



## *“Be there with us”: An appreciative inquiry into supporting culturally diverse dementia-care workers as learners*



### Authors

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### Introduction

Appreciative inquiry (AI) empowers and sustains change by asking positive questions. The AI approach offered us a way to explore what it was about the *Walking in Another's Shoes* dementia-care training that was working well for our culturally and linguistically diverse learners, to inform our practice and future developments (Reed, 2007).

### Background

The role of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) workers in aged care is substantial and expanding (McGregor, 2012; Colombo et al., 2011). In 2006, almost a quarter of New Zealand's aged-care workers were born overseas, and almost half of these were of non-European ethnicity. As the need for aged-care workers continues to grow in an industry with significant recruitment and retention issues, New Zealand may further increase its reliance on immigration (Badkar, Callister, & Didham, 2009; McGregor, 2012). However CALD carers may face discrimination, communication and language challenges, and disillusionment in the role (McGregor, 2012).

It has been suggested that “better training opportunities could improve the quality of care and, in turn, could encourage retention of caregivers and job satisfaction” (Department of Labour, 2009). What is better training for CALD carers? Much of the research into CALD learners’ perspectives of best practice has focused on high-status entry qualifications, rather than poorly valued work roles in which migrants are over-represented. There is little research on the optimal learning and support strategies for work-related training for migrant learners beyond literacy and numeracy approaches (Heather & Thwaite, 2011).

The *Walking in Another’s Shoes* programme for person-centred dementia care is an eight-month small-group experiential training programme offered by several New Zealand District Health Boards. It combines monthly full-day workshops with one-on-one workplace facilitation to nurture reflective professional carers who can respond in creative person-centred ways to each unique individual and situation (Innes, 2001; Loveday, 2011). (For more about the programme see Gee, Scott, & Croucher, 2011.) Reflecting the wider picture, our experience with our CALD learners highlighted the importance of this group to the sector, the challenges they faced in the workplace, and the potential of supportive education to transform their work experience.

AI offered a collaborative approach to educational practice development that started with understanding what is working for our CALD students, and then exploring how this could inform and inspire our future practice and developments (Reed, 2010). The AI cycle involves gathering evidence about the best of what is now (discovery) and articulating “what might be” (dream). The participants work together to develop strategies (design) and implement and re-evaluate the actions (destiny) (Dewar & Mackay, 2010). The dual defining characteristics of the approach are a focus on the positive rather than a problem-solving approach, and a conceptualisation of change as a process of participatory inquiry (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

## Method

Phase one of the project involved gathering together culturally and linguistically diverse graduates to identify and study moments of excellence, gather information about successful processes and outcomes, and invite feedback and insights on what could be done to move toward better outcomes (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). Four AI discussion groups were held with a total of 19 female graduates of the Christchurch *Walking in Another’s Shoes* programme for carers. The graduates’ countries of origin included Fiji, Philippines, South Africa, China, Samoa, and Ecuador. A thematic qualitative analysis of the transcripts was conducted based on the framework approach (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 1999; Ritchie & Spencer, 2004).

Phase two of the project used an AI approach with the team of educators, to build on the insights from the focus groups to grow and improve our educational initiatives. Educators were presented with the main themes that emerged from the focus groups and facilitated to engage in their own AI cycle. This involved inquiring into teaching practices that fostered the identified strengths through a written exercise, collating these into a booklet resource, and meeting as a group on two occasions to create an agenda for creating a more effective and supportive learning environment.

## The AI process helped us listen to the stories of our students

The AI emphasis on collecting stories allows us to understand not just facts but also feelings (Fifolt & Lander, 2013). Although the AI process focuses on the positive, problems are still listened to and used for positive learning (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2006). The AI focus groups enabled us to gather and document the graduates' stories of the challenges they faced as new migrant carers.

For all of us, our cultural background influences our perceptions of dementia, expectations of the family, and attitudes to care (Alzheimer's Australia Vic, 2008). The differences between the perceptions in the carers' cultures of origin compared to New Zealand culture were cast into sharp relief when the carers started working in a residential care environment. There was a very strong theme of the obligation to look after older people, and many carers highlighted that dementia rest homes do not exist in their country of origin:

*"It's really different. When I first came here, I just couldn't understand why they sent them to the rest home. Like in our family we look after our grandparents and only [if] they are very sick we send them to the hospital ... But it's not like because they're old or they need someone to look after them you, you know, just send them away."*

From these cultural perspectives, the situation of the older residents was poignant:

*"I think it's a personal hurt because when I have a resident that says, 'Why can't I go home?' then I am lost for words ... because I am thinking, 'But why, why is this person not going home?'"*

The carers' occupational backgrounds ranged from never having being in paid employment, to unrelated jobs, through to being registered nurses. Most were unfamiliar with dementia when they entered the role, not only at a personal level but at a cultural level. Often there was not a concept of "dementia" in their country of origin – instead cognitive and behavioural changes were seen as part of ageing or mental illness. While carers from nursing backgrounds had an understanding of the brain changes associated with dementia they still felt they had little understanding of the behaviours that challenge when coming into a caring role. Prior to dementia education the carers often took the behaviour of residents personally (see also Doyle & Timonen, 2009):

*“I didn’t know what dementia is and then they just told me the same thing over and over, and they come to me you know, trying to hit you or trying to spit on you, then, ‘What’s wrong with me, I didn’t do anything’, I just felt so bad.”*

The students’ stories also reinforced how differences in language, accent, idiomatic expressions, and humour, and sometimes prejudice acted as communication barriers with both staff and residents (Cangiano et al., 2009; Doyle & Timonen, 2009).

*“That’s one thing about us caregivers: our English is not the first language ... They will correct our pronunciation and probably our accent agitates them too. We have to work hard; we immigrants have to work harder to win them ... the elderly we take care [of], in their generation there were not so many immigrants and when they hear us talking immediately they don’t want [us]. ... So we have to work hard.”*

The position of the carers as migrant workers carried a range of complexities including visas, qualifications, registration, English-language requirements, misinformation, and separation from families. In this complex position the carer could feel vulnerable:

*“Because before ... I feel like I’m not really very confident, because I’m small. Because back of my mind still I’m on a work permit, I don’t have that safe. I might do something wrong.”*

The initial few months in the role were challenging for most of the carers. More than one was reduced to tears in the early days:

*“Why am I here? What am I doing? ... Because I had no understanding. I mean it was just so weird for me ... First day I went home and I cried and I cried and I cried.”*

What was striking however was how positive the carers were about their role now. There was a strong and consistent theme that they loved their job. One of the messages that emerged was the value of providing support and education early as new carers adjust to the role.

As a result of our AI process we introduced a session within the course to provide a supportive environment for the students to reflect on and share their own cultural background and to hear about other cultural perspectives on dementia and residential care. As part of this session, students were provided with a range of quotes illustrating different perspectives on dementia and dementia care in order to stimulate discussion, including quotes from the focus group participants. Students who piloted this session rated it highly in attaining its objectives. In the AI peer-discussion groups the educators resolved to provide more opportunities for people to tell stories about their own culture, to be braver in enabling discussion about CALD students’ negative experiences, and to encourage students to support colleagues who have similar negative experiences.

## The AI process helped us reaffirm our positive central core

The AI approach seeks to identify the core values that “give life”. Relationships were key for our graduates. They were enormously positive about the changes that the programme fostered in: skills to respond constructively to behaviours that challenge, confidence, and relationships with clients and with their team. The *Walking in Another’s Shoes* programme helped the carers to work in a person-centred way that provided a meaningful and rewarding work experience. The carers talked about the satisfaction of establishing trust. Some spoke passionately about the importance of person-centred rather than task-oriented care. Some consciously gave the care they would have wanted to provide to their own family members. The carers talked about the rewards of making residents smile, brightening their day, and making them happy.

*“... if we just go deeply into what dementia is, it’s a rewarding job... It’s like a compliment, that you are part of their life.”*

The stories reinforce the importance of training and support for culturally and linguistically diverse carers to enable communication and relationship building with older people (see also Cangiano et al., 2009).

## The AI process helped us identify and build on what works

AI focuses on building on strengths (Fifolt & Lander, 2013). From a social constructionist perspective, people’s talk helps create the reality in which they live. By talking and connecting about values, strengths, and possibilities, AI helped us to turn from a reality of problems to a reality of potential (Wasserman & McNamee, 2010). A number of strengths of *Walking in Another Shoes* were identified.

### Building supportive relationships

The students talked about the support they received from the educator and the bond they formed with their classmates. The regular one-to-one sessions with the educator were central to the effectiveness and experience of the programme.

*“I felt that there’s a support, because you can talk to the educator – anything even, because she would ask us how are you, how is the work place, how is the management ... one on one it’s so comforting to us.”*

Environments that build positive relationships with the educator and with other students provide a solid foundation, and a sense of belonging and security that enhances learning, well-being, and retention (Marshall, Baldwin, & Peach, 2008; Tomoana, 2012b; Zepke et al., 2005). Educators can

convey that they are interested in, care for, and respect their students in many ways but probably the clearest is to really listen to what they say (Knowles, 1980). The educators built supportive relationships by establishing connections with the students before the first workshop, actively listening to and validating the students, enabling group bonding through activities and sharing stories, breaking down language and status barriers, and making the one-to-one sessions welcoming and personally tailored.

### Learning from each other

The students talked about how they learnt from each other. They particularly valued the opportunity to hear case studies from other facilities that could be relevant to their own work.

*“We got you know about 20 plus students here. You know we had a really good team, we kept sharing stories with each other and respect each other and we discussed lots of things. We learned heaps of things from everybody here.”*

Sometimes to their surprise, this mutual sharing positioned them as a source of experience in the class, and some learners also became role models in the workplace.

Successful learning environments help learners feel that their life experiences and knowledge are acknowledged and that they are respected (Knowles, 1980). The learners’ contributions are recognised and valued as a rich resource, and are tapped into with a wide range of experiential techniques (Greenwood & Te Aika, 2009; Knowles, 1980; Loveday, 2011; Tomoana, 2012b). This can be a particularly profound experience for learners who are in a role that is often referred to as “unskilled”. Structurally, group reflective discussion is the common denominator of the workshop activities in *Walking in Another’s Shoes*, and the facilitation style is about asking questions, not providing solutions. The educators worked to shape an environment where students felt safe to share and made sharing a core of the workshops.

### Inspiring

Students talked of the way the programme gave them confidence, encouragement, reinforcement, a sense of self-worth, and a love of their jobs.

*“It’s just encouragement, reinforcing them and giving them confidence to do this job thoroughly ... and you stay, you didn’t choose [this job] but you stay because you love it.”*

An environment of fun and humour that celebrates successes can help increase confidence and empowerment, and strengthen group bonds (Marshall et al., 2008). An appreciative inquiry (AI) facilitation style recognises and validates the students’ strengths and integrates them into the



learning (Chu, Abella, & Paurini, 2013). The programme affirmed the students' strengths, the importance of what they do, and their potential to make a difference to the lives of the people they worked with. The educators helped to inspire the students by sharing their own passion, validating students' stories and celebrating their successes.

### Keeping it real

Students valued the way the course enabled them to look at and do their job differently. The one-to-one sessions with the educator, the input of other students, and the focus on students' own clients were identified as particularly useful.

*"They were saying ... think of a person and what's the most difficult ... This person is good other than at shower time and then, 'What's the shower look like?' And then everyone was pitching in some ideas."*

As adults, our carers came to us to learn how to work with people living with dementia in a more effective and satisfying way, and they wanted to be able to apply that knowledge and skill straight away (Knowles, 1980). The programme created an environment that was goal-directed, relevant, and practical (Knowles, 1980), particularly through using a case-based approach, and through the focus in the one-to-one sessions on planning how they were going to apply their learning to their own work. The educators shared ways to further incorporate relevant case studies students had talked about, to be clear about "take-home messages", and to provide additional workplace support.

### Being culturally responsive

Students highlighted the relevance of culture in their experience of working in care facilities, and the value of the exchange of cultural perspectives between the students themselves.

*"I think it's just better to open it up to the floor because people got a tendency to explain how they feel best."*

Cultural responsiveness is about respect for the diversity and culture of others and maximising the wealth of experiences and knowledge that students bring into the classroom (Tomoana, 2012b). The educators shared tips for setting a safe foundation, sharing cultural perspectives and making other cultures visible, facilitating cross-cultural relationships amongst students and with clients, being aware of communication differences, and allowing talk about challenges.

Across these strengths, the AI process provided a way to crystallise the key strengths of the *Walking in Another's Shoes* approach in a way people could share. This took the form of a resource for educators in the programme inspired by Ria Tomoana's project at Te Kura Matatini o Whitireia (Tomoana, 2012a). Vision statements, student quotes, and a range of tips for creating a learning

environment that reflects and nurtures each strength were collated together as a resource *Walking for all: Sharing successful supportive learning strategies* [available on Ako Aotearoa website <https://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/ako-hub/good-practice-publication-grants-e-book/person-centred-care>].

The AI process included educators reflecting on how they would develop their practice in response to this resource, to make *Walking in Another's Shoes* even more effective and supportive for students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

## The AI process helped us engage with learners in our future planning

While as educators we often gauge the satisfaction of our students, and provide opportunities for suggestions, the chance to engage students in visioning the future was qualitatively different. The focus of the students was not on altering the programme but moving towards a vision of a more consistent person-centred culture of care by expanding the programme. This included continued learning and connections after graduation, and targeting managers and other leaders. The project and the students' stories were presented to the regional governance body, and funding was secured to pilot new graduate support and education initiatives and to investigate the feasibility of a programme for leaders.

## The AI process helped us strengthen a community of practice

For the shared success of an initiative people need a shared vision, shared measurement of results, a mutually reinforcing plan of action, consistent open communication, and backbone support (Duvander, Voetmann, & James, 2013). Forming a professional learning community or community of practice that can pass on applied knowledge to new members can help to ensure that change is sustained (Alkema, 2012; Duvander et al., 2012). This was particularly salient for *Walking in Another's Shoes* in the context of rapid growth. There were just two educators in 2011 but by mid-2014 this had increased to ten, and the team was continuing to grow. The AI process provided a way for people to tap into the rich pool of knowledge, ideas, and experience of the team as a whole (see Fifolt & Lander, 2013), to articulate some of this in a way that could be shared, and to help create a shared vision of the best of *Walking in Another's Shoes* educational practice.

## Conclusion

Care-giving can be seen as a marginalised and demanding role (McGregor, 2012), but these culturally and linguistically diverse graduates spoke of a rewarding job that they loved. They blossomed in a supportive learning environment that recognised the centrality of relationships to the learning and



caring experience, and the potential to teach not just traditional skills but skills that increase resilience, positive emotion, engagement, and meaning (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009).

This experience illustrated how conducting appreciative inquiry (AI) as part of the evaluation of adult education programmes can help us to better understand what we do and its impact in the context of culture and the work environment. This strength-based participatory approach can value and build from the learners' and educators' experiences and reflections (Preskill & Catasambas, 2006). We hope that this publication will encourage educators to incorporate an AI approach into their evaluation and quality management cycles.

*“But one thing is evident as we reflect on what we have learned with AI: human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about. ... By inquiring into its positive core, an organization or community enhances its collective wisdom, builds energy and resiliency for change and extends its capacity to achieve extraordinary results.”*  
(Cooperrider & Whitney, 2006, p. 277).

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