

Attempting to disrupt racial division in social work classrooms through small-group activities

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Abstract: The notion of racial difference and racial segregation has continued to be problematic in higher education studies. Students belonging to minority ethnic groups often feel segregated, even in courses and classrooms that promote anti-discriminatory and anti-racist practices. This paper presents a study that evaluated racially disruptive teaching pedagogies. The study involved 27 students from the BA Social Work student cohorts within a university based in the South East of England. Students were encouraged to integrate and interrogate matters of race and belonging during a seminar on protected characteristics designed to disrupt racial division. Qualitative surveys were conducted to understand participants' views about racial division and racially disruptive teaching pedagogy which had been employed to promote racial integration. Findings revealed the need for additional and brave reflective spaces that disrupt racial segregation and foster a better understanding about race and the need for more innovative teaching around cultural competence. The paper concludes by stressing the significance and value of racially disruptive teaching activities and racial assimilation in social work programmes for tackling racial bias, segregation and decolonisation. It is argued that racially disruptive teaching will prepare students to confidently unravel oppression and challenge the discrimination, racism, microaggressions and inequality that service users experience first as students then as qualified practitioners..

Keywords: Racial disruption; racial consciousness; racially disruptive pedagogies; social work; anti-racist practice

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Introduction

This paper starts from the position that anti-racist practices, thinking, approaches and insights start from the classroom and through the introduction of 'racially disruptive' teaching activities. The paper will use the term 'ethnic minorities' to ensure sensitivity and inclusivity, although terms such as 'Black' or 'Black and Asian Minority' are used in reference to specific research that this paper relies upon.

The need to disrupt racial division is articulated by DiAngelo (2012), who contends that the dominant conceptualisation of unearned white privilege leaves black and ethnic minorities marginalised. DiAngelo identifies that the way to disrupt the centrality of whiteness is through anti-racist education, race consciousness and disrupting institutional practices that preserve white privilege. In 2015, The Runnymede Trust, a United Kingdom (UK) think tank, identified that the centrality of white perspectives affects the progression of black, Asian and minority ethnic students. As such, they identified an awarding gap which currently exists in most institutions in the UK. This awarding gap has been linked to institutional racism, structural inequalities relating to teaching and learning, and assessment strategies (Alexander and Arday, 2015; Arday, Belluigi and Thomas, 2020).

In social work, previous studies on minority ethnic students in the UK have questioned the extent to which social work education provides inclusive teaching pedagogies (Bernard et al., 2011; Tedam, 2012). They indicated that the absence of culturally inclusive teaching results in black students struggling to access the social work curriculum fully. Research by Bernard et al. (2011) analysing 118 black and minority ethnic students and disabled students' experiences of social work education training within eight higher education institutions in Britain, identified that black social work students experienced racial inferiority. They also found explicit, implicit, negative and disapproving comments not only from their white peers but also from academics who expect less academic ability from them. This ultimately affects their learning experience as there is then a propensity to disengage from being an active learner.

Additional impact includes withdrawing from university altogether or feeling discouraged from actively joining in or taking part in student societies, whether or not they specifically relate to their ethnicities, due to fear of further discrimination and segregation. That being said, Jessop and Williams (2009) conducted a qualitative study with a small number

of black students in a small, predominantly white university in England with the view to understanding their experiences in relation to access, participation, retention and achievement. Although they found a strong sense of belonging and integration among black students, racism still existed and it was downplayed. Therefore, this contributed to feelings of isolation, particularly in relation to campus culture, and from the lack of diversity among academic staff, the curriculum, and the notable sense of awkwardness among staff and students when discussing difference (Jessop and Williams, 2009). This suggests that experiences of racism are ongoing; however, the aforementioned sense of belonging and integration might be facilitated by the size of the campus and the initiatives that exist within the educational system (Matias and Mackey, 2016).

Hillen and Levy's (2015) qualitative research into students studying on undergraduate and postgraduate social work programmes, and the experiences of academic tutors/lecturers and practice educators working with black and Asian minority students in Scotland (UK), identified that subtle microaggressions such as everyday and repeated subtle, non-verbal, unconscious attacks, negative verbal and non-verbal demeaning exchanges from white peers or academics to black students affected self-esteem, causing self-doubt, inadequacy, isolation and an inability to engage fully, especially when their views were undermined. Masocha's (2015) review of literature adds that these experiences often left black and Asian minority students feeling like an 'invisible' minority. According to Cardoza et al. (2017), a barrage of racialised microaggressions in the classroom can impact on students' psycho-emotional wellbeing, due to racial battle fatigue. Scholars in this area have argued for more positive teaching methods and learning spaces that are more supportive, safer and braver to address stress and social isolation (Cree, 2011; Arao and Clemens, 2013).

One of the criticisms of social work degrees in the UK is the differences found in their approaches; that is, some have an ethnocentric base, others a Eurocentric, depending on where they are located. These differences are not always acknowledged (Hillen and Levy, 2015). Ethnocentric approaches promote the 'white' way of learning; they fail to embrace other approaches that make way for racial understanding and multiculturalism and fail to consider the experiences of black students who are learning about social work (Bernard et al., 2011, p.13), which contributes to ongoing segregation.

Jeffery's (2005) qualitative study of social work university educators with long-term involvement in cross-cultural, and anti-racist work in Canada explored the paradox of teaching and working with 'whiteness' in social

work. Her research argues against reproducing whiteness as the overriding method of both social work practice and social work education. This Canadian perspective is relevant in the UK, given that whiteness and white perspectives remain alive and dominant, influencing social work education and practice experiences of ethnic minorities. As such, social work education should be a learning journey that problematises white privilege, oppression and discrimination. According to Harvey et al. (2010, p.70), it is the responsibility of social workers 'to understand culture, its function and to recognise the strengths that exist in all cultures'. Understanding culture should happen before practice placements and before qualifying. It should be embedded within the curriculum. Yet, evidence suggests that anti-racist practice is often watered-down without robust teaching around race and culture (Hillen and Levy, 2015). Often, anti-racism perspectives are clouded within the concepts of diversity, equality, cultural competence, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practices (Jeyasingham and Morton, 2019). This does not mean those concepts are not important but that social work should encourage anti-racist perspectives as standalone concepts that include examining a range of racial histories, institutional racism, white privilege, the priorities of social justice and diversity, without masking race, racism and race-related incivilities under the umbrella of other broader frameworks.

The notion that the UK social work curriculum is white-centric and contributes to the negative learning experiences and poor academic outcomes of black, Asian and minority ethnic students (Tadam, 2012; Bunce et al., 2019) reflects the evidence that black, Asian and minority ethnic clients are over-represented in social services and the disproportionately lower number of Black, Asian and minority ethnic employees in the population of social work academics (British Association of Social Work, 2020). It is, therefore, the responsibility of university programmes to address the negative experiences, microaggressions, Black, Asian and minority ethnic awarding and attainment gaps. Thus, the institution, its programmes, and staff should focus on becoming genuine allies that reflexively consider ways to decentre whiteness and apply teaching pedagogies that address both social isolation and racial segregation that affect learning and engagement in the classroom environment (Langdon, 2013).

With similar conclusions, Hollinrake et al. (2019) highlight existing contradictions between the delivery of values and ethics modules, and the teaching of culture and race on social work, yet minority ethnic

students continue to endure difficult experiences in the classroom, due to discrimination that hinders performance. They encourage social work programmes to offer teaching spaces that allow minority ethnic students to tell their stories and narratives without judgement. These approaches will help unravel and address colour blindness or what DiAngelo (2018) refers to as the struggle for whites to admit their privileges, due to a reluctance to see themselves in racial terms.

Teaching anti-racism should encourage students to understand their own identities first and foremost, and then those of others around them, their peers and those they learn with, before commencing practice. Casey (2015) identified that professionals working with ethnic minorities often fear being labelled racist. This fear suggests the lack of competence in exploring issues around race, ethnicity and culture that, in the end, potentially has implications for service users. On the other hand, service users worry about accessing help, due to marginalisation or discrimination, and often it is because service users do not feel listened to, understood or they feel less respected than their white counterparts (Butt, 2006). With that in mind, social work training should allow students to understand, at a deeper level, the potential impact of service users' accounts of discriminatory experiences on how they engage or interact with social work interventions.

Jeffery (2005, p.424) argued that the social worker whose consciousness is raised and who has a deeper awareness of who she is might simply be a better-skilled and competent universal subject. The elevation of racial consciousness can be supported by social work programmes that centre issues of racism beyond the pedagogy, and exploring the unfiltered history of colonisation (Haynes and Patton, 2019; Thurber, Harbin and Bandy, 2019). Deeper racial awareness can be achieved through the use of creative/innovative teaching strategies and pedagogies that do not simply address social isolation or cultural humility but that promote self-awareness, self-examination through reflection and reflexivity (Arao and Clemens, 2013; Hollinrake et al., 2019).

Arday, Belluigi and Thomas (2020) recommend decolonising activities that actively involve minority ethnic students in changing teaching and learning practices in Britain. Hollinrake et al. (2019) also emphasise that cross-examining histories of racism and oppression, and constructing knowledge by capturing black narratives, both negative and positive contributions, are important in developing emancipatory pedagogies (Hollinrake et al., 2019). This cross-examination process might not be easy when racial divides occur due to racial affinity or familiarity associated

with cognitive processes that aim to preserve white supremacy (Cole, 2018). However, one way to be creative about teaching race and racism could include small-group activities that are safe and interactive but at the same time aim to address what Wagner (2015) called the othering/them/us culture. As such, this paper is based on teaching activities including small-group activities intended to address ethnic division in the classroom as well as to promote racial integration.

Learning in small groups

The constructivist learning–teaching process by Piaget and Vygotsky (1978) suggests that students play a role in constructing information through active learning, in response to tasks provided by the facilitator, to gain a better understanding of a subject (Jaques, 2000). Learners are nurtured and scaffolded into ‘zones of proximal development’ to gain new knowledge through active participation in learning activities. In the context of anti-racist teaching pedagogies, small-group teaching may focus on social context, identities and experiences of racial segregation or incorporation, while relying on students’ cognitive abilities to disrupt segregation, thus creating a particular atmosphere or dynamic within small-group teaching.

Small-group teaching, carried out in this way, encourages learning through social interaction, and allows students to appreciate engaging in a non-dictatorial educative process as (1) it is reflective, (2) it promotes critical thinking and analysis, (3) it is focused, (4) it deepens learning, and (5) it helps to develop substantive knowledge and skills (Exley and Dennick, 2004). Students are focused on the social relations in the educative processes of an anti-racist classroom. This allows for the consideration of social issues of power and identity-taking at play in the classroom or outside of it.

However, social interdependence theory proposes that individuals are affected by their own acts and/or those of other individuals (Johnson and Johnson, 2001). As such, if group tasks are affected by segregation, cooperative learning might be difficult to achieve, mainly if the issues of conflicts of identity, negative interdependence or engagement, and a lack of responsibility or accountability towards an anti-racist classroom are present.

Pande and Drzewiecka (2017) suggest that racial assimilation and

incorporation are better models of addressing anti-racism in classrooms opposed to integration that involves merely inter-mixing and not a process of fully understanding. Pande and Drzewiecka (2017) argue that if students maintain racial consciousness within their conscious mind, then integration will help overcome stereotypes, preconceptions and prejudice based on skin colour.

This study explores students' experiences of racial disruption through classroom-based activities intended to create an anti-racist classroom environment, and enhance teaching and learning about anti-racist, anti-discrimination and anti-oppressive practice. The objective was to foster the sharing of narratives about discrimination and to strengthen self-examination about identity through reflective and reflexive activities to feed into the process of a student becoming an anti-oppressive practitioner.

Racial consciousness and teaching practices

This study draws on the concept of racial consciousness (Peller, 1995; Haynes and Patton, 2019). George Fredrickson defines race as 'consciousness of status and identity based on ancestry and colour', which he linked with division, social classification, ignorance, prejudice and aggression (1988, p.3). It is a multifaceted understanding of the racialised world and the racial climate at the individual level, as well as a mechanism to describe and evaluate the impact of various magnitudes of racial discrimination.

Critical racial consciousness, therefore, involves a critical understanding of the uneven power relationships that exist between different racial backgrounds (Carter, 2005). It involves critical reflection on how assumptions, privilege, and biases about race influence one's perception of the world. Among ethnic students, racial consciousness heightens awareness of racism, stigmatised status, and how these contribute to poorer educational or attainment outcomes, lack of support, disparities in learning, and employability for black students, as well as structural barriers perpetuating inequality.

Singh's (2019) study exploring the outcomes of anti-racist social work education concluded that when the right teaching approaches are employed that include intercultural dialogue and unravelling unconscious bias, this enables deeper racial consciousness and self-examination, alteration in attitudes, insights, and gaining the right knowledge and skills for practice.

However, Jeyasingham and Morton's (2019) literature review identified the scarcity of social work literature exploring teaching practices that reflect on racial history, discourse and narratives. Their work is supported by Arday et al. (2020), who conducted a study with Russell University student participants and concluded that classroom discourse and conversations on race are a helpful step to understand the realities of colonial struggle, and to think creatively and collectively about decolonisation as well as to support minority ethnic students with their day-to-day struggles with institutional racism. They assert that both students and social workers need to be more conscious and reflective about their own positionality and look deeper into racial constructs and how these manifest into oppression (Jeyasingham and Morton, 2019). The pedagogies employed in this project encouraged participants to actively reflect upon the challenges of racialised experiences and differences in identities.

Research aims and objectives

The overall objective was to offer students the space to learn from experiences concerning their own identities, with the view to prepare for social work practice.

The study aims of the research included:

- to understand how trainee social workers relate to race and ethnicity-based discrimination,
- to provide a safe space for students to reflect and learn from a range of narratives about identity, through racially disruptive classroom pedagogies and group work, enabling them to develop racial consciousness.

This paper is specifically interested in the views and experiences of minority ethnic students, following a racially disruptive teaching activity. The rationale for this is that minority ethnic students had played a substantial role in sharing their stories and narratives. Because of this, and in light of pre-existing research highlighting that minority ethnic students continue to be viewed as culturally deficient (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) and that their experiences of ongoing racist practices, microaggressions (Masocha, 2015), and white dominance still prevail (Feagin, 2013), their views were noteworthy.

The study

Methodology

An interpretative qualitative research design using the concept of race consciousness (Peller, 1995) was applied to the study. Interpretivism was an approach to aid sense-making through ongoing reflection, pre-suppositions, and experiences of racism. It also accounted for any sensitivities in the variation of interpretation occurring during the analysis process, as often 'there is no place to stand outside of the social world that allows a view of truth unmediated by human knowledge and embeddedness in circumstance' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013, p.98). Participants' experiences and responses were, therefore, taken as their reality. However, this paper will present a critical analysis and interpretation of those experiences.

Methods

This activity employed disruptive pedagogy, which was intended to disrupt a number of factors that promoted division, isolation, dominance, oppression, discrimination and existing relations of power within and beyond classroom structures, practices and routines (Mills, 1997). Disruptive pedagogy in this paper involved challenging seating arrangements that promoted segregation of minority ethnic students, challenging oppressiveness and prejudice in the form of verbal and non-verbal language, and assumptions that worked in favour of maintaining white dominance. The activity enabled students to see themselves as tools for creating better awareness and consciousness through reflective activities.

To achieve this, a session on protected characteristics and anti-racist practice in social work was delivered to 27 Bachelor (Hons) of Social Work students of whom 45% were white and 55% minority ethnic students. The overall population of white students within the university was 49% with the predominance of white teaching faculty and professional services staff at the time of this research. Minority ethnic students still felt racially segregated through observable blatant racial division. Bernard et al. (2011) reported that higher education institutions represent knowledge and experiences of dominant social groups. For marginalised students, this affects staff-student relationships as well as peer relations within the

classroom. As such, 'racialised spaces' can be a representation of power, and thus, a barrier to integration (Foucault, 1977).

As noted earlier by prominent researchers in this area of study (Bernard et al., 2011; Tedam, 2012), the social work course itself promotes racial and cultural bias given its Eurocentric focus. It promotes white dominant perspectives and white cultural values, and places whiteness in a superior place in terms of language, and from some minority ethnic perspectives on this course, 'possessing correct accents' and clear articulation of the English languages, traditions and the overall social constructs of social work practice and education. With this in mind, students were already working within the hierarchies of power and dominance.

Prior to this study, participants had already learned, from other modules, the fundamental values of social work, the aspects of othering, cultural competence, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, and they had learned about human rights and the protected characteristics of identity during the early stages of their programme. In effect, the activity expected students to draw on the learning from these activities to inform a greater level of reflective discussions during this activity. Of the 27 students only 12 students completed the post-activity survey.

Activity one

The first activity involved disrupting classroom stereotypes. Participants were asked to stand around the class, next to someone of a different racial or ethnic make-up or gender (although gender was not of critical importance for this study) while facing the wall, to facilitate engagement in a safe, positive and non-judgemental learning space.

All participants had consented to tell the class how some aspects of their intersectional protected characteristics and identities resulted in discrimination. They spoke about how they had been negatively treated due to their identity, for example: (i) 'because of my identity as X, ... are negative experiences I have gone through'. They then told the group how they expect to be treated so that they did not feel oppressed or discriminated, for example (ii) 'because of my identity as X, I expect to be treated...'. Participants were free to disclose aspects of their identity with which they felt comfortable, or to withdraw from the task at any point.

Activity two

To diversify engagement, and as part of the second activity, participants worked in small groups with peers from mixed backgrounds in terms of

race, ethnicity and gender, and with colleagues with whom they did not usually associate. Self-selection was discouraged, so as to create space for discomfort and engagement with deeper learning (Santas, 2000; Waring and Bordoloi, 2012).

Group tasks ran for 45 minutes. Within the groups, a particular focus was placed on:

1. exploring what students heard in activity one, the impact of discrimination,
2. recognising commonalities between them (participants) and reflecting on 'identity', including racial privileges, discrimination, and oppression (race and identity as the main focus),
3. exploring how those experiences could be avoided,
4. reflecting on learning about anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice through personal and peer experiences,
5. participants discussing their experiences of taking part in this session, their feelings of discomfort, and the learning arising from this.

The sessions normalised the difficulties that arose in discussing race, ethnicity or other aspects of protected identities. All participants were asked to imagine and empathise with the experiences of clients who struggle with inequality and oppression. This was in order to develop the skills necessary for practice.

Activity three

Participants were then asked to engage in meta-cognitive reflections by writing down in their critical reflective journals concerns they had about race/racism in the classroom, discomfort experienced from the two classroom-based activities and learning arising from this (Thurber et al., 2019). The purpose of the reflection was to support the development of self-awareness in relation to racial being, race consciousness, and their relationships with others' racial identities.

Reflection was also to aid an understanding of emotional responses to the interactions, to appreciate the emotional reactions of others, and reflect upon the similarities and differences to their own. These reflective exercises encouraged 'embodied dimensions' of learning (Estrada and Matthews, 2016). Learning from lived experience allowed students to take ownership of their own emotional responses about race, racism, white supremacy, and whiteness (Estrada and Matthews, 2016). Participants were offered optional reflective prompts focusing on race:

1. How do you perceive your peers' experiences in relation to their race and their intersectional protected characteristics?
2. How do you think your peers consider your racialised experiences?
3. Is there anything new you have learned in regards to your own racialised experiences or those of your peers?
4. From your group discussions, is there anything you need to change to ensure racial integration or address racial discrimination in the classroom or on the course? What might be the barriers?
5. How do you think this learning will translate into your social work training and how you should engage with clients in the future?

These individual reflections were not included in the data but were designed to support reflective practice and professional development.

Post-activity survey

After the sessions, participants completed a short semi-structured qualitative questionnaire asking open-ended questions about their feelings and experiences of the racial disruption component of this project, particularly, the first where students were mixed and their thoughts about racial integration on the course. Examples of questions relevant to this study included:

- What is your view about racial mixing and integration to combat racial division?
- How do you think the activities on racial disruption supported your learning around cultural competence?
- What are the main areas of learning gained from this activity?

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the institutional ethics committee in 2018. Participants were provided with information sheets and verbal explanations about the research and its benefits before taking part, they gave consent to take part in both learning activities as well as the survey and had the right to withdraw at any time. All activities were not recorded,

in order to render safe learning spaces, encourage the embodiment of the learning process, to help sustain conversations, foster open reflections about what they had learned, and to allow unfiltered sense-making of discriminatory experiences disclosed in group discussions. Moreover, the study was about exploring individual experiences of 'racial disruption', thus, recording of these was not essential. However, one-to-one support was offered to those who felt emotionally affected by the exercise requiring space to buffer their emotions, thoughts and feelings.

Analysis

A thematic analysis was undertaken, using NVIVO, through an exploration of commonalities and variances of experience across participant responses. Common themes were reported, although relevant quotations were used in the presentation of the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2012). The interpretive analysis was informed by the concept of race consciousness, which situates the social construction of race, recognises the impact of racial division, pinpoints the lived experiences of oppression and exploitation and, like other critical race theories, is a vehicle for challenging oppression and championing decolonisation and inclusive teaching and learning pedagogies (Arday et al., 2020).

Findings

Racial integration as an uncomfortable and unnatural experience

Through this study, it became apparent that there were limited creative opportunities to enhance discussions about race, racial histories, greater understanding of the narratives of racism and oppression among peers to promote racial assimilation.

In this study, the division between black and white students in lecture rooms was common, but particularly blatant. This observation corroborates with other studies, suggesting that the absence of racial assimilation and incorporation results in isolation, and active racial discernment (Pande and Drzewiecka, 2017). Racial disruption as a teaching strategy aimed to

eradicate racial division. However, mixing students of different groups and creating space to explore identities and experiences of racism was considered a 'forced experience' [Kalama]. This was partly because students reported that they were not always 'prompted to integrate in other classes' and 'there was reluctance to integrate involuntarily' [Ayanna]. As such, for some, racial assimilation and disruption created a sense of awkwardness:

Racial integration is a forced activity and it's not comfortable or natural. There clearly is a strong divide between ethnic minorities and white students but within the ethnic minority groups there is a group of Africans, Caribbeans, and Asians and that has its own issues. The division can be suffocating... [and] very disempowering ... Some white students portrayed themselves as having an interest in challenging racism, their experiences and challenges of addressing racism ... but when you get to know them you see that it was all a front but it becomes very difficult to challenge because some African students are timid and do not like confrontation. [Phoenix]

The above participant portrays an absence of racial incorporation or deeper genuine racial engagement between participants of different races. As such, this created tension and disempowerment. As with other studies, disempowerment prevents minority ethnic students from having influence, holding a position of power or authority, or succeeding (Bernard et al., 2011; Masocha et al., 2015). Phoenix's exception alludes to optical allyship, where white peers made statements about challenging racism at the surface without genuine and deeper commitment towards understanding and addressing racism. Notably, the division between minority ethnic groupings is also prominent but this is outside the scope of this paper.

Racial challenges that were observed in group reflections were seen as a continuation of racism in the outside world:

Inside and outside the classroom, these patterns of relationships [racial divisions] continue... It is something engrained and difficult to break down. The way we are so divided represents a bigger problem of racism in the bigger society... it's like a pecking order, like a tick box classification of your race on application forms. [Axel]

Racial division in and outside of the classroom is recognised by Cole (2018) as a cognitive process that allows students to pursue an identity goal, promote a preferred sense of self, and an identity of affiliation but that it

preserves white superiority whether or not it is intentional. In the case of Axel, and in the latter part of Phoenix's contribution, their experiences reflect racial hierarchies where we see the division between black and white and inequality that operates on a larger scale in the society, pointing to bigger racialised social systems (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Teaching spaces should also be used to empower and equip minority ethnic students to call out or challenge white fragility without the fear of being labelled as aggressive or confrontational.

The majority of students believed that the effort to disrupt racial division was helpful and it enabled students, particularly white students, to become more conscious about their biases. However, students quickly returned to their affinities:

White colleagues were consciously working on their biases and thinking carefully about where to sit, but it [racial incorporation] could not result in integration easily because students still clog back together within their ethnic groups afterwards... when you meet white colleagues in a different situation, like on placement around other white people, they blatantly ignore or avoid you. [Zane]

Notably, outside of racially disruptive teaching, students preferred to circulate within familiar groups. This is debatable because it feels safer, familiar, or comfortable. However, this sustains traditional dichotomous thinking that preserves othering, and is entrenched within racial ideologies – us/them, white/other, oppressed/oppressor binaries (Wagner, 2005).

Generally, there was a consensus that racial division should be addressed to liberate and progress the re-examining of racial compromises. It is argued that teaching pedagogies that unsettle and disrupt deeply rooted racial frames that promote division are important in social work teaching in order to allow the shaping of psychological and emotional constructs needed by student social workers towards becoming knowledgeable and competent anti-racist practitioners.

Racial disruption as an opportunity to learn, debate and reflect

Since this project was about self-surveillance through critical reflection and discursive engagement about experiences of discrimination in groups of participants with mixed identities, Michel Foucault's (1977) notion of panopticism is relevant here, as minority ethnic students felt they were

under constant scrutiny. It was also important to ensure that neither white students or minority ethnic students were made to feel like ‘the other’.

However, some participants were concerned about the possible reinforcement of stereotypes and microaggressions arising from involuntary mixing. During post-lecture activity reflections, African students in particular spoke about how some white students reported they struggled to understand African accents compared to black British accents. The former was deemed ‘stronger’ and the latter ‘softer and comprehensible.’ On the other hand, racial consciousness allowed students to examine their personal and professional values:

The group reflections with people of different colour and race [were] quite interesting because the people in my group asked a lot of questions about my experiences and when we discussed things, it helped me see things differently... from the point of view of my white peers, there are things they do not get ... for example, being told we should not place the race card when we are truly experiencing racism and microaggressions. Where their stereotypes and biases come from. I helped someone else learn from how I feel about racism, why I struggle to talk openly about my race and identity, and what I have been going through. [Raeni]

While ethnic minorities predominantly told their stories, group discussions enabled participants to understand racial double standards. They were also able to reflect and appreciate the importance of learning from and educating others. This corroborates with Arday et al. (2020), asserting the importance of classroom discourse and conversations on race and identity in order to disrupt inequalities. This learning was seen as a way to disrupt inequalities in classrooms and to prepare for practice:

It is important to understand diversity and our own identities in class to be respectful and become more aware of difference. It is important for social workers to know their own identity in order for them to work safely. As individuals, social workers are the tool of the profession. They need to apply the use of self in everything they do. If a social worker doesn't know their identity, they most probably don't know what makes them who they are in terms of values and wonder how they will manage talking about identity with service users angry and bitter about how their identity has disadvantaged them: [Jett]

The above excerpt alludes to an important professional skill of knowing the self and the use of self in social work as a helpful tool for social

worker–client relationships, where understanding of difference in culture and identities can be negotiated and communicated to disrupt oppression. This point relates to the process of discovering, discussing difference and disrupting racism and oppression as noted in Tendam's (2021) 4D2P's anti-oppressive framework. Through understanding of one's identity and culture, during and post-training, social workers should be able to demonstrate anti-oppressive, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice.

Students who felt that teaching was broadly focused on service users appreciated deeper learning arising from the classroom space:

As students, we always tend to talk about diversity as if it relates to us vs the service users. I don't think there is a culture whereby students are supported to talk, share and even challenge each other's diversity or aspect of it that may cause a problem in future practice. There were times where white people were challenged because they denied the racist experiences that were disclosed existed. Challenging each other constructively was definitely missing. I always felt that the university environment is the best and safest place to discuss, reflect and debate individual diversities but this has never happened and people always choose to remain on the safe side, which felt almost like political correctness. [Rocco]

Space to explore a range of complex identities and cross-cultural issues before direct engagement with service users was considered vital to prepare for practice and to avoid mistakes. However, teaching on cultural competence was not considered innovative:

When we did cultural competence, the lecturer should have addressed issues of white privilege and racial social oppression, but their approach was not as stringent to address and challenge these behaviours ... the disruption today was really encouraging because we were all able to discover aspects of other people's identity that we never knew about. We spoke openly and reflected on their sad experiences, my own biases. More sessions like these will help us appreciate other people's realities, their cultures, things that are not taught in class but the pain that people carry with them and how they expect to be treated. [Palaila]

As well as inadequate teaching around cultural competence, participants recognised hesitation in discussing issues about race, as their white

counterparts feared being labelled racist:

White students in my group were worried about being perceived racist when asking questions about our race and cultures. Surely in the classroom it must be safe to help us build the confidence and to avoid mistakes with service users. [Lenus]

Across the excerpts, students indicated fear from colleagues about exploring the identity of minority ethnic peers and experiences of racism was common. The inability to discuss identity and race is likely to lead to students failing to appreciate the reality of racism, ongoing colour blindness and manifestation of racism. Providing students with safe learning spaces to openly explore the right language and discourse confronts the fear of holding conversations about race, and to develop confidence in critically exploring or reconceptualising conversations about race is important for developing racial consciousness, self-awareness and anti-racist practice (Arao and Clemens, 2013). These conversations should promote self-awareness and conscious appreciation about the impact of incivilities on the other (Jeffery, 2005):

For these participants, racially disruptive learning methods are important in providing feelings of discomfort as long as they lead to rich learning about difficult knowledge about race, diverse complex cultural issues, and transformation. This process, as preparation for practice, was deemed important, given that once qualified as social workers,

we do not have a choice about which service users we want to work with. [Oz]

Discussion

Unique to this study is the use of a range of activities that disrupt racial division in classrooms and the facilitation of anti-racism reflective sessions. This study advances the importance of racial disruption in social work education in order to make way for teaching and learning about racial identities, experiences of discrimination and racial consciousness. There is a need for further racially disruptive teaching methods to support the decolonisation agenda and its attempt to promote the diversification of the classroom. Although disrupting racial segregation was uncomfortable for some learners, if offered within the principle of brave spaces and

with sensitivities, the process will equip students for practice. It will allow students who endure challenging racial experiences to use their narratives as tools for learning, at the same time helping peers overcome the anxieties they may have over how to facilitate conversations about race with others. However, caution should be taken when seeking narratives and story-telling approaches from minority ethnic students, as they could be overburdened with teaching their peers, which might result in a barrier to learning, arising from over-reliance and moral injury.

This study argues that teaching about race, the disruption of race, racism and knowledge will engender a higher level of racial consciousness; however, the absence of consistent racial incorporation prevents the development of critical race intelligence among social work students before they qualify (Arday, Belluigi and Thomas, 2020). The findings support Casey (2015), suggesting that the absence of racial consciousness among practitioners, may, in practice, omit important aspects of service users' identities because they are either worried about being called racists or they are unsure about how to start the conversations. Thus, the training ground is in education and training spaces (Tadam, 2019; Singh, 2019).

As with other studies, teaching pedagogies that encourage learning from each other's experiences have myriad potential benefits, not only for students from the dominant group, to understand the anti-racist perspective (Wagner, 2005). Drawing from this paper's findings, fear of disrupting knowledge and delivering anti-racist concepts creates a barrier to disrupting racial division and racial inequalities, not just in the classroom but also in the delivery of health and social care services. Thus, culturally sensitive teaching practices that disrupt racism should be seen as a process of breaking the silence and making anti-racist social work education visible in the learning and teaching contexts (Tadam, 2019; Singh, 2019). This visibility should not only be to students as a way of preparing for practice but also to white colleagues so that they, too, commit to the decolonisation agenda.

Conclusion

There are practice and skills benefits if social work education utilises racially disruptive activities in social work education. Curricula content needs to be carefully selected and facilitated with in-depth exploration

of racial identity and positive and negative racial experiences, in order to disrupt inequalities. Both students and facilitators need to be brave in continuing anti-racist work, and to be committed to transforming teaching practices and classroom environments so that they become more inclusive. Teaching students how to start conversations about race is important. It needs care and sensitivity to avoid problematising one race. Instead, it is preferable to look at the historical and political context of race and racism, appreciate the relevance of students' narratives and experiences as authentic when exploring dominant racial positions. The relevance of this view is around the concepts of anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice perspectives where social workers are required to understand and challenge oppressive and discriminatory practices. Social work students leaving training competent in these areas should be able to extricate the complexities of oppression and the manner in which numerous oppressions interconnect.

While this study is limited to a small group of students, the idea of disruptive pedagogies in classroom teaching anti-racist practice is important in preparing students in social work training as part of readiness for the direct practice component of the course, and in preparation for practice learning. In terms of practice education, students in practice can be encouraged to reflect on racialised experiences, racial narratives, and discrimination or oppression through group supervision or action learning sets, as the means to augment the provision of safe reflective spaces intended to enable them to learn from each other with the view to cement anti-racist practice. Further studies exploring the effectiveness of racially disruptive pedagogies once students are both reaching the end of their studies and once in employment are needed as this will help us understand the impact of such innovative teaching approaches on minority ethnic service users.

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