New Voices

Democratising and decolonising social work education: Opportunities for leadership

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ABSTRACT

Regulatory standards informing social work education reinforce the importance of inclusive practices and the promotion of human rights. This article considers the ways in which social work values of equity and self-determination can be operationalised in academic social work programmes. It argues that democratising and decolonising practices have the greatest potential to change the nature of social work education in ways that support self-determination and the promotion of equity.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of equity and the development of inclusive processes rest at the heart of social work. Regulatory frameworks across the world reinforce the commitment of social work to education that is based on social work values and principles, including giving effect to self-determination and promoting equity. Recent research has identified the importance of democratising and decolonising practices within the discipline's standards of practice in social work education. Through an analysis of the *Global Standards for the Training and Education of the Social Work Profession* (hereafter Global Standards) (IASSW & IFSW, 2004) and local standards across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, McNabb and Connolly (2017) found the Global Standards to be strong on issues of equity, participation and rights, and that these areas represent a key focus of global influence and leadership. In drawing upon elements of Shapiro's (2011) democratic theory, the study found that the Global Standards have an important role in democratising social work education through the reinforcement of equity issues. The strong focus on service-user participation within the Global Standards was found to be a key area that local standards in Australasia could better reinforce and, in so doing, more strongly influence practice at the local level. Interestingly, by comparison the study found that the local standards demonstrated leadership in the furtherance of Indigenous rights and concerns, something that the Global Standards might note and better incorporate in a future review. This does perhaps illustrate the locally specific nature of expressions of self-determination and the imperatives this presents at the country level. The author suggests that this mix of global and local leadership in the reinforcement of democratising and decolonising ideas would more fully align and reflect the social work profession's fundamental principles and values.

Whilst standards undoubtedly aspire to reinforce the values of social work, there has been limited research globally on how the commitment to democratisation, decolonisation and addressing equity issues has been implemented within social work education, including if, and how, it might influence future practice. This raises questions for social work educators in operationalising this commitment with respect to programmatic delivery. In this short article I argue that leaders in social work education are bound by an ethical commitment, as all social workers are, to find a way to operationalise social work values in the delivery of their academic programmes (Webster, McNabb, & Darroch, 2015, p. 45).
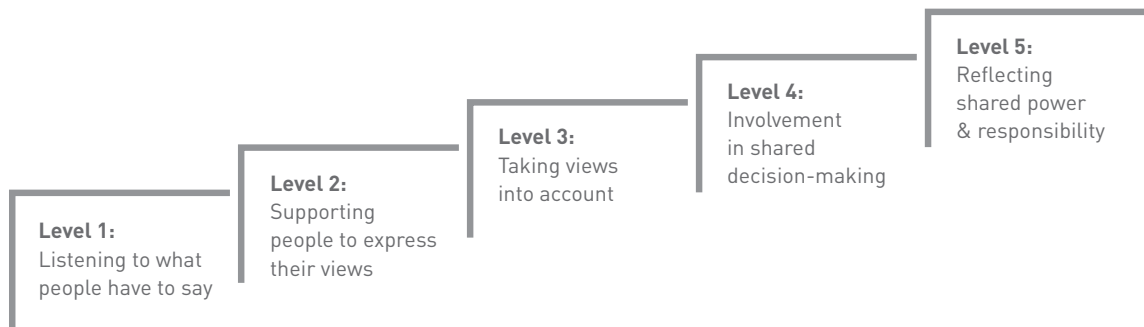
Democratising Practices in Social Work Education

Service user participation is an integral part of the Global Standards and should be evidenced in all dimensions of the programme, and across the points where service users may engage with a school. Service users are those people who are consumers of public social work services. Their participation should also be evidenced in the school's involvement with the regulatory social work bodies and may also include carer participation.

According to Shapiro (2011), principles of participation are an important part of an effective civil society. This involves the maximisation of stakeholder participation in collective life and matters that concern them, thus guarding against the domination of single interests. Drawing upon these ideas from a programme-delivery perspective invites opportunities for greater service user participation in social work education programmes. Involving service users in the classroom is, of course, not a new idea and when they share

their experiences in this way it can be powerful for student learning. Student experience of being public service users can also be privileged in the classroom. This type of service-user involvement, however, does not necessarily engage them in higher levels of participation, for example, co-designing social work education from a service user perspective, or having a real say in what is taught and how it is taught.

Figure 1: Levels of citizen participation (Shier, 2001)

Level 5:
Reflecting shared power & responsibility

Level 4:
Involvement in shared decision-making

Level 3:
Taking views into account

Level 2:
Supporting people to express their views

Level 1:
Listening to what people have to say

Shier (2001) has developed a useful five-level model of participation, and although it was created to enhance children's involvement in decision-making, it can also be usefully adapted to other areas of citizen participation. Adapting this to service user involvement in social work education, at the very basic level of participation, service users would be listened to (see Figure 1). This is followed by service users being supported to express their views – the sharing of experience in the classroom could be seen as an example of this level of participation. The third level of participation is where service users' views are taken into account, for example, educators might decide to incorporate service user perspectives into course content. Levels four and five arguably reflect more meaningful participation where service users have a real say in decision-making, and involvement in power sharing. In Aotearoa New Zealand the Social Workers Registration Board standards and its expectation of "Collaboration in programme development and review" (Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), 2016, 5.1, p. 7) suggests a level of active participation at levels four and five. How to engage service user representation in these higher levels of involvement in decision-making and power-sharing is something that academic programmes need to grapple with if they wish to move beyond simpler levels of service user involvement. In the local standards (in Aotearoa New Zealand) service users are specifically mentioned as an essential party as collaborators "in programme development and review" (SWRB, 2016, 5.1, p. 7), as important to the programme's stakeholder management plan and important attenders of regular meetings with stakeholders "to ensure that stakeholders' views are sought and considered" (2016, 5.2p. 7). This specificity about service user involvement does not limit further engagement, but positions regulatory expectations at a minimal level, arguably located at the lower levels of participation in Shier's model.

The UK approach, which has a tradition of user participation in social work, reinforces the importance of expecting higher-level service user involvement, and importantly providing the funding required to support it. This is noted in social work education policy where

separate funding is required to support service user and carer participation in programmes (The College of Social Work, 2012, p. 9). Leadership in the democratisation of social work academic programmes would see similar reinforcers of service user participation rights.

In addition to issues of democratisation, decolonising practices have also been an important feature of social work, particularly in countries such as Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia.

Decolonising Practices in Social Work Education
The global movement for decolonisation has found its formal expression in the United Nations (UN) decolonisation programme and in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) adopted in 2007 (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Decolonisation is the process of a colonised people releasing themselves from collective oppression and asserting their right to self-determination. Although the Global Standards do not have a specific focus on Indigenous rights and interests, broader global social work Indigenous policy has been expanded in the recently revised global social work definition (IFSW & IASSW, 2014) which included Indigenous knowledge as foundational, something that was previously absent in the definition. Social work from an international perspective supports Indigenous self-determination, and recognises this in the development of knowledge: "social work knowledges will be co-created and informed by Indigenous peoples" (IFSW & IASSW, 2014). It is pleasing to note that the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) has supported Indigenous representation through a membership policy where Aotearoa New Zealand has joint representation from both the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) and from the Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association, the Indigenous representative body.

Colonised people have long fought colonisation and tokenistic participation and thinking. In Aotearoa New Zealand the social work profession has grappled with Indigenous rights and colonisation, including having a Standing Committee on Racism in the 1980s. The ANZASW constitution was revised in 1992 to include a commitment to undertake social work in accordance with the Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand (Nash, 2001b, p. 41). In this document, Māori were recognised as first peoples, with subsequent rights. The notion of partnership was expressed within ANZASW by sharing governance between Māori and non-Māori beginning in the 1990s (McNabb, 2014, p. 65). In 1986 the NZ Council for Education and Training in the Social Services (NZCETSS) was established to govern social work education programmes. It had a structure of half Māori and half non-Māori membership with a strong commitment to social justice (Nash, 2001a).

In Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, the importance of decolonising practices in social work has been reinforced in the social work education standards (McNabb & Connolly, in press). The SWRB in Aotearoa New Zealand established a consultation process to further develop its policy concerning the standard of competence to practise social work with Māori which also relates to the graduate attribute to be able to work in a bicultural context and acknowledge the centrality of the Treaty. The draft policy named "Kaitiakitanga" was developed for this consultation process which prioritised engagement with Māori (SWRB, 2015) and led to a revised set of competency standards (SWRB, 2016). In Australia, the

social work education standards include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing as one of four essential core curriculum content areas (Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), 2012). This has been further developed with the publication of the teaching and learning framework *Getting it Right: Creating Partnerships for Change* which "is an evidence-informed road map for the development and delivery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing in Australian social work curricula" (Zubrzycki et al., 2014, p. 5).

Introducing decolonising expectations in social work standards is, however, not quite the same as operationalising them in practice. Internationally, efforts have been made to operationalise a decolonising agenda in social work education introducing formal policies that have affirmed the link between the goal of indigenisation and fundamental social work values and principles (Morelli, Mataira, & Kaulukukui, 2013). This decolonising agenda integrated Indigenous cultural values in all aspects of academic activities within and beyond teaching within an academic programme. It saw, for example, the hosting of a global Indigenous-focused conference and the launch of an Indigenous-themed journal. Always privileging Indigenous voices, they targeted the recruitment and retention of Indigenous students and faculty, they taught Indigenous history and colonisation, Indigenous cultural competence, and they ensured a place for all students and staff to share their cultural stories. These activities, embraced within an integrated decolonising agenda and enduring over several years, provide an important illustration of leadership in the decolonising of social work education.

The extent to which decolonising practices are operationalised in Aotearoa New Zealand social work education is an important area of research. There are, however, two social work programmes based in Wānanga (Māori tertiary education providers) which demonstrate the strongest commitment to programme indigenisation. These are exciting developments that could also provide insight into the ways in which mainstream programmes might more strongly indigenise academic programmes.

CONCLUSION

This article has focused attention on the drivers for change in democratising and decolonising practices in social work education. Both are well grounded in social work values and principles and are reflected, in various degrees, across global and local social work education standards. While standards of social work education clearly do incorporate democratising and decolonising expectations, it could be argued that the regulatory bodies could nevertheless be more directive, providing a stronger driver for change.

Leaders in social work education are in a key position to advance democratising and decolonising agendas within academic programmes and at a collective level. It has been argued here that processes of meaningful service user participation are an important part of a democratising agenda. Although not touched on in this brief article, it has been noted in a fuller analysis, the ways in which students are essential stakeholders in social work education (McNabb & Connolly, 2017). Applying Shier's model (see Figure 1) could be a useful means of testing the nature and extent of student and other service user participation within social work programmes.

With respect to decolonising practices, Indigenous social work educators have taken leadership in indigenising programmes but require strong support from non-Indigenous colleagues. There is, therefore, an important role for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators to support purposeful decolonising agendas. The Hawaiian experience described earlier (Morelli, Mataira, & Kaulukukui, 2013), is a good example of an attempt to develop an integrated set of activities that privilege Indigenous voices and experiences.

In many respects, leadership in social work education requires that we move beyond expectations of practice that are found in regulatory frameworks which are, by necessity, minimal in nature, toward a full integration of decolonising and democratising practices. It is these practices that have the greatest potential to change the nature of social work education in ways that support self-determination and the promotion of equity.

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