WORKPLACE
A JOURNAL FOR ACADEMIC LABOR
ISSN 1715-0094

#37
2026

Alexander-Richardson, B., & Thomas, K.. (2026). Pushing back the margins: Increasing anti-oppressive pedagogical practices in social work education. *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, *37*, 89-107.
https//doi.org/10.14288/workplace.v37i1.187124

PUSHING BACK THE MARGINS: INCREASING ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, policies are being enacted to ban critical pedagogies in the classroom at alarming rates, creating multiple challenges to teach social justice concepts effectively. Opponents of these concepts seek to punish those who teach them by law, attempting to silence those who would speak about marginalization and thus allow oppression to continue unrestrained. However, social workers must be able to address and challenge structural racism as a foundation of ethical practice and it is our duty to combat these dangerous restrictions. One way to disrupt this cycle is through the intentional use of anti-oppressive pedagogies, which often emphasize the concept of reflexivity and the repositioning of marginalized voices to a more centralized viewpoint. These perspectives are moving to the forefront of social work education as the profession increasingly recognizes and grapples with issues of power and oppression internally. In this article, two U.S.-based social work professors address the challenges of working in a hostile sociopolitical climate and share effective strategies for resistance. The authors present specific recommendations for increasing anti-oppressive commitment in social work education while attempting to help the reader gain a deeper understanding of the complex interaction between social work and racial disparities in the U.S., discuss why this matters on a global scale, and improve reader ability to recognize common academic practices which marginalize non-dominant voices and perpetuate inequity.

Keywords: social work education, social justice, anti-oppression, anti-racist, pedagogy

It is well documented that social work education has historically failed to adequately address issues pertaining to racial justice or to effectively incorporate Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) experiences into mainstream curriculum (Beck, 2019; Meshelemiah, 2024; Murray-Lichtman et al., 2022; NASW, 2025). Despite the whitewashing of the profession's history and the lack of uniform agreement on how to handle current racial disparities, social workers must be able to address and challenge structural racism as a foundation of ethical practice. But pedagogy often reinforces a color-blind lens and there is a responsibility for social workers at all levels of practice to confront this. This is particularly true for academics - who often avoid such topics altogether - thus recreating the problems with social work education perpetually. Furthermore, BIPOC academics often bear the emotional and physical burden of this perpetuation in forms of managing BIPOC student experiences and personal experiences with forms of discrimination such as microaggressions simultaneously (Campbell & Rodríguez, 2019; Waller et al., 2023; Williams, 2021).

One way to disrupt this cycle is through the intentional use of anti-racist pedagogies, which often emphasize the concept of reflexivity and the repositioning of marginalized voices to a more centralized viewpoint. These perspectives are moving to the forefront of social work education as the profession increasingly recognizes and grapples with issues of power and oppression internally. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) issued a formal apology statement in 2021, and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) added anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion as a new element in the 2022 EPAS – both of which demonstrate that all U.S. based social work professionals must be aligned with anti-racist practices going forward (CSWE, 2022; NASW, 2021). This is further supported by the Grand Challenges of Social Work point #10 to eliminate racism (Teasley et al., 2022), which also demonstrates that this problem is pertinent to the profession. This article provides methods for social work educators to examine their own understanding of anti-oppressive pedagogy and its implications for practice, and guidance for imbuing racial justice focused pedagogy into classroom engagement.

This paper uses a conceptual methodology, grounded in the comprehensive review of scholarly literature to examine the intersections between anti-oppressive pedagogical practices and social work education. The review process involved a systematic yet flexible search strategy to ensure both breadth and depth of coverage. Databases such as *Social Work Abstracts*, *PsycINFO*, *ERIC*, *Social Science,* and *Academic Search Complete* were searched using a combination of keywords related to social work education, anti-oppressive pedagogy, professional practice and sociopolitical climate. Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, professional and technical reports, and legal reports were prioritized to capture empirical, theoretical, and practical perspectives. The authors also prioritized works published within the last 10-15 years to capture current trends in the profession, while foundational works were incorporated to provide necessary historical and theoretical grounding. Throughout the review, the authors engaged in a process of thematic synthesis, identifying recurring concepts, tensions, and gaps across the literature (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The social work profession has embedded in its ethical principles a commitment to seeking justice and equity across all social identities (Alexander et al., 2023; CSWE, 2022; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017; Woo, 2022). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has recently noted changes made to the 2022 Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) regarding this topic which includes a concerted effort to enhance social work's commitment to antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI). The addition of Educational Policy 2.0 on ADEI details new expectations for how social work programs evaluate and update curriculum. Specifically, this policy and accreditation standard states that social work programs must promote conversations and show evidence of ongoing work related to ADEI (CSWE, 2022). This new standard now requires social work programs across the nation to address ADEI in both explicit and implicit curricula.

However, many of these efforts have faced considerable resistance. For example, since 2021, several U.S. states have introduced bills designed to restrict curriculum on race, politics, and sexual orientation (Sachs et al., 2022; Schwartz, 2012; Villavicencio et al., 2023). These legislative actions have created a unique predicament for social work education as the profession's core values and educational standards rely on the ability to have conversations about equitable treatment and anti-oppression through the utilization of justice-focused pedagogy in the classroom. In tandem, these movements have widespread consequences for social work education and higher educational systems, effectively "positioning schools in the center of national debates and further alienating marginalized students whose histories and experience are already largely invisible in schools and classrooms" (Villavicencio et al., 2023, p.251).

Common Academic Practices that Promote Marginalization

The pool of college-seeking students is becoming the most diverse in the history of the United States (Royal et al., 2022). However, the concept of an equitable education that prepares students for academic and professional success and civic engagement has fallen short for students from non-dominant cultures (Zion et al., 2015). To improve the student experience for all, educators must have the preparation and freedom to challenge traditional conceptualizations of academic practices, both instructional and administrative. Moreover, failing to shift the perspective of how educators and institutions serve students from non-dominant cultures will continue to perpetuate the practices that do not support them (Harper, 2016; Royal et al., 2022). Current popular educational models often emphasize effort as means for academic achievement and minimize systemic injustices that disproportionately place students from non-dominant cultures in resource-deprived classrooms and schools (Zion et al., 2015). These models often serve as a foundation for common academic practices that marginalize non-dominant voices and perpetuate inequity including systemic exclusion from learning for special education needs and/or disciplinary actions, academic opportunity gaps, and disproportionate distribution of representative voices across curriculum (Akhtar, 2023; Cruz et al., 2023, Zion et al., 2015)

Systemic Exclusion from Learning

The opportunity to learn has been identified as one of the strongest predictors of student academic and social success (Pace et al., 2019). Exclusion from learning can be linked to many negative outcomes across a student's lifespan. These methods which have been infused into U.S. educational systems at all levels have become normalized gatekeeping entities that frequently perpetuate inequity and disproportionately harm students from diverse backgrounds including but not limited to students who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), students with disabilities, immigrants, and students with multiple marginalized social identities (Cruz et al., 2023). It is imperative to understand these mechanisms of oppression to effectively challenge and change them.

Special Education. Research has indicated that being placed in special education curriculum or labeled with special education needs (e.g., learning differences, language differences, mental health concerns etc.) impacts access to effective teachers (Glimour & Henry, 2018; Lai et al., 2021). Specifically, students who carry the special education label are significantly more likely to have less experienced teachers compared to their counterparts who do not have this label (Glimour & Henry, 2018; Lai et al., 2021). Additional outcome disparities for students labeled with special education needs include lower academic outcomes, postsecondary school attendance, employment, independent living, and community engagement (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020; Harber et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2011; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011).

These issues often continue into postsecondary education in very similar ways including the need for students to self-identify as a student with a disability that has special education needs and follow the detailed procedural steps necessary to obtain classroom accommodations that often separate the student from their peers and classroom further perpetuating marginalization and decreasing a sense of belonging (Leake & Stodden, 2014). These ramifications are worth noting as research indicates if new students do not start to feel like they belong within eight weeks of arriving on campus, they are especially high risk for dropping out (Raley, 2007). In contrast, students who develop supportive social networks are likely to be more academically successful (Antonio, 2001; Thomas, 2000). Across many contexts, students labeled with intellectual disability and/or emotional disorders face an increased likelihood of exclusion from general education classrooms (Kurth et al., 2015). Yet separate education mechanisms with extensive support needs remain the primary service-delivery model (Hagiwara et al., 2019, Taneja Johansson, 2014). As a result, many students do not identify themselves as a student with a disability, which is likely to leave the mistaken impression on educators that disabilities are rare among students in post-secondary education and curriculum need not account for it.

Disciplinary Systems. School exclusion as a disciplinary option has been increasingly practiced across the United States since the passage of legislation like the Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA) in 1994 which initiated the implementation of Zero Tolerance policies (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023; Skiba et al., 2014). Zero Tolerance policies are linked to increased use of varying degrees of exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions and expulsions (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). Though the initial intent of these policies were to increase school safety, they have led to the overuse of exclusionary discipline for less dangerous behaviors like fighting, insubordination, and bullying (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023; Evans & Lester, 2012) resulting in unintended negative consequences for specific

groups of students as disciplinary practices such as suspensions, expulsions, and restrictive attendance policies have been linked to the exclusion of marginalized students from their classroom and school sites and harm at disproportionate rates (American Psychological Association, 2008; Losen; 2018; Cruz et al., 2023). Further, these practices have been linked to decreased sense of safety in school, negative school climate perceptions, increased risk for contact with juvenile justice system, numerous health outcomes including higher levels of depressive symptoms in students and drug use disorder in adulthood, and decreased feelings of connectedness to educators (Anyon et al., 2016; Duarte et al., 2023; Eyllon et al., 2022; Pena-Shaff et al., 2018; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023; Skiba et al., 2014)

Despite extensive empirical evidence to support that these types of practices disproportionately harm students of color, LGBTQ+ students, immigrants, and students with disabilities, schools continue to support and engage in its widespread use (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022; Sevon, 2022). Paradoxically, these practices are touted as measures to enact justice but are instead solidifying the systemic barriers which continue to exclude historically marginalized populations at alarming rates. This issue combined with other exclusionary academic practices serves to deny some students opportunities to learn and pursue higher education. Therefore, if higher institution educators - particularly those in the social work profession - seek to reduce or eliminate the effects of these types of educational practices on marginalized and underrepresented students, the intentional use of anti-oppressive and anti-racist pedagogy must be incorporated in curriculum. These changes hold potential to create a ripple effect of positive outcomes for the social work practice with students who have experienced anti-oppressive educational methods.

Academic Opportunity Gaps

Another academic practice that disproportionately affects marginalized students lies in ignorance of or failed attempts to address opportunity gaps. As mentioned already, there is no shortage of evidence that these harmful practices exist, and therefore no viable excuse for refusing to acknowledge and address them. Opportunity gaps, particularly those related to ADEI, exist at all levels of education and are present in the lives of educators and students (Milner, 2012). First-generation college students, students of color, and immigrant[1] college students are largely affected by this phenomenon. For example, research indicates first-generation college students often experience a cultural mismatch early on in college settings which predicts reduced perceived of sense of fit in college and ultimately predicts lower grade point averages, degree completion rates, and perceived social status upon graduation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Phillips et al., 2020; Royal, et al., 2022; Stephens et al., 2014). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the learning opportunities for students from various backgrounds both in the U.S. and globally. School closures related to the pandemic produced unequal formal and informal learning opportunities for students (Bonal & González, 2020). These unequal opportunities are likely to have exacerbated existing inequalities in skills acquisition and academic performance (Bonal & González, 2020).

These examples highlight the importance of understanding the nuanced and multifaceted experiences and processes (i.e., opportunity gaps) that lead to the outcomes (i.e., achievement gaps) (Milner, 2012). In fact, some educational researchers argue that perceived achievement gaps are merely the result of other gaps that lead individuals to believe an achievement gap exists (Irvine, 2010; Milner, 2012). Contributing gaps that may shape belief in an achievement gap include:

> the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable housing gap; the health care gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap; and the quality childcare gap. (Irvine, 2010, p. xii)

If higher education leaders and educators truly value supporting marginalized students, then the call to work toward dismantling the systemic factors that perpetuate opportunity gaps within their departments and institutions is upon them. Degree completion "for any student cannot be actualized unless scholars and practitioners are actively working

[1] It is important to stratify immigrant data appropriately to recognize the significant disparities that exist between immigrants and refugee when accessing higher education. While nearly 40% of immigrants will attain a college degree, only 3% of refugee learners will (Hadas & Battle, 2021; Thomas & Lipman, 2023).

to remove institutional barriers and promote equitable distribution of resources and opportunities" (Royal et al., 2022, p.101).

Disproportionate Distribution of Representative Voices Across Curriculum

To improve academic opportunities, educators must be prepared to work effectively with students who come from different backgrounds and possibly underserved educational systems which includes improving representation of varying perspectives across curriculum. These educators must also work to dismantle the oppressive standards and perspectives which they have internalized within themselves so they can reduce the potential harm they may perpetuate through their classroom instruction. This concept coined with the phrase "decolonizing curriculum" has picked up global momentum in recent years (Akhtar, 2023; Alvares & Faruqi, 2012). For further context, the term *colonization* refers to the "process of internalizing the colonizer's culture, while vilifying that of the colonized" (Akhtar, 2023, p. 298) and the term *decolonization* refers to the process of deconstructing and challenging the ideology of colonization (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). The global nature of this movement introduces varying complexities in how *decolonizing* is interpreted because deconstruction needs to happen at a local and individual level (Akhtar, 2023).

> For example, the meaning it holds for scholars in countries such as Zimbabwe where it may be seen as essential to strip away the legacy of western knowledge and theories that have been left over from colonialism (Mabvurira, 2018) is very different from the work in China, a country that was never 'colonised' by the west, but where western knowledge and theories about social work have still come to influence practice, often at the negation of local knowledge and practices (Sim et al., 2017). Some Chinese scholars prefer to focus instead on the 'indigenization[2] and authentization of social work' (Cheung & Liu, 2004) (Akhtar, 2023, p. 298).

Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, too, focus on Indigenization of pedagogical practices and curriculum. Globally, a decolonized approach to education means broadly rejecting Eurocentric views (Shahjahan et al., 2022).

In the context of the United States and, more specifically, social work, decolonizing the curriculum has charged individuals with correcting the exclusionary practices that silence the voices of scholars of color and Indigenous and women scholars, reimagining contributions from a wider range of perspectives, and challenging and critiquing structures of knowledge and concepts that rose to popularity during the age of European expansion (English & Heilbronn, 2024). As previously stated NASW issued a formal apology statement in 2021 and CSWE added anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion as a new element in the 2022 EPAS (CSWE, 2022; NASW, 2021) – both of which supports the notion that all social work professionals - educators and practitioners alike - have a responsibility to be aligned with anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices. In short, the remedies of presenting truthful, historical, cultural, and pedagogical content need to be introduced to students and disseminated among educational spaces (Charles, 2019). However, given some of the restraints of current academic practices and the current political landscape in the U.S., one question is pushed to the forefront of this discussion for social work education: how do educators provide learning experiences that sufficiently address inequities and prepare students to do meaningful and equitable work in the social work profession without also acknowledging the historical and current practices of marginalization that have led to the necessity and purpose of the profession?

Anti-Oppressive Pedagogies

When political ideology becomes restrictive, academics must increase efforts aimed at social justice in the classroom space to reduce practices that promote marginalization. One option is rooted in the perspectives of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, philosopher, and critical theorist who challenged traditional pedagogical practices and asserted that education could be a force of liberation instead of indoctrination. A Freirean approach holds that raising collective, social awareness in the classroom serves to increase a sense of responsibility towards one another and focus away

[2] It is important to note that Indigenization should be capitalized as a means of reclaiming Indigenous presence in spaces which seek to erase Indigenous people, according to Indigenous scholar Dr. Autumn Blackdeer. She emphatically states: "capitalize Indigenous, Indigeneity, Indigenizing, Indige-everything. forever. We are still here." (BlackDeer, 2024).

from individual gain (Freire, 2000). This type of "consciousness-raising" can include strategies such as examining biases, the co-creation of knowledge, incorporating critical reflection in teaching, recognizing intersectional identities and ensuring they are respected and reflected in the learning process, leveraging marginalized and underrepresented voices to challenge dominant narratives, and examining power and privilege as the instructor in the learning environment (ETFO, 2021; Migueliz Valcarlos et al., 2020). These tactics work to develop inclusive community learning spaces where diverse lived experiences and multiple ways of knowing are free to be expressed; this directly contrasts the unilateral views and oppressive practices commonly touted as standards of social work. Instructors should intentionally use anti-oppressive tactics to ensure not only that all perspectives are heard, but that a sense of ownership and purpose emerges in relation to learning (Rodriguez & Huemmer, 2019).

Freire's (2000) concept of consciousness raising also helps to support mobilizing students to take positive action. This is a crucial outcome as social action is fundamental to anti-oppressive teaching, and the goal should always be to create change. Even still, research indicates that many educators are likely to revert to teaching in the ways they were taught which often centers Whiteness and does not account for "racialized discrimination and oppressive historical contexts of the United States education system" (Deutschman, et al., 2024, p. 597). However, social work educators are charged with doing just the opposite and added pressures and restrictions on education based on contentious political times make the engagement of anti-oppressive pedagogy even more difficult. As part of our ethical mandate to support the vulnerable and marginalized in society and to challenge systems of oppression, we must ensure intentional disruption of harmful practices and resist political rhetoric which seeks to silence knowledge and tools for change.

Policy Ban on Critical Classroom Pedagogy

Pedagogical bans can be traced back in the United States to practices of enslavement, when Black individuals were legally restricted from learning how to read or write – a charge punishable by law. Post-Civil War era increased access to public education in the South. In response, white activists created "textbook committees" which resulted in different textbooks being created for different parts of the country and heavily restricted the content of history lessons (Johns, 2024). This was intentionally designed to suppress narratives discussing slavery and the resulting impact on thousands of people nationwide. This set the precedent for intentionally shaping classroom lessons for decades to come.

In the U.S., institutions of higher education have been renowned for both academic freedom and critical engagement of issues within the classroom space. This is, in part, because of the value set which underlies our education system – equipping individuals with the abilities to tackle socioeconomic and political issues which present a threat to democracy as we conceive of it (Giroux, 2006). While academic freedom is typically upheld in universities, legal challenges have emerged – particularly after World War II and, subsequently, the Civil Rights Era. These restrictions focused on censoring foreign ideas and alternative models of government. In 1967, *Keyishian vs. Board of Regents* challenged a requirement for professors to sign a statement indicating that they were not Communists, and this was overturned on the basis that it was too vague to properly interpret (Krebs, 2022). Following that, the Powell Memo written by future supreme court justice Lewis F. Powell claimed universities were the biggest threat to free enterprise and started rhetoric around 'balance' as there were not enough conservative perspectives represented in social science arenas. It argued a broad plan for infiltrating higher education with conservative values to create far-reaching changes to society through educated political leaders, authors, media experts, academic publications, and more (Giroux, 2006). The effects of this are still seen in today's critical theory bans.

In the last few years, the educational landscape has seen a massive wave of attempts to control and silence critical pedagogies in the classroom at all levels of education. Over 1600 books were banned during the 2021-22 school year, primarily those focused on understanding LGBTQ+ and BIPOC experiences (Johns, 2024). According to UCLA law, an astonishing 783 anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) bills were filed in courthouses across the United States between 2020-2023 (Alexander et al., 2024). According to the World Population Review, by April of 2023, 18 states had banned CRT and another nine had impending legislation to ban its use. Seventeen additional states had attempted CRT bans which either failed to pass or were vetoed. This brings the total to 47 states which sought to restrict the use of critical pedagogies in educational spaces, leaving only California, Delaware, and Vermont with no attempts at the state level (World Population Review, 2023). Delaware did, however, pass HB 198 – a measure *requiring* all schools to teach Black history (HB 198, 2021).

Critical theory bans are, by nature, abhorrent to the social work profession. It is imperative that all social workers realize this and act accordingly with this understanding. Critical theories embody key social work values such as social justice and the importance of human relationships while engaging diversity and difference in practice and advocating for change for those who are marginalized and oppressed. As such, a rejection of critical theory is a rejection of social work itself (Holman et al., 2022). The fervor around banning the use of critical theories in academia frames colleges and universities as the center of the debate (Villavicencio et al., 2023), which ultimately undermines not only academic freedom but the values which the U.S. educational system holds so dearly.

Challenges of Working in a Hostile Sociopolitical Climate

Navigating the current sociopolitical context as a social work educator is especially challenging given the direct opposition of educational standards and goals for students between the social work profession and the broader political environment. Social Work educators are tasked with adhering to the CSWE EPAS and ADEI standards which already carry some degree of emotional labor due to the task's complexity (Akhtar, 2023). This emotional labor is, as previously mentioned, heightened for BIPOC and queer practitioners especially given their proximity to the subject matter. Adding to this, the fact that the current political landscape directly opposes these standards increases the burden and risk for social work education. It has become increasingly difficult to conduct work outside of politics as the realities of our political context and its bearing on education make that aim futile. It is also now necessary to understand how broader political contexts may shape educational constraints.

First, it is important to note that attempts to ban various approaches to education are not a new phenomenon. Education is recognized as a powerful force for change at both the individual and societal levels and, thus, is frequently critiqued by the public and the government. There are strong historical and political initiatives designed to keep an intersectional lens – a foundational aspect of social work perspectives – out of classrooms because neutral approaches do not allow for rich contextual analysis of sociopolitical situations (Pen America, 2021; Pen America, 2023; Warren et al., 2021). As a result, it becomes much more difficult to recognize discrimination and the impact of various identities such as race, class, and gender on lived experiences (Wanberg, 2013). The social work educator is wise to keep this awareness at the forefront of classroom discussions around critical approaches as not only a means of resistance, but as a technique for raising critical consciousness and exploring the strengths of those who have navigated these challenges in the past in order to draw upon for the future.

POSITIONALITY

The authors' own positionality as educators and practitioners in social work informed the selection, interpretation, and synthesis of the literature. Collectively, the authors bring backgrounds in social work education, practicum[3] instruction, and practice-based research, which shaped both the framing of this paper, and the emphasis placed on pedagogical and professional implications for social work education. This reflexive engagement is consistent with social work's commitment to critical self-awareness and acknowledgement of how positionality influences scholarship. By combining systematic literature engagement with critical reflection rooted in social work education, this conceptual paper develops an integrative framework that advances dialogue between theory, research, and practice in the profession.

First Author

I entered this writing process as a Black, nondisabled, cisgender, heterosexual woman born in the Northern United States, but raised in the South by a single parent in a lower-middle class home. I have a master's degree and Ph.D. in Social Work which has shaped my interest in understanding the lived experiences in vulnerable populations and my commitment to advocacy. My contributions to this paper are based on my role as a tenure-track faculty member in a social work program. Like many others, I have been deeply concerned by the sociopolitical tensions in the United

[3] There is a growing movement in the social work profession to shift from the term "field" to "practicum". While both terms refer to the hands-on learning component of social work education, "practicum" is now favored by many programs because of the former term's historical connotations. This reflects a deliberate move toward inclusive, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and asset-based language.

States in the last several years and was both excited and apprehensive to share my experiences and thoughts on how I have navigated being a social work educator during these times. I have found comfort in collaborating with my dear colleague and friend while engaging in this work to be able to provide recommendations and insights for other educators.

Second Author

I am a white, cisgender bisexual single mother living with chronic pain. Although born in the United States, I was raised overseas – primarily in South Africa during the end of the Apartheid, which greatly impacted my perspectives on social justice and the world around me. I hold three degrees in social work (BSW, MSW, PhD) – each guiding me towards a more liberatory praxis which now imbues my teaching strategies. While teaching, I strive to support my students in gaining a prismatic perspective; that is, holding the ability to look at issues from multiple perspectives not as a thought experiment, but as a means of embodied solidarity to bring change to the world around them through relational empathy. Indeed, the relationship between my co-author and myself demonstrates this: we met as doctoral students and became friends, then later colleagues – but our identities both mirror and juxtapose each other's in ways that challenge us to see the world in deeper, layered, and more nuanced ways. We often turn to conversation to grapple with challenges we experience both in the classroom and in society, which has in part coalesced into this paper. Writing this is one form of resistance to the growing threat in this country that I recognize from my childhood, from textbooks, and from spaces of sociopolitical advocacy - and being able to publish our thoughts is just one small way of acknowledging to future generations that we knew, and we tried. Not only did we not back down amid increasing threat, but we used our voices and our platforms to raise awareness. For me, this is the ultimate purpose of social work: to stand firm against injustice however we can.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the varying recommendations and conflicting interests for anti-oppressive pedagogy, there seems to be widespread uncertainty among social work educators about their responsibilities and effective strategies on how to respond. Based on strategies deemed effective in the literature and personal experiences, we offer the following recommendations to challenge marginalization and oppression within the educational system.

Use of Self

A fundamental component of social work education includes developing and understanding of "use of self" (Newcomb et al., 2020), or how the social worker is themselves an intervention simply by existing and bringing change into the space. How that change occurs and for whose benefit is dependent on the practitioner's knowledge, skill, and awareness of power dynamics. This holds the potential to be such a powerful force that there are significant ethical considerations here as well. The Code of Ethics guides us to use critical self-reflection as a component of developing cultural competence (Sec. 1.05c), to recognize when we are ineffective in assisting clients with achieving progress (Sec. 1.16a), to hold ourselves and each other accountable if we believe any form of impairment may be impacting practice (Sec. 2.08; 4.05), as a few examples. This combined with the strong warnings on appropriate use of self-disclosure and recognizing countertransference underscores the importance of demonstrating effective use of self. We are also told to act in ways that are compatible with the realization of social justice (Sec. 6.05) and to promote conditions that encourage cultural and social diversity while advocating for institutions to confirm equity and justice (Sec. 6.04c). Therefore, the social worker's use of self is an appropriate form of resistance to unjust situations, when thoughtfully and effectively utilized.

The concept of "use of self" can be traced in part to Carl Roger's humanistic approach to therapy and the importance of "unconditional positive regard" (Rogers, 1959). The decision to share one's personal identities, social location, or other aspects of self must not be taken lightly. There is very real risk to doing so, particularly in a sociopolitical climate which is hostile to sharing and valuing marginalized identities. Nevertheless, the decision to utilize the self in a classroom space to engage students in consideration of power and oppression becomes a form of critical pedagogy on its own (Holman et al., 2022). The authors have effectively utilized their "use of self" through disclosing personal aspects and experiences such as growing up as a White child in Apartheid South Africa and the impact this had on recognizing racial injustice in the U.S., being queer and teaching at a Christian college to prompt discussion around privilege and perception of heteronormativity, and being born in an urban city in New Jersey where the BIPOC

experience is common and diversity is centralized and subsequently moving to a suburban city in South Carolina where racial and social injustices were apparent further motivating the pursuit of authentic ADEI and justice efforts. When applied thoughtfully, this technique can serve to challenge students' underlying beliefs, demonstrate complexities around lived experience, and humanize the activist's struggle for justice.

Dosing and Spacing

The concept of "dosing and spacing" comes from renowned trauma specialist Bruce Perry, who argues that the amount of a stressor and the time between experiencing it can greatly impact the trajectory of growth and development depending on each person's capacity to tolerate stress (Perry, 2006; Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Initially created for working with traumatized children, this idea can also be applied to the classroom learning environment when discussing difficult or emotionally charged topics. Dosing and spacing, when applied effectively, delivers a small amount of a new concept in a manner which does not challenge the nervous system to respond as if it is a threat; instead, this technique allows the student to integrate knowledge in a way that feels natural and has enormous transformative power because it reduces resistance to change. For the social work professor, this means that the learning trajectory may not – and indeed should not – occur along a preplanned timeline such as a syllabus may dictate. Instead, the savvy social work professor should have patience and tact to ensure students are able to acclimate to concepts which may feel very foreign to their worldviews.

Utilizing this technique allows students to process the cognitive dissonance which inevitably arises during social justice discussions. Kumashiro (2002) draws on literature which explains that students often want classroom experiences which affirm their beliefs and experiences, but anti-oppressive pedagogies often challenge these. He notes that this can impede learning without a framework for critically assessing one's values and perspectives. By repeating and reflecting students' lived experiences and supporting them as they examine the impact of their identities on their beliefs, he was able reduce the resistance to anti-oppressive practices. Part of this process includes allowing ample time to process ways in which students might have – intentionally or unintentionally – been complicit with acts of oppression, as this brings up feelings of shame, guilt, and anger which can be difficult to process (Kumashiro, 2002). By adopting a dosing and spacing approach, social work educators intentionally make time for students to integrate new concepts in an emotionally regulated manner.

As part of this approach, the authors set foundational classroom rules and students are then invited to meet in small groups to discuss any additions that may need to be made for the classroom environment to feel safer[4] for them to engage in difficult conversation. This is an intentional activity during the first class meeting to allow students their first "dose" of discussing values and needs. Four of the main foundational rules offered are as follows: give yourselves "grace and space", "sit in discomfort" not defensiveness, "use curiosity not judgment", and "be mindful that an academic exercise can be someone's lived experience". In addition to offering students the chance to co-create classroom expectations, this practice offers a framework to refer to when emotions may increase in class and provides language to soften discussions which may otherwise become unwieldy.

Student Engagement in Political/Social Movements

As mentioned previously, raising critical consciousness is a key aspect of taking an anti-oppressive approach in the classroom. This critical consciousness is not necessarily intended to have the outcome of engaging in sociopolitical movements, but this can be an outcome. There is still immense benefit to facilitating this awareness, including increased engagement in the classroom and connecting to the learning material (Edmondson et al., 2019). This is particularly important for the social work profession - which has always been concerned with sociopolitical

[4] A safe space is a place or environment in which a person or group of people feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment or other emotional or physical harm. However, there is a shift towards brave spaces, in recognition that safety cannot always be ensured in any space, and stating such is disingenuous. A brave space is a space where participants feel comfortable learning, sharing, and growing and all participants feel encouraged to share their perspectives even if it's challenging or outside the norm.

movements (albeit misguided at times through a unilaterally applied White Protestant lens) - as a tool for engaging in social action in a manner which seeks to liberate instead of (even unintentionally) oppress.

The authors have always encouraged students to engage in social and political action, frequently with the reminder that "social work is political" as is a common slogan, supported by Code of Ethics Sec. 6.04. Throughout various courses, students have responded to the call to action by joining in protests, writing their legislators, creating awareness campaigns, voting for the first time, increasing social media engagement around sociopolitical issues, and more. It is important to note that students of all political backgrounds have responded to encourage to take political action in ways that align with social work values. A frequent theme in student responses has been explaining that prior to having tools such as critical awareness and theoretical frameworks for understanding and articulating these issues, they have felt both overwhelmed by and unable to even begin to engage in meaningful action. However, throughout repeated classroom discussions detailing an anti-oppressive lens and tangible action points, they felt capable of impacting issues they care deeply about. Some examples of issues students have chosen to act upon include opposing child separation at the border, the potential loss of mental health services in their area, encouraging legislators to support climate justice, and most recently calling for Palestinian liberation and divestment of funds for war. Students are not told *what* action items to support or *how* to vote, but rather are clearly taught the underlying social work principles which call for justice and their critical application which creates an understanding of power and oppression; the result is quite often a desire to participate in collective action, as long as they are adequately supported through any cognitive dissonance which can and does arise as they process new concepts.

Indeed, these experiences are echoed in the literature as well. Lane et al. (2017) describe how they were able to use consciousness-raising to create a "living classroom" which felt safe[5] enough for students to share their perspectives of current and historical issues of injustice. They too utilized Freire's perspectives to use education as a transformative tool for liberation with the use of dialogue and co-creation of knowledge. In doing so, they were able to guide students into community action as a response to police violence against African American men. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2023) share how engaging in protests is a tangible form of collective action which can increase a sense of belonging and improve mental health outcomes during times of sociopolitical tension. Their study found that college students who engaged in Black Lives Matter protests provided meaning-making and emotional coping tools to process their distress at the deaths of Black individuals nationwide.

Radical Self-Care

As previously noted, the emotional labor that comes along with engaging in anti-oppressive work can lead to a sense of overwhelm for educators (Akhtar, 2023) especially those with multiple marginalized social identities. Self-care remains a recommended strategy in the literature to minimize professional burnout and compassion fatigue in helping professions such as education and social work (Dorociak et al., 2017; Figley, 2002; Skovhold & Ronnestad, 2003; Wise et al., 2012). However, radical self-care which is linked to the research of Black and Latinx feminists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldua, is a more nuanced concept used by those who seek to push forward social justice efforts while preserving their health and wellbeing (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). Despite this new understanding of self-care, outdated and limited conceptualizations of self-care continue to act as a barrier to its practice.

Miller et al. (2019) proposes a more comprehensive conceptual model of self-care that extends beyond the traditional conceptualization of self-care as solely action behaviors (e.g., increasing exercise, consuming nutritious foods, setting boundaries, taking breaks, enjoying pleasurable activities). The model conceptualizes self-care as a multi-layered process including: 1.) self-care support (i.e., external factors influencing the practice and engagement of self-care), 2.) self-care orientation (i.e., the perspective one holds about self-care and how that shapes their prioritizing a self-care practice), 3.) self-care motivation (i.e., an internal factor that can sustain and facilitate self-care), 4.) self-care skills (i.e., a self-awareness that helps individuals know when and how to engage in self-care behaviors based on their "emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual state"), and 5.) self-care behaviors (i.e., most closely aligned with

[5] It should be noted that safety is difficult to guarantee for everyone in the classroom with a marginalized identity during discussions about identity and privilege. This is why the authors recommend rule four "be mindful that an academic exercise can be someone's lived experience" to reduce the potential for harmful discussion proactively.

common views of self-care) (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). This model address self-care as a sustainable process important and necessary for anti-oppressive social work educational practices without reducing it to isolated behaviors that insufficiently impact the overall health and wellbeing of those engaging in this important work.

Intentionally Cultivating Relationships

Beyond knowledge and understanding of anti-oppressive education, social work faculty must develop a reasonable level of comfort with dialogue about race, racism, and other forms of oppression among peers and colleagues. As we consider the tools necessary to engage in this type of work, we should ask ourselves who among us are intentional about cultivating relationships among fellow faculty that offer space for these types of conversations and allows us to co-create pathways to compassionate and empathic teaching. More importantly, building these relationships encourages ongoing reflexivity on professional norms and expectations including inevitable failures which can be used as a resource to improve teaching practices. According to Laliberté and Bain (2018), failures can be seen as "reflexivities of discomfort" that can be used to understand feelings of shame, guilt, and frustration and inspire broader conversations that collectively facilitate institutional change (p. 1094).

The authors offer their own relationship as an example of this dynamic between social work colleagues with a deepened interested in exploring antiracist and anti-oppressive social work practice and education. It is important to discuss that the authors have differing salient identities and backgrounds but converge on social worker and educator identities and acknowledge their experiences have helped to shape the lens through which they view social issues. Discussions frequently center around deepening each other's understanding of the impact of our convergent lived experiences and finding ways to challenge injustice as our insights broaden beyond our individual perspectives. Indeed, the authors have both provided solace to each other when experiencing various microaggressions in academia, and offered alternative perspectives and solutions; in short, this type of relationship acts as its own source of resilience against harmful practices in academia which often push BIPOC and LGBTQ+ professors out. Utilizing this relationship as a shared space for learning, empowerment, resource sharing, and failure has been the catalyst for many conversations on equitable and anti-oppressive social work education which has resulted in positive growth not only for each author individually but for the students in their respective classrooms as well. The authors continue to use their relationship for change-making activities within academia, such as co-authoring this paper.

Mentoring

One-to-one mentorship is likely the most common model of mentorship in academic settings. It encourages personal and professional development and growth while also giving space and time to work through inevitable failures. Positive outcomes of mentorship can include increased productivity, improved self-esteem and self-efficacy, and professional and academic independence. While institutional infrastructure for this type of relationship commonly supports a student-faculty mentorship, the real challenge has been formalizing this type of support for faculty themselves and addressing the need for "different kinds of spaces, made up of different kinds of 'doings'" in support of mentorship (Jupp, 2008, p.341). In other words, there is a need for time and space to connect on more meaningful and personal levels that encourage ongoing, collective reflexivity on professional norms and expectations (Laliberté & Bain, 2018) which can be especially helpful at the intersection of social work education, ADEI work, and the current sociopolitical climate. This is not to say that some forms of faculty mentorship do not exist, however, they often exist within established and exclusionary networks (Laliberté & Bain, 2018).

Since "teaching environments are rarely experienced as safe spaces for people marginalized at intersections of difference, yet we rarely create opportunities for sharing and proactively addressing these lived experiences" (Laliberté & Bain, 2018, p. 1109), we must open up conversations regarding faculty mentorship such that it becomes a professional norm that is valued and practiced in a range of contexts rather than the current under-funded, under-resourced institutional support that it is often given (Laliberté & Bain, 2018). In the context of an increasingly divisive faculty structure, the professional practice of faculty mentorship is, in and of itself, a political disruption to the institution of academia. Mentorship can serve as outlet to mobilize feelings of insecurity and failure in such a way that allows one to move forward and engage in social transformation rather than retreating into self-protective isolation (Laliberté & Bain, 2018). This may need to happen across institutions in situations where an individual may be the only person pursuing anti-oppressive perspectives and strategies at their college/university.

CONCLUSION

Given the history of advocacy and focus on confronting the most pressing social issues of the time, social work is poised to be at the forefront of change in issues pertaining to racial justice in the United States. See: NASW timeline for more information on racial (in)justice acknowledged in the profession. However, the profession also needs to confront its own internal issues related to racial (in)justice and a history of whiteness (Thyberg, 2023). The starting point for this confrontation must occur in the classroom, or we run the risk of continually re-creating justice-blind social workers with every graduation ceremony.

When the techniques described in this paper are intentionally and consistently applied, there is potential for great change in the classroom and beyond. As we recognize that education is a powerfully uplifting force, and that our professional standards require us to ceaselessly challenge injustice in all forms, we can leverage our academic freedom to design curriculum and classroom experiences which push back the margins of injustice to allow for greater inclusion and liberation in all spaces. As students learn these techniques as well, they will go forth and engage in anti-oppressive ways in the spaces they inhabit. Together, we can make impactful changes to society one classroom discussion at a time.

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