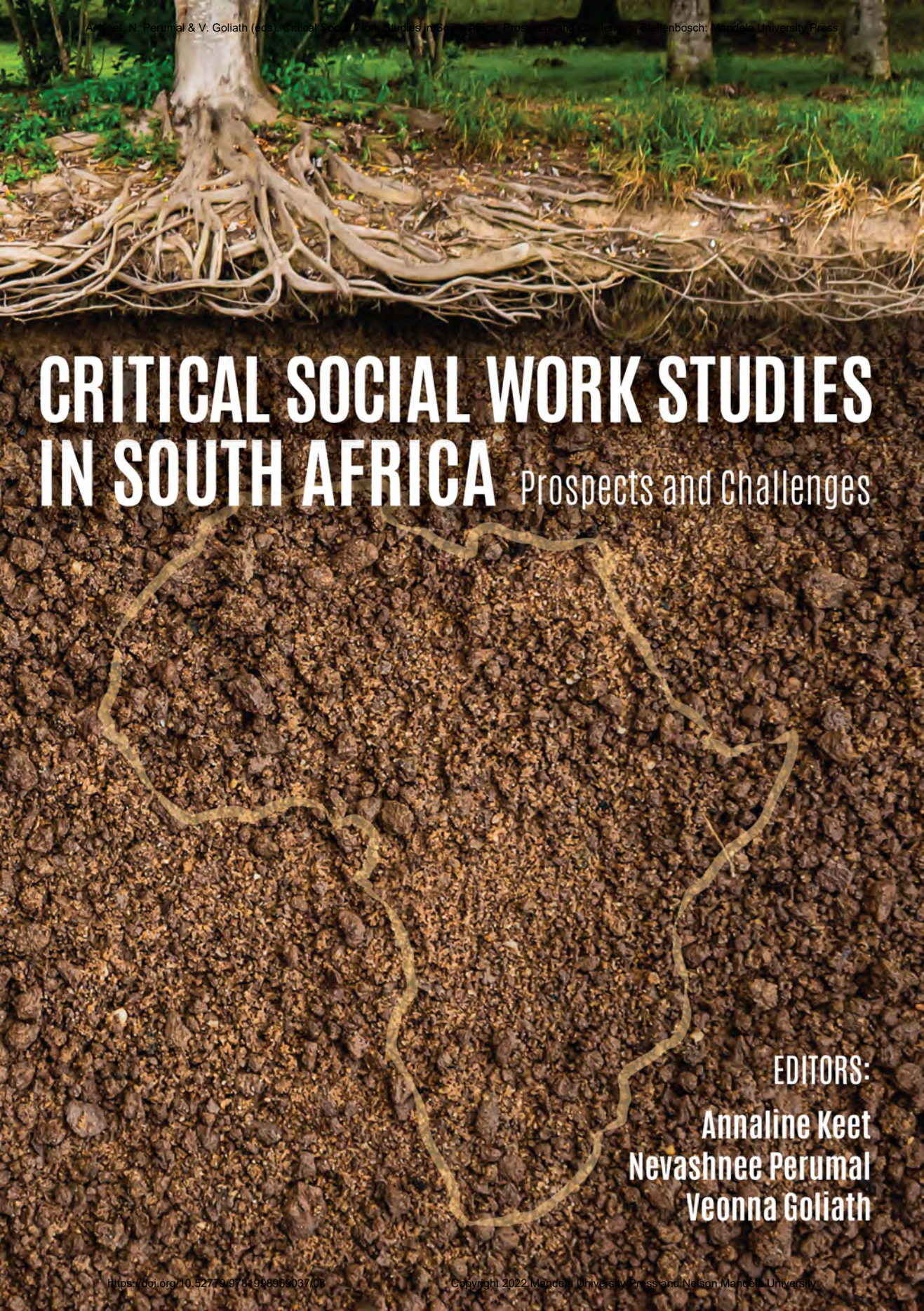


The background of the cover is a photograph of a forest floor. In the upper half, the thick, gnarled roots of a large tree spread out across the ground. Below the roots, the soil is dark and textured, with a yellowish-brown outline of the map of South Africa superimposed on it. The title text is overlaid on the upper part of the image.

CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK STUDIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Prospects and Challenges

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THE IMPERATIVE TO DECOLONISE KNOWLEDGE FORMATION IN A SOCIAL WORK COURSE

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the global call to decolonise the curriculum in higher education, there is a need to interrogate the assumptions and discourses of social work education. Alongside the current knowledge formation in teaching and learning at universities, there is little emphasis on engaging students and tapping into the knowledge systems they bring into the learning space. The form of education in higher learning institutions often positions lecturers as producers of knowledge responsible for depositing information while students are seen as recipients and consumers of it. So, students consume this knowledge without interrogating and perceiving what it means in relation to their lived realities. Such an education system is described by Paulo Freire as the banking concept of education, which holds that education is an act of depositing in which the students are depositories and the teacher the depositor. For Freire, true knowledge emerges only through invention, re-invention and restless inquiry that human beings pursue in the world – with the world and with each other.

The method of teaching discussed in this chapter focuses on decentring the lecturer as a depositor of knowledge. Students form groups and engage in group discussions and courageous conversations after I have introduced the concepts and focus topic of each seminar. This method has, in many ways, challenged the traditional method of teaching and learning by encouraging students to bring their knowledge systems into the classroom. It has also resulted in deeper connections, confrontations and contradictions among students as they grapple with their discomfort. Societal issues such as race, inequalities, stance on social movements such as #FeesMustFall, structural disadvantages and past injustices became the focus for discussion. I argue in this chapter that a new form of knowledge emerges when students are engaged and actively participate in the process of learning. This is deeply rooted in an acknowledgement that students come from different knowledge systems and bringing that knowledge into the learning space can become an enriching and powerful way of learning.

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Critical Social Work Studies in South Africa: Prospects and Challenges**KEYWORDS**

banking concept of education, courageous conversations, critical social work, decolonisation, knowledge formation

INTRODUCTION

This chapter merges the academic and reflective forms of writing to deliberate on the teaching method in a fourth-year course of critical social work (Harms-Smith & Nathane, 2018). I seek to disrupt the traditional way of teaching through a teaching method that provides a platform for students to engage and contribute directly to their own learning. In the course, students engage with the focus topic of each lecture in relation to contemporary local and global issues, their own histories, lived realities and the knowledge systems narrated in families. One of the central goals behind my method of teaching is the recognition that each student comes from a knowledge system and brings with him or her that knowledge into the formal learning environment. The understanding that students are not empty vessels in which information needs to be deposited is closely linked to Paulo Freire's critique of traditional education and his banking concept of education (Freire, 1972). This approach to teaching is decolonising knowledge formation by disrupting the way lecturers have traditionally positioned and elevated themselves as the sole producers of knowledge and students as passive consumers of that knowledge.

My orientation in this method of teaching is strongly influenced by my own African world view and background deeply embedded in indigenous knowledge systems. Masoga (2020) argues that this is the knowledge system that has been passed down since time immemorial through many generations as part of the soul of African nations. This knowledge system also contains cautionary tales told from the perspective of indigenous people and is designed to prevent the dying of a people, culture and ecosystem (Tuhivai-Smith, 2012). I was raised and socialised in an African society in South Africa and observed different practices and a way of life in African communities. My knowledge system is deeply rooted in the principle of connectedness: recognising the humanity of every individual, esteeming the knowledge of others and the storied lives of all.

One of the central practices of human engagement in African societies and other indigenous societies elsewhere is the practice of sitting in a circle as a symbol of inclusivity and connectedness (Hadebe, 2016). The sitting position also symbolises respect for human worth and dignity. While sitting in circles is an African practice in family gatherings or meetings, its effectiveness in the classroom has been overlooked. Also, sitting in circles in spaces of learning is a foreign concept in predominantly colonial universities. This is because even the lecture hall/theatre setting in most

institutions has the proscenium arch that separates the stage from the auditorium. This epitomises one elevated individual in the form of a lecturer who possesses all the knowledge and is responsible for depositing information (Freire, 1972). In the critical social work seminars, I requested students to sit in a circle during group discussions.

The significance of circles is strikingly captured in a poem by Oduyoye (2010) cited in Hadebe (2016):

A Circle expands forever. It covers all who wish to hold hands. And its size depends on each other. It is a vision of solidarity. It turns outwards to interact with the outside. And inward for self-critique. A circle expands forever. It is a vision of accountability. It grows as the other is moved to grow. A circle must have a center. But a single dot does not make a Circle. One tree does not make a forest. A circle is a vision of cooperation, mutuality and care.

I strongly believe that sitting in circles and recognising the importance of students' active participation in knowledge formation enriches the teaching and learning process and eventually leads to a true decolonised method of knowledge formation.

Understanding the imperative for decolonisation resonates with the description of critical social work which is "concerned with the analysis and transformation of power relations at every level of social work practice" (Healy, 2000:172). The discourse on colonialism and decolonialism is hardly known among social work students and this underscores an indictment against social work education in an African context. For many decades, social work students in South Africa have been trained through a curriculum that has never introduced them to other knowledge systems relevant to the reality of an African context, let alone allow them to bring their knowledge systems into the learning space. Thus, a "failure to decolonise is an oppressive act" (Harms Smith, 2014, Nathane & Harms Smith, 2017). If social justice, empowerment and dignity form the basis of the aims of social work (IASSW, 2014), then it should engage with issues of ideology, power relations, oppression and decolonisation. Social work, a profession seeking social justice and the liberation of people, itself stands accused of its own coloniality and domestication (Harms Smith, 2013; Harms Smith & Nathane, 2018). Its epistemology and discourse, in the South African context, require a process of decolonisation.

Social work academics have often confined students to being empty recipients of the dominant Western intervention methods, without much consideration of methods and practices in the knowledge system that students bring to the learning space. There is a need to recognise the evident contribution made by students past and present in shifting the agenda of teaching and learning in South Africa.

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The students of the 16 June 1976 uprising to the 2016/2017 #FeesMustFall movement have shaped the agenda of teaching and learning. I register with great discomfort the little credit that academics have given to the student Fallist movement in their call for a decolonised education. Prior to the 2016/17 #FeesMustFall movement, there was very little emphasis on, or efforts made, by higher learning institutions to decolonise education. The students in the Fallist movement gave the academics the language to articulate the need to decolonise the curriculum. It is with this recognition of the valuable contribution that students bring to the learning space that this chapter calls for a shifting and rethinking of teaching methods. The citation below speaks to the central call made by students in higher learning institutions across South Africa during the two waves of the #FeesMustFall. While students called for a free tertiary education, they also argued for the significance of decolonising that education and the need to recognise that in post-apartheid South Africa education is still deeply rooted in the colonial matrix of power.

The most successful societies are those that have invested significantly in education. However, free education should be delinked from decoloniality. Decolonisation is premised on the fact that knowledge is not value-free. It argues that our epistemology or systems of knowledge are based on Western values or the colonial matrix of power. Decoloniality has been defined as “epistemic disobedience”, “epistemic delinking” and “epistemic reconstruction”. It aims to liberate education from the epistemology of power, inequality, various forms of discrimination and exploitation. This is indeed a laudable objective that should not detract from the historical legacy of knowledge and its transmission over generations as a common legacy of all humanity. This decolonising project is a multigenerational task that we will bequeath to our future generations. One fundamental step towards this is to first master the existing sciences. Without that one cannot deconstruct, delink and reconstruct”. (Address by Manjra, a medical doctor, an elected member of UCT’s Council, #FeesMustFall 7 October 2016)

The call to decolonise universities is global, from the #RhodesMustFall movement in Oxford to Georgetown University in the United States and the local #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa (Bhambra, Gebrial & Nişancıoğlu, 2015). It is also a public reckoning of universities with their colonial past and the need to challenge Eurocentric domination and the lack of curricular diversity. The desire for a decolonised education and the knowledge formation that governs it has long awaited such articulation and confrontation against a system that subjects most students to invisibility in knowledge formation. I believe that there is a different kind of conversation that is enabled, and that new possibilities open up when the knowledge systems of students are embraced.

The feature of student invisibility in universities is evident in how course content is delivered and processed by students. Knowledge is presented in a manner that is alien to the existential experiences of students and does not recognise the knowledge that

they bring into the space. For instance, my experience as an undergraduate student at a university in the late 1990s shows a very deep colonial pattern of delivering course content. The lived experiences of the majority of Black South African students were rendered invisible in the way the content was delivered. This was evident in a particular module focusing on poverty and the Bantu education system in South Africa. The module was taught mainly by White lecturers to the majority of Black African students who had experience of poverty and had received much of their schooling through the Bantu education system. This is not to say that the course would have been better off taught by Black lecturers because that would be to assume that all Black lecturers at the time had experienced economic woes or were formerly students of Bantu education. Rather it is to say that the White lecturers who delivered this course were not aware of their positionality ('their privilege') in delivering course content to the students and in failing to engage students' lived reality. There was no effort to tap into students' experiences because there was no desire to create a safe space for those experiences to come to the fore. Thus, the richness that students could bring by adding their lived experiences to the knowledge and learning space was lost.

Furthermore, engaging students in a meaningful way stems from the realisation that individuals are not passive observers of their environment, but are constantly interacting with their social world. What I found disturbing in content on poverty was the way it pathologised poor people for their condition without interrogating the structures that created their condition in the first place. For instance, poor people are often viewed as disempowered people needing a lot of external help rather than as functional beings with agency, who are able to self-organise and self-regulate. According to Freire (1972), a form of education which does not encourage students to critically reflect in the process of their learning serves the interest of the oppressor in its failure to aid a critical consciousness of the oppressed and, in situations where it is already present, to give that critical consciousness the recognition it deserves.

Paulo Freire's banking concept of education critically looks at the teacher-student relationship in education systems that position the teacher as the deliverer of information and the student as the passive absorber of that information. Freire asserts that this method of sharing information alienates the existential experience of students in that it does not give them room to process information in ways that speak to them or their surroundings. Students are seen as empty containers/depositories and the role of the teacher in this learning process is to deposit content in a manner that is detached from the reality of students – thus this content lacks transformative power (Freire, 1972).

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Moreover, Freire argues that with time, the practice of receiving, filling and storing deposits can lead to a situation where not only the information is filed away but also the individuals themselves through the lack of engagement and perceiving what is taught (Freire, 1972). Such an educative system, Freire argues, serves the interests of the oppressor in that it has a deleterious effect on the creative power of students and does not allow individuals to be fully human, if one is to understand being fully human as constantly inquiring and engaging with one's position in the world. According to Freire (1972), true knowledge emerges only through invention, reinvention and restlessness and through hopeful inquiry that human beings pursue in the world of power.

ABOUT THE COURSE AND METHOD OF TEACHING

Critical social work is a course taught at fourth-year level in the Bachelor of Social Work degree at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (Harms-Smith & Nathane, 2018). In this course, the work of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid theorists such as Biko (1978), Fanon (1963), Freire (1972), Hook (2004) and that of radical and critical social work theorists Ferguson (2008) and Garret (2013), are elementary. The goal of this course, as described earlier in this chapter, is that during the four topics covered (Critical Social Work, Courageous Conversation about Race, Critical Theorists – Biko and Freire, and, lastly, Decolonisation), social work students will begin to engage in restless inquiry and find ways of further developing a critical lens in their work and field practice. Issues of race, gender, inequality and social injustice, poverty, privilege and experiences of feeling alienated in a predominantly White academic institution are among the dominant themes. The cause that this course champions is that it helps students uncover ideologies and adopt an anti-colonial stance and critical perspective to what is taught in class. Consequently, this informs their worldview and future practices while at the same time, it fosters a strong element of advocacy and activism for future practice in social work. The three-hour seminars are held once a week (in July and August). The teaching is categorised this way: the lecturer teaches in the first hour of the seminar while the second hour-and-a-half consists of a student-led engagement about the content covered in the first part of the seminar. In the second half of the lecture, learning is steered by the students with the lecturer as a listener or guide in the students' thinking processes. What has emerged is that students' perspectives and critical reflection in these group discussions tend to form a significant contribution in the content that was shared in the first part of the seminar. The substantial time devoted to student engagement allows students to critique and complicate each other's perspectives on the course content.

There are four major topics covered in each seminar and students' formative assessment is through submitting a critical response paper on any of the four topics covered in this course. Critical social work is premised on the central goal of social work practice, which is to promote social change by redressing social inequality (Healy, 2000). It links problems of individuals to a broader socio-political sphere to better understand their situations and promote social change. The core mission of critical social work is to promote social justice through social work practice and policy making (Healy, 2000; Sewpaul, 2006). It is also critical of the traditional social work practice that prioritises individual psychotherapy or individualistic solutions to structural social problems. In the social context of South Africa, many issues confronting most of the population can be directly linked to dominant structural forces that continue to keep society in a cycle of poverty and disadvantage (Harms Smith, 2013). The theoretical approaches covered in this course can be seen as tools to interrogate the ideologies that underpin these theories (Harms Smith & Nathane, 2018). This way, a radical and critical social work is proposed as an appropriate response to the South African context.

The learning approach used in the second seminar of the course is based on Glen Singleton's (2015) conversations about race, with a specific reference to racial issues in South Africa. Singleton's courageous conversation is a strategy for breaking down racial tensions and raising racism as a topic of discussion. It allows those who possess knowledge on a particular experience to have the opportunity to share it, and those who do not have the knowledge to learn and grow from that experience (Singleton & Linton, 2006). In this seminar, the point of departure in talking about race is to make the students aware that race is an explosive issue in South Africa, precisely because it forces us to confront the tragic facts of our past and present. In addition, students are made aware that they are going to experience the discomfort of talking about race in a class of students from diverse racial groups. Since the model was developed in the United States of America, issues around race in the course are contextualised and discussed in relation to the long history of more than 400 years of racial discrimination in South Africa. The courageous conversations model on race introduces a new set of four agreements that defy and even contradict the tightly-held norms relating to race conversation (Singleton & Linton, 2006). These South African norms include avoiding the conversation or disengaging and a belief that there is need to move on and leave the past behind. The four commitments are to i) stay engaged, ii) experience discomfort, iii) speak your truth and iv) expect and accept non-closure.

The commitment to staying engaged in the conversation about race is significant since the reality is that when individuals experience personal or collective discomfort in these conversations, they tend to disengage. To prevent this from happening, students collectively hold each other accountable to ensure they all stay engaged.

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They also call each other out when they experience others to be disengaged. Staying engaged in this case means that one is involved in the dialogue morally, emotionally, intellectually and socially. It also means they are willing to listen with empathy and with openness, particularly for students who have not been negatively impacted by experiences of racism in their lives (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Allowing individuals to experience and sit with the discomfort that comes with holding such conversations is perhaps the most challenging commitment that comes with this work. There is an acknowledgement that discomfort is inevitable, especially in dialogues about race, and the commitment that the students make in bringing difficult matters to the fore is significant. For it is the refusal to talk about the issues that creates discomfort or the fear to sit with the dissonance that leads to experiences of discord in society. What should be realised is that the work of healing and change entails much discomfort. I believe that the reason why a country like South Africa has not dealt with its racial past is the avoidance of this deep discomfort.

The norm of speaking your truth according to Singleton and Linton (2006) requires that individuals be honest about their thoughts, feelings and opinions. During courageous conversation sessions in class, students are encouraged to share thoughts and feelings, and not just say what they think others want to hear. In most cases, students are afraid to offend others or to express their rage or to sound ignorant in conversations about race. Some stay silent to protect their beliefs and opinions from being misinterpreted or challenged. The fear to offend others plays out in Black students, who tend to apologise to their White classmates before they speak their truth by saying, for example, 'I am sorry to say this but ...' or 'I do not mean to offend anyone but ...' or 'No offence but ...' White student responses vary, in some cases feeling that by virtue of being White they have to take the blame for a crime they did not commit or by keeping quiet during the conversation about race as they feel that they do not want to take up space.

The norms at play also lead to an expectation of arriving at some form of closure at the end of the conversation or to 'close the chapter of race and leave it in the past'. On the contrary, in this class students are encouraged to be okay with 'hanging out in uncertainty', not rushing to quick solutions, especially in relation to racial understanding which requires ongoing dialogue. Thus, the conversation about race is less focused on providing solutions than on recognising that racism is a deeper and broader societal issue rooted in the structures of institutions. Due to this, there is recognition that the classroom cannot provide closure on a topic that is not closed in the real world and that the work of holding courageous conversations is ongoing (Singleton & Linton, 2006). As a result, students are encouraged to take this conversation outside the classroom and facilitate courageous conversations with their families and friends to reflect on racism. What has been evident over the years

is that students are already bringing the experiences of their families about living in apartheid South Africa as these narratives have been shared in families through many generations.

The third seminar focuses on Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and critical consciousness, as well as Bantu Steve Biko's Black Consciousness. The seminar unpacks three elements in Freire's work: 1) the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor; 2) critical consciousness and 3) conditions for liberation. These components are applied to social work practice in South Africa, particularly with the individuals experiencing poverty and different forms of oppression. The focus is also on Biko's work, *I Write What I Like* (1978). Biko was the father of the Black Consciousness movement and one of the most powerful figures in South Africa's struggle against apartheid. Biko's conviction was that Black people in South Africa could not be liberated until they united to break their chains of servitude (Biko, 1996). Biko's quotes below are used to pose provocative questions:

- **Question – *To what extent is anger about racism and oppression verbalised in South Africa today?***

To anyone living in the black world, the hidden anger and turmoil could always be seen shining through the faces and actions of these voiceless masses but it was never verbalised. (p.34, par 3)

- **Question – *How effective was the preparation of the Black man, considering the internalised and ongoing oppression that is evident today?***

The logic behind white domination is to prepare the black man for the subservient role in this country. Not so long ago this used to be freely said in parliament, even about the educational system of the black people. It is still said even today, although in a much more sophisticated language. To a large extent the evildoers have succeeded in producing at the output end of their machine a kind of black man who is man only in form. This is the extent to which the process of dehumanisation has advanced. (p.28, par 2)

- **Question – *How successful is this project? What is the importance of celebrating or rewriting the history of African heroes or of reimagining the Black man before colonisation as a free man?***

Part of the approach envisaged in bringing about black consciousness has to be directed to the past, to seek to rewrite the history of the black man and produce in it the heroes who form the core of the African background. (p.29, par 5)

■ *Question – What is the role of the person who is not oppressed?*

Total identification with an oppressed group in a system that forces one group to enjoy privilege and to live on the sweat of another, is impossible. [...] The (white) liberal must fight on his own and for himself. If they are true liberals they must realise that they themselves are oppressed, and that they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous 'they' with whom they can hardly claim identification. (p.66, par 3)

■ *Question – On conscientisation, what does this say about the role of the social worker working with oppressed populations and those living in conditions where they experience violence and denial of their humanity?*

For a long time the black has been listening with patience to the advice he has been receiving on how best to respond to the kick. With painful slowness he is now beginning to show signs that it is his right and duty to respond to the kick in the way he sees fit. (p.66, par 4)

The seminar on Biko's Black Consciousness is the second explosive seminar, after the one on courageous conversations. It has fuelled vigorous engagement among students. Black students often voice their unspoken painful experiences in a predominantly White institution that they describe as violent because it alienates them. According to Biko (1996), this violence connects to the intrapsychic level through which intergenerational trauma, the feelings of inferiority coupled with the interpersonal, are transmitted or passed down. Students also grapple with their discomfort of talking about race, past and current injustices in South Africa and how the past is still in the present for the majority of Black students. It is important to note that all seminars end with a debriefing session facilitated by the lecturer in which students are held and given space to express their feelings of pain and discomfort.

The focus of the last seminar is on decolonisation with specific reference to the work of Neslon Maldonado Torres (2011) and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013). In these works, decolonial scholars address the following: decoloniality's point of departure and the existential realities of suffering, oppression, repression, domination and exclusion. Decoloniality enables the unmasking of racism as a global problem, as well as how knowledge including science and religion was used to justify colonialism. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, only a decolonised being can appreciate the value of indigenous and endogenous knowledge as ideal for the creation of African futures. Decolonisation is as much a critical intellectual theory as it is a political project. It seeks to disentangle ex-colonised parts of the world from coloniality. It is purposed for the ongoing struggle and agenda that seeks to unmask, unveil and reveal coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

While Maldonado-Torres (2011) helps conceive decoloniality as a pluriversal epistemology of the future and a way of thinking, knowing and doing, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) helps us understand that it was born out of the realisation that the modern world is an unequal world order. This latter is not only sustained by colonial matrices of power but also by pedagogies and epistemologies that continue to produce alienated Africans who are socialised into hating the Africa that produced them and liking the Europe and America that rejects them. Therefore, universities in Africa are sites for reproduction of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). There were several ways in which students engaged with the topic of decoloniality, mainly linking it to the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements and their call for a decolonised education. Students were also able to critique the social work curriculum and the many approaches that are centred in the West and are a misfit to the local context of families and individuals.

THE IMPERATIVE TO DECOLONISE AND UNDERSTAND THE LOCAL CONTEXT

The move towards decolonisation cannot happen without an understanding and acknowledgement of the damage of the colonial project and its ongoing burden (Freire, 1972). In South Africa, these factors manifest themselves in the lives of students who are currently enrolled in former Whites-only universities. While the country has had a democratic dispensation of more than two decades, the reality is that the position of the majority of South Africans has not changed. The students currently enrolled in the social work course come from diverse backgrounds with the majority of them being Black South Africans.

It becomes imperative to teach a curriculum that taps into the knowledge systems of all students and reflects on their lived reality and storied lives. Failing to do so subjects students to an education from which they are alienated and misses the opportunity of engaging in what Freire (1972) refers to as true knowledge formation. True knowledge formation is essential in liberating humanity and it emerges through the invention and inquiry that human beings pursue in the world (Freire, 1972). Consequently, this knowledge must engage students to develop critical consciousness about the nature of unjust structural forces that operate in the society in which they live. Social work education specifically and higher education in general must be suited to its own unique socio-cultural environment, informed by the worldview of the local population, and so challenge the current system of teaching and assessment that has been transplanted from the Global North (Harms Smith & Nathane, 2018). The system needs to be reconstructed, not only to fit the social structures and cultural environments in Africa, but also to serve the needs and aspirations of the local population.

CONCLUSION

The work of decoloniality should seek to de-centre the core, which consists of the knowledge formation of the historically privileged, by allowing shifts in perspectives, listening and documenting multiple stories that the students bring to the learning process. However, at the same time, and as Ross (2018) warns, knowledge from Euro-American contexts should not be discredited altogether. The aspects that are useable, appropriate and relevant ought to be sifted and integrated into African knowledge. It has been the focus of this chapter to argue that the over-reliance on Western texts and paradigms towards knowledge formation be challenged, all knowledge systems be embraced and the efforts to bring students into the circle of knowledge formation be intentional. There is a great need to engage social work in training and practice suited to the local population.

New forms of knowledge emerge when students are engaged and actively participate in their learning process. The recognition that students come from different knowledge systems and that they bring these knowledge systems into a shared class space can culminate in an enriching and a powerfully decolonial learning experience. This method to teaching and learning has in many ways challenged traditional methods of teaching and learning within the social work field and has stimulated a deeper engagement and insight from students across racial, class and geographical divides. Finally, it has resulted in deeper connections of solidarity among students who share ideologies. Students were also able to identify with the plight of others as they shared their painful experiences.

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