England in 1863, Ada Wells migrated to Christchurch with her family in 1873. Her early years were shaped by her father's strict Plymouth Brethren beliefs, which instilled a sense of discipline and resilience that would later underpin her activism. By 1877, Ada began her career as a pupil-teacher, later attending Canterbury College and working as an assistant teacher at Christchurch Girls' High (Fogarty, 1993).

Marriage and challenges

In 1884, Ada married Harry Wells, an organist 11 years her senior (Peters, 1986). Their marriage was fraught with challenges, including Harry's struggles with alcoholism and employment instability (Ehrhardt and Beaglehole, 1993; Newton, 197?). Despite these difficulties, Ada managed to support her family through teaching and healing work. Her experiences as a survivor of domestic violence profoundly influenced her political and social views (Amey, 2014; Brown, 2000; Fogarty, 1993).

Ada Wells herself did not initiate divorce proceedings. It appears that the Wellses came to some sort of arrangement. During the later 1800s and early 1900s, the church and the law discouraged divorce. Divorce was the preserve of the wealthy elite, so most couples sought alternate options such as simple desertion, incarceration, or institutionalisation (usually the woman was 'put away') (Cook, 2018). Women like Ada Wells had very minimal legal rights to apply for divorce or retain custody of their children. They also had limited work options and were less likely to have a private income (Cook, 2018). Meanwhile, the feminist movement advocated for women to have the same rights as men to apply for a divorce. Each legislative change, starting with the 1898 Divorce Act, which broadened the grounds for divorce, also led to an increase in the number of divorce applications (Cook, 2018).

Advocacy and social justice

Ada Wells was deeply involved in various social justice initiatives at micro, meso and macro levels. She co-founded the Canterbury Women's Institute in 1892 and joined the National Council of Women in 1896. In 1898 her work extended to the Canterbury Children's Aid Society and the Housewives' Union, where she advocated for affordable housing, nutritious food, and education for women (Dalziel, 1993; Fogarty, 1993; Fry, 1985; Tennant, 1986). Ada's spiritual beliefs intermingled with her political ideology influenced her involvement in the Women's Christian Temperance Movement, which played a significant role in advocating for universal suffrage, and her stance against conscription during World War I (Vesty & Copley, 2015).

Legacy

In 1917, Ada Wells made history as the first woman elected to the St Albans Ward of the Christchurch City Council. Her contributions to local and national politics, as well as her advocacy for women's rights and social welfare, continue to inspire generations. Ada Wells' decision to seek alternatives to divorce and continue supporting her family despite limited legal and financial options reflects personal resilience and agency. Ada Wells' life was also testament to the power of advocacy. For example, her involvement in the Women's Christian Temperance Movement connected spiritual beliefs with social reform, particularly around alcohol abuse and conscription. In addition, her political advocacy challenged patriarchal norms and contributed to national feminist movements, advocating for equal rights, education, and social justice including divorce reform. Thus, her work laid the foundation for many social reforms, making her a true heroine of Christchurch and New Zealand (Fogarty, 1993; Sharfe, 1987).

DISCUSSION: ON SURVIVOR STORIES, HOPE, AND RESILIENCE

Family violence is a pervasive issue across societies, including Aotearoa New Zealand. This historic survivor story examines the life of Ada Wells, remembered for her feminist politics and as a survivor of domestic violence (Amey, 2014; Ehrhardt & Beaglehole, 1993; Fogarty, 1993). Despite these challenges, Wells sustained her spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing through extensive community support. Her story conveys a powerful message of hope: "you are not alone" (Richardson, 1990; Tolerton, 2008).

While Wells' experiences reflect those of an educated, white, middle-class woman (Sharfe, 1987), her story also highlights broader societal issues, such as the dangers posed by alcohol dependency and the precarious conditions of employment in late nineteenth and early twentieth century New Zealand (Fordyce, 2022). These historical factors provide critical insights into the enduring nature of family violence today.

The retelling of Ada Wells' story serves as a pedagogical tool, offering students a relatable, local example of how survivor narratives can inspire resilience and hope. However, it is essential to critically engage with less palatable aspects of her story, such as the influence of eugenicist ideas on her feminist politics (Wanhalla, 2001). Eugenics, which sought to 'improve' humanity through practices like selective breeding and enforced sterilisation, shaped social attitudes in white settler New Zealand, including those towards Māori. The promotion of intermarriage between Māori and Pākehā as a means of 'improving' the race reflects these problematic ideologies (Wanhalla, 2001). Additionally, this study does not address traditional Māori knowledge systems, which historically provided guidance on respectful relationships and appropriate behaviour between men and women. These cultural practices, disrupted by colonisation, contrast sharply with the high levels of family violence experienced by Māori wāhine today (Pihama et al., 2020). One idea to address this would involve expanding the storytelling repertoire to draw in cultural stories, such as traditional Māori folklore and children's stories. For example, the story of Mataora and Niwareka is often used as an origin narrative for tā moko, the art of Māori tattoo, but it also reveals insights into a domestic violence situation and how the whānau sought redress and reconciliation (Higgins, 2013). The children's storybook *I Am a Little Voice* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2023), is another useful teaching resource for children and adults. The book includes exercises designed to nurture resilience in tamariki, exemplifying how storytelling can be adapted across age groups and contexts to address family violence.

By examining Ada Wells' story within its historical and cultural contexts, students are encouraged to critically reflect on the complexities of family violence and the resilience required to overcome it. This approach not only has potential to deepen their understanding of the subject matter but also equips them with the analytical tools needed to address such issues in their future practice. This is particularly effective when the teacher is attuned to identifying teachable moments within the story to deepen students' understanding of support work practices in action (Treloar, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored how storytelling and social justice can be harnessed to teach resilience, especially when navigating difficult topics in the classroom. Through this process, the educator gained confidence in using narrative as a pedagogical strategy, recognising its capacity to deepen self-awareness and enhance teaching effectiveness for both educators and learners.

Looking ahead, this storytelling approach will be embedded across future learner intakes, laying the groundwork for further research into how narrative-based teaching influences student outcomes. Lived experience narratives have proven to be powerful pedagogical tools. They foster empathy, encourage critical reflection, and reinforce the importance of hope and resilience—reminding students that recovery is possible, and support is available. For students preparing for roles in health and wellbeing, particularly in family violence support or social justice advocacy, these stories offer more than inspiration—they provide practical insight into lived realities. The historic survivor story presented here enables learners to connect past and present, interrogate shifts in social attitudes, and critically examine enduring issues such as discrimination, racism, and inequality.

A resilient health and wellbeing workforce depends on ongoing professional development and reflective practice (Te Pou, 2025; Te Pou & Ministry of Health, 2021). Training must be relevant and applicable (Te Puna Aonui, 2024), equipping students with knowledge of legislation, privacy protocols, government roles, and specialist services. Good practice also involves cultivating a mindset open to expanding professional knowledge and navigating complex, often painful topics with sensitivity and skill. Ultimately, sharing lived experience stories offers a meaningful way to explore themes of resilience, hope, and transformation. Addressing family violence requires not only individual commitment but also systemic change across macro, meso, and micro levels (Harms & Maidment, 2018). With bold approaches and supportive environments, society can move toward real and lasting solutions.

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