

Practice What You Preach: Creating Partnerships and Decolonising the Social Work Curriculum

Ryan Al-Natour and Jane Mears

Ryan Al Natour: Centre for Regional Advancement of Learning, Equity, Access & Participation, School of Education and the Arts, Central Queensland University

Jane Mears: School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University

Address for Correspondence:

r.al-natour@cqu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

In recent times, Indigenous scholars have recommended transforming the existing social work curriculum in ways that decolonise its dominant Eurocentric foundations. This article is a critical reflection on the work of two non-Indigenous social work educators and our attempts to decolonise our teaching practice at Western Sydney University (WSU). We sought to value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and expertise, and to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing into our practice. Firstly, we situate our efforts to decolonise our teaching and practice within the Australian historic and contemporary contexts and we then review and reflect on our own struggles and experiences of decolonising the social work curriculum. Al-Natour discusses his decolonisation efforts in teaching Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Mears explores her efforts to integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges into her research, engagement and teaching with large cohorts of mostly non-Indigenous students. Our aim in this article is to remind non-Indigenous academics of the central importance of, and the necessity for, decolonisation across the social sciences and particularly, social work, a profession that now supports working towards social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Further, our purpose is to alert fellow non-Indigenous scholars to practices that we have utilised in valuing and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.

Keywords: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; Indigenous; Decolonisation; Welfare; Social work; Education*

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginnings of European colonisation, Australian social workers have been complicit in the dispossession and attempted genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Walter, Taylor, & Habibis, 2013). Zubrzycki et al. (2014) correlate “the history of the social work profession and the continued dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (p. 20) with the continuous oppression of Indigenous Australians, “reflected in high levels of racism and low levels of life expectancy” (p. 20). The impact of colonisation and the pivotal role played by human service workers in exacerbating the oppression and dispossession of Indigenous Australians has been well documented (Green & Baldry, 2008, 2013). Similarly, Harms et al. (2011) discuss how the “history of negative relationships with social workers in Aboriginal communities was seen to have led to cynicism, fear and anger with some current social workers” (p. 162). There is now a growing body of evidence supporting the necessity that social work practice should be and can be enriched by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives (Bennett, 2015). This process of enrichment can challenge colonisation and lead to more culturally responsive and creative practices (Zubrzycki et al., 2014).

Although the profession of social work in Australia is primarily made up of non-Indigenous practitioners (Gair, Thomson, Miles, & Harris, 2003; Walter et al., 2013), many non-Indigenous workers and academics working in social work and community work courses are committed to embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges, and working towards decolonising the curriculum (see, for example, Williamson & Dalal, 2007). We are two such academics.

Zubrzycki et al. (2014) recommend ways that social work lecturers can interrogate their own teaching and learning, change the curriculum and transform Australian social work education. This transformation can occur in ways that enable social work graduates to work more compassionately with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. To do this, they recommend that lecturers need to engage in self-critical reflection. This recommendation prompted us to work together and critically reflect on our own attempts to understand the issues and to decolonise our own teaching. Upon reflecting on our identities and ancestries, we have identified commonalities in relation to our colonised heritage and ancestry. Al-Natour is a younger male of Palestinian descent and Mears is an older white female of Irish descent. For discussion on the colonisation of Palestine, see for example, Pappe (2004); Said (1978); and Sa'di and Abu-Lughod (2007). (For discussion on the colonisation of Ireland, see Garner, 2003; Howe, 2002). Upon reflection it is evident that our different ancestries, experiences and settler-colonial privileges influence our approaches to, and passions for, decolonising Australian social work.

This article is an account of our efforts to enrich social work education. We deliberately made space and started a conversation about our attempts to embed these frameworks into our own work and practice. Within this space, we began interrogating our own teaching practices and discussing the complex challenges that we were facing as non-Indigenous people attempting to decolonise the curriculum. We systematically shared our own knowledge, understanding and supported each other in working towards transforming the curriculum.

The article is structured as follows: first, we critique the colonial nature of social and welfare work from the perspective of one non-Indigenous man and one non-Indigenous woman. The argument presented here is that non-Indigenous people need to understand the ongoing impact of colonisation and how we, as non-Indigenous Australians, are instrumental in the post-colonising processes (Brown & Stega, 2005). We suggest that Moreton-Robinson's (2003) criticism of post-colonial theory is useful in conceptualising the non-Indigenous positionality in challenging colonial human service work. We then unpack the processes of decolonisation as Indigenous academics have framed it and proceed to examine this history and challenge colonial human service work. It is here that we situate our own work and we present two reflective accounts. Al-Natour discusses his struggles to work in decolonising community work education in a post-colonising, higher education environment. Mears discusses her collaborative work in storytelling that challenges the conservative, colonial nature of social work (de Vries, Macdonald, Mears, & Netthiem, 2012) and how she incorporated this knowledge into her teaching and practice with large groups of mostly non-Indigenous, undergraduate students. Both these narratives illustrate the struggles, complexities and continual commitment required to challenge colonial human service work and transform the curriculum.

Positioning non-Indigenous academics within social work

One way of initiating this discussion about the decolonisation of social work is to state the obvious: decolonisation cannot be appropriately conceptualised without the acknowledgement of colonisation. Across the globe, there are various contemporary and historical European colonial projects in Asia, the Middle East, North and South Africa, Aotearoa New Zealand, the Americas and Australia. Within each of these geographical localities lie the stories of colonisation and survival unique to global Indigenous populations (Cruz, 2008). Our discussion is largely centred on the experiences of Indigenous Australian peoples since 1788.

According to Green and Baldry (2013, p. 171), "to decolonise we must first identify and articulate how this colonisation has occurred, how it continues to occur and how it has affected each one of us... Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike". Our use of decolonisation is situated in our knowledge of Australian history and the ongoing challenges that colonisation poses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Muller (2014) discussed the impact of colonisation and the need for decolonisation:

Colonisation has wreaked havoc on each of our lives and each of our individual journeys is unique. For us [Indigenous people], decolonisation offers the possibility of a positive future where healing and harmony might be found. Decolonisation is equally relevant for the settler society. Our history makes a depressing read, especially if one accepts the colonisers' version. (p. 54)

Significantly, Muller (2014) also argued that decolonisation is not a straightforward process, rather requiring "honest personal introspection and commitment to change" (p. 54). Muller (2014) reminds us that decolonisation is not an issue exclusively for Indigenous people, but is also the responsibility of non-Indigenous people.

The history of Australian social work highlights the fact that social workers are instrumental in colonisation (Zubrzycki et al., 2014). Thus, decolonisation requires that workers face the truth and appreciate the experiences of Indigenous peoples. Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) seminal work on decolonising methodologies in a New Zealand context is an excellent starting point to assist us to understand the importance of decolonisation. She argued for the need to critique the way we see histories through the dominant views of colonisers and further, that we need to constantly critique and understand how decolonisation challenges these narratives.

Contemporary disadvantages facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are situated in Australia's historical context as a settler-colonial society. While Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argued that Indigenous people should critically examine how their colonial histories have shaped their hearts, bodies, minds and spirits, evidence of Australia's attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples is abundant. On almost every social indicator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are severely disadvantaged (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 2012).

The impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander hearts, bodies, minds and spirits should be the focus area of decolonisation in social work (Green & Baldry, 2008). Non-Indigenous peoples (like ourselves) need to appreciate and recognise the impact of colonisation and engage in partnerships with Indigenous peoples. This is particularly necessary for social workers, where social justice principles underpin ethical and professional practice and decolonisation frameworks incorporate and acknowledge the "curse of colonisation" (Muller, 2014, p. 64). While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous peoples need to work in partnership towards decolonisation, the processes vary. As Baskin (2005, p. 105) argued, decolonisation inevitably differs "for Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples. It will also be different for non-Aboriginal peoples, depending largely on whether one is White or not" (Baskin, 2005, p. 105).

These discussions of decolonisation are challenged by a similar discourse developed by Geonpul academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003). In a chapter on Indigenous belonging and place in a white post-colonising society, she argued that continued Indigenous experiences of dispossessions and relationships to the land (framed as "ontological relationships" (2003, p. 32), challenge the ongoing narratives of belonging by non-Indigenous peoples, both coloniser and migrant. The present authors fit into these fluid categories of coloniser and migrant in the Australian context; however, while we identify to some extent as part of the world's colonised and colonising populations, we accept our non-Indigenous positionality in the Australian welfare context. We position ourselves as non-Indigenous workers born and raised in Australia who regularly interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. While we might epitomise aspects of both white and non-white non-Indigenous Australia, what we both have in common is that our own ancestors escaped our own colonised spaces of Palestine and Ireland. As a result, we hold settler-colonial privilege over Indigenous Australian peoples. We also mark out our positions as two social work academics who now reside on the lands of dispossessed peoples. This reflection on our identities and ancestries, though both similar and dissimilar to each other, is our starting point for understanding the necessities of decolonisation. Similarly, Young (2004) reminded herself "consciously that I accumulate the opportunities I have because of the dispossession of others" (p. 105).

We encourage other non-Indigenous academics within the social sciences to similarly reflect upon their own identities, interrogate their settler-colonial privileges, and further identify how these facets shape their curriculum teaching and learning frameworks.

While acknowledging the strengths and importance of discourses among post-colonial theorists, Moreton-Robinson (2003) argued for the need to differentiate the Australian colonial project from others. In Australia, the processes of colonisation are ongoing, and postcolonising signifies “the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonising relationship that positions us [Indigenous peoples] as belonging but not belonging” (Moreton-Robinson, 2003, p. 38). This discussion explains the ongoing relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, especially in the context of social work. As Moreton-Robinson (2003) rightly outlines, unlike other colonies in North Africa and parts of Asia, the colonial agents within Australia did not return home and whiteness influences how we understand what it means to be post-colonial Australia. Moreton-Robinson (2003) used the term post-colonising to understand the nature of colonisation in Australia in ways that differentiate colonial efforts from other colonised societies. By conceptualising the current experiences as “post colonising” (p. 30), colonisation is experienced as a process that continues today. From a curriculum perspective, we remind educators to examine whether social work teaching and learning frameworks further the colonisation of Australia, or resist it. We argue, as have others, that these discourses on decolonisation, which focus on critically examining histories and taking an anti-colonial and post-colonising stance, which emphasises the ongoing nature of colonisation, offer significant frameworks for challenging the existing nature of social work and its foundations within tertiary education (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011; Briskman, 2003; Razack, 2009). The next section briefly contextualises the necessities of challenging the colonial nature of welfare and social work education.

Challenging the colonial nature of welfare and social work education

We are working within universities that are colonial institutions “dominated by western practices and principles” (Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006, p. 399). Universities have been places where research in various disciplines have racially categorised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as inferior, subhuman, a threat, in need of ‘saving’, or a supposedly ‘dying race’ (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012). All academic disciplines are guilty of these practices (Martin, 2003). As Tuhiwai Smith (1999) pointed out, “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism”. She singled out the word, ‘research’, as “probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary” (p. 1).

We have been influenced by the writings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics (Zubrzycki et al., 2014; Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006; Green & Baldry, 2008, Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Muller, 2014; Watson, 1988) and Indigenous social work educators (see Razack, 2009) who have emphasised the roles of decolonisation in creating partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples committed to incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemologies and experiences. It is crucial for educators to acknowledge that student experiences within tutorials and lecture theatres differ among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students (Zubrzycki et al., 2014). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, decolonisation processes are necessary for the development of their professional identities, particularly where they are aware of the reputation of social work in

contributing to the Stolen Generation (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Many students are likely to be members of the Stolen Generation themselves or descendants of members of the Stolen Generation (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). The personal, family and community disintegration in many Aboriginal societies, enacted by missions, statutes and regulations, and State and Commonwealth policies, is still being enacted today and the impact should not be underestimated if genuine and workable solutions to prevent violence in Indigenous communities are to be developed (Green & Baldry, 2013; Watson, 1988; Walter et al., 2013). Treatment and healing is required on a massive scale, including the healing of individuals, families and whole communities (Atkinson, 2002; Bacon, 2013; Memmott, Stacy, Chambers, & Keys, 2001).

Zubrzycki et al. (2014) encourage academics to avoid homogenising the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences of colonisation and dispossession, as each student may have varying levels of connections to their own histories and culture, and deeply complex identities and positions that have been impacted on by Australia's colonial history. The decolonisation processes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples involve "throwing off of the colonial mentality" (Watson, 1994, p. 96) (emphasis added). We understand this process of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in throwing off – to use Watson's (1994) term – colonial impositions is a complex, confronting and challenging process. For non-Indigenous students, "the process of decolonisation provides critical foundations upon which to work collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples [a process] of deep reflection and a willingness to develop cultural and political awareness" (Zubrzycki et al., 2014, p. 20).

The decolonising of epistemological frameworks in social work education is also necessary in closing the gap, a term referring to the efforts of peoples and institutions to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social disadvantage in education, employment, child mortality, health and life expectancy (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). Cruz (2008, p. 652) argued that "[decolonisation is] an opportunity to reflect out loud about a timid attempt at walking outside the line in spaces where Knowledge (capital K) is wielded as a tool to silence the voices of people fighting their marginalization". Menzies and Gilbert (2013) similarly argued that a decolonising perspective aids the development of epistemologies and practices of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous workers. A decolonising perspective: (1) allows human service workers to highlight the objectives and viewpoints of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and (2) assists workers to gain knowledge of colonisation as an ongoing process that continues to impact on these communities (Zubrzycki et al., 2014; Dumbrell & Green, 2008).

The report, "Getting it right: Creating partnerships for change" (Zubrzycki et al., 2014) similarly places emphasis on decolonisation and the use of Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies in social work education. These authors encourage both students and academics to consider their own histories in relation to their present identities and self-conceptualisations and encourages social work scholars to think about the delivery of content, about who has the power to develop Indigenous content, about what training and development is needed for educators and about how student assessments can reflect Indigenous pedagogies. Decolonisation is a work in progress, transforming the reality

that “Australian social work is white” (see Walter et al., 2013, p. 230) to the possibility that Australian social work used to be (ideally) white and colonial.

Indeed, as Young et al., (2013) recommended, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ knowledges and practices have an inalienable right to occupy the middle ground in social work education and practice. They propose a framework for transforming the Australian social work curriculum and suggest this framework (see Zubrzycki et al., 2014) is one which should both inform, and be, a core teaching and learning curriculum component. The next two sections explore our own efforts to decolonise our research, teaching and practice. Our purpose is to strengthen the discourses on the post-colonising nature of human service work and highlight the importance of decolonisation.

We stress that we do not see ourselves as ‘experts’ and make no attempt to speak on behalf of Indigenous peoples. The contribution this article makes needs to be seen in the context of information sharing and continual learning. There are many different ways of challenging colonial human service work. We discuss two different strategies below that we have adopted in working collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in social and welfare education to decolonise our own teaching and practice.

Note: the next two sections are written in the first person to reflect the narratives and viewpoints of both authors separately.

Decolonising lectures and tutorials

I have worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people staff, students and communities at WSU since 2011 and currently work at Central Queensland University (CQ University) on decolonising curriculums across different schools. I grew up in Blacktown, a community that currently has a high concentration of Aboriginal families (see Cowlshaw, 2009). I have worked in Aboriginal housing and completed a number of Indigenous Studies units in my qualifications. I have been fortunate that my scholarly and personal mentors have been Aboriginal female scholars. My reflections on challenging the colonial nature of human service work are grounded in my experiences teaching the Bachelor of Community and Social Development (BCSD) which is offered within the School of Social Science and Psychology at WSU.

This degree is offered only to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, in intensive block mode. Every four to five weeks, students arrive on campus for an intensive week that is equivalent to four weeks of mainstream tutorials and lectures. This course has a special focus on Indigenous issues and perspectives. Students complete a number of Indigenous Studies units as part of their education, and they critically analyse a number of current issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today. While this might be ideal in creating a culturally responsive education environment, Moreton-Robinson’s (2003) discussions of post-colonising societies are relevant in identifying how university environments are places that overlook stories of dispossession and genocide. In teaching BCSD units, I found the process challenging. A number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work scholars emphasise that Indigenous students have distinctive experiences as first Australians including alienation, exposure to racist insults and anti-Aboriginal stereotypes (Behrendt et al., 2012). Zubrzycki et al. (2014) discuss

the processes of constructing separate learning spaces as a strategy that complements the decolonising of tertiary education:

Constructing separate groups for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may also encourage these students to get on with ... learning themselves without having to be ... 'on show' or to be expected to be the 'experts'. (Zubrzycki et al., 2014, p. 39)

Additionally, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may have little knowledge of their own cultural locations and belonging, because of past and present histories, and can benefit from learning opportunities that are free from external demands and expectations (Zubrzycki et al., 2014, p. 39). By creating and working through Indigenous spaces within a tertiary institution, social work education accommodates Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, and moves from its Eurocentric hegemony.

I have also taught a number of units in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) while lecturing in the BCSD programme with largely non-Indigenous students. The level of depth and discussion on Indigenous issues, strategies on best practice in engaging communities, community knowledge and the exchange of ideas, is significantly deeper for BCSD students. For students enrolled in the BSW, the starting point can be very basic (e.g., 'What are the differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?'; 'What is the Stolen Generation?'). The *yarning circles* within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education enable mainstream ways to be one lens through which we understand knowledges and issues in society.

In the BCSD, I have met mainly Koori and Murri students, and a small number of Torres Strait Islander students. These diverse students vary in ages and community experiences. They are mostly women who come from various parts of NSW. A minority are from Queensland, NT and WA. The BCSD is a way of maintaining students' community work while achieving 'that bit of paper' (a degree or diploma). Some have grown up in Aboriginal communities and some have identified or 'found out' about their Aboriginal heritage later in life. These stories, which students have generously shared, helped me identify where they are situated as they navigate their journeys within a settler-colonial society. These stories further affirm that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have diverse experiences and social work education needs to accommodate these.

The diversity has made for some interesting exchanges of ideas in the classroom. In a post-colonising (Moreton-Robinson, 2003) context, we see that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities are complex and colonised in every sense. Common to all these students is continued experience of colonisation. The very fact that we converse in English is one of the most overt signifiers of colonisation. It is a language that was imposed upon their ancestors. Students have discussed their loss of language, disconnection from culture and removal from homelands. Some students have specifically discussed their 'fair skinned' appearance, arguing it is a signifier of colonisation. By actively listening to their stories, I have learnt of the importance of creating a safe environment where students can critically reflect on their own life experiences. Using decolonisation, I have positioned my role within Aboriginal tertiary education as something that is constantly negotiated, never 'set in stone'.

My role in decolonising the lecture theatre, and the pedagogies involved, is something that is learnt, then relearnt, and then learnt again – depending on the students and their stories.

I have also learnt the necessity of reconceptualising the university space in ways that are favourable to decolonisation. Bhabha's (1990) notion of the third space is significant in guiding the decolonisation of the university lecture theatre from a colonial, western hegemonic space to a culturally safe place where Aboriginal education can flourish. In the context of social work education, Zubrzycki et al. (2014) discuss the emergence of the third space when educators engage in collaborative processes of knowledge development. We argue the third space is a place for new insights, knowledge and conceptions of identity that can be located between the coloniser and colonised. We also recognise that:

There is not a single third space – they are many and varied, they shift, they are spaces rather than places. They're often risky, unsettling spaces. We have to be prepared to shift, to be open, to listen, to change. (Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006. p. 407)

Within the BCSD, this space operates both on campus and on-line. Students discuss the complex structures of their communities and identities. We discuss, for example, some of the contemporary challenges posed by what is termed *lateral violence* in communities (Gooda 2011, p. 25). The students critically examine models and theories by Indigenous scholars and they exchange life and community experiences.

The BCSD is a place where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students discuss their diverse perspectives and share their knowledge of life. Over time, the students develop a collective identity as BCSD students, or what some term to be the BCSD mob, and group cohesion becomes part of these learning spaces. This complements the collective and cooperative basis of Aboriginal communities that survives in western, individualistic colonial environments. In tutorials, or *Yarning Circles* (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Robertson, Demosthenous, & Demosthenous, 2005), students are able to define themselves, challenge existing frameworks and ways of knowing, reveal oppressive structures and discuss strategies to empower communities. There are three key objectives that operate in this learning space. These include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander influence in the program, the involvement of the community in the lecture theatre, and the privileging of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges. The majority of lecturers in BCSD are Indigenous, working in partnership with non-Indigenous staff and are always available for consultation on matters of cultural responsiveness and guidance.

The involvement of the community in the classroom occurs on many levels. Guest lecturers from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander institutions come and share their knowledge with the students. Students visit members of the community and community organisations, such as the Redfern Community Centre, the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, and the Office of Registrar of Indigenous Corporations. In lectures, Indigenous knowledge is privileged rather than confined into one session within a unit. It is these partnerships with Indigenous colleagues, both at university and within communities, which have enabled stronger connections between university and significant Aboriginal community stakeholders.

Bennett, Green, Gilbert, and Bessarab (2013) suggest a number of strategies, concepts and discourses that can aid in social work decolonisation. In my experience, students have responded positively to the content in this publication and have found the chapters relevant to work with their respective communities, specifically, counselling methods of 'Yarning and Listening', information on the main Indigenous stakeholders in Australian social work, Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and detailed information about engaging communities. These efforts towards challenging the colonial nature of social work parallel the efforts of Jane Mears working in partnership and collaboration with an Aboriginal colleague (de Vries et al., 2012).

Mears challenges the mainstream, western knowledge systems concerning history and identity and explores how these challenges can be incorporated into practice.

Storytelling an Aboriginal perspective through partnership

Our conversations have encouraged me to critically reflect on how I have worked at WSU to challenge racism and work towards social justice for Indigenous peoples. I have been trying to decolonise my teaching, research, engagement and practices (Zubrzycki et al., 2014) for almost 40 years. I have been extremely fortunate in having the patient, consistent support and affirmation from many exceptional Indigenous teachers, colleagues and friends.

In this section, I tell one particular story of a close partnership and friendship with an older Indigenous woman, Nancy de Vries. Nancy worked tirelessly and patiently with me for over 20 years until her death in 2010. Her friendship, affirmation and encouragement have been pivotal in supporting my efforts to decolonise my teaching, research and engagement.

I have taught mostly non-Indigenous students enrolled in social welfare and social work courses. However, I am privileged to also have been one of a very small number of white lecturers teaching subject units to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in social welfare awards equivalent to the BCSD, through block mode, as described by Al-Natour, above. I have worked closely with these students for over 30 years.

In class, these students told horrendous stories, particularly about their experiences with 'the welfare'. This inevitably involved many conversations about appropriate and meaningful curriculum and how they could work with me to make my units more relevant and meaningful for to them. Initially, we accessed and collected the work of relevant Indigenous writers and researchers to feed into the curriculum. In retrospect, I can see that my students were leading me to critically reflect on decolonising the curriculum and privilege Indigenous frameworks. At the same time, I was applying what I was learning from these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into my classes with the BSW students, making space to discuss the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and including guest lectures from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues. A regular participant in these conversations was Nancy de Vries.

Nancy and I had on-going and stimulating conversations around challenging racism and decolonising the curriculum. After Nancy graduated from WSU in 1988, she continued to mentor and advise me, and very generously would come each semester to talk to social

work students about her experiences of colonisation, racism, and discrimination. She delivered very moving and powerful lectures that had a profound impact on me and the students. With her permission, I taped all these lectures. Our friendship developed slowly over many years. We had common ground, in that we were both older women, sharing common experiences of single motherhood and we both became grandmothers over this time.

One day in the mid-1990s, I suggested she write a book. Nancy thought this was an excellent idea – but only if I worked with her. I readily agreed, little knowing this would take nearly two decades. Nancy told me many, many stories and I spent many months in 1999 yarning with Nancy, ending up with 60 hours of tapes. We also collected stories from her family, friends and Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues.

I experienced many ‘aha’ moments that brought home to me the ‘white’ and colonial nature of the social and welfare work professions and how these professionals marginalised and colonised Aboriginal people. Nancy took the lead, clarifying frameworks, theoretical paradigms, methodologies and developing arguments. Nancy consistently challenged, nurtured and affirmed my efforts. Her book, *One Life, Two Stories: Nancy de Vries’ Journey Home* (2012), is about understanding colonisation, decolonising and it provides a challenging framework to transform our thinking.

This book has four themes: firstly, the story as told by Nancy; secondly her official records are reproduced, telling a very different story about Nancy; thirdly, the story of the historical context; and fourthly, the story of non-Indigenous people witnessing this pain and hearing these stories. These four themes are now firmly incorporated into my own teaching and practice and are attributed to her.

Nancy’s story demonstrates powerfully the negation of Indigenous views of history and how this is a critical part of asserting colonial ideology (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Decolonisation is a process that:

...cannot be conceptualised without the acknowledgement of a recognition and understanding of the past, as well as an understanding of the role that social work, social welfare and individual social workers and welfare workers have played (and are still playing) in the colonisation [of] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Colonisation is not an event in Australia’s past. It is a process. (de Vries et al., 2012, p. 13)

Nancy’s voice is “that of the *denied*, those many thousands of Australians who as children suffered terrible fates at the hands of inspired eugenicists and the bureaucracies they developed to control the development of the poor, the coloured, the Aboriginal and other groups whose members were defined as in deficit” (Grieves, 2013, p. 198). However, while others may become voiceless and even lose ambition to acquire bravery and defence of themselves and others, Nancy would not be denied. As Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 2) writes, “Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell ... an alternative story; the history of Western research through the eyes of the colonised”.

Having read, listened and witnessed Nancy's story, we are challenged to think about our own past, our present and our future. Nancy follows the principles set out by Tuhiwai Smith (1999). She celebrates her survival and the survival of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Nancy remembers a painful past and speaks of her responses to that pain and how she felt about the experiences of dehumanisation. She is committed to change, and envisions for us a future, to dream a new dream and set a new vision and support all of us in reframing our thinking.

Working closely with Nancy over such a long period of time has had a profound impact on me and given me a rare and very privileged opportunity to critically reflect on my own learning, teaching, research and engagement. This project provided space and time to learn and reflect. I need to stress again here, that this took many years. Running parallel with the writing of the book were many opportunities to incorporate the 'aha' moments I experienced with Nancy, into the overall project of decolonising social work curriculum at WSU.

I have incorporated and continue to incorporate what Nancy has taught me into my teaching. Nancy's influence and the time she spent with me provided space for reflective learning and enabled me to think through new strategies that I could apply to my teaching and practice. Through working with Nancy, my own understanding has been developed and enhanced. Nancy has provided a clear framework for decolonising, which I struggle to bring consistently to my research, teaching and practice. This book is also an on-going resource that can be used in the academy, and the community, enabling Nancy's voice and indeed, the collective voices of Indigenous Australians, to be heard.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we firstly outlined the history and colonial nature of social work, arguing that non-Indigenous people need to understand the ongoing impact of colonisation. We summarised decolonisation as discussed by Indigenous academics and how decolonisation challenges Australian social work. We then situated our own work via two reflective accounts. Al-Natour discussed his efforts in decolonising community work education in tertiary education. Mears described her collaborative work in telling a story that challenges social work today (de Vries et al., 2012) and how this informs her teaching and practice with large groups of mostly non-Indigenous, undergraduate students.

There is a consensus among academics that change needs to happen, it is time, we suggest, to *practice what you preach*. For non-Indigenous people, partnerships are developed by taking an active role in listening to the diverse experiences among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our efforts as two non-Indigenous social work academics (with different, yet similar, backgrounds) show that it is possible, through utilising strategies such as making space, collaborating and devoting time and effort to decolonising our teaching and practice, to change social work education. We encourage non-Indigenous people to critically reflect on their identities and positions in creating these partnerships, which also means considering history and colonisation as determinants of these relationships. Once we face the past, and understand and acknowledge how the past operates in the everyday, it is only then that decolonisation will become an active process rather than a discursive one.

Dedication: This article is dedicated to the many hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, both our students and those in communities, who have worked tirelessly, patiently and with extraordinary good humour, alongside us, encouraging and inspiring us to witness, listen carefully, to understand and, most importantly, to act.

References

- Atkinson, J. (2002). *Trauma trails, recreating song lines: The transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia*. North Melbourne, VIC: Spinifex Press.
- Bacon, V. (2013). Yarning and listening: Yarning and learning through stories. In B. Bennett, S. Green, S. Gilbert, & D. Bessarab (Eds.), *Our voices: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work* (pp. 136–165). South Yarra, VIC: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Baskin, C. (2005). Centring Aboriginal worldviews in social work education. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 34, 96–106.
- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: Final report*. Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.
- Bennett, B. (2015). “Stop deploying your white privilege on me!” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement with the Australian Association of Social Workers. *Australian Social Work*, 68(1), 1931.
- Bennett, B., Green, S., Gilbert S., & Bessarab, D. (Eds.). (2013). *Our voices: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work*. South Yarra, VIC: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bennett, B., Zubrzycki, J., & Bacon, V. (2011). What do we know? The experiences of social workers working alongside Aboriginal people. *Australian Social Work*, 64(1), 20–37.
- Bessarab, D., & Ng’andu, B. (2010). Yarning about yarning as a legitimate method in Indigenous research. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 3(1), 37–50.
- Bhabha, H. (1990). The third space. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 207–221). London, UK: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Briskman, L. (2003). Indigenous Australians: Towards postcolonial social work. In J. Allan, B. Pease, & L. Briskman (Eds.), *Critical social work: An introduction to theories and practices*. Sydney, NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Brown, L. A., & Strega, S. (2005). *Research as resistance: Critical, indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars’ Press.
- Cruz, M. R. (2008). What if I just cite Graciela? Working toward decolonizing knowledge through a critical ethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(4), 651–658.
- Commission on Social Determinants of Health. (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.
- Cowlishaw, G. (2009). *The city’s outback*. Sydney, NSW: UNSW Press.
- de Vries, N., Macdonald, G., Mears, J., & Netthiem, A. (2012). *One life, two stories: Nancy de Vries’ journey home*. Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press.
- Dudgeon, P., & Fielder, J. (2006). Third spaces within tertiary places: Indigenous Australian studies. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 16(5), 396–409.
- Dumbrill, G. C., & Green, J. (2008). Indigenous knowledge in the social work academy. *Social Work Education*, 27(5), 489–503.
- Gair, S., Thomson, J., Miles, D., & Harris, N. (2003). It’s very “white” isn’t it! : Challenging monoculturalism in social work and welfare education. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 5, 37–52.
- Garner, S. (2003). *Racism in the Irish experience*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Gooda, M. (2011). *Social justice report 2011: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner*. Sydney, NSW: Paragon Printers Australia.
- Green, S., & Baldry, E. (2008). Building Indigenous Australian social work. *Australian Social Work*, 61(4), 389–402.
- Green S., & Baldry, E. (2013). Indigenous social work education in Australia. In B. Bennett, S. Green, S. Gilbert, & D.

- Bessarab (Eds.), *Our voices: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work* (pp. 166–180). South Yarra, VIC: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grieves, V. (2013). One life, two stories: Nancy de Vries' journey home [Review of the book by N. de Vries, G. Macdonald, J. Mears, & A. Netthiem]. *Journal of the European Association for Studies of Australia*, 4(1), 197–200
- Harms, L., Middleton, J., Whyte, J., Anderson, I., Clarke, A., Sloan, J., ... Smith, M. (2011). Social work with Aboriginal clients: Perspectives on educational preparation and practice. *Australian Social Work*, 64(2), 156–168.
- Howe, S. (2002). *Ireland and empire: Colonial legacies in Irish history and culture*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (1997). *Bringing them home: Report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*. Author. Retrieved from <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997>
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (2012). *Face the facts: Some questions and answers about refugees, migrants and Indigenous people*. Author. Retrieved from <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997>
- Martin, K. (2003). Ways of knowing, being and doing: A theoretical framework and methods for Indigenous and Indigenist research. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27(76), 203–214.
- Memmott, P., Stacy, R., Chambers, C., & Keys, C. (2001). *Violence in Indigenous communities: Full Report*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: Crime Prevention Branch, Attorney-General's Department.
- Menzies, K., & Gilbert, S. (2013). Engaging communities. In B. Bennett, S. Green, S. Gilbert, & D. Bessarab (Eds.), *Our voices: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work* (pp. 50–72). South Yarra, VIC: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2003). "I still call Australia home": Indigenous belonging and place in a white postcolonizing society. In S. Ahmed, C. Castaeda, A. Fortier, & M. Sheller (Eds.), *Uprootings/regroundings: Questions of home and migration* (pp. 131–149). Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Muller, L. (2014). *A theory of Indigenous Australian health and human service work*. Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Pappe, I. (2004). *A history of modern Palestine: One land, two peoples*. New York, USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Razack, N. (2009). Decolonizing the pedagogy and practice of international social work. *International Social Work*, 52(1), 9–21.
- Robertson, B., Demosthenous, C., & Demosthenous, H. (2005). Stories from the Aboriginal women of the yarning circle: When cultures collide. *Hecate*, 31(2), 34 - 44
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. London, UK: Penguin Classics.
- Sa'di, A., & Abu-Lughod, L. (Eds.). (2007). *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the claims of memory*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. Dunedin, NZ: Zed Books & University of Otago Press.
- Walter, M., & Taylor, S., & Habibis, D. (2013). Australian social work is white. In B. Bennett, S. Green, S. Gilbert, & D. Bessarab (Eds.), *Our voices: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work* (pp. 230–247). South Yarra, VIC: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Watson, L. (1988). An Aboriginal perspective: Developing an Indigenous social work. In E. Chamberlain (Ed.), *Change and continuity in Australian social work* (pp. 117–186). Melbourne, VIC: Longman Cheshire.
- Williamson, J., & Dalal, P. (2007). Indigenising the curriculum or negotiating the tensions at the cultural interface? Embedding Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies in a university curriculum. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36, 51–58.
- Young, S. M. (2004). Social work theory and practice: The invisibility of whiteness. In A. Moreton-Robinson (Ed.), *Whitening race* (pp. 104–118). Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Young, S., Zubrzycki, J., Green, S., Jones, V., Stratton, K., & Bessarab, D. (2013). "Getting it right: Creating partnerships for change": Developing a framework for integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in Australian Social Work education. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 22(3–4), 179–197. doi:10.1080/15313204.2013.843120
- Zubrzycki, J., Green, S., Jones, V., Stratton, K., Young, S., & Bessarab, D. (2014). *Getting it right: Creating partnerships for change. Integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in social work education and practice*. Teaching and Learning Framework. Sydney, NSW: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.