REFLECTIVE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN SUPPORT OF SOCIALLY JUST SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: THE EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AT A UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

The use of reflective skills as a cognitive tool in education to cultivate critical responsiveness to practice was investigated. The study aimed to determine students' ability to engage with practice in an insightful manner. Forty-two third-year students participated through reflective exercises on their community work projects. The study was qualitative in nature, using thematic content analysis. The findings indicated that critical reflection, as an educational tool, encourages constructive engagement in students. This paper argues that for social work to fulfil its social justice mandate, social work education is vital in honing the graduate attributes required for this purpose.

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INTRODUCTION

Social justice and human dignity are core components of social work principles and ethics; therefore social work education should lead to socially just practice. Social workers' ability to practise in a socially just manner relies significantly on their ability to reflect on the influence of their personal and professional socialisation and the structural inequalities that influence the lives of service users. In order to achieve a deep sense of social justice, social workers should be educated to be critical, responsive practitioners who can observe, ask questions and fight against inequalities.

Education is a means of developing critical and reflective capabilities in social work students to complement their procedural competencies and contribute to their personal and professional socialisation. The notion of procedural competencies in social work resonates with what McLean (2006) refers to as the technical-rational approach to knowledge in universities, which seems to receive preference above the hermeneutic and emancipatory interests. Walker (2009) argues for the recognition of hermeneutic and emancipatory knowledge sets when she indicates that universities, and in particular the humanities, should provide opportunities for students to critically examine their worldviews, and guide them to become world citizens with ethical obligations, not only for their own wellbeing but towards other people. Social work education is a means towards cultivating a critical responsive practice that is able to ensure service delivery that is based on the felt needs of the service users, bringing about visible and sustainable improvements in their lives, which are the conditions necessary for social justice. It is believed that the pedagogical structure of the curriculum should ensure that graduates develop skills that will enable them to practise in a society deprived of human rights.

The article reports on a literature review which focused on social justice in the context of social work and the use of reflective skills in social work education. Because the service users with whom the participants are engaged are negatively affected by an unequal social structure, a theory of oppression was used as theoretical underpinning. The data are presented through a qualitative presentation of five identified themes.

Bell (cited in Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007:1) refers to "social justice" as the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Bankston (2010) explicates social justice as the equitable distribution of resources, physical and psychological safety, interdependence and democratic interaction, amongst members, fundamental to a socially just society, working towards the eradication of dehumanising inequalities. The International Federation of Social Workers (2012) proposes that social workers have the responsibility to promote social justice in relation

to society in general, and in relation to the people with whom they work. Social workers thus have a responsibility to challenge negative discrimination against people and to recognise and respect different forms of diversity. They should respect and promote those rights and choices of people that are not in violation of other people's legitimate interests (Craig, 2002; Ringo, 2008).

This view of social justice is in agreement with what is depicted in the ethical codes of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) and the code of ethics issued by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP, 2007). Both codes particularly ascribe to social workers the duty to work towards the eradication of social inequalities, working towards a society where all its members have the same basic rights, security, opportunities, obligations and social benefits, and access to the information required to achieve these.

Dominelli (2002) contends that social work finds itself in a contradictory position. Located within the organs of state, the social work mandate has both inclusionary and exclusionary dimensions. While it is part of society's social control arrangements (exclusionary), it is also tasked with helping people who are socially and emotionally vulnerable as a result of social exclusion (inclusionary). Social workers as a result often feel restrained in their capacity to act as autonomous professionals. As the profession has the mandate to promote social justice, Craig (2002) suggests that social workers should reposition themselves not as the agents of endless top-down government initiatives, but work more explicitly with and for the excluded and deprived. They thus need an appropriate and critical political distance away from a position of being merely agents of change driven by government objectives and should relearn the skills of community development, focus on the increasingly submerged social work values of empowerment and advocacy and engage in promoting user involvement within the range of service initiatives. This repositioning would prepare social workers for their roles as public intellectuals who can confidently participate in debates on social issues in the public domain. Karger and Hermandez (2004), however, argue that the involvement in direct services, high caseloads, long working hours and funding arrangements between government and service providers impact negatively on the emergence of public intellectuals in social work. Howard (2010) adds that graduate education also lacks substantive and analytical rigour, and fails to develop the graduate attributes needed to play these roles. Graduate attributes, according to Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell and Watts (2000), are the qualities, skills and awareness a university wants students to develop during their stay at the institution. They include but can also go beyond disciplinary expertise. They should include qualities that prepare students for active citizenship.

BUILDING REFLECTIVE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE THROUGH EDUCATION

In order to achieve the goals of social justice, Chu, Tsui and Yan (2009) are of the opinion that social workers should become critical, self-reflective practitioners whose

actions would convey the values of the social work profession. They should thus take into account the relationship between personal value systems and social work practice. Van Soest, Canon and Grant (2002 in Humphreys, 2012) emphasise two critical challenges that social work educators face, namely that students should be prepared to work towards transforming unjust and oppressive social, economic and political institutions into just and non-oppressive alternatives. Secondly, students must be prepared to practise in an increasingly diverse society. This raises the question of the skills set that a social work graduate needs. It is not sufficient for a student to understand social justice, human rights and non-discrimination as concepts in relation to their code of ethics; they need to develop graduate attributes that allow them to understand how the dominant discourses of the discipline, the structural location of social work service organisations and their own worldview influence their ability to deliver services that acknowledge the self-determination and agency of the service users, and their ability to maintain truly democratic relationships.

Reflective social work training has the potential to prepare the student to understand the inequalities locked up in these structural arrangements and as a result their professional relationships. Rossiter (2005) thinks that a critical reflective practice promotes a necessary distance from practice that will assist practitioners to understand the construction of practice, enhancing a level of freedom that opens perspectives capable of addressing questions about social work, social justice and the place of the practitioner. This is in line with Wilson's (2011) view that reflective practice better prepares the social work student for a fundamentally complex and uncertain working environment. With this view, Wilson clearly adds to Schön's (1983) view that learning environments and disciplines should not be over-confident and static about their knowledge sets. In solving societal problems, professional disciplines regularly encounter complexities for which answers are not always available. The certainty found in professional expertise often becomes the armour against what is unknown and in these contexts the decision to be tentative and reflective can result in discomfort. Wilson (2011) indicates that in social work it is not just the discomfort resulting from an unknown space that challenges the implementation of reflective practice. The need to minimise risk for vulnerable groups like children and the need for accountability lead to the domination of bureaucratic instrumental bias and over-reliance on proceduralised forms of practice. However, at the same time, Wilson challenges the absolute value of competence-based approaches in social work education and practice, suggesting that they may impede good practice and decision making in complex situations.

The relationship between critical events such as the threat of a suicidal client, the abuse of a child and societal realities such as large-scale poverty requires social workers to apply skills that include competence-based skills as well as critical-reflective competences. They need to make timely assessments based on their existing knowledge base, apply intervention strategies, often of a statutory nature, while understanding and challenging the structural injustices that contribute to many of the social problems they work with on a daily basis. Social workers thus need to have two sets of skills, a procedural competency that allows them to operate within the framework of protection

and statutory compliance, and a set of critical, reflective skills that allows for critical questioning and advocacy. The combination of these educational outcomes will contribute to a deeper sense of social justice advocacy in their work.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THEORY OF OPPRESSION TO SUPPORT REFLECTIVE LEARNING

A theory of oppression is of significance in this study as people living in unjust circumstances often have to deal with a range of oppressive experiences. Adams *et al.* (2007) are of the opinion that this theory will provide a framework for a questioning and challenging practice, in this instance social work practice. The features of oppression are so woven into the lives of social service users that it can easily be normalised in society. These authors identify the features as pervasive, restrictive, hierarchical, complex, internalised and with shared characteristics of "isms". They are pervasive in the sense that institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias and social prejudice are fused into a complex web. They are also restrictive as they generate material and structural restrictions that profoundly limit self-development and self-determination. They are also hierarchical, with the levels of inequality between privileged and disempowered groups widening within these unbalanced relationships. Because people hold multiple social group memberships, their experience of power and privilege is often also complex and cross-cutting. For instance, a patriarchal male from a very poor background may simultaneously experience privilege and oppression in his different societal positions. Oppression is also internalised in the human psyche of both privileged and disempowered groups. This holds the danger that poor people may often be blamed for their own circumstances rather than the structural and economic systems that create these circumstances. Different forms of oppression also manifest through issues of racism, classism, heterosexism, sexism, religion, able-ism, ageism and the experience of immigrants/xenophobia.

Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy provides a tool through which people can ask questions about these pervasive forms of oppression, so woven into society that they are seen as normal. A reflective exercise was used in this research, with a focus on questioning the social work student about social justice violations they observe in the communities, and how, in their view, the impact of their interventions can be regarded as such a tool. Students were forced into dialogue that requires of them a form of critical thinking through which they can identify oppressive forces influencing the lives of social welfare service users.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research project was qualitative in nature, exploring participants' understanding of the notion of social justice in their social work practice. Participants who provided informed consent completed a reflective written exercise guided by open-ended questions, based on their community work projects.

Sampling

The researchers used purposive sampling, considered as suitable for qualitative studies, according to Strydom and Delport (2011). The 2012 third-year social work class at the University of the Free State was selected, as they conducted their first community work projects as part of their experiential learning. They were thus regarded as a group of students who have the attributes of the population serving the purpose of the study. A general invitation was extended to the group to participate, with a clear explanation of the research. Sixty-seven per cent (42) of the third-year students participated in the project. The total population for 2012 was 62 students for the year group. The sample consisted of 33 female and 9 male participants. The questions required of them to reflect on the nature of the communities; the types of problems these communities experienced; their (the students') ability to make a difference through their interventions, and whether the curriculum had prepared them to make a meaningful contribution. They were also expected to reflect on their understanding of a life of dignity. Dignity, according to Gran (1983), is promoted by recognising people as capable of making their own decisions and accepting responsibility for that. They also had to identify possible shortcomings of the profession to make a meaningful contribution to a quality life for service users, which Bankston (2010) and Craig (2002) consider to be a life where human rights are respected and where social justice prevails so that the individual will be able to fulfil his/her life tasks and meet basic human needs. Eventually they had to provide suggestions on how to improve their interventions as social work students.

Data analysis

The data, generated in hard copy format, were read through to identify categories and naming them. Schurink, Fouché and De Vos (2011) regard this process as one holding conceptual power as researchers pull together groups of concepts. Open coding was used to break down, scrutinise, conceptualise and categorise the data; five themes were identified and are discussed below. The data are presented as the findings; quotations to support the findings are followed by a discussion of the findings. The reflective exercises of the participants were numbered as P1-P42 and quotations from the reflective writings are used in the analysis to support the findings.

The eight communities where the participants launched their twelve community development projects are located in Bloemfontein, Free State Province. These communities presented with characteristics typical of lower socio-economic experiences. These characteristics were poverty, high levels of unemployment, high levels of HIV/AIDS infection, a shortage of community resources, high crime rates, vulnerable children and drug abuse, representing what Dominelli (2002) refers to as citizen groups experiencing different levels of exclusion.

Nature of community work projects

Students worked in small groups and based their projects on the needs identified by the communities to which they were allocated. This involved awareness campaigns regarding a range of social challenges. In 2012 there were twelve third-year groups working on eleven themes. These themes included projects with the following themes:

- Child sexual abuse, focusing on creating awareness in the community on the incidence of child sexual abuse and the resources available to deal with these appropriately;

- Glue sniffing amongst primary school learners, focusing on creating awareness amongst vulnerable youth;

- Awareness campaign on gender-based violence at the University of the Free State (UFS) as a response to incidents on campus;

- Awareness campaign within the broader Bloemfontein community on the plight of street children;

- Two HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, one focusing on support for university students affected by the pandemic and a second one focusing on equipping service workers on campus with information pertaining to HIV/AIDS;

- Empowering youths in lower-income communities with income-generating skills by facilitating their engagement with resources addressing skills development and job opportunities;

- Drug and alcohol abuse awareness campaign amongst high school learners;

- Building community cohesion to tackle common social challenges;

- Recycling project to empower unemployed women;

- Equipping foster children with life skills to facilitate healthy relationships with their foster parents;

- Awareness campaign, highlighting issues of child abuse and neglect, and strategies to deal with this.

FINDINGS

Introduction

The following section illustrates the results around the five themes as identified in the participants' reflective writings. The overall focus of the themes is on community work as method, community members as experts about their lives, factors impacting negatively on socially just lifestyles and effective service delivery, and the appropriateness of the current curriculum in student preparation. Findings are supported by participant quotations followed by a discussion of the theme.

THEME 1:   Community work projects could make a meaningful contribution to the lives of community members

Thirty-five (35) out of 42 participants were of the opinion that their interventions made a meaningful contribution to the communities. Two participants did not answer this, while five were of the opinion that their projects failed to make an impact. While these

projects were effective for communities, there is no reflection from their side on the extent to which they contributed to the macro challenges that communities face.

Some of the excerpts of the participants are presented here as vivid appraisals of their opinion on whether community projects contribute meaningfully to the lives of the community members.

> **P2:** *"Our intervention made a meaningful contribution because we were able to link the community with the necessary resources/services to help manage the need they had."*

> **P1:** *"The project gave foster children the platform to express their feelings, challenges and expectations of being a foster child. This contributed to the rebuilding of their relationships with their foster parents and community members as the forum provided them with information, insight and knowledge"*

> **P24:** *"Yes, because our project did not need funds from any stakeholder to start it. All that the community had to do was to collect tin, glass and paper to recycle in order for them to have some income. It was also helpful because in doing so they were also busy cleaning their own environment."*

> **P10:** *"Volgens my was dit nie betekenisvol nie. Van die gemeenskapslede het die probleem nie gesien as 'n probleem nie. Die gemeenskap moet die geleentheid gebied word om te sê wat hulle werklike probleem is. Mense sê dan dat maatskaplike werkers nie betrokke is in hul gemeenskap nie. Hoe kan 'n maatskaplike werker 'n probleem identifiseer as sy nie in die gemeenskap is nie?"*. (In my view, it was not meaningful. Some of the community members did not regard the problem as being a problem. The community must be given the opportunity to say what their real problem is. People say that social workers are not involved in their communities. How can a social worker identify a problem if she is not involved in the community?)

The thoughts presented by participant 2 link to the view of Weyers (2011) that the purpose of community work is to create and maintain the opportunities, resources and services that people need to develop to their full potential. The ethical codes of the NASW (2008) and the SACSSP (2007), as well of the views expressed by Craig (2002), also argue for people's access to resources and information to address their basic needs.

Bell (cited in Adams *et al.*, 2007) suggests that social justice can be achieved if groups in a society fully and equally participate to meet their expressed needs. Participant 10 explicitly states that the community was not involved in the identification of their needs and as a result the project did not address the real needs as experienced by them; as a result justice was not served. When social work students are able to reflect on the successes and failures of their projects using the theories guiding their intervention (in this case community development), there is evidence of critical reflection on their part.

The SACSSP code of Ethics (2007) makes reference to the duty of social workers to work towards the eradication of social inequalities, working towards a society where all members have the same basic rights, security, opportunities, obligations and social

benefits, amongst others. It is evident that the projects they found most useful were those that could contribute towards financial and health improvement. In addition to the implementation and evaluation of these projects, students should have the opportunity to locate their community interventions within the broader context of societal inequalities. This may be an area of development during curriculum review.

THEME 2:   Understanding problems from the community's perspective, as members are experts in their own right

It was important to determine the participants' views on the extent that their theoretical training in community work prepared them for their service learning in this regard. As indicated by Tanga (2012), service learning is, according to the Council on Social Work Education in the United States of America, a signature pedagogy with the purpose of socialising students to the role of practitioner, containing the pedagogical norms that connect and integrate theory and practice. In this study participants were asked to describe how their social work knowledge and skills helped them to understand the problems as expressed by the community. Twenty-nine of the participants recognised the importance of understanding problems from the point of community members, with six explicitly recognising the community members as experts in their own situations, or having experts among them. There was also the recognition from 28 participants that communication and relationship-building skills are required to develop a better understanding of community needs. Nine participants indicated that the community development process, as taught in their particular community development module, proved to be an effective tool for successful engagement. Related issues taught in class, which they mentioned, included communication and relationship-building skills. The current curriculum and training had helped them realise that when working with human beings, engaging them and recognising the clients' right to self-determination were essential. The practical aspect of the curriculum also teaches students to be more compassionate and understanding towards people.

This theme was reflected in the views of two participants:

> **P28:** *"In gemeenskapswerk het ek geleer dat jy as maatskaplike werker nooit 'n gemeenskap se behoeftes moet bepaal nie, dus het ek die behoeftes soos deur die gemeenskap geïdentifiseer, aangespreek."* (In community work I was taught that as a social worker you should never identify a community's needs yourself, therefore I addressed the needs as identified by the community.)

> **P24:** *"As a social worker you are taught that what the community considers as a pressing problem should be the focal point of the project."*

Participants' training in community development practice plays a significant role in these expressed views. The majority view of participants who acknowledged the expertise of community members coincides with Craig's (2002) view that in a socially just system recognition will be given to the dignity and equal worth of all people, and that these communities as service users will participate in services delivery as full

citizens. In general, and despite obvious challenges experienced by communities, their inherent capabilities were recognised, as shown in these participants' responses.

THEME 3: Poverty, geographical inequalities, and poor management in governmental agencies are causes of people living undignified lives and lacking access to social services

Poverty was regarded by all participants as the most common reason for people living in undignified circumstances. If people are poor and unable to care for their families, their ability to control decisions about their situation is limited. Service users live in communities that are often characterised by crime, drug and alcohol abuse, dysfunctional schools and poor basic health care, negatively affecting their daily lives.

Geographical inequalities were also identified by two participants, stemming from the rural communities' lack of access to social workers and services in general. This shows some understanding of systemic disparities. Eighteen of the participants identified government as the biggest culprit responsible for people living undignified lives, as unemployment was found to prevent many people from earning a living wage. Poor resource management also was regarded as the cause of people not having access to basic services. Many fingers were also pointed at corruption committed by government officials and those in top positions, as money intended for the poor was perceived as often being mismanaged.

Five participants were of the opinion that class and racial disparities still existed and one participant indicated that mostly black South Africans and those living in rural areas were found vulnerable to having to live undignified lives. The participants feel that because of an imbalance in resource allocation, the gap continues to widen between those who have and those who have no resources. The lack of care by social workers was also identified by four participants, thus alluding to social work services delivered in a way not promoting the dignity of clients.

The views expressed by four participants convey their thoughts:

> **P15:** *"No, because many of the people still live in shanties without proper water and toilet facilities, no electricity, dusty roads and lacking clinics and municipal services."*

> **P1:** *"No, most South Africans, especially those residing in rural areas, are not aware of their human rights, social justice and the need to have a dignified life."*

> **P 3:** *"Nee, daar is 'n groot gaping tussen diegene wat baie het en die wat glad nie het nie."* (No, there is a big gap between those who have a lot and those who don't have anything.)

> **P36:** *"No, some social workers do not finish their work with clients and leave them hanging, even before the main goal was reached."*

These reflective insights from participants show a significant level of understanding of the inequalities that reigned in the communities where they worked. They also showed insight into the extent to which these systemic inequalities affect people's experience of

citizenship. These conditions prevailing in communities thus gave participants an understanding of the social injustice that their clients were exposed to. Adams *et al.* (2007) refer to oppression as being restrictive; the comment made by participant 1 resonates with the effect of oppression causing material and structural restrictions that limit self-development and self-determination.

The comment made by participant 36 is important as it reflects on the risks of social workers in the field losing their reflective abilities and as a result becoming agents of oppression rather than advocates for social justice, a concern raised by Dominelli (2002).

Participants in this context thus showed an ability to take a critical stance, identifying that the organs of state that should be the custodians of social justice are often the violators of it. Participants thus have the ability to sense something is wrong or detect a discomfort with the current situation. They may need a theory in their curriculum that would help them ground this uncomfortable feeling. A theory of oppression as described by Adams *et al.* (2007) may be beneficial in this regard.

THEME 4:   Structural challenges impede effective social work service delivery

The majority of participants (25) were of the opinion that structural challenges created a difficult working environment for social workers. These challenges include a lack of professional social workers; high case loads; and a significant amount of administration preventing them from delivering a service that could make a real impact on people's lives, similar conditions as those identified by Karger and Hermandez (2004). Under these circumstances social work runs the risk of becoming just another "job" unable to help people deal with social injustices. The impact of this, as identified by eight participants, is that social workers no longer have the time to build meaningful relationships with their clients, and they lack compassion, a further contribution to socially unjust social work practices.

Seventeen participants were also of the opinion that social workers receive very little recognition and support for the work they do as the profession is not highly regarded. Despite this, many communities regard social workers as miracle workers, as the main actors in changing undignified living conditions, thus expecting much from them while they themselves are not actively involved in their own development.

The following comments express some of the participants' views around the impact of structural challenges on effective service delivery:

> **P5:** *"Maatskaplike werkers is dikwels oorlaai met werk en kan nie voldoende aandag en tyd gee aan elke geval, gemeenskap, ensovoorts nie, wat ons eties verplig is om te doen."* (Social workers are often overloaded with work and cannot give sufficient attention and time to each case, community, etc. as is ethically expected from us.)

P7: *"'n Mens word dikwels oorlaai met werk en dit veroorsaak dat jy nie by al die werk/gevalle kan uitkom nie, en dit veroorsaak weer dat probleme voortgesit word."* (One is often overloaded with work, resulting in one not being able to attend to all the work/cases and this leads to the continuation of problems.)

P27: *"Social workers need to be recognised in our country as hard-working professionals, because every time in our country when, for example, there is a social crisis, people, government officials and the media criticise."*

P24: *"Most of the community members depend on social workers for everything, e.g. to solve their financial problems, to help them get identity books, help with their children's upbringing, and that can be overwhelming."*

Several reasons have been identified for the profession's shortcomings in making a meaningful difference in people's lives. The conditions under which social workers operate are seen as jeopardising their ability to fulfil the mandate of the profession. The profession also needs to be recognised as an important role-player in the fight against poverty and inequality. Social workers must have access to resources and funding in order to address the identified needs of communities. The lack of them leads to social workers becoming overwhelmed and worn out, which eventually could have a negative impact on their personal lives. Lloyd, King and Chenoweth (2002) are of the opinion that aspects of social work such as the nature of the work (the building of relationships with people who are experiencing difficulties in their lives); the relatively low status of the discipline; the lack of autonomy social workers have in their work; and the organisational realities such as high case loads, lack of funding, staff turn-over and shortages, all contribute to the risk of burn-out, a condition that may impair the effectiveness of the social worker.

THEME 5: The current curriculum is appropriate and meaningful for effective social work service delivery

The overwhelming number (40 out of 42) of participants were of the opinion that the current social work curriculum is appropriate for their preparation for meaningful service rendering to social welfare service users. Their ability to build meaningful, respectful relationships and to establish partnerships with clients in working on those issues they deemed important were seen as having been developed through both the theoretical and practical components of the curriculum. Two participants raised the concern that the administrative burden might make it difficult for social workers in practice to maintain the ability to use this knowledge successfully. Two other participants also suggested that the curriculum should make provision for service learning to be introduced much earlier in the curriculum.

The findings regarding the aforementioned theme are reflected in the views of two participants:

P33: *"Yes, because to make a significant difference in peoples' lives you need to allow them to make certain decisions. With the knowledge that I have acquired*

and skills I gained, it helps me to give people a variety of possible solutions to whatever situation they are facing, and to do this objectively."

P30: *"Yes! Social work training does prepare me for making a difference in the lives of clients because my own life has changed and I have a different view of life."*

The curriculum follows a holistic approach, allowing students to apply methods appropriate to the improvement of the social functioning of their client/group/community. The training also prepares the student to treat the client as an individual, thus contributing to the development of their self-help skills and inner strength. Participants in this research believed that this approach would eventually lead to an improvement in the quality of life of many service users, leading to a life of dignity. Although this research project did not specifically focus on the integration of theory and practice through service learning, there was an indication by some participants that earlier exposure to service learning would be beneficial. Tanga (2011, cited in Tanga, 2012) states that exposure to service learning is important for students' empowerment and consciousness-raising.

Concluding remarks

Judging from the responses of participants, it is evident that an opportunity to reflect on their social work practice is educational in itself. Student participants showed the potential to critically reflect on the practice of social work and were able to identify the violation of service users' human rights through unjust practices. They were also able to recognise structural inequalities and their impact on socially just practices.

When reflecting on their own practical experiences, they viewed their own interventions as beneficial within the limitations of the context. They did recognise, however, that the interventions did not address larger structural challenges that service users face. The critical reflection thus provided participants with a necessary distance, as indicated by Rossiter (2005), to raise questions about practice, social justice issues, systemic injustices and the social worker's role.

It is believed that social work students could benefit from a curriculum that, in addition to the development of technical competencies, incorporates pedagogies that support consciousness development and meaning making of their position in the social context, their critically reflective skills could only deepen and their development as socially just practitioners would be enhanced. Social identity development theory and cognitive development theory, as discussed by Adams *et al.* (2007), could help students understand their own worldviews. Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy, on the other hand, can provide a tool through which they can ask questions about ubiquitous forms of oppression. Furthermore, classroom activities that stimulate active student engagement through discussions and debates will encourage their active participation in their own learning. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) are of the impression that discussion is a powerful way to explore supposedly settled questions and to develop a fuller

appreciation of the multifarious nature of human experience. They further state that discussion and democratic principles are inseparable, because both have the same root purpose: to nurture and promote human growth. A curriculum that combines technical competencies with consciousness development may provide social work students with the graduate attributes through which they can evaluate their own professional path, identify risks of inhumane practices and become advocates for social justice.

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