

A new path to cultivate human rights education at schools of social work in Africa from a decolonial lens

Corlie Giliomee

Department of Social Work and Criminology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Email: corlie.giliomee@up.ac.za

Abstract

This article reports on a theoretical and empirical study exploring the nature and extent of human rights coverage in the curriculum in schools of social work at universities in Southern and East Africa. In a mixed methods research approach, quantitative data were gathered using an online survey, and qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews and document study. The findings indicate that countries' socio-political contexts influence the freedom of their higher education institutions to discuss human rights and speak out about human rights abuses. Educators' personal viewpoints, training, and experiences influence the human rights content that they present in the curriculum. Students are not involved in curriculum design in the schools surveyed. The study recommends that a new path for cultivating human rights education for schools of social work in Africa be followed where a decolonial human rights-infused social work curriculum and locally relevant pedagogy are adopted. It calls for training for social work educators to deliver and research a human rights-based curriculum to be pursued from a decolonial perspective.

Keywords: Human rights; human rights education; social work education; decolonization; Africa

Introduction

The colonization of African countries has permeated Africans' perceptions of themselves. Global North approaches and practices are now applied to address social ills in African societies—ironically, many of these ills were brought about by colonization itself. One such approach is the social work profession carried to Africa by missionaries, administrators, and civil society organizations from the Global North. Social work in its current form is therefore not the outflow of indigenous conceptions developed by Africans (Kudchodkar, 1963; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Africans had their own unique ways of addressing social problems, embedded in the kinship system, locally relevant values and norms, and cultural practices. Social work as a helping profession addressing social problems in the Global North, on the other hand, was and remains interwoven with the ideological frameworks of philanthropy, feminism, Christianity and socialism (Kendall, 1978), ideological frameworks which were not part of the African world view and philosophies. However, schools of social work education in Africa have been influenced by these non-indigenous forms of knowledge (Rankopo & Osei-Hwedi, 2011). It is only recently that some of these schools have embarked on the generation and rediscovery of indigenous forms of knowledge to be included in the social work curriculum. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge the influence of Global North knowledge also in the

field of human rights, given that social work has been perceived as a human rights profession since its inception (Healy, 2008). In fact, human rights and social justice repeatedly emerged throughout the history of social work in countries in the Global North (Ife, 2012), but its history in Africa does not reflect whether and how Africans have been involved in developing and influencing the emergence of human rights in the social work profession (including its education and practice) according to their own perspectives and needs. It can be said that both the profession of social work and human rights are constructs that entered Africa in the wake of the colonizer.

The focus of this article is on the nature and extent to which human rights are included in the curricula of schools of social work in Southern and East Africa, and the pedagogy used in human rights education from a locally relevant perspective. The study explores social work in Africa from a wider scholarly viewpoint, but the scope of the empirical study has been narrowed to focus only on schools of social work in Southern and East Africa. This article provides a brief background on human rights education in social work, social work education in Africa, and the interfaces, followed by the theoretical framework, research methods, results, and discussion. The article culminates in conclusions and recommendations with specific reference to a human rights-infused social work curriculum and locally relevant pedagogy from a decolonial perspective.

Human rights, human rights education and social work education

In his definition of human rights, Ife (2012, p. 19) explains that ‘by human rights we generally mean those rights that belong to all people, regardless of national origin, race, culture, age, sex or any other characteristic’. These rights are implied to be universal, applying to everyone, everywhere. The international definition of the social work profession approved by the International Federation of Social Workers’ General Meeting and the International Association for Schools of Social Work’s General Assembly in July 2014 affirmed the link between social work and human rights by referring to human rights and social justice as principles central to social work. The acknowledged centrality of human rights principles in the profession offers a framework which acts as a guide for grassroots activism, social development and governmental accountability around the world (Deweese & Roche, 2001). A human rights framework thus provides a pathway for social work students to develop a better understanding of, and to identify with, social justice and service user rights, building a human rights perspective on all forms of practice.

In 1995, the United Nations announced the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (Suárez, 2007), thereby placing the focus internationally on the importance of the integration of human rights education into education from primary school to the tertiary level. This intensified focus fueled the infusion of human rights into social work curricula in the Global North. By 2014, schools of social work especially in the United States had made considerable progress toward alignment with the UN’s focus on advancing human rights education (Libal & Healy, 2014). In Africa, however, human rights have not yet been fully infused into the curriculum (Kafula, 2016; Lucas, 2013). African contexts pose different human rights challenges to social work education than Global North contexts do. Although human rights issues have close links with justice, peace, conflict and development in Africa (Kafula, 2016), it cannot be said that either social work or social work education in *all* African countries has noticeably identified with the disadvantaged, committing itself to confronting injustice and oppression, placing human rights at the core of the social work curriculum discourse (Lucas, 2013). Social work students in Africa still need to be prepared to prevent acts of marginalization, intimidation and oppression

by political leaders, however contentious such resistance and activism may be. Such abilities can only be nurtured if human rights material is embedded in social work training, equipping social workers with the skills required to influence policy at both the national and international levels (Kafula, 2016).

Lucas (2013) suggests that the infusion approach can be used to integrate human rights concepts and values into the social work curriculum. Some of the main constraints faced by human rights education in social work in Africa are limited resources and political hostility. Both these obstacles were indeed identified by participants in the current study as making it difficult to promote human rights education in social work. Such education in social work in Africa needs to be advanced through transformative and activist social work practice, embarking on a process where social work sheds the domination by governments to create interventions with emancipatory dimensions. This process can be facilitated by public awareness programmes, links with social movements, and engagement in policy practice, and by harnessing new media technologies for both social work education and practice.

Pedagogic methods refer to teaching methods. Collins and O'Brien (2011) describe pedagogy as an art, as the profession of teaching, and as the way a teacher actually teaches. It includes the style and methodology of teaching chosen, and the preparatory instruction or training that prospective teachers acquire in teacher education programmes. Social work lecturers do not typically follow a formal teacher training programme, but develop their pedagogic skills via continuous education programmes offered by their universities and/or enrolling for postgraduate certificates of higher education, or by trial and error. African social work programmes and pedagogy were influenced by the continent's colonization, and by Global North models, teaching from a Global North world view (Kreitzer, 2012). Therefore, developing locally relevant pedagogy for human rights at African schools of social work presents a unique challenge, in the sense that such methods need to fit the local African context.

It is therefore part of the decolonization process of social work education in Africa to develop locally relevant pedagogic methods, such as the following: mastering communication techniques for both small groups and very large gatherings of people (mass presentations), audio-visual tool mastery, role play, street play, simulation games, non-formal education methods (specifically in countries with a high illiteracy rate), consciousness-raising, organization and mobilization methods, folk drama, songs and ballads (Desai, 2018). Lucas (2013) suggests that for social workers in Africa, teaching methods that facilitate transformative and activist rights-based social work practice, resulting in the development of courageous and determined professionals, is imperative. However, pedagogic methods do not stand alone—they are merely the vehicle for rolling out a specific curriculum. Desai (2018) contends that for curriculum development in social work education, it is important that curricula attempt to centralize change functions, due to the profession's aim of effecting social, economic and political change. Although the broad aim of social work education worldwide fits Desai's description, the micro curriculum content in social work education will vary from region to region in the world, and even between universities in a specific country (Barretta-Herman, 2008). There may be definite standards and competencies for social work education that influence the curriculum content in a specific country. Each school of social work should therefore develop a curriculum that adheres to international benchmarks, and also displays the unique ethos of the particular school, in conjunction with the specific context in which the school is situated.

For many years schools of social work in Africa have expressed the need to develop their own unique models for social work education (Mwansa, 2012). From 1971 to 1986, there was debate within the Association for Social Work Education in Africa (ASWEA) concerning the relevance of Global North social work education in the context of the African reality (Kreitzer, 2012). In the 1990s, Osei-Hwedie (1993) remarked that the time had come for social work in Africa to find itself. This view was echoed by Mupedziswa's (2001) plea for social work education in Africa to shed its remedial character and move toward developmental social work education. Although the social work profession is relatively young in Africa, the clinical and development needs of the continent are expediting the growth of the profession (Mwansa, 2012), which has the potential to consider its own unique pedagogy and to develop solid training institutions, building on, and if necessary, deviating from the knowledge from Global North influences. However, social work education in Africa continues to face many challenges, ranging from a lack of resources (both material and financial) to a lack of proper professional recognition of social workers in Africa (Chitereka, 2009). Professional associations and regulatory frameworks can advance the development of social work education on the continent. Part of this process is purposefully to adopt a developmental approach to social work education which will reflect human rights approaches. Progress in this direction is evident with the development of more recent social work activities in African regions, including the work of the Association for Schools of Social Work in Africa (ASSWA), and the professional and research outcomes of the Promotion of Professional Social Work toward Social Development and Poverty Reduction in East Africa (PROSOWO) project, as reflected on the PROSOWO website (<https://appear.at/en/projects/current-projects/project-websites/project129-prosowo>). There is thus evidence that universities in Africa are ready to embark on the process of creating a more locally relevant social work programme. Research on curriculum content areas, as well as pedagogy culturally relevant for Africa within a human rights framework, will advance the transition from a Global North educational approach to more indigenous approaches.

Decolonizing human rights education

Decolonization implies investigating how current societies have been swamped by the knowledge, thought and power structures of the Global North, and the way in which that knowledge and thought has continually undermined and exploited colonized people and all they once had (Zembylas, 2018). Human rights education in all spheres of education has signally failed to address the contradictions between what it is supposed to achieve, and the countless human rights violations that people around the globe still experience. Zembylas (2017) attributes this state of affairs to the practice of an uncritical and narrow type of human rights discourse in education. To address these contradictions, he therefore suggests a shift toward following a decolonizing approach in human rights education. He argues that creating spaces for decolonizing pedagogy can transform human rights education theory and practice to a pedagogy with a less Eurocentric outlook, with multiple perspectives and a pluralist, as well as a universal, comprehension of human rights. Such a comprehension should recognize the histories of coloniality, their entanglement with human rights and abuses of those rights, and the importance of social justice projects (Zembylas, 2017), which are also significant for rights-based social work practice.

Decolonization of human rights education in social work requires reflexivity to interrogate the existing curriculum and pedagogic methods. Keet (2012) remarks that for human rights education to become truly reflexive, it needs to adopt a dynamic, self-renewing and critical orientation of human rights. Such renewal should be grounded in our ability to articulate human rights education and human rights as a critical engagement 'that is neither caught up in human

rights idolatry or cultism, nor is conservative and uncritical' (Keet, 2012, p. 9). The inclusion of different notions of human rights in a human rights education that challenges Global North structures around standards of what is 'human' and what 'rights' are, must therefore enlarge the scope of human rights education, leading to a reconfiguration of that education (Zembylas, 2017). Human rights education in social work curricula in Africa must thus reflect cognizance of the effects of colonialism on human rights education in order to design and embrace a decolonized curriculum.

Theoretical framework: critical pedagogy and human rights theory

Two theoretical frameworks were used for this study, namely critical pedagogy and human rights theory.

Critical pedagogy is mainly associated with the work of Paulo Freire, who is still considered the 'most significant educational philosopher in the development of critical pedagogic thought and practice' (Darder et al., 2009, p. 5). However, there are other educators, theorists and philosophers who have contributed to the theory of critical pedagogy, including Horton, Gramsci, Foucault, Giroux, Aronowitz, Apple, Greene and McLaren (cited in Darder et al., 2009). In particular, the members of the Frankfurt School, such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Lowenthal, Fromm and Marcuse, contributed to vast theoretical development and contributions from 1923 until the late 1960s. Giroux and McLaren are still continuously writing on critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2009).

Darder et al. (2009) identify seven principles that inform critical pedagogy. First, contrary to the traditional perspective, critical education argues that schools actually work against the class interests of those students who are economically and politically most vulnerable in society—this critique evolved into the principle of political economy, which holds that the interaction between politics and the economy can have a negative impact on vulnerable people in society. Second, the insight that knowledge is created in a historical context supports the principle of the historicity of language, which implies that language is not neutral, but deeply intertwined with the contexts in which it is conceived (Darder et al., 2009). A third principle is that of dialectical theory, which alludes to a dialectical view of knowledge that functions to unmask the connections between objective knowledge and the cultural norms, values and standards at large (Darder et al., 2009). Ideology and critique form the fourth principle, where ideology is seen as a societal framework of thought used in society to create order and give meaning to our political and social world. Critical pedagogy suggests that ideology should be interrogated and critiqued in order to determine its influence in knowledge formation (Darder et al., 2009). The fifth principle is related to hegemony, which can be seen as a process of social control that is carried out through the intellectual and moral leadership of a dominant social class over subordinate groups. This is a process that critical pedagogy seeks to detect and deconstruct (Darder et al., 2009). Praxis is the sixth principle. It refers to the alliance of theory and practice, which can only co-exist—praxis is impossible without constant reflection, dialogue and action (Darder et al., 2009). Dialogue and conscientisation form the last principle, which holds that for people to be able to move from naïve to critical transitivity, they need to engage in dialogue, which implies a parallel relationship between them and equal agency (Darder et al., 2009).

To be able to view the world from a critical pedagogic perspective, the principles mentioned above need to be integrated both in thinking processes and practice. Freire's explanation and description of critical pedagogy, and the emphasis that he places on the detrimental effects of the 'banking' concept of education, is a very valuable approach to use when analyzing the

curriculum for human rights content (Souto-Manning, 2010). According to Ife (2012), critical pedagogy requires that the teacher and the student actively and jointly engage with the subject. In this way knowledge becomes neutral, but not contextualized, allowing both student and teacher, via dialogue with each other, to construct and reconstruct the knowledge. This process then becomes a form of dialogical praxis (Ife, 2012).

What Freire (1971, p. 73) has denounced as the ‘banking’ concept of education, mentioned above, describes, maintains and even stimulates the contradiction: the teacher should facilitate learning, but may in fact hinder learning through attitudes and practices which mirror an oppressive society as a whole (Freire, 1971). Instead, teaching human rights from a critical pedagogic perspective would seek to respect both the rights of the student and the teacher. For Ife (2012), this approach is most respectful of students when it treats them as autonomous participants in the learning process, rather than as passive recipients of knowledge. However, teaching students in this way about human rights arguably also implies that students should be given the right to make informed choices about how they take responsibility for their own learning, a voice regarding field placements, and being part of the collaborative learning process. Critical pedagogy is therefore more than a theoretical perspective on the world: it is a way of thinking about the world and its people. Because of the theory’s high regard for human beings, their value, input into their own lives and education, and its respect for people’s rights, critical pedagogy is the appropriate theoretical framework from which human rights education in social work can be studied.

Globally, *theorizing on human rights* is still mainly located in legal contexts and literature—for example, Manor (2015) recognizes that interdisciplinary research and work on human rights have gained momentum since the 1990s and is growing, but the legal literature on human rights still outweighs that in the social sciences. There is thus an opportunity to develop theorizing on human rights and human rights education in social work as a social science. However, it must be acknowledged that, just as social work education in Africa has been influenced and shaped by Global North bodies of knowledge, ‘human rights’ as a theoretical construct has also been theorized mainly from the Global North. In this regard, Mutua (2001) asserts that the current definitions and explanations of human rights are Global North constructions, which all people in the rest of the world may not regard as valid for their own contexts, even if their governments have ratified international conventions and treaties. Mutua (2001) therefore proposes that, in order for human rights to be redeemed and to become truly universalized in its conception, multiculturalism needs to be achieved by finding a balance between group and individual rights, giving more weight to social and economic rights, connecting rights to duties more significantly, and addressing the links between the corpus and economic systems.

Human rights theorizing for social work education in Africa therefore poses two challenges. First, social work needs to develop its own human rights theory. Staub-Bernasconi (2016) claims that social work already has a solid human rights foundation, but, thus far, this foundation is only a commitment to practise from a rights-based perspective and to human rights as part of social work’s foundational conceptualization. Social work does not yet include a philosophical and theoretical base for human rights. Second, as Mutua (2001) has pointed out, human rights conceptualization in social work education in Africa urgently needs to be decolonized and become a reflection of the local African context.

In the absence of a significant human rights theoretical basis, social work draws on the existing basic understanding of human rights, which includes the three generations of human rights among the five core notions of human rights which are part of the *Universal Declaration of*

Human Rights, as Wronka (2017) argues. These five core notions include human dignity and nondiscrimination, alongside the three generations of rights. The three generations of rights encompass, firstly, civil and political rights, secondly, economic, social and cultural rights and, thirdly, collective rights related to communities, populations, societies or nations. Ife (2012) indicates that it is important to understand human rights in the context of people realizing their full humanity, and recognizing that structures and discourses of oppression, by their very nature, operate against human rights values. In the African context, collective rights are especially important—these rights are linked to the emphasis of the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights* on collective rights. Collective rights are important for upholding the rights of peoples and individuals on the continent and offer a conceptual basis to begin theorizing human rights for the continent. However, all three generations of rights are crucial as mechanisms to ensure that people's rights are respected.

Social work furthermore draws on rights-based practice principles to ensure that human rights are integrated in social work practice. Androff (2016, p. 26) acknowledges that social work does not possess the legal sophistication or philosophical nuance that would strengthen it, but avers that the profession's main strength lies in its practical relevance. Androff (2016, p. 35) then provides a theoretical framework of principles for rights-based social work practice, which centers around human dignity, nondiscrimination, participation, transparency and accountability. These principles contribute to a theoretical background for rights-based social work practice, which can be elaborated on and shaped for social work practice in Africa.

Method

The study used a mixed methods research approach, which combined an integrated philosophy, quantitative and qualitative methods, and a convergent research design orientation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) which allowed data to be collected in different ways from schools of social work in Southern and East Africa. The researcher aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of human rights education in the different schools of social work at universities in Southern and East Africa by merging qualitative and quantitative sets of data, as defined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) to assess how the results regarding human rights education diverged and converged.

The population was all the schools of social work in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East Africa that offer at least a degree programme in social work. These constitute the entire collection of sampling units (Strydom, 2011) relevant to the study. All these universities could be identified from websites, and could potentially be included in the quantitative study (the survey), so no sampling procedure was applied in respect of the survey. For the qualitative leg of the study, non-probability sampling with a purposive sampling technique was employed. The researcher relied on her judgment, as suggested by Strydom (2011) and Strydom and Delpont (2011) to select a sample of seven universities, based on the experience or knowledge of educators of schools of social work in Southern and East Africa, to illustrate features that were of interest to the study. In line with Neuman (2012), for in-depth investigation, the researcher identified the particular cases that adhered to three criteria: the university had to be in Southern or East Africa and offer a bachelor's degree in social work; the social work programme had to include human rights content; and it would be possible to use English as the medium of communication and documentation (the researcher cannot speak the various African languages, and wanted to preclude misunderstandings arising from translation or interpreting).

Quantitative data were collected via an online survey using Qualtrics from 28 other schools in the respective regions. The survey was structured around the biographical details about the specific school of social work, the school's approach to social work teaching, the human rights content in the school's curriculum, teaching methodologies related to human rights, learning materials related to human rights, and proposals for developing human rights curricula and relevant teaching methods. Initially, the researcher identified 94 schools of social work in Southern and East Africa that offer a Bachelor of Social Work degree programme, according to the internet and ASSWA list server. The researcher contacted the 80 schools for which e-mail contact addresses could be obtained from the internet and ASSWA list server, neither of which were fully up to date. Fewer than half (33 schools) responded to the e-mail invitation to participate in the study. Moreover, only 28 completed surveys were returned, in spite of repeated follow-up e-mails. Of the 28 surveys completed, 14 came from schools in Southern Africa (South Africa, Malawi, Mauritius, Zambia, and Botswana), and 14 came from East Africa (Somalia, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Burundi). Because the response rate for the surveys was so low, there were five schools that were included in both the quantitative and the qualitative parts of the study.

The numbers in the quantitative data collected from the 28 completed surveys were computed in Excel, and the data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 25 (SPSS 25) software. To present the quantitative descriptions derived from the coded data from the non-standardized survey in a manageable form, as recommended by Babbie (2013) and Monette et al. (2008), descriptive statistics were used. Bivariate analysis, through which the association of the position of one variable with the likely position of another variable is assessed (Fouché & Bartley, 2011), was used for data analysis.

The qualitative data were collected from eight participants in one-on-one interviews at seven universities in Southern and East Africa, as well as from a document study of the curricula of the same seven schools of social work in that region. Two of these universities are situated in South Africa, and one each is situated in Botswana, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia. (In accordance with the confidentiality agreement between the researcher and the participants, the names of the universities are withheld.) The interview schedule used for the interviews contained open questions that focused on exploring participants' perceptions on human rights content in the curriculum and on the pedagogical methods used to teach human rights content. Thematic data analysis was applied to the interview data, following the process described by Creswell (2014). Summarising qualitative content analysis and structuring content analysis (Flick, 2014) were applied to the data from the document study.

Ethical guidelines were applied. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the various schools of social work where data were collected. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities' Research Ethics Committee. The Qualtrics platform was used for the surveys, which allowed for built-in consent from the respondents. Informed written consent was obtained from interviewees. They were informed that participation is voluntary. Avoidance of harm and debriefing was not applicable to the study, given the research topic, although the researcher acknowledges that avoidance of harm can never be completely guaranteed.

Two limitations of the study are that only a limited number of interviews could be conducted, and that the curricula of only a sample of schools of social work could be collected, because of the cost involved in such data collection, and time constraints. Moreover, although a large number of schools of social work were identified via the internet for potential participation in

the quantitative part of the study, dormant websites and the resulting lack of usable contact details meant that only about a third of schools of social work in Southern and East Africa could actually be contacted to invite them to participate.

Findings and discussion

Six themes and 14 subthemes were identified from the qualitative data analysis, and were triangulated with the quantitative data. Triangulation involved comparing the qualitative data (from the interviews and document study of the social work curricula of participating schools in Southern and East Africa) and the quantitative data (from schools of social work in the region). Similar questions were asked in the semi-structured interviews and surveys. The themes identified in the document study correlated with the data collected from the surveys and interviews. A full discussion of findings derived from all these themes is too broad for the scope of this article, but findings resulting from four subthemes are discussed below, as they are specifically related to indicating a new path for human rights education in social work from a decolonial perspective. These four subthemes are the freedom to teach human rights and speak out against human rights violations, inclusion of human rights content in modules dependent on the educator's discretion, student participation in teaching and learning, and the prioritization of human rights content in the social work curriculum with a focus on local relevance.

Key finding 1: a country's socio-political context has an impact on higher education institutions' pedagogic practice and educators' freedom to speak and teach about human rights

Human rights is a fraught topic in most Southern and East African countries, given the socio-political context in which many universities function. The respondents to the survey and interviewees were aware that social work is a rights-based profession, but social work educators in some countries find it difficult to teach students how to engage in advocacy for people's rights, given the limitation of their political freedom. State-funded universities also have to comply with government policies, which may affect academic freedom. Below are comments from survey respondents and interviewees that indicate the link or disconnect between the integration of human rights as a topic in their curriculum and the socio-political context of their country:

Teaching about human rights and practising – it is highly context-dependent; especially it is highly dependent on the government policy.

In [Country X] the Social Work Curriculum (and other undergraduate curricula) is/are harmonised at national level (in Public Universities). The issue of human rights in [Country X] and in most African countries is problematic, given the nature of governments in the continent.

Thus, the given socio-political context in a country, influenced by the respective government's views on, or practices regarding, human rights, has a considerable influence on whether and how human rights content is included in the social work curriculum. Some governments of African countries have not yet shed the colonial influence they have been subjected to for decades or even centuries. This state of affairs furthermore maintains the colonial-infused policies and curricula of higher education institutions. In this context, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. x) writes that colonialism's remnants in African governments led to the creation of a 'double-

faced empire hiding coloniality behind a rhetoric of spreading modernity, civilization, democracy and human rights'. In other words, although governments may pretend to be in favor of human rights and may even ratify human rights treaties and conventions, the prevailing coloniality implies ongoing power abuses, contradicting the commitment to uphold human rights.

Key finding 2: a particular educator's personal viewpoints and experiences influence the inclusion and infusion of human rights content in the curriculum

The infusion and inclusion of human rights content in the curriculum, ways of discussing that content in class, the sharing or not sharing of personal experiences of human rights violations, and participation or nonparticipation in protest action, are very personal decisions for social work educators, regardless of the level of academic freedom that the university or institution allows. The comment below illustrates this:

I guess what I am trying to say is that there is no conscious effort to say we really want a curriculum that will reflect and will deliberately ensure that members of staff infuse the human rights aspects into whatever they teach. You know, we don't do that. It just gets subsumed one way or the other, in a very disorganised way I would say ... depending on the specific lecturer.

It can therefore not be assumed that all educators will necessarily include human rights content in the modules they teach, unless the inclusion of human rights content in the curriculum is mandated by a particular school of social work. Furthermore, not all educators are equally self-aware about how Global North knowledge has influenced their own viewpoints on human rights and what it means to introduce a decolonized human rights curriculum. As long as educators look at human rights from a Global North paradigm and do not link it in their own minds to the local context and to their own personal experiences, human rights will be presented to social work students in a clinical, detached and purely academic way. Training for social work educators on how to engage with decolonized human rights content in the social work curriculum may give new impetus to human rights education in these schools.

Key finding 3: students are not involved in curriculum design, only in evaluating the curriculum

One of the key features of human rights education is that it should follow a participatory approach (Bajaj et al., 2016). In the case of higher education this means that students should be involved in their own learning. Participating in own learning implies taking part in class activities, giving feedback on learning experiences, evaluating modules and participating in curriculum design. The data show that students were involved in all the aforementioned pedagogic practices, except in curriculum design and development. Only 3.6% of survey respondents (1 of 28) reported that students were often involved in curriculum design, while almost half of the respondents, 42.9% (12 of 28), indicated that students were never involved with curriculum design. If students are not directly involved in curriculum development, coloniality will prevail in curriculum design.

Key finding 4: more human rights-specific literature that is locally relevant needs to be published for human rights education in social work in Africa

The data revealed that respondents still mostly used books on human rights published outside Africa to teach human rights (in 39.3% of schools, 11 of 28). The teaching materials that respondents identified as ones that they never used are books on human rights published in their own countries, for 25% of schools (7 of 28). Schools of social work in Africa therefore still mostly rely on the Global North literature to teach social work content, and specifically human rights content. Although African scholars have published much more local literature on social work in the last few years (2016–2021), no human rights-specific local literature had been published by the time this survey was done.

The qualitative data showed that one institution filled the gap regarding local Africa human rights material by asking students to do field trips in order to assess how practitioners include human rights in their daily work with service users, and thereafter to compare those observations with the literature in their Global North textbooks:

Often times we ask the students to go out to different agencies to observe what's happening in the real life with different group(s) of people and we try to help them so that they can come out with something [...] they have to communicate that reality by integrating with the theoretical approach. So, to help them to generate some knowledge; practical knowledge in the society because often time we use material published in the Western societies not locally. We don't have proper teaching and learning documents which reflect the local experience, so in order to incorporate the local experience they have to learn it from the real-life experience rather than from written documents.

Although many recent publications by African social work scholars include references and links to human rights, there is a dearth of publications with a dedicated focus on human rights education in social work in Africa. The findings indicated that not enough locally relevant books, published in Africa, are available to educators at schools of social work to use in a human rights-focused curriculum. Hence, educators still mainly use Western textbooks. Moreover, although there are many human rights manuals (Reynaert et al., 2019, p. 24), some of which include local African case studies, robust academic material on human rights that can form the basis for rights-based social work practice in Africa urgently needs to be developed.

Conclusions and recommendations

A first step in advancing human rights in decolonized social work education for Africa is to adopt, in principle, the infusion of human rights in the social work curriculum and to adapt the planned curriculum outline and pedagogic methods in accordance with the local context to contribute to the decolonization process of social work education on the continent. This has not yet happened in all the schools of social work that participated in this study. Therefore it is recommended that, in order for human rights education to reach its full transformational potential in African social work curricula, social work educators come to understand the socio-political context of their country, and how it influences social work education. They need to challenge the continuing coloniality in governments. Such coloniality hinders policies and legislation affording all Africans true democracy and ways to realize their human rights.

There is a direct correlation between whether and how human rights are taught and the readiness of educators to be involved in that teaching. Some social work educators are not

sufficiently committed to including human rights content in the curriculum—some because they are unfamiliar with the human rights subject, others because they are uncertain about and/or lack of experience in engaging in human rights issues, or because they engage uncritically with human rights and its meaning for, and understanding of, African societies. An educator's personal and professional experiences of human rights affects the depth and extent of that educator's human rights teaching and commitment to employing a human rights framework in social work practice. Dedicated training programmes for social work educators to advance human rights education in schools of social work in Africa will make a noteworthy difference in this regard.

Social work lecturers need to undertake customized training and development in human rights education for social work in the African context. This training should address aspects such as the creation of an awareness among educators regarding their personal beliefs, viewpoints and experiences related to human rights and human rights violations; exposure to relevant human rights literature and information and how to include and use formal human rights documents in teaching and learning; how to source, develop and use locally relevant examples related to human rights for educational purposes; how to use the participatory approach to human rights education; how to build and create a culture of human rights within the particular school of social work; and how to facilitate a teaching and learning environment where students can learn how to create a culture of human rights in the contexts in which they are practising as students and will practise in the future as professional social workers. Additionally, training should include how to create a class atmosphere conducive to finding common ground with and among students, both on a pedagogic and personal level. In cases where students themselves have been exposed to human rights violations, this may be helpful in order to concurrently model to students how they can facilitate finding common ground in practice to address human rights violations that occur in communities. Training should include how to facilitate quality learning, especially in order to advance as human rights educators in a post-colonial teaching and learning environment, with a dedicated effort to decolonize human rights learning material and become aware of continued coloniality in their social work programme.

In line with the fundamental premise of the social work profession regarding human rights, both individual educators and educators as a collective should take joint responsibility to include human rights in the curriculum. However, they cannot do so without interrogating the curriculum to unmask colonial influences. Moreover, as the data indicated, students' participation in their own learning is not yet significantly harnessed at all schools of social work in Southern and East Africa. This situation is not conducive to advancing human rights education in social work, as it denies students a voice in their own learning. Critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework can be of value here, as it problematizes the relationship between pedagogic practices and socio-political relations, and focuses on the importance of radically democratizing educational sites and larger social formations (Fischman & McLaren, 2005). Educators should involve students meaningfully in curriculum design in order to develop a curriculum where the power to decide over the content and how learning occurs is not regulated only by educators. Unless students are purposefully brought into the design of the curriculum, educators do not use students' feedback to inform changes in the curriculum and are not held as accountable as they should be for implementing student-led changes. However, for meaningful involvement, students must be equipped to understand the core values of social work themselves and must become actively involved in curriculum development, while taking responsibility for the learning outcomes in practice.

Lastly, in the absence of comprehensive local literature on human rights, innovative teaching is required to present relevant case studies and analyze universal material on human rights in an African context. Without sufficient knowledge of fundamental human rights documents, it is difficult for students to engage in meaningful rights-based social work discussion, and eventually, practice. Infusing human rights into the social work curriculum at schools of social work in Africa, therefore, requires an interwoven process where educators embark on a process of both advancing human rights education in social work education and decolonizing human rights education, while engaging in teaching practices that will reveal and transform coloniality. Social work educators should also embark on research in local African contexts and develop study material and publications with a specific focus on human rights education at schools of social work, including best practice case examples that would equip students to engage in rights-based social work practice that fits the local African context.

The hope is for human rights education in social work education to equip future social workers to stay in touch with the socio-political contexts in their respective countries, even those that impose restrictions on realizing peoples' rights. They will need to take up their advocacy role to challenge legislation, policies and beliefs that contribute to the violations of citizens' rights and the enactment of democratic values, and to call for transparency from governments in the action taken to implement the various human rights conventions ratified by those governments. For this to happen, social work educators and their students must challenge and dismantle the miasma of coloniality that still filters via governments to higher education institutions in order radically to transform human rights education in the social work education landscape.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences: African Pathways Mobility Grant. And: The Mellon Foundation Southern Modernities Grant 2015

Notes on contributors

Dr. Corlie Giliomee has been a lecturer in the Department of Social Work and Criminology at the University of Pretoria, for the last eleven years. She has worked in various areas in the field of social work for 15 years. She teaches social development and ethics in social work. Her academic and research interests center on human rights education, human rights, social justice, social work education, social development, and homelessness. She has a passion and vision for the development and promotion of social work education in Africa and the development of human rights education. Since June 2018 she has been serving as the treasurer of the Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa (ASSWA). She completed her doctoral study titled "Exploring human rights education at Schools of social work in Southern and East Africa" in 2020. Currently, she is serving on the executive committee of the University and College Consortium for Human Rights Education (UCCHRE). She is also a member of the committee for human rights of the International Association for Schools of Social Work (IASSW).

References

- Androff, D. (2016). *Practicing rights: Human rights-based based approaches to social work practice*. Routledge.
- Babbie, E. (2013). *The practice of social research* (13th ed.). Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Bajaj, M., Cislighi, B., & Mackie, G. (2016). *Advancing transformative human rights education: Appendix D to the report of the global citizenship commission*. Open Book Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0091.13>
- Barretta-Herman, A. (2008). Meeting the expectations of the global standards: A status report on the IASSW membership. *International Social Work*, 51(6), 823–834. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872808095253>
- Chitereka, C. (2009). Social work practice in a developing continent: The case of Africa. *Advances in Social Work*, 10(2), 144–156. <https://doi.org/10.18060/223>
- Collins, J. W., III, & O'Brien, N. P. (Eds.). (2011). *The Greenwood dictionary of education*. Greenwood.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage.
- Darder, A., Baltodano, M. P., & Torres, R. D. (2009). Critical pedagogy: An introduction. In A. Darder, M. P. Boltodano, & R. D. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (2nd ed., pp. 1–20). Routledge .
- Desai, A. S. (2018). Curriculum imperatives for social change. In C. Noble (Ed.), *Voices of social work: The Eileen Younghusband lectures 1984-2018* (pp. 60–81). International Association of Schools of Social Work.
- Deweese, M., & Roche, S. E. (2001). Teaching about human rights in social work. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 21(1–2), 137–155. https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v21n01_09
- Fischman, G. E., & McLaren, P. (2005). Rethinking critical pedagogy and the Gramscian and Freirean legacies: From organic to committed intellectuals or critical pedagogy, commitment, and praxis. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 5(4), 425–447. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708605279701>
- Flick, U. (2014). *An introduction to qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Fouché, C. B., & Bartley, A. (2011). Quantitative data analysis and interpretation. In A. S. De Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouché, & C. S. L. Delpont (Eds.), *Research at grass roots: For the social sciences and human service professions* (4th ed., pp. 248–275). Van Schaik.
- Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury.

- Healy, L. M. (2008). Exploring the history of social work as a human rights profession. *International Social Work*, 51(6), 735–748. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872808095247>
- Ife, J. (2012). *Human rights and social work towards a rights-based practice* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Kafula, S. C. (2016). The role of social work in peace, human rights, and development in Africa. *Journal of Education & Social Policy*, 3(5), 115–121.
- Keet, A. (2012). Discourse, betrayal, critique: The renewal of human rights education. In C. Roux (Ed.), *Safe spaces: Human rights education in diverse contexts* (pp. 7–29). Sense Publishers.
- Kendall, K. A. (1978). *Reflections on social work education: 1950-1978*. International Federation of Schools of Social Work.
- Kreitzer, L. (2012). *Social work in Africa: Exploring culturally relevant education and practice in Ghana*. University of Calgary Press.
- Kudchodkar, L. S. (1963). Observations. *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, 24(2), 96.
- Libal, K. R., & Healy, L. M. (2014). Bringing human rights home in social work education. In K. R. Libal, S. M. Berthold, R. L. Thomas, & L. M. Healy (Eds.), *Advancing human rights in social work education* (pp. 121–143). Council on Social Work Education.
- Lucas, T. (2013). Social work in Africa: The imperative for social justice, human rights and peace. *Botswana Journal of African Studies*, 27(1), 87–106.
- Manor, J. (2015). Foreword. In C. Lennox (Ed.), *Contemporary challenges in securing human rights* (pp. 1–20). Human Rights Consortium, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London.
- Monette, D. R., Sullivan, T. J., & De Jong, C. R. (2008). *Applied social research: A tool for human services* (7th ed.). Thompson Wadsworth.
- Mupedziswa, R. (2001). The quest for relevance: Towards a conceptual model of developmental social work education and training in Africa. *International Social Work*, 44(3), 285–300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002087280104400302>
- Mutua, M. (2001). Savages, victims and saviors: The metaphor of human rights. *Harvard International Law Journal*, 24(1), 202–245.
- Mwansa, L. -K.J. (2012). Social work in Africa. In L. M. Healy & R. J. Link (Eds.), *Handbook of international social work* (pp. 365–372). Oxford University Press.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2013). *Empire, global coloniality and African subjectivity*. Berghahn Books.
- Neuman, W. L. (2012). *Basics of social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Pearson.

Osei-Hwedie, K. (1993). The challenge of social work in Africa: Starting the indigenisation process. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 8(1), 19–30.

Rankopo, M. J., & Osei-Hwedi, K. (2011). Globalization and culturally relevant social work: African perspectives on indigenization. *International Social Work*, 54(1), 137–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872810372367>

Reynaert, D., Dijkstra, P., Knevel, J., Hartman, J., Tirions, M., Geraghty, C., Gradener, J., Lochtenberg, M., & Van den Hoven, R. (2019). Human rights at the heart of the social work curriculum. *Social Work Education*, 38(1), 21–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2018.1554033>

Souto-Manning, M. (2010). *Freire, teaching, and learning: Culture circles across contexts*. Peter Lang.

Staub-Bernasconi, S. M. (2016). Social work and human rights – linking two traditions of human rights in social work. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 1(1), 40–49. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-016-0005-0>

Strydom, H. (2011). Sampling in the quantitative paradigm. In A. S. De Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouché, & C. S. L. Delpont (Eds.), *Research at grass roots: For the social sciences and human service professions* (4th ed., pp. 222–234). Van Schaik.

Strydom, H., & Delpont, C. S. L. (2011). Sampling and pilot study in qualitative research. In A. S. De Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouché, & C. S. L. Delpont (Eds.), *Research at grass roots: For the social sciences and human service professions* (4th ed., pp. 390–396). Van Schaik.

Suárez, D. (2007). Education professionals and the construction of human rights education. *Comparative Education Review*, 51(1), 48–70. <https://doi.org/10.1086/508638>

Wronka, J. (2017). *Human rights and social justice: Social action and service for the helping and health professions* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Zembylas, M. (2017). Re-contextualising human rights education: Some decolonial strategies and pedagogical/curricular possibilities. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 25(4), 487–499. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2017.1281834>

Zembylas, M. (2018). Toward a decolonizing approach in human rights education: Pedagogical openings and curricular possibilities. In M. Zembylas & A. Keet (Eds.), *Critical human rights, citizenship, and democracy education* (pp. 35–51). Bloomsbury Academic.