

Using Community Service Learning as a Conduit to Decolonise Bachelor of Social Work Education

Delores V. Mullings

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6802-0735>
St John's College, Canada
dmullings@mun.ca

Emily Power

Ontario Association of Social Workers
Canada

Sulaimon Giwa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8076-0277>
Memorial University of Newfoundland
Canada
sgiwa@mun.ca

Karun K. Karki

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8712-6831>
University of the Fraser Valley
Canada
karun.karki@ufv.ca

Melanie Burt

The Newfoundland and Labrador
College of Social Work, Canada

Courtney Caines

The Newfoundland and Labrador
College of Social Work, Canada

Paige English-Lillos

The Newfoundland and Labrador
College of Social Work, Canada

Ashlyn McLean

The Newfoundland and Labrador
College of Social Work, Canada

Jessica Ricketts

The Newfoundland and Labrador
College of Social Work, Canada

Abstract

Social work education and practice have been implicated in colonial violence against Black and Indigenous people in Canada. Notwithstanding, undergraduate students enter social work programmes ready to “help” service recipients. Schools of social work also continue to centre social work education around the notion of “helping” alongside other key activities such as advocacy and counselling. Regarding the intent, social work education and practice have and continue to perpetuate anti-Black racism, racism, and colonialism at the intersections of race, among some of the most vulnerable and systemically disadvantaged in society. This article demonstrates how to combine decolonising social work education and community service learning (CSL) to provide students an opportunity to critically and consciously work with community groups to meet the community’s needs. This reflective paper

captures 1) the lessons learned and growth achieved among a group of undergraduate social work learners as they completed a CSL term project through a decolonised lens in partnership with Indigenous community members in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada; and 2) the coaching and support that the teacher provided to the students to help them understand colonisation and their complicity as mostly white settler learners and future social work practitioners. The paper discusses the importance of CSL and decolonising social work education; then outlines the class's context, process, and actions; next, through excerpts, CSL reflections are shared, and the paper concludes with a brief discussion.

Keywords: community service learning; decolonisation; social work education; white privilege; Indigenous

Introduction

When I pose the question, “why social work?” to undergraduate learners, the most popular response is to “help others” as their primary reason for enrolling in the social work programme. This response may be well-intentioned, but how, then, do schools of social work shift the learners’ focus on helping in partnership while guiding them to recognise the complexities inherent in the helping process? Despite, or perhaps because of, the emphasis on helping others, the social work profession has repeatedly failed to work effectively with vulnerable populations, thereby revictimising many groups and individuals in their quest to “help.” In Canada, for example, “help” for Indigenous and Black families has historically resulted in the destruction of those very families that practitioners claim to help (Absolon 2019; Adjei et al. 2017; Chansonneuve 2005; Haig-Brown and Nock 2006; Ojo 2016; Phillips and Pon 2018). These families have borne the brunt of a helping social work profession that continues to perpetuate anti-Black racism and colonialism, separating children from their kin and placing them in state care (Blackstock 2015; CBC 2014; Clarke et al. 2018; Contenta, Monsebraaten, and Rankin 2016; Humphreys 2014).

The colonial-based education in schools of social work is inadequate and renders social work graduates ill equipped to work effectively with Indigenous, African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) families, among others. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) implicated social work education and practice in the genocide of Indigenous people in Canada. Joining other social work scholars, this paper argues that decolonising social work education is one way to address anti-Black, racist, and colonialist victimisation of children and families (Absolon 2019; Hackett 2019; Mullings et al. 2021; Razack 2009; Sinclair 2004). Social work education must be transformed to provide social work learners with the knowledge and skills to practise with systemically disadvantaged communities at the intersection of race. Decolonised social work education through CSL is a viable option.

This reflective paper captures 1) the lessons learned and growth achieved among a group of undergraduate social work learners as they completed a CSL term project through a decolonised lens in partnership with Indigenous community members in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada; and 2) the coaching and support that the teacher provided to the students to help them understand colonisation and their complicity as mostly white settler learners and future social work practitioners. To begin, we discuss the importance of CSL and decolonising social work education; then we outline our context, process, and actions; next, through excerpts, we highlight aspects of CSL by sharing reflections that were completed as a part of the class requirements. The paper concludes with a brief discussion.

Community Service Learning

As learners exposed to this type of experiential learning, we begin by discussing the concepts and premises of CSL, as we understand and experienced it in relation to our term experience. CSL and decolonised education provided an opportunity for us to collaborate with community members on a project that the community chose and that we, the students, helped facilitate. CSL is an innovative pedagogical tool that challenges traditional teaching and learning; it “intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant community service” (Howard 1998, 22). The process of participating in our CSL project helped us to theoretically and practically learn about disadvantaged populations. We realised that collaborating with the community is key (Gerstenblatt and Gilbert 2014) to having successful CSL projects. Therefore, our experience with CSL allowed us to engage with populations that we would not otherwise be in contact with until field practicum or paid practice. We applied theories from course texts and discussions to our partnership with the community and experienced what it potentially feels like to be on the front lines of decolonised racial justice work.

An important principle in CSL is the reflective component (Furuto 2007; Phillips 2007) to meet the full potential of a learning and teaching tool. As such, we were required to participate in ongoing reflection, both in-class and by individually submitted written and artistic assignments throughout the term. This constant reflection allowed us to deconstruct, critically analyse and understand our actions, experiences, and feelings. Indeed, the reflective component helped us to understand the deeper meaning of CSL (Gerstenblatt and Gilbert 2014; Phillips 2007). Through reflections, we examined our lived experience with community collaboration and began thinking about our future roles as social workers and facilitators of decolonising social work practice, racial justice, and social transformation. Many of the students in the class had our first experience with civic engagement during our community partnership. CSL advocates suggest that service learning is not something that can be ignored in university systems, as it is a tool for social justice (Ko 2015). We discovered that it is important for CSL to become a part of social work education; it challenges colonial education systems while helping students to extend their learning beyond what is taught in the classroom. Therefore, we support the argument that for “students to develop a commitment to social

justice, they need to experience diversity and be in relationships with individuals from different backgrounds and circumstances” (Benigni Cipolle 2010, 33). With Indigenous community members’ leadership, our service learning project helped to bring increased attention to the social problem of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). This learning experience will help us become collaborative leaders for racial justice as we embrace the opportunity to decolonise future social work practice.

Decolonising Social Work Education

Colonisation has uprooted people, forcing them to disconnect from their lands, languages, and cultures (Ibrahima and Mattaini 2019; Rodney 2018; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). It has destroyed civilisations, ways of being, infrastructures, political systems, and social supports that predate European capitalist, individualistic, economic world views (MacDonald and Steenbeek 2015; Rodney 1974). Tuck and Yang (2012) posit that in settler societies such as Canada, theories of decolonisation create the space to analyse and assess settler colonialism and anti-Blackness in education. Decolonising education includes transforming the curriculum, physical architect, symbols and spaces, the identities of those in positions of power, embedding local and community histories and lived experiences (Absolon 2019; Mullings 2013; Tuck and Yang 2012); and represents a “communal project of resistance to Eurocentric knowledge production and consumption” (Maringira and Gukurume 2016, 39). Educators and administrators at institutions of higher learning have increasingly used the term decolonisation in a performative manner by inserting Indigenous guest speakers, reading land acknowledgements, having Elders bring prayers and some Indigenous content at events and in courses. Meaningful Indigenous presence must be deliberate and consistent to signal a commitment to decolonisation social work education.

Using a decolonised approach in CSL is an important aspect of racial justice work because it allows students to help create community empowerment (DePaola 2014) rather than assuming a position of power. Black and Indigenous people continue to experience the remnants of historical and new forms of colonisation (e.g., child welfare workers scrutinising their parenting practices) which results in children’s disproportionate apprehension from their families and overrepresentation in foster and group homes (Blackstock 2015; Clarke et al. 2018). Absolon (2019, 12) notes that schools of social work “continue to demonstrate a lack of core curriculum that offers accurate and quality Anishinaabek/Indigenous perspectives and decolonising courses.” As future social worker practitioners, learners are responsible for helping to create the space for systemically disadvantaged people to tell their own stories—an important first step along a continuum in decolonising social work education and facilitating social transformation.

Context, Demographics and Process

In September 2014, this project was started with a group of 20 first-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students, representing a rich demographic, including those self-

identifying as between the ages of 18 and 32, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, living with (dis)abilities, and originally from rural, remote, and urban centres. The majority identify as women of European descent, cisgender, Christian, and born in Newfoundland and Labrador. The teacher self-identifies as a cisgender Black woman of African Caribbean descent.

One of the students describes the process as follows. At the beginning of the semester, our teacher offered to work with anyone who wanted to write and publish an article about our experience in the course. Throughout the term, she reminded us that we could use our reflections and journal notes as a foundation for our manuscripts. She recorded her reflections in a journal throughout the semester, some of which are used in this article. At the end of the course, she again offered to support us in publishing something as a group to share our experience. Several students agreed to work on the manuscript together. She scheduled four meetings to guide us in defining our process, and helped us organise how to proceed with the actual writing. Our teacher coached us on how to create the outline and write for academic journals. We discussed the most salient aspects of our experiences from our own perspectives; then we reviewed our final paper and other reflections submitted throughout the term. We then chose excerpts from our reflections and journals relevant to our learning that we wanted to share. After we had chosen our excerpts, our teacher grouped them into themes (Carey 2012). We also divided up tasks, including literature search and review, drafting, referencing, and editing, according to our strengths. To represent learners who contributed excerpts, we use the pseudonyms Clair, Candice, Joan, Megan, Sara, and Vanessa to share our experiences. Note that not all authors provided excerpts that are reflected in the themes.

Term Project Context

As part of decolonising education, our class was required to participate in several community-based and community-led activities while decentring ourselves, learning from the community and giving back. With leadership from the Indigenous Student Centre at Memorial University, our class helped to organise and participate in the “Sisters in Spirit Vigil,” an annual event to “honour the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls [MMIWG] and gender diverse people, support grieving families, and create opportunities for healing” (NWAC 2020, para. 1).

Our class felt it was important to continue with decolonising our education after hearing the messages shared at the MMIWG’s vigil. When our teacher presented the opportunity for our class to choose a term project, we chose to partner with various members of Indigenous communities in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, to centre the MMIWG crisis. The method of deciding on the project and contacting community members immediately introduced us to several CSL concepts. Our professor created an encouraging learning environment where we had the flexibility to make our own choices. We introduced our idea to members of Indigenous communities to seek direction and feedback. We were directed to make a documentary about the MMIWG crisis, and we did not hesitate.

The experience of decolonising social work education and doing a CSL project was uncomfortable, and filled with tension, conflict, energy, growth, and pride. Our class's collaboration with the community was a success: together we created a 23-minute documentary about MMIWG. In the process, we built lasting relationships with community members and among each other, challenged racial injustice and colonisation, and civically engaged in our community. The documentary debuted at the end of our semester in December 2014 and was well received by a large public audience at Memorial University. Our professor guided our experience. She was our sounding board and source of encouragement and—much to our discomfort but equally important—consistently challenged us to look at things when we wanted to hide them or hide from them.

Decolonising Pedagogy: Facilitating, Coaching and Guiding

The facilitator of this project (Mullings), who is the professor of the class, describes the fundamental principles of her teaching as follows. Decolonising pedagogy is the hallmark of my teaching and learning approach, where I centre race and racialisation at their intersections. Social work education, predicated on Eurocentrism, promotes racist ideals which must be eradicated. Similar to hooks (1994), I believe that education is a freeing experience, so I implement various forms of decolonising strategies, including interrogating and deconstructing colonisation's historical impact and contemporary manifestation, coaching, encouraging students to build relationships with community members, introducing content from a complex global perspective, eliminating formal lectures and Power Point presentations, sharing decision-making power and providing direct and intense individual and group support. These activities demonstrate to learners the possible ways of freeing themselves from the entrapment of colonial educational experiences. Other ways in which I decolonise social work education occur with whole semester CSL class projects, where learners work reciprocally with community groups to fulfil the community's needs. Many learners are unsure of what decolonising education and CSL are, so they engage reluctantly but blossom through the semester, suggesting that “this class has changed me personally and professionally” (verbal class feedback). Others criticise the experience, noting that “the professor should teach the class and not expect students to do her job” (Personal Communication, December 2014).

I am invested in my and learners' liberation and freedom as demonstrated in my teaching and learning practice; I want to “grow and [be] empowered by the process” of learning, so I model vulnerability (hooks 1994, 22). Assuming this position is not easy. *Mi haffi* (I must) have courage; but “courage, as a virtue, is not something I can find outside myself. Because it comprises the conquering of my fears, it implies fear” (Freire 1998, 39–46). I concretise my primary role to help motivate, encourage, and challenge learners to question their own existence built on racist and colonial values. I also incorporate the values and knowledge of CSL partners in the classroom to honour the decolonising process. Therefore, learners see themselves and the community reflected in their learning spiritually and emotionally. My support enables learners to resolve conflicts, have tense conversations among themselves and with me, become aware of personal

and systemic power, and develop and maintain strong, meaningful relationships. This approach is “informed by a political project that speaks not only to the interest of individual freedom and social reconstruction, but also has immediate relevance” for my teaching practice (Giroux 2001, 77).

Decolonising Social Work Education in Action

I (Mullings) assumed the role of facilitator, coach, and guide in my attempt to decolonise social work education. I journal to capture my experiences as an educator; reflect on my learners’ and my own growth and development, and this provides a foundation for adjusting my pedagogy and activities. In this section, I draw upon my notes and journals regarding my experiences and thoughts about this course. I share some of the details on how one of our 60 minutes class discussions unfolded. This discussion was designed to help learners reflect on the motivation for their reactions to a potential community partner, who had not responded to their communications within their expected time. Since it was a term project, planning needed to begin immediately but could only begin when community partnerships were formed. When the potential community partner did not respond as the learners had expected, they voiced frustration and anger. I intervened on their behalf, and it appeared that the contact person had been away from work.

Our class discussion was guided by the following premise and questions: The community organisation has no obligation or responsibility to support, partner with, or help to educate learners in our course. Furthermore, as the only community agency of its kind in the city, it is inundated with requests for public speaking, specialised training, community partnerships, and student placements. Being a not-for-profit organisation, they have a high volume of users and are resource limited. Important questions had to be answered: Were learners using their own experiences with social media (instant response) to judge community members? Did they understand the complexities of not-for-profit organisations? Were they angry with the community member because they felt the member should be more responsive to their needs? Did they think that community members ought to be grateful that they wanted to partner with them? Did they feel disrespected? How did race, racism, and colonialism influence learners’ reactions?

I drew on the work of Black and Indigenous scholars to guide students through discussions and reflections on the motivation and impact of colonisation and the exoticisation of Indigenous peoples. We discussed how schools, researchers, and politicians are clamouring to check boxes or add lines to their repertoire showing their work with Indigenous communities, and sometimes, Indigenous individuals and communities are harmed in the process. This may include ignoring their communities’ histories and needs, lumping all Indigenous peoples into one group, not properly consulting on research, implementing misaligned cultural practices, ignoring calls for self-determination, failing to listen to their ideas, and imposing colonial rules. Our discussion also explored aspects of colonial experiences of Indigenous peoples’ histories and how historical and contemporary experiences may influence potential

partnerships with people who are not Indigenous, including the history of violence and harm that those in institutions, such as the church (nuns, priests), criminal justice, and government (politicians, teachers, social workers) have perpetuated against Black, Indigenous, and racialised communities (Battiste 2000; Clarke et al. 2018; Hart 1999; Mishra and Hodge 1991; Mullings, Morgan, and Quelleng 2016). These discussions were passionate, nonlinear, and complex. At times, many learners seemed angry, defensive, reluctant or unable to fully engage in the discussions when they were challenged, whereas others seemed open to adjusting their ways of thinking. There is no suggestion that history was erased with these small discussions or that learners' perspectives changed with new knowledge, but the hope is that they learn to critically interrogate themselves, their beliefs, values, and ideas, including power and privilege, as well as their expectations and perceptions of Indigenous communities.

Student Reflections

This section highlights aspects of our learning by sharing reflections that we completed as part of the class requirements during the CSL project. Although the class worked together in teams on the project, we were required to submit individual reflections based on our own learning throughout the semester; this is a core CSL principle. Reflections gave us a richer understanding of our learning as our experience unfolded. Writing the reflections was sometimes challenging and emotional, but the process elucidated the need to decolonise social work education and our roles as social justice facilitators.

These assignments and class exercises encouraged us to go inside ourselves to question our ways of being and our motives for doing things. Dr Mullings said to us “think with your belly” and “dig deeper.” We began to think outside of our immediate course work with the project and contemplated the impact of our individual interactions with community members and our classmates. This was valuable learning that we believe would not have been uncovered without reflection, because we were focused on the action part of our project, which limited our ability to realise our growth in preparation for becoming effective social. As many of us were new to civic engagement and the concept of decolonisation, we had to leave our comfort zone and dive into the project.

The information in this section is taken from our final class assignment, a reflection paper, which our class designed with support from our facilitator, short reflection assignments that were submitted throughout the term and notes from class discussions. That final paper, submitted on the last day of class, captures our growing understanding of colonisation and CSL. Four themes emerged in our learning: unfair challenge and uncomfortable feelings; community-based learning; learning about whiteness; and power and control.

Unfair Challenge and Uncomfortable Feelings

Decolonising education combined with CSL challenged us in ways we had never experienced anywhere in our education. The learning and adjustments to connect the

course content (theory) to practice were rewarding. The learning was challenging but effective. Many students shared Megan's feelings of discomfort (student reflections are presented verbatim):

During the semester, I often felt uncomfortable with the concept and practice of CSL. I was stepping outside of my comfort zone by making decisions for myself when it came to education. This was scary for me because I did not feel ready to face these issues on my own. [Megan]

Joan went further to discuss both theory and practice to capture their feelings:

Researchers say CSL is an ideal teaching and learning tool to help students learn about and understand social injustice. My experience cannot be so simply defined. For me, CSL was earth shattering. I was thrust into a project so broad and highly politicised that I questioned whether the challenge was fair to students. [Joan]

The theme of difficulty was strong, as Clair said:

This semester has been one of the most difficult challenges I have experienced in my life. It has introduced me to a form of learning I have never experienced, and I learned many new things, not only from the course content but also from my classmates. Decolonised social work education forced me to step outside of my comfort zone. [Clair]

Clair also echoed other learners' feelings, saying:

[I was] uncomfortable initially but grateful for the experience and believe it has given me hands-on experience and the ability to think critically and will serve to enhance my future learning. [Clair]

Community-based Learning

Learners felt that the course "provided lessons beyond any classroom lecture or discussion" which allowed them to develop skills they "would not have developed from theoretical knowledge provided in a lecture form or review of course content" [Candice]. Others, like Joan, felt that the learning opportunities were deliberate:

CSL was intended to make us think for ourselves, be independent, develop confidence in ourselves and each other, work hard, and teach us valuable life lessons about working collaboratively and respectfully with community groups and individuals. We were supported to develop the desire and commitment to decolonise social work, influence social change, and pride in our civic engagement. The project's goal was to create people who are inspired to be social workers that will make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged people. It has definitely invoked this in me. I feel different and fired up to continue to slowly influence colonisation and promote social justice. [Joan]

Some learners said they felt as if CSL was like being in the frontlines; seeing, acting, and feeling had a high learning value for them:

By attending the Sisters in Spirit Vigil, working on our CSL project, and reflecting on both, I was given the chance to hear the voices of the women and families affected by this crisis. Their voices are what really put things into perspective for me and helped capture my emotions toward the subject. This is where the valued experience of CSL comes into play by using “community-based learning in support of academic learning” (Furuto 2007, 21). I would not have gained the same understanding of this issue simply by reading an academic article. The chance to interact with Indigenous individuals and families and to hear their stories at the vigil and in our documentary is what truly impacted and helped to educate me. [Sara]

Learners also had a different appreciation for:

... the work that goes into a decolonised CSL project and how many guidelines and ethics must be followed. I feel proud of our class’s approach to this project, and I believe we were respectful to the communities. In a way, our approach has been a process of using the community’s experiences as a basis for our project, and then using our privilege as students with access to such an experienced professor for guidance and the opportunity to create this final project with the community. [Vanessa]

Learning about Whiteness

Learners reflected on hearing the term “whiteness” and the process of coming to terms with how they are positioned as people of white settler origin. Some were unaware of their own white privilege and the power it assumes, while others had never heard the term. Their new knowledge and understanding motivated strong emotions, including shame, embarrassment, and dismay:

As a part of the course material, we covered the concept of whiteness, which helped me understand the MMIWG crisis that we studied. Whiteness was never a concept I considered in my everyday life before becoming a social work student. The discussions along with this project led me to discover that our whiteness truly affects other people. As Simons et al. (2012) suggested, students who are engaged in service-learning think of ourselves in racial terms, so I began to recognise my whiteness and white privilege. Through this idea of whiteness, it is evident that I contribute to racism without even realising it. It became clear that this concept could be applied to our CSL project because we had to begin to understand the concept of whiteness and the ideas behind it as it relates to Indigenous people and colonisation. It has been a difficult learning experience to understand my whiteness and its impact on others. [Vanessa]

Along similar lines, Joan reflected:

I have learned a lot about myself. Before the class, I was very unaware of my own social location and my privilege, and I had never heard the term “whiteness.” During one of our student-facilitated classes, we were discussing the concept of “whiteness,” how it is manifested in society, and the benefits that come from being constructed as a white person. As customary, the class was responsible for the structure and the content of the discussion, but Dr Mullings provided guidance to help us shape the arguments. During

this class, she asked us when was the first time we realised we were white. I was very taken aback by this question because I did not have an answer. I had never before consciously considered that I am white, or what it means to be white. Therefore, that class discussion provided a very humbling experience for me because I realised that being white gives me unearned benefits and privileges that people of other races do not and will never have. [Joan]

Clair reflected:

I, as a white person with privilege, was unaware of this terrible truth about MMIWG. It has saddened me that I could be living in this country every day and to be unaware of exactly what is going on. It was not until I entered this social justice class and began reaching out to the community that I realised the impact that the MMIWG has on many Indigenous families. When my classmates interviewed students on campus, very few of them had heard that all these women have been missing and murdered, and it is happening right in front of our eyes. It was eye opening for me and made me think about all the devastation that people are truly unaware of. [Clair]

Joan spoke about feeling shaken:

My self-awareness has grown tremendously throughout this semester. The decolonising education and the CSL project ensured that our class confront our identities and positions of power. What I have been confronted with has been a truth so ugly, I am shaken to my very core. My whiteness has been invisible to me my entire life. I am now trying to reconcile with what it means as part of my identity and am drowning in shame and embarrassment at my own ignorance. Dr Mullings guided us through discussions about the importance of white social workers [and students] acknowledging our complicity in causing racial trauma, violence, and harm to Black and Indigenous families and children. I am still reflecting on those discussions at the end of this course. [Joan]

Learners demonstrated a clearer understanding of white privilege. Mullings (2013) states that CSL is an important tool to enable students to:

... recognise their privilege by seeing discrimination and injustice in society, while reducing preconceived stereotypes and increasing empathy. I believe that this project has done all of these, because I am now aware of the white privileges I have, that I did not know existed before. I recognise my own privilege in everyday life and find myself thinking about how I am experiencing most things differently than another race would be. [Clair]

Power and Control

As learners processed their experience throughout the course, they began to understand the notion of power and control. This realisation stimulated thoughts about their roles and responsibilities as learners and as future social work practitioners. They were also

able to link the need to be cognisant of their personal and positional power as white individuals to lessen harm caused to disadvantaged groups during interactions:

Engaging with decolonising education and having the chance to complete an actual service-learning term project was the major learning aspect for me in this course. This experience has taught me so much about how to work with community partners and about some of the things to consider when working with Indigenous communities in Newfoundland. I applied to the social work programme knowing that I wanted to help people. I thought I was suitable to become a social worker, considering my life experiences and my personal traits (e.g., empathy). I now realise that my initial thoughts of social work practice before having the experience of decolonising education and CSL would likely have motivated me to take the approach of working “for” people and communities rather than working with them (Phillips 2007). My approach would have been to problem solve and suggest a plan to help service users. I have learned that such an approach implicates me in racist and oppressive behaviour by excluding people from having a voice in their own helping process (Mullings 2013). [Vanessa]

Clair shared:

I learned that there is colonialism and injustice everywhere in this society, and I want to help address them meaningfully. I am now aware that racism and oppression have a long history against systemically marginalised groups. The solution starts here: it starts with us as social work students as we become aware of our own racism, power, and privilege. [Clair]

Sara reflected on the decolonised classroom structure:

Our classroom environment had a decolonised structure where we made decisions about aspects of the course, including developing assignments, facilitating discussions, and co-teaching with the professor. Decolonised learning also prepared our class for how best to collaborate with community groups in meaningful ways by ensuring their inclusion in all aspects of the project. For example, one of our community contacts decided on the title of the documentary. This may seem like a small decision, but our class recognised the importance of community members having the right to name themselves and how they are portrayed in the documentary. [Sara]

Joan recognised areas of strength and those to be improved:

During the last week of the project, I realised I had taken on far too much work and had not delegated nearly enough to support the size of this project. With that being said, I did not have many classmates actively looking to be helpful beyond what they felt was their job or what they felt comfortable doing. Perhaps I did not trust my classmates, so I did not give them responsibilities, which ensured that a lot of the important tasks were left for me to complete. These are important lessons for me as a future social worker. This experience has helped me realise that when working with others, trust is important, which means I need to develop the confidence and comfort to not only share power but let go of control. [Joan]

Learners discussed their feelings on learning and understanding colonisation and the practice of CSL. They expressed being fearful, challenged, and hesitant with their learning, but they also demonstrated growth in understanding themselves, what it means to work in partnership with community members, and a commitment to civic engagement and social justice work. Although we regularly discussed CSL principles (community-led, reciprocity, power sharing) and the impact of colonisation, it was only nearing the end of the semester that learners began to demonstrate an understanding of these principles, as evidenced in their reflection.

Further Reflection: Discussion

We feel that CSL learning in general, and our specific project, embodied the basic social work ideals, which are to work with the community as they work toward self-determination and self-empowerment. CSL gave us the opportunity to interact and build relationships with the communities that we may be working with in the future. The colonial education system normally reserves student contact with the community in structured ways, including field practicum and other forms of experiential learning. Therefore, we did not think we would have the opportunity to engage in decolonising education or help promote racial justice as social work learners. Having had this opportunity in our first year of study has allowed us to gain experience in decolonising education and, by extension, potentially social work practice.

We agree that “service learning, with its praxis of study-action-reflection, has the potential in higher education to enhance student classroom learning, critical awareness, and civic participation” (Phillips 2007, 6). Social workers who are committed to participating in activities to enhance social justice ultimately create social change. To do this, as social work learners and potential social workers, we must first develop a relationship with, an understanding of, compassion for, and commitment to the community we are working with in order to properly serve their needs (Larson and Murtadha 2002). The importance of community involvement in our learning has proven to be quite significant. We learned that it is important to take the literature and course material and apply it to CSL concepts and practice. Our knowledge about decolonisation and social justice increased throughout the project, and we began developing a better understanding of what it means to advocate with and on behalf of others.

We agree the project was a fantastic learning experience, and we will take away many lessons that we could never have received from traditional education alone. We learned the importance of co-operating with our classmates and community members, including during times of disagreement and conflict. As a class, we trust that we left an impression on the individuals in the community we worked with and that we showed our understanding of the importance of MMIWG. Our CSL project resulted in members of our class becoming critically conscious and politically aware of important social concerns facing Indigenous families in Canada. We now know racism “shapes those on whom it bestows privilege as well as those it oppresses” (Frankenberg 1993, 444). Our new awareness has helped us understand that the concerns of Indigenous people are the

concerns of all Canadians, and therefore, we are all responsible for ending violence against Indigenous populations. This learning experience will help us become collaborative leaders for social justice and decolonise social work practice.

Conclusion

There is a long history of colonial and tyrannical abuse against Indigenous peoples of Canada by social work systems (Blackstock 2015; Sinclair 2004; TRC 2015). Therefore, the relationship between Indigenous groups and white settlers in authority, including social workers and social work learners, is tenuous, and trying to work in partnership is layered with power dynamics, racism, and colonisation that must be consciously addressed. Decolonised social work education can help learners understand historical and contemporary racism, colonisation, and atrocities perpetuated against systemically disadvantaged groups, including Indigenous peoples. CSL is an important learning and teaching tool to help social work learners understand how to work with communities and individuals who are culturally and racially different from them, develop and maintain relationships, take responsibility for their own learning, and work creatively and independently. Our class set out as a group of mostly white identified learners to work with a community we had limited knowledge of, yet expected its members to welcome us with open arms and work in partnership with us so that we could learn. By the end of the semester, we began to see that we may have set ourselves up for failure and potentially caused harm.

Social work education and practice are Eurocentric in nature (Ibrahima and Mattaini 2019); therefore, social work professionals have historically negatively affected Indigenous communities in Canada. In our eagerness to “help,” we failed to consider the long history of violence, exploitation, and assimilation Indigenous people in Canada have experienced (MacDonald and Steenbeek 2015); that individuals in these communities have a right to self-determination, that community members are overworked, or that we needed to be more culturally and racially responsive in our approach to avoid harming or exploiting members of the communities we were trying to partner with. We have come a long way in one semester and hope to continue learning as we go through our social work programme. Our semester in the Social Justice course was a valuable learning and teaching experience that we will never forget. We are grateful that some community members agreed to partner with us, and that, too, is unforgettable. However, we take note that others did not want to partner with us for various reasons, and we honour that space as well since in many cases, Indigenous community members’ rights to self-determine are taken away.

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