

TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK: CONTEXTUALISED SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Despite significant transformation efforts in South African social welfare, social work education still inducts students into prevailing paradigms. Critics suggest that dominant social work is ineffective in that it is culturally inappropriate, marginalises other knowledges, overlooks structural issues, is expensive and is mismatched to local needs. The term "contextualised social work education" as used in this article incorporates the local focus on decolonisation/decoloniality and indigenisation. This article highlights the work of 12 South African educators in offering contextualised social work education. In exemplifying their decolonising work, the imperatives, challenges, supports and future pathways/options identified by participants are discussed.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Social work positions itself as facilitating change. However, it has been critiqued as inadequately responsive to local conditions and cultures, and for reinforcing social control. If it is to be a progressive force, social work must transform towards a socially just and locally appropriate discipline. Furthermore, social work education, which inducts students into dominant worldviews and modes of intervention, specifically needs to be interrogated. Transforming social work education has particular relevance for South Africa, where education, including that of social workers, has historically been shaped by hegemonic colonial, apartheid and Western influences (Gray & Mazibuko, 2002; Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018; Mwansa, 2011). Although transformation of social work education in South Africa has been limited (Mogorosi & Thabede, 2018), this article demonstrates that meaningful educational shifts are nevertheless occurring.

This article reports on a study that explored the lived experiences of social work educators regarding contextualised social work education in South Africa. It highlights that South African educators understand contextualised social work education through the lenses of decolonisation and indigenisation. The article further describes meaningful examples of the implementation and teaching of contextualised social work education, and illustrates how academics are incorporating different ways of learning and doing. Finally, the article identifies the barriers as well as the facilitators or enablers towards implementing contextualised social work education at South African universities. It is hoped that evidence of contextualised social work education will advance the discourse on transformative education and allow for deeper understanding of possible content and pedagogy, thereby strengthening existing work and encouraging further initiatives.

The article begins with a brief discussion of contextualised social work education as presented in the scholarly literature, followed by an exploration of the understanding of contextual social work within the South African context. It provides an overview of the research process and then presents the findings of the lived experiences of academics who have attempted to implement contextual social work education. Finally, it considers the implications of this research.

This study is part of a larger study which looked at contextualised education in South Africa and Canada. The research team were from South Africa and Canada, and were involved in interviewing participants across both countries. This article, however, focuses only on the results of the South African part of the study. Disaggregating the results allows a nuanced exploration of contextualised social work education within the realities of the South African experience.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Dominant approaches to social work**

Internationally, there is a growing critique of dominant approaches in social work. Many of these concerns have also been identified in South Africa. Social work has existed formally in South Africa since the 1930s, when the first social work college was established (Gray & Mazibuko, 2002), and has for decades promoted Western assumptions regarding practice and education. Consequentially, dominant social work education and practice in South Africa are variously described as Western, white, mainstream, and based on American and British conceptions of social work. Globalisation and the

internationalisation of social work have reinforced dominant social work ideologies in many contexts, South Africa being no exception (Hammoud, 1988; Patel, 2015; Spitzer, Twikirize & Wairire, 2014). Formally articulated critiques regarding the inappropriateness of Western approaches and the need for indigenous responses emerged in the 1980s from professional anti-apartheid associations, such as the South African Black Social Workers Association and Concerned Social Workers (Patel, 2005; Sacco & Schmid, 2015). Many social workers confronted racist and oppressive practices, black social workers in particular risking their lives and livelihoods to do so.

Such critiques have been complemented by the work of prominent academics from Africa, who have confronted the lack of cultural appropriateness of dominant interventions, texts and theory, and flagged the need for locally meaningful and authentic approaches (Bernstein & Gray, 1991; Chitereka, 2009; Osei-Hwedi, 1993). Developmental social welfare was conceptualised and formalised as a South African policy with the 1997 White Paper on Social Development (Patel, 2015) and offered a government-sanctioned alternative to historical social work practice and education. Academics such as Sewpaul (2013) and Lombard (2015) have ensured a South African voice in crucial international social work debates. This generation of practitioners and academics has sown the seeds for future transformation and an articulation of contextualised social work education.

The adoption of a developmental approach to social welfare (Patel, 2015) saw shifts in emphasis to engaging communities in addressing issues of poverty and injustice. However, despite all the changes in the social work profession since 1994, our teaching and practice of social work are still largely informed by a Western model of practice and hence influenced by a psychoanalytic approach and based on a first-world model that is curative and remedial (Van Breda, 2018). Western models and the scientific worldview do not always fit in with the reality of many grassroots people, who traditionally have lived with a more holistic connection to family, community, and nature (Cane, 2000 as cited in Turton, 2019).

Neoliberalism has strengthened the individualistic focus of social work, and the new managerialism at its core has restricted the professional autonomy of social workers (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015). The neoliberal approach further entrenches deficit and risk-based lenses and standardisation (Sewpaul & Holscher, 2004). This dilutes diversity and seeks universal rather than customised responses (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019). In addition, mainstream social work is increasingly competency informed, becoming technocratic and instrumental (Dedotsi & Young, 2018). These various factors intersect, making Western social work interventions culturally and locally inappropriate. Moreover, individualised approaches are typically more expensive than group or community interventions, are less sustainable and generally do not alleviate social problems (Patel, 2015; Spitzer, 2019).

Further critique around these dominant frameworks are, for example, that expert-led deficit-informed interventions are viewed as pathologising and non-participatory (Hammoud, 1988; Harms-Smith & Nathane, 2018; Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Patel, 2015). Practitioners and academics assert that individualised interventions are insufficiently cognisant of the interaction of the emotional, intellectual, physical, social and spiritual dimensions, thus overlooking holistic, integrated responses (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2008). Furthermore, they tend to ignore the impact of contemporary and historical structural issues that compromise individual, family and community functioning, rendering systemic barriers, discrimination and oppression invisible (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019).

Professionalised responses and language diminish non-dominant cultural values, marginalise alternative ways of knowing, being and doing, and disregard collective approaches to decision-making and identity (Canavera, Akesson, Lanids, Armstrong & Meyer, 2019; Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). These Western models of practice are often imposed on diverse cultural communities without a proper understanding of indigenous models that would talk directly to the reality of the people and thus in many cases are neither relevant nor appropriate to their social and cultural realities (Gray et al. as cited in Turton, 2019).

### **Alternatives to the dominant approaches**

Internationally, alternatives proposed to dominant social work have been rich and varied. Alternatives seek to be socially just, relevant to local communities and to avoid the harms of social control. They also seek to be culturally meaningful. In the seminal collection of articles contained in the book *Indigenous social work around the world*, the authors Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird (2008) note that social work is essentially a Western intervention that has “a history of silencing marginal voices ... and being imported into diverse cultural contexts across the world” – often the poorer nations of the world.

One alternative is culturally appropriate social work, which seeks to locate practice within local culture, privileging local languages, knowledges and helping strategies (Forkuor, Ofori-Dua, Forkuor & Obeng, 2018; Harms, Middleton, Whyte, Anderson, Clarke, Sloan, Hagel & Smith, 2011; Mogorosi & Thabedi, 2018). Another construction is the local, which emphasises place and engagement with the lived realities of specific communities. Indigenised social work practice offers yet another lens, though this approach has been criticised for simply adapting mainstream knowledges and practices to indigenous groups (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). In contrast, indigenous social work actively centres indigenous cultural knowledges, beliefs and ways of being and doing, highlights intergenerational impacts of colonisation and considers Western knowledge as complementary (Gray et al., 2008). Afrocentrism exemplifies an indigenous perspective (Makhubele, Matlakala & Mabvurira, 2019; Mathebane & Sekude, 2018; Shokane & Masoga, 2018). As a further alternative, decolonised social work and decoloniality foreground the ways in which Western discourses and assumptions create and reproduce historical and current subjugation (Harms-Smith & Nathane, 2018; Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018).

These options all resist dominant social work, but do not necessarily share the same antecedents or agendas. Together, however, they suggest that alternative modes of social work must be implemented for individuals and communities to be served appropriately. Although not extensive, practice examples of the alternative approaches are being gathered (Furuto, 2013; Gray et al., 2008; Spitzer et al., 2014). Principles for such practice and education have been highlighted, namely recognising political and policy influences, acknowledging (oppressive) histories, relying on indigenous materials and incorporating cultural knowledges (Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2019). However, there is relatively little in scholarly texts regarding classroom content and pedagogy.

### **Contextualised social work education**

According to Fook, as cited by Lyngstad (2012: 405),

Contextual social work is rooted in a specific understanding of how to build and facilitate a relevant and adequate social work education and social work practice. Generally speaking, to have some knowledge and understanding of local conditions (social problems, welfare policies, local values and attitudes, culture and traditions, decision-making processes, etc.) is very useful and sometimes a must if we want to address problems and design social work methods in an adequate way.

However, critical social work literature suggests that dominant social work fails to adequately pay attention to context. Indeed, professional imperialism (Midgely, 1981) imposes Northern constructs of social conditions and interventions on Southern and non-dominant contexts, making local realities invisible or irrelevant. In addition, dominant constructions of context create subjectivities in relation to mainstream ideologies and discourses. Thus, to avoid the inefficacy and harm of dominant social work issues, social work practitioners must attend to historical and contemporary oppression, develop a nuanced understanding of local conditions, theorise locally meaningful interventions, and rely on locally produced knowledge and ways of doing.

Dominant epistemologies infuse not only practice, but also social work education. Noting the variety of alternatives articulated, and relying on a critical, postmodern understanding of social work, Schmid & Morgenshtern (2019) have conceptualised contextualised social work education. This construct

integrates the various articulations of alternative practices and education to unsettle dominant understandings of social work education and to further theorise the alternatives offered.

A number of principles describe contextualised social work education. It is based on a social justice perspective that values the inherent dignity of persons and their human rights and promotes emancipation. It foregrounds issues of power. It is an approach that values a range of ways of knowing, doing and being, and focuses on communal identities and collective decision-making. It privileges the local and advances knowledge in forms consistent with local ways of knowledge production. These principles shape the content, which emphasises a deep appreciation of historical and contemporary colonisation and oppression, and their damaging impact of these on Indigenous peoples and teaches ways of resisting these processes (Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2019).

This construction of contextualised social work education emphasises that the preferred epistemologies will also be dependent on locality and indigenous priorities. It is clear from the earlier review of the literature, that in South Africa ‘decolonisation/decoloniality’ is the chosen discourse. For South Africans, decolonisation has more overtly political connotations as it is “achieved through a process of ... liberating oneself from oppressive conditions” (Yellow Bird, 2010: 284) and thus the power of the oppressor is challenged in the struggle for liberation. At the same time Yellow Bird (2010: 284) notes, “It is the restoration of cultural practices, thinking, beliefs, and values that were taken away or abandoned but are still relevant or necessary for survival and well-being.” One can conclude that decolonisation is the preferred South African discourse and framework for the delivery of contextualised social work education.

## **THE STUDY**

This research was embarked upon after recognising that there was a gap in the literature specifically around alternatives to dominant social work educational content and pedagogy. The intention was to gather examples of such forms of alternative education, while also understanding how social work academics described their conceptual foundations. This study used as its framework contextualised social work education (CSWE). However, the primary purpose was not to impose this term. Rather we aimed to learn how local academics articulated their guiding discourses, by asking them how they understood contextualised social work education and to identify the term that they most closely associated and worked with.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a qualitative approach, which enabled the researchers to explore the lived experiences of social work educators who were implementing contextualised/decolonised social work education. Purposive and convenience sampling was used to recruit social work educators who had offered contextualised education. Purposive sampling seeks to appropriately choose participants who, based on the researcher’s judgement, will provide data that are representative of the relevant population (Robinson, 2013). Convenience sampling relies on data collection from population members who meet certain criteria, such as easy accessibility, availability at a given time, or willingness to participate (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

In order to recruit participants, we used word of mouth, and a recruitment letter was distributed by ASASWEI (Association of South African Social Work Educational Institutions) to all social work educators in the country. Thirteen social work educators were interviewed, representing 10 of 16 South African social work programmes. One participant withdrew from the interview because of concerns around personal and institutional identification. Regarding further demographics, we did not ask participants to identify themselves racially and cannot confirm representivity in this regard. We did not focus on field placements, even though this is a cornerstone of social work education and must also be contextualised (Bar-On, 2001). In an attempt not to blur the boundaries between education and practice, we chose to focus on the classroom.

Data were collected using individual interviews and sharing circles. One interview was conducted face-to-face because the researcher was in the same city as the participant, while the rest of the interviews took place via Skype or Zoom, as the researchers were either in a different province or in a different country. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to elicit the participants' views. Participants were asked what terms they would use to describe CSWE, to reflect on associated imperatives, and thereafter to speak to the content as well as pedagogy that characterised their CSWE. In a final set of questions, interviewees described challenges, supports and future pathways.

After the interviews were completed, a national sharing circle was held. The methodology of sharing circles was used to facilitate an equal opportunity for the participants to be heard and to reflect the relational research principles that are consistent with many indigenous cultures. Sharing circles promote equality, trust, respect, dialogue and a sense of community (Talking feathers for sharing and restorative justice circles, 2019). All the participants were invited to join in the national sharing circle that took place virtually using Zoom. Six participants joined in this discussion; two were able to participate only for part of the session as a result of technical complications.

We adopted a thematic content analysis, which is a "descriptive presentation of qualitative data" (Anderson, 2007: 1). All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Data were organised around the questions. Themes, sub-themes and categories were developed from there. At the end of each data-gathering process, categories and themes were drawn together using the principles of thematic networks (Attride-Sterling, 2001). The research team reviewed these to ensure an accurate reflection of the data as well as cohesiveness of themes and categories. There was then a further round of refining themes and categories.

Guidelines for trustworthiness were adhered to throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure that the results are credible and dependable. Confirmability was ensured by the using member checking to verify that the data were a true reflection of the interview. Participants were able to view, correct and comment on each round of themes generated, and then could formally reflect on these in the sharing circles. These themes were produced from the interviews and then again from the sharing circles, at which point there was further refinement. Trustworthiness was further enhanced by using the sharing circle as a form of triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participation in the study was voluntary, and we explained all the steps in the letter of informed consent to the participants before they agreed to participate and signed the form. Participants were able to withdraw following the review of their transcripts, but not once the themes had been compiled for that stage of the research.

We have resisted offering a profile of participants for two reasons. First, a profile may inadvertently and indirectly identify participants. Noting that this topic is contested in the South African context, we wanted to ensure participants' anonymity as far as possible. Second, each story in qualitative research is valued individually. Despite common themes being drawn out, there is no attempt at generalisability and thus representivity also does not need to be established. We can confirm though, that the participants were from ten social work programmes in South Africa. Ethics approval was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at University of Johannesburg.

## **FINDINGS**

This section presents the themes, which were drawn from the data. It was at times difficult to separate out what was a description of CSWE versus the content or strategies associated with such education. The reader should therefore assume connections and links between these ideas and within themes.

The themes are presented as follows. First, we reflect the understanding and definitions of alternatives to dominant social work education, which explored what CSWE meant to the participants. The section on imperatives identifies whether formal or informal imperatives existed in the country, in the institutions, and in the faculties and departments towards CSWE. Personal drivers towards CSWE were also explored. The section on implementation examines how the participants attempted to implement

CSWE and how they incorporated different ways of knowing, being and doing into social work courses. Barriers and enablers to the implementation of CSWE were addressed as well as what pathways (options) are necessary to support ongoing CSWE. These themes represent the results from the interviews and the sharing circle.

## DEFINITIONS OF CSWE

It was apparent that there was no simple understanding of CSWE. Typically, participants spoke of CSWE as being multidimensional. One participant, P12, suggested that a “*multipronged*” understanding of contextualised social work was required to avoid “*essentialising*” any particular aspect, while P8 spoke of a “*blended*” approach. These intersecting facets included indigenous, indigenised, developmental, decolonised/decoloniality and culturally appropriate social work. For many, notions of power and empowerment as well as social justice informed contextualised social work.

Some participants chose to unpack particular aspects of CSWE. For example, developmental social work seemed to form the backdrop for contextualised thinking. P2 suggested that “*developmental social work is what we live and breathe ... It’s our contribution to world social work ...*” and P12 noted that since “*1997 with the conception of the White Paper on Social Welfare, we were already taking an interest in contextualised social work education.*” The local was emphasised, with P2 saying that good social work “*shares a common ethos ... language ... principles, but it finds local expression in local context, finding local solutions to local problems.*”

This implied “*an effort to focus on an indigenous knowledge base*” (P9) and making “*knowledge local and locally relevant ... and accessible*” (P7). Despite emphasising the local, P4 suggested “*the global and the local are dialectically engaged ... and mutually reinforcing.*” Decolonisation and decoloniality seemed to be another pillar of CSWE and were associated with the ideas of emancipatory pedagogy. This was described by P4 as “*rooted in post-colonial, anti-oppressive, practice and theoretical frameworks ... The emancipatory element comes with ... decolonisation of our thinking.*”

Afrocentrism was an expression of such decolonisation and included centring African knowledges as well as “*unsettling Western ideologies, but not dismissing the latter entirely*” (P13). Indeed, P12 remarked, “*Afrocentric knowledge ... is sometimes mis-conceptualised as replacing Eurocentrism ... It’s really about valuing what is relevant for indigenous knowledge practice.*” Afrocentrism also meant raising African knowledge to the level of theory and “*telling our own stories*” (P13). While local ways had to be affirmed, P13 cautioned against privileging all aspects of local culture, maintaining that it was important for her to remove all “*retrogressive aspects ... in these cultural practices.*”

Based on the feedback received from the participants, it is apparent that CSWE encompasses a number of approaches that present alternatives to the dominant and mainstream, Western-based social work.

## IMPERATIVES

A second theme was related to the perceived imperatives behind the adoption of CSWE. Rather than singling out only one prompt, participants tended to offer a number of imperatives. The analysis has disaggregated these.

The personal and professional experiences of the participants shaped participants’ interest in CSWE. Some participants had been trained during the apartheid era. This education relied on Western literature and theories, did not reflect participants’ lived experience, promoted racial segregation, frequently reinforced stereotypes and did not give “*voice and respect to our own culture*” (P1). For yet others, their dissatisfaction lay in the curriculum that was outdated, despite the changing times. P11 suggested, “*When 1994 happened in this country we had to do a lot of introspection ... social work is no longer that time of 1960. We are well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century now ... [into] the fourth industrial revolution.*”

The continued prevalence of Western teaching materials and their mismatch with the lived experience of service users was a further concern. P7 offered an example regarding a family therapy course: “*The*

*alternative methods presented in the text is so irrelevant ... Where would you find a naughty corner in a shack? ... And parenting mechanisms of taking away electronic devices? ... In rural areas where do the kids get the electronic devices that you can take from them?"* Being exposed to people of other backgrounds and moving to multi-ethnic communities was eye-opening for some, while experiencing first-hand the impact of social conditions and the limitations of their social work training in practice were revelatory too. P5 said, *"People regard social workers as the most useless and also ineffective kind of professionals."*

Imperatives also related quite directly to student needs. First was taking into account students' lived realities, with P6 highlighting *"Most of our students are from impoverished communities"*, while P8 noted *"They came from child-headed households or they grew up with their grannies ... or some of them had no living relatives ... they came to this campus with the extra burden of taking care of youngsters in their own family."* The importance of understanding and acknowledging the realities of students' lives is emphasised by Kiguwa (2017:104), noting that social justice pedagogy has to draw attention to issues of equity and the "learners' sociopolitical and material positioning." Participant views also aligned with another study, which revealed that student vulnerability to hunger has emerged as an alarming problem at South African higher education institutions (Wegerif & Adeniyi, 2019).

P10 observed that the emphasis on a Western way of thinking resulted in the Black, rural students at her university *"feeling that their culture may be backward"*. Thus, CSWE had to offer relevant support as well as valuing their own cultures. Also important was to learn from students' experiences, with P6 suggesting *"Their prior learning comes from the communities that they are going to serve when they are graduated."* These findings concur with another local study on student's reflections of decolonisation and indigenisation of social work education and practice (Soji, 2017). Students suggested that the current curriculum does not reflect their values, norms and ways of life, and that indigenous knowledge is negated, seen as inferior and therefore not recognised.

Yet another imperative was ensuring that students were prepared for practice, whether this was in South African communities, or in other parts of Africa or the global North. P11 noted that *"My students are going out and practising ... in [vulnerable] communities ... that have unique features that are not necessarily out of the textbook."* At the same time P6 warned that students should not be trained to only *"practice in their neighbourhood ... We are [also] training them for the global market."* The recruitment of South African social workers to work in countries such as England and Australia has provided an impetus for social workers to work internationally (Naidoo & Kasiram, 2006).

A further imperative was *the demand by students for decolonised education*. Indeed, the participants identified the strong student voice through the #FeesMustFall campaign as a critical imperative. For example, P10 commented: *"It wasn't until the [radicalness of the] 'Fees must Fall' that the notion of ... decolonisation came into the public sphere and actually ignited a public debate across faculties and universities and lay persons."*

There were also additional formal imperatives. The legislative framework imposed its own contextualisation, for example, in its regard for local languages, traditional leadership and specific pieces of legislation. Policy directives from educational and professional regulatory bodies, such as the Council for Higher Education and the South African Association for Social Service Professionals, similarly required compliance. The institutional direction as well as departmental priorities were a further driver and perhaps the most important to the participants. P7 excitedly reported: *"Our institution has really embraced it ... there are very intentional mechanisms in place and projects to decolonise the curriculum."* Adopting transformed, decolonised, contextual education as a common project (such as departmental research around decoloniality or producing an article around authentication) seemed also to inspire. P11 valued such initiatives highly: *"It's getting us to introspect ... and making us deliberately check, in a very strategic manner, how you are teaching, how you are recognising things in terms of decoloniality."* Additionally, ASASWEI has played an important role in driving the agenda

of contextualised social work education through a conference, colloquia, publications and resources offered.

## EDUCATION

This study in particular wanted to highlight the content and pedagogy of contextual social work education as implemented by the participants. Participants were asked to describe initiatives with regard to both, as well as teaching strategies used.

### Content

Regarding content, participants asserted that there were universal aspects of social work theory and practice that were fundamental. For example, P10 noted: *“Social workers have to understand from the psychological point of view how people think and what they are doing, how do they define themselves as individuals and in the context of others ... how they interpret that world ... [while] the values, the skills, the techniques, they remain the same.”*

Participants also argued that each subject area had to be contextualised to local circumstances and scrutinised for their relevance. As such, revised values and ethics needed to include *“Ubuntu”* (P4), *“communal values”* (P5) and *“collective confidentiality”* (P7). At the same time, it was suggested *“You have to bring to the fore the ideology”* (P10) and that it was essential to expose *“the hidden curricula.”* (P5) Furthermore, content had to be drawn from local literature and oral traditions. For many, the preferred social work methods and associated content pertained to group and community work, rather than *“individual work, case work and case management”* which potentially *“pathologized.”* (P4)

Participants additionally prioritised meaningful information on local social conditions as well as cultural responses. For example, P1 included *“real world examples”* that were *“relevant to the students and their future practice.”* Social conditions had to be re-interpreted within the South African setting, as they did not necessarily mirror social conditions in the Western world. P6 maintained, *“the milieu ... people’s political experiences ... value emphases and cultures are different”*. Furthermore, content had to address not only local conditions, but had to alert students to global circumstances, the interaction of the global and local contexts, and *“global hegemonic practices.”* (P12) Another participant, P2, spoke about the value of informing students of South Africans’ international influence: *“I think that’s the ... pride we want to have as social work academics and then to let our social work students know that we’re relevant ... [to] global norms and standards [where] we found local expression.”*

Another content area had to do with critical social work perspectives. As such, decolonisation/-decoloniality along with *“an acknowledgment of ... the injustices of the past”* (P1) had to be included. Critical theory such as Afrocentrism, feminism and queer theory (cited as *“LGBTI issues”*) had to be embedded. The importance of human rights and social justice as content areas was emphasised. Finally, national policies and legislation as well as international frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals had to be part of the curriculum content.

### Strategies

Some classroom strategies offered were structural, while others related directly to pedagogy. A primary strategy was departments creating the frameworks and policies for contextualised learning. A second set of strategies related to students - such as facilitating open access, recognising prior learning, ensuring representivity, and attending to students’ physical and emotional vulnerabilities. P1 observed *“I had to be very mindful of how students are coping ... are they first in their family, how far away from the university do they stay, what is the source of funding they have, how is English fluency, literacy and academic literacy.”*

In accordance with Nyika (2014) and the concern about lack of mother-tongue instruction affecting performance, many underlined the importance of facilitated access to language(s) through being multilingual, translating materials, having key concepts available in a number of languages, and using other students/unemployed graduates to support group work in particular languages.

Educators adapted teaching to the varying student learning styles. Facilitating student decision making and influence over the curriculum was another strategy towards contextualised education. Per illustration, P7 identified that a new module was being introduced *“that was completely generated by students, for students, with students.”* Ensuring future opportunities for students was also important, and it was noted by P2 that in partnership with an American university they were able to offer students fourth-year social development internships abroad. Speaking of one particular student, he noted, *“This completely turned her view of the world ... and her life around.”* (P2)

Experiential and authentic activities in a safe space constituted a core pedagogical approach to contextualised education. Participants most often used case studies, but also included games, journaling and excursions; invited local speakers; incorporated practical examples; utilised technology; and facilitated joint community research projects. At one university, fourth-year students were engaged in a project on youth and gangs, and *“now ... on gender-based violence.”* (P6)

Educators also employed strategies such as group and teamwork that facilitated participation, collaboration and reciprocity. This was motivated by noting that *“if [teaching] has ... to be emancipatory, then it must be participatory, because even with the most marginalised and excluded and oppressed groups of people, participation ... is so powerful”* (P4). Another participant P13 stated, *“I employ ... collaborative learning ... I encourage students to speak to one another ... to bring in examples ... from their practice education ... and from their own experiences.”*

Yet another pedagogical tool used to advance CSWE was the development of critical consciousness. Becoming self-aware and using critical thinking tools promoted student ownership for learning and allowed them to respond to a range of different practice contexts. Educators unsettled students, supporting them in interrogating dominant discourses, challenging injustices, identifying gaps, and strategising to fill such gaps. Assignments promoted *“reflection and application”* (P11); explored cultural perspectives on problem solving and meaning making; and encouraged values exploration. This was emphasised by P11: *“If you don’t understand your own values and where you come from and respect other people’s values, then you are not ... in social work.”*

Freire (2000) always emphasised the development of critical consciousness as a pedagogical and transformational approach to learning. Bagelman and Tremblay (2017: 199) state that *“individual transformation, or the development of ones’ critical consciousness, is acknowledged to be the foundation for an individual to then participate in larger social change.”*

Choosing relevant local literature was another intentional strategy. P10 commented *“I have seen a trend of looking at research from African perspectives and ... coming up with African solutions.”* Knowledge production was deliberate, participants producing their own materials through research, engagement, publishing articles and books, developing videos and drawing up case studies. Students were also encouraged to produce local materials. In a related strategy, educators attempted to incorporate diverse ways of knowing into the classroom through, for example, *“The [intentional] use of language, the use of different modes of teaching”*(P8); *“introducing alternative voices into the classroom”*(P5); *“or highlighting oral knowledge.”* (P5)

Participants identified as another pedagogical strategy their own self-reflection, awareness and authenticity. P1 said that she assumed an indigenised approach was coupled with the educators reflecting on their own life situations, as noted in *“the educator... self-interrogating his or her own beliefs, life and privileges.”* P5 tried to *“dismantle the power”* he had over students by ensuring *“that my students are starting ... to own their education.”*

P5 added: *“What is an advantage ... is ... that I’m one of the lecturers coming from where these students are coming from (my village is not very far)... I know how to sometimes sleep at night without food ... I try to motivate the students using my own background.”*

Finally, strong relationships with communities influenced classroom pedagogy. P5 talked about how he regularly returns to the communities where he did his research, while P8 identified her ongoing

community involvement. P2 reported: *“Most of the academics on the team this year have ... spoken at the local social work practitioner’s forum ... we have a lot of connections with the NGO and the government sector [that facilitated placement opportunities] ... There are often social workers in our space that are not academics.”*

## **CHALLENGES, STRENGTHS AND PATHWAYS**

Participants raised a series of intersecting challenges and strengths. The primary support identified was personal passion for and commitment to relevant, decolonised social work education and practice. For many, institutional supports and the associated *“institutional culture”* (P9) were also significant. The university commitment to transformed education offered a common identity and purpose, affirming departments with progressive ideas. Faculty groups, such as The Black Academic Forum, as well as interdisciplinary commitment to transformed education allowed for the implementation of contextualised social work. Formal policy often ensured associated resources that helped in developing appropriate assessment and language.

Peer support (internal and nationally), co-instruction, co-construction and the sharing of knowledge through dialogue were highly appreciated. Similarly, there was value in hiring diverse staff who were invested in CSWE. Many participants highlighted the important role of ASASWEI in promoting decoloniality and thus shifting the landscape towards CSWE. Noting the general paucity of relevant, indigenous, culturally appropriate materials, it seemed that being able to conduct research, develop local materials and share such resources was a further significant support. This included being party to developing international policies such as the Global Standards. Similarly, having role models was inspiring: *“I have been so privileged ... to see the major impact of my predecessors ... on global social work. And where is it coming from? Little southern African tip of nowhere.”* (P2)

Although institutional supports were valued, there were still major gaps. Neoliberalism and its impact on education and social work was a significant concern. P4 expressed it so: *“A ... major barrier ... is the increased commodification and neo-liberal appropriation of education ... the emphasis on numbers ... the checklist approach, the new managerialist impositions on academics ... and wanting to achieve the highest world ranking ... huge intakes ... and expectations of high pass rates ... It’s ... how many articles you are publishing ... rather than the quality of the articles and its impact.”*

As such, large class sizes were identified as problematic, preventing a *“meaningful roll out”* (P7) of CSWE. Participants felt Westernised models limited the assessment of contextual knowledge. Notions of the *“sanitised classroom”* (P4) that privileged Western knowledge and in so doing marginalised alternative knowledges/discourses were concerning. An associated issue was the lack of time to consider and integrate alternative approaches, to work experientially and, where needed, to source or create relevant materials. It appeared not every university or department had clear policies around transforming education, this limiting the buy-in of both older and neophyte academics who were attached to or inducted into Western ideas. Furthermore, university bureaucracy did not accommodate alternative modes of teaching; they were inflexible around time frames and rigid ethics reviews. A participant thus spoke about the need for *“structural decolonisation.”* (P4)

Additionally, the lack of funding was a common concern. P2 was vocal about resource constraints, noting *“We don’t even have the basic stuff ... projectors with blown bulbs ... pigeon infestation ... So we’ve had an ongoing, internal battle as academics just to do our job”*. Lecturers had to use their own resources to visit communities and there was no support to take students into communities. Funds supporting collaboration or multilingualism in classrooms were mostly lacking. Although there was dedicated funding for research focusing on transformed education, there were insufficient funds to cover associated costs such as travel. It was noted that further grants were needed to incentivise or reward (productive) researchers.

Participants were frustrated with the typical physical classroom set-up because this limited participation, P6 observing that *“We need to be changing classrooms [so that] the lecturer can move*

*around and engage ... students can dance.*” Also, on the institutional level, inconsistent definitions were of concern to some: decoloniality, developmental welfare and Africanisation continued to be contested. Some implied that any critiques were negatively interpreted and evoked (racial) stereotyping.

As inferred in the imperatives as well as pedagogy, there were challenges regarding students. Of note was students’ lack of financial, technological and other resources. Students frequently came from contexts of poverty and violence, which impacted on their engagement and academic success. Furthermore, P8 felt that the diversity of the student profile added complexity: *“The fact that they are coming from different contexts and ... communities, they might not relate equally.”* Ensuring that students had adequate access regarding language was a major concern. A further challenge was rigid student perspectives, some being reluctant to engage in macro intervention, while others did not want to have their personal world views challenged. Student protests sometimes complicated the learning process. Another challenge pertaining to students was that job opportunities upon graduation were inadequate. At the same time, the life experiences which students contributed to classroom dialogue were seen as invaluable and their feedback also was a cherished support.

Another difficulty was maintaining the tension between the local and the global. P6 explained: *“We don’t want to localise our degrees in such a way that it actually constrains the movement of social work students from one part of the world to the next ... [but] if we go too global, we are very little use to the plight of the people on the ground and if we go too local then we are only training our social workers to practice in their neighbourhood.”*

Some explicit pathways or options were offered. First, it was recommended that institutional support be enhanced through establishing departmental policies, bureaucracies be sensitised to this new educational agenda, and appropriate funding be made available. Second, being personally motivated and ensuring the commitment of colleagues through dialogue, conferences and professional development was important. Academic discretion, though, still had to be maintained: *“We need to allow people to use their own professional judgement to do things”*, P8 said. A third area was facilitating clarity around the meaning of CSWE, enhancing research efforts, and furthering local knowledge production and theorising. Fourth, one needed to pay attention to students’ voices and enable them to contribute to and produce appropriate knowledge. Practitioner voices also needed to be heard and community initiatives supported. Finally, P13 concluded: *“We consider decolonisation as a process where we can’t have it done in just one day or one week. This is going to take some time, but we are moving towards that.”*

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

In adopting a complex, multidimensional conceptualisation of CSWE, these educators propose that content should centre African/indigenous perspectives and local knowledge(s) and attend to locally defined social conditions. It should also re-conceptualise theories and lived realities through a South African lens and examine (oppressive) South African history and acknowledge global factors. Indeed, as advocated by Boulton (2018), Chitereka (2009), Harms-Smith and Nathane (2018), and Mathebande and Sekudu (2018), they resist the imposition of Western perspectives and reclaim the South African narrative through focusing on the local, societal and cultural context, interrogating dominant values and ethics, and prioritising knowledge production and epistemic theorising. Educators privilege community work as the method and community as location as suggested by Mwansa (2011). Most importantly, the language and lens of decoloniality are adopted and applied.

A content area that requires further exploration relates to the tensions between the global and the local, the universal and the indigenous. This concern is reflected in the literature. For example, a common assumption is that universal social work allows for indigenous expressions of social work (Hochfeld, 2010). This delicate balance seems to pose a dilemma for the participants. For them, relevant factors include the local and foreign composition of the student cohort, and the global mobility of graduates

(Kasiram, 2009; Spolander, Pullen-Sansfacon, Brown & Englebrecht, 2011). These reasons intersect with a desire to have South African education validated as world class. To meet these expectations, South African educators must ensure that content and pedagogy have relevance to their students and prospective service users through centring the indigenous and attending to issues of decoloniality, while adhering to global standards and including global content (Palattiyil, Sidhva, Pawar, Shajahan, Cox & Anand, 2018). In creating a social work professional identity, it has been difficult to identify what is unique to social work as a discipline and thus what is universal to social work (Mwansa, 2011), and questions of contextualised social work simply serve to heighten such anxieties – particularly in a neoliberal world that privileges Northern social work interpretations.

In addition to offering contextualised content, these lecturers employ empowering pedagogical strategies such as participation, critical thinking and attention to student self-awareness regarding identity, values and relationship to culture (in accordance with Bernstein & Gray, 1991 and Hochfeld, 2010). However, deeper reflection by instructors on their personal social location may be warranted. While some participants referred directly to reflexivity and an awareness of their relationship to power, the impact of their social location on social work intervention and their potential complicity in oppressive social work (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019), almost half of the participants did not. It may be that they felt this was self-evident. It is reasonable to assume, however, that some educators may not be identifying, in the classroom, the intersectional ways in which they hold or are subject to power and privilege. It is also possible that they are focusing only on awareness of cultural difference and cultural identity, rather than on power differentials. This area merits further investigation.

The study suggests that social work students find contextualised education meaningful. Participants highlighted that part of ensuring relevance is effective student support, especially as the majority of students were identified as subject to multiple vulnerabilities. Language accessibility was also a concern for many students. Not only does the South African social work student profile shift the work around social location and power in the social work relationship, but it also points to the need for integration of student support.

In reviewing the adoption of CSWE, it appears an intentional shift has been a recent experience for most study participants, although this has been within the context of decolonisation and the indigenisation of the curriculum. The introduction of the 1997 White Paper on Social Development (Gray & Mazibuko, 2002) did not act as a sufficient imperative, despite participants acknowledging it as establishing the post-apartheid welfare framework. Rather, a combination of additional factors appear to have moved the transformation agenda forward. Notably, according to this study, the #FeesMustFall campaign and associated student action had an inordinate impact on unsettling apparently immutable constructions of education and, specifically in this case, social work education. In addition to personal life experiences, the institutional environment has been a central element in facilitating and supporting this change. This has been through a multipronged, broad-based strategy that has included formal policies, the assistance of Centres for Teaching and Learning, and comprehensive resourcing.

Being able to jointly work on departmental transformation initiatives and having ASASWEI support has further entrenched a commitment to contextual social work. Indeed, Mwansa (2011) argues for such professional leadership on a continental level. Enhancing trust and dialogue amongst peers was recommended and seems pertinent, noting that one participant withdrew from the study worrying that her perspectives would reflect negatively on her and her institution. For those departments where transformation has been slower, it seems advocating for institutional adoption and resourcing of a change agenda, leveraging student voices, developing common projects and using ASASWEI support are crucial in activating change.

As a caveat, the research process underlines that social work theorising can never be divorced from the situations in which it is taught and practised. Participants and researchers were reminded of context in

an ongoing fashion; for example, one participant noted that the inadequate living conditions of students and community members were evident from his office window; another participant was interviewed during a student protest; and technological challenges and load shedding impacted on data collection. The research team was comprised of an older white South African woman living in Canada, a younger Indigenous Canadian man, a middle aged Russian-Israeli-Canadian woman and an older Black South African woman (designated so-called 'Coloured') and we are cognisant that our social locations, individual investment in, and definitions of CSWE may influence the outcomes in yet unseen ways.

CSWE conforms to current South African political imperatives, while also having greater meaning and relevance to students and service users than conventional individualised approaches. Indeed, CSWE is potentially a reparative mechanism that also avoids replicating harm and social control. That there is an emergence of CSWE is especially significant at this stage of South African social work development: Whereas the social work corps comprised around 9 000 registered social workers some fifteen years ago, it now includes around 30 000 social workers. This is a formidable force and equipping these service providers to engage meaningfully and appropriately is timely. Hammoud (1988) suggested that once social workers are attuned to the challenges in their societies, they could work towards offering transformed, relevant education. It seems South African social worker educators are on this path.

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