

Decolonising Social Work Education in South Africa

Since 1994 the winds of change have continuously blown across South Africa. They have brought with them a fundamental and rapid change in our society, with a quest towards freedom and justice. Behind these winds lie an awakened black consciousness and the petition that all means of colonisation be abandoned. With this in mind, there is a need to interrogate the mechanisms that have to be put into place to allow Black South Africans to transform the ideological basis of the education system. The current system has been transplanted from elsewhere, with alien traditions and cultural forms. It needs to be reconstructed, not only to fit the social structures and cultural environments in Africa, but also to serve African needs and aspirations.

Over the past several years, increasing attention has been given to decolonise the education system in South Africa. However, the concept of decoloniality has proved to be neither simple nor straightforward, making it a dominant but contested discourse in the educational landscape. Consequently, academics and scholars are vigorously debating the concepts, to make sense of what it really means. What does a decolonial education look like and aspire to achieve?

In social work education, these debates have been most evident in the regional decolonial dialogues in 2016 (ASASWEI 2017) and the international social work conference held in Gauteng in 2017 (ASASWEI, ASSWA, and DSD 2017). These debates are taking into consideration:

- limited local literature, particularly located in a rural context;
- adapting the content and focus of what is taught and how it is taught, as well as the focus of research, to the circumstances and aspirations of the country;
- adapting institutional structures to align with local values and experience; and
- language issues.

This themed issue of the *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Development*, on the topic, “Decolonising social work education in South Africa”, is published in partnership with the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI). It opens a valuable window for social work academics and scholars to share their knowledge and experiences around issues of decolonising education in South Africa.

The insights published here may be relevant in other African countries, who also share a history of colonisation, and indeed in many other parts of the world.

This themed issue hopes to contribute to:

- setting up truly African institutions of higher learning, devoted to serving Africa and its people, while not isolating Africa from the international community;
- adapting the curriculum and teaching methods to fit current local contexts against the long history of colonial and racial oppression;
- developing homemade literature for teaching modules at all levels;
- understanding that involvement with the community advances the educational purpose and contributes to better understanding of the concerns of society; and
- rooting all programmes in and designing them to further the ideals of freedom and justice.

This themed issue includes eight inspiring vision papers from esteemed academics and scholars that set the stage for subsequent issues to concretise the concept of decoloniality.

Mathebane and Sekudu open this themed issue with a review of the process of colonisation in social work education, and the various ways the Global North has and continues to dictate social work discourse in Africa. The authors give particular attention to processes for decolonisation, both conceptually and in specific relation to decolonising the social work curriculum in South Africa. They translate these concepts into practice implications, such as adopting a culturally relative stance, incorporating oral (and not only written) knowledge into the curriculum, and considering knowledge as positioned.

Mogorosi and Thabede express the need to contextualise the social work curriculum within South Africa's peculiar conditions. The authors contend that to ensure continued relevance and effectiveness, social work as a discipline and professional practice should always be cognisant of the local histories, cultures, practices and general world views of the population and clientele it purports to serve. It is argued in this paper that there is an urgent need for South Africa to evolve a brand of social work theory, training and practice suited to its own unique socio-cultural environment, informed by the world view of the local population. The authors suggest ways in which social work professional practice in South Africa can strive towards being culturally appropriate, within the African cultural contexts in which it is practised. (*We draw readers' attention to the fact that Prof. Dumisani G. Thabede, the co-author of this article, passed away on 19 January 2014, during the early conceptualisation of this paper. His name is retained as a memorial to his important contribution to social work and social transformation in South Africa.*)

Shokane and Masoga advocate for the acknowledgement of indigenous knowledge as an invaluable tool to the contributions of social work scientific knowledge. They opine that as South Africa enters a new phase of knowledge development, disciplines like social work are challenged to rethink their methods and theories to embrace this emerging variation. For this to succeed, the authors call for a transformed social work education that recognises philosophies and discourses such as decolonisation, indigenisation and Africanisation.

Harms Smith and Nathane critique knowledge that domesticates and oppresses. They are of the view that it is time for social work education to engage with issues of ideology, power relations, oppression and decolonisation in order to break free from historical European domination. For this to happen, they advocate for a need for social work education to denounce the status quo and repossess its true historical roots and cultivate a critical and anti-colonial approach. They provide a review of key decolonial writers and illustrate their points with a case study.

Ross laments social work's over-reliance on Western texts, characterised by Western paradigms, theories and methodologies. She proclaims an urgent need for social work on the continent of Africa to move away from the remedial Eurocentric approaches and towards effective and more ubiquitous developmental approaches. This paradigm change should be in line with African culture and the socio-economic policies of Africa. The focus should be on Afrocentric models based on indigenous knowledge systems, community-based interventions and local values and practices. On the other hand, Ross warns against discrediting everything from Euro-American contexts and advocates for sifting and interrogating aspects that are usable, appropriate and relevant, and what aspects of African knowledge need to be integrated into Western approaches.

Makhubele, Mabvurira and Matlakala analyse language as an impediment or a resource in social work education. In their analysis they contend that language is fundamental in learning, and that people tend to express themselves more effectively in their cultural language. They contend that language and culture are at the core of learning and that their inclusion in the education and training systems must be viewed as a prerequisite, not an option. Based on this and other cultural aspects, the status quo is that the post-apartheid education system has been slack and restrictive in accommodating indigenous languages in education and training. In line with the Constitution, the authors argue strongly for elevating the status of African languages in social work teaching and learning.

Hoosain reports on a qualitative study with Western Cape displaced families who experienced the historical traumas of both their slave past and their displacement during apartheid. Her research explores how these dual traumas are transmitted inter-generationally. She found that power relations have a greater impact on how people choose to remember or not to remember the historical traumatic events of the past. The definition of trauma was found wanting, in that it disregarded how people feel or felt

about their historical scars, as it excluded forms of oppression as contributory factors of trauma. Hoosain's research provides an exemplar of a decolonial research approach in social work.

Boulton is the author of the last article in this collection. Hers is an adapted version of the keynote address she presented at the Social Work 2017 conference, where she spoke about the topic of decolonising research ethics. Boulton writes not from a South African, or even a social work, perspective, but rather as a Māori researcher in New Zealand (Aotearoa). Her work is included in this collection to provide an external point of reference that has both similarities to our own (given Māori experiences of colonisation, that robbed Māoris of land and led to a fragmentation of traditional family systems) and differences (for example Māoris constitute only a small minority of the New Zealand population). Boulton shows the role of critical ethics in decolonial research, and the ways her team have incorporated indigenous ethics and values into their construction of research ethics.

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Themed Issue Guest Editors

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