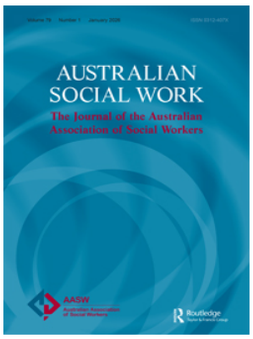

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How Do We Decolonise the Social Work Curriculum?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, social work educators have raised the need to decolonise the curriculum. This article explores what is meant by decolonising the curriculum, and why just adding some new readings and/or widening the diversity of presenters can result in efforts which are no more than superficial and tokenistic. Rather, decolonising the curriculum requires an openness to learn and unlearn and to put new learning into action, and includes reconsidering the validity of knowledges recognised and taught by higher education providers. Moreover, it requires a vision of what can be achieved and commitment to realise that vision. It takes time to listen to the pain and anger of those who have been colonised, to understand what it is we need to address these emotions, and to not just rush straight into action. Drawing on the international literature on decolonising education as well as writings by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work educators, this article identified a range of critical processes that may contribute to a decolonised curriculum being realised. This not only includes processes directly associated with pedagogy and student learning, but also the role of institutional processes in supporting or hindering such efforts.

IMPLICATIONS

- Decolonising the curriculum is consistent with a human rights approach to social work.
- Decolonising the curriculum requires a fundamental rethink about how social work education is provided and what knowledges are privileged.
- Non-Indigenous social workers can play a crucial role in decolonising the curriculum, providing their efforts are accountable to Indigenous Peoples.

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Education systems across the globe reproduce privilege unless actively challenged (Boronski, 2022). In particular, universities have been implicated in colonisation through developing classifications of knowledge (Mignolo, 2009) and not recognising local knowledges as legitimate (Manathunga, 2018). Historically, Indigenous knowledges have been viewed as "unscientific, illogical, anti-developmental and useless" (Meda, 2020, p. 91). Furthermore, Indigenous peoples have been portrayed as being

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economically and mentally underdeveloped (Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2019) or "barbaric" (Abu Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021, p. 3) and assumed to be in need of whatever the colonising powers bestowed on them (Gebrial, 2018). The model for a European university has been assumed to have international relevance for higher education providers, with the same structures, processes, curriculum, and often even the same architecture being replicated (Gukurume & Maringira, 2020). However, Indigenous Peoples have become increasingly vocal in the twenty-first century for the need to have "an education that is driven by Indigenous needs, values and visions, [an] education that highlights their many strengths and acts of resistance while privileging their ways of seeing the world" (Baskin & Cornacchia, 2021, p. 72). Internationally, this has led to discussion and debates about the need to decolonise the curriculum in many countries and academic disciplines.

Within Australia, Indigenous social workers have highlighted that Indigenous knowledges continue to be othered and given lesser status than non-Indigenous knowledges (Briese & Menzel, 2020). Hence, it has been argued that the history of this land needs to be retold with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges centred rather than marginalised by colonial narratives (Walter & Baltra-Ulloa, 2019). Rather than portraying Indigenous Peoples as being deficient, "a resilient tone that respects and celebrates the relentless determination and strength of Indigenous peoples and their cultures" is required (Bennett & Gates, 2021, p. 9). The need to decolonise Australian social work education is explicitly being proposed by Indigenous educators (e.g., Bennett & Gates, 2021; Muller, 2023; Russ-Smith, 2019). Accredited programs of social work education in Australia, the majority of which are located within universities, have been required to teach about Indigenous knowledges since 2012. This requirement is in response to the "ongoing legacies of Australia's colonial history and the historical and contemporary roles that the social work profession has in the provision of human services to First Australians" (Zubrzycki et al., 2014, p. 6). However, the current requirements under the heading "The history and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2021, pp. 30–31) consist only of statements about content and do not explicitly engage with the broader debates regarding decolonising the curriculum.

Changing the curriculum is one of the ways in which education providers seek to contribute to addressing societal tensions (Jansen, 2017). In early 2022, some social work academics at Deakin University raised the question of whether our programs could go further and decolonise the curriculum. A day was set aside to begin this process and almost all staff were present, including staff who identify as being Aboriginal people. Having wrongly assumed a shared understanding as to what was meant by decolonising the curriculum, actions were proposed and debated, but it seemed all we could agree on was that decolonising the curriculum, whatever that meant, was a good idea and no clear implementation strategy emerged. It was agreed that prior to meeting again, individuals or groups would further explore issues to enable the group to become more informed as to what we might do. An earlier draft of this article was the contribution of a non-Indigenous social work academic to the group's deliberations as to what could be understood as decolonising the curriculum and what were some of the processes that have been proposed. All staff involved in the earlier discussions were sent a draft of this article, and some, including one staff member who

identifies as an Aboriginal person, provided feedback. Whereas other scholars have sought to explore these questions specifically in respect of Australian social work (e.g., Ryan & Ivelja, 2023), the potential contribution of ideas and processes from other countries and disciplines has been noted in a recent article published in *Australian Social Work* by an Indigenous scholar (Muller, 2023).

Method

A scoping review involves scoping (scanning) a body of literature rather than exhaustively exploring a known body of literature to answer one or more specific questions (Munn et al., 2018). The search term "decolonising the curriculum" was entered into Google Scholar on 27 April 2022 with the only initial restriction being literature published in the English language. Other literature suggested by colleagues or found while working on other projects also was included and reference lists from retrieved literature were scrutinised for potentially relevant publications. Over the following two months, four issues of the journal *Decolonising the Curriculum* published by the University of Brighton, 38 other articles, five books, one other book chapter, and one published report were retrieved and examined for content relating to what was meant by the search term or processes for achieving this.

Although the ideas presented, including how decolonising processes were classified, were developed by the author, feedback from conference presentations and from reviewers of an earlier version led to further literature being incorporated into this review. The following discussion includes perspectives from the international literature as well as perspectives from Australian Indigenous social workers in response to the questions "What is decolonising the curriculum?" and "How to decolonise the curriculum?".

What is Decolonising the Curriculum?

Internationally, a lack of clarity is one of the biggest issues facing efforts to decolonise the curriculum (Liyanage, 2020). In particular, understandings of what a decolonised curriculum is, or should be, tend to be assumed rather than articulated (Ballim, 2018). Consequently, it is not uncommon for there to be differing perspectives and/or expectations among stakeholders as to what is entailed in such a process (Mahabeer, 2020; Meda, 2020). This lack of consensus has been commented on by Australian social workers considering what it means to decolonise the curriculum (e.g., Muller, 2023; Ryan & Ivelja, 2023) and for social work educators there is no agreement around the associated question of how to decolonise social work (Green, 2019).

Calls to decolonise the curriculum have arisen in a range of places with at least three distinct sets of circumstances. These include settler-colonial societies such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Richardson, 2018); former European colonies in Africa, Asia, and South America in which the goal of colonisation was to "extract resources and/or labour from the dominated nation or people" (Richardson, 2018, p. 235); and in former colonial powers such as Britain, to where large numbers of racially diverse people from former African and Asian colonies have migrated (Wilson et al., 2022). In Britain, those seeking to decolonise the curriculum have

also been seeking to address the implications of the slave trade, and the reverencing of those who benefitted from this trade (Morreira et al., 2020).

Specific concerns for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples include "the active and conscious resistance to colonial forces that continue to oppress Indigenous sovereignty" (Russ-Smith, 2019, p. 105). Although there is international agreement that a decolonised curriculum refuses to privilege knowledges and practices of colonial powers over those of Indigenous Peoples (Mahabeer, 2020), perspectives as to how this should occur vary widely. In some countries the emphasis has been on replacing the colonial canon with content that "a particular country wants its citizens to learn, value and cherish" (Meda, 2020, p. 90) and/or that prepares students for the socioeconomic and cultural realities of the communities in which they will work (Sathorar & Geduld, 2018). However, implementing proposals for the complete removal of colonial authors and thinkers, particularly those who have explicitly advocated and supported racism is considered difficult, if not impossible, by many education providers (Gebrial, 2018).

An alternate viewpoint is that it is necessary to contextualise colonial writers, including identifying their place of privilege in society (Liyanage, 2020). This enables critical discussion and analysis of "the historical legacy of empire, its genocidal brutalities and the racial hierarchies that are among its legacies" (Dennis, 2018, p. 194). Rather than eradicating European or Western knowledges, they are de-centred, and Indigenous knowledges are positioned as also having legitimacy (Meda, 2020). A further perspective is that a decolonised curriculum "should not promote one dominant perspective and thus strike a balance between drawing on local content and context and using globally sensitive references and methods" (Sathorar & Geduld, 2018, p. 4). As finding space for new content typically requires removal of some of that which is currently taught, decolonising the curriculum involves identifying what is, and what should be, privileged (Kaneva et al., 2020).

Decolonising the curriculum not only requires examining and changing what is taught (Icaza & Vázquez, 2018) but also requires rethinking the pedagogical processes (Kaneva et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2022), adopting "a critical approach" in order to create a "humanising pedagogy" (Sathorar & Geduld, 2018, p. 10). Australian social work educators having noted that adding Indigenous content does not in itself decolonise the curriculum (Bennett & Gates, 2021), have identified the need for pedagogies that centre Indigenous knowledges (Briese & Menzel, 2020), such as yarning (Ryan & Ivelja, 2023).

Ultimately, decolonising requires addressing all the institutional processes that impact on the educational experience:

> Decolonising the curriculum is about embedding liberation and equality in all aspects of higher education from changing course content, changing the language of teaching if it benefits the minority at the expense of the majority, changing the way courses are taught, updating assessment techniques, developing research and publication practices, supporting training, resources and funding and modifying recruitment criteria. (Lumadi, 2021, p. 38)

As a microcosm of the broader society, educational institutions readily can reinforce and reproduce social inclusion and exclusion (Icaza & Vázquez, 2018) unless they make a conscious effort not to do so. An implicit curriculum of policies and processes around student selection and supports provided to students during their studies, demographic profiles of students and staff, and administrative processes can be a powerful force in giving students a message that they belong or not in this course and profession

(Ballim, 2018). Furthermore, this implicit curriculum "is also where coloniality is enacted, whereby the dominant values and cultures of the colonisers are taught informally to indoctrinate learners to think and act" (Mahabeer, 2020, p. 102). Recognising the need for a sense of belonging, some Australian providers of social work education provide separate programs for Indigenous students (e.g., Al-Natour & Mears, 2016; Briese & Menzel, 2020).

It has been proposed that while suggestions relating to decolonising the curriculum proliferate, there has been minimal progress (Abu Moghli & Kadiwal, 2020). Lack of clarity as to what constitutes decolonising the curriculum has led to critiques that too many other agendas are being subsumed resulting in the concerns of Indigenous Peoples being decentred (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This can result in losing sight of the scope of what is required to decolonise the curriculum, and that a radical reconceptualisation of what higher education is and how education is delivered may be required (Moss et al., 2022).

How to Decolonise the Curriculum

As the process and impacts of colonialism have varied between different countries, strategies for decolonisation will need to reflect such differences rather than be a one-size-fits-all approach (Choat, 2021). Nevertheless, there are some processes that arguably readily apply wherever we engage in decolonising the curriculum. These are outlined below.

Vision and Commitment

Decolonising the curriculum requires a vision of what can be and a commitment to making it happen (Fomunyam, 2017). A starting point may be recognising that there are different ways of living and being that the current curriculum may not adequately address (Boronski, 2022). At the same time an openness to both learn and unlearn, and to commit to putting new learning into action is required (Mahabeer, 2018), as is being open to different ways of being an educator (Boronski, 2022). In the Australian context, this includes being willing to learn Indigenous perspectives on the history of this country (Walter & Baltra-Ulloa, 2019).

At an individual level, making a commitment to decolonising the curriculum necessarily involves examining one's own experiences of privilege (Manathunga, 2018) and how the distribution of privilege within society has contributed to our understandings of how power is mediated by factors including race, class, and gender (Begum & Saini, 2019). Embarking on a process of decolonisation requires social workers to engage with uncomfortable issues concerning race and the whiteness of social work in Australia (Walter & Baltra-Ulloa, 2019), and to explore power dimensions (Russ-Smith, 2019). In particular, this requires people whose lives are inherently privileged, on the basis of being born white, to commit to remaining engaged rather than manifest what has been termed "white fragility" (DiAngelo, 2011), which involves deflecting discussions about race. This deflection can range from attempting to discredit any suggestion of white privilege to refusing to engage with the issues.

The magnitude of the task can become overwhelming, but without an ongoing commitment to the process of decolonisation, no change is realised (Walter & Baltra-Ulloa, 2019).

For Australian social workers, the advice of Satour and Goldingay is a critical reminder that the commitment to decolonising the curriculum needs to be constantly reaffirmed:

> Acting in decolonising ways is a decision that needs to be made every day. It is a conscious act to take responsibility to resist the powerful colonial forces that would normalise only Western ways of knowing, being, and doing in every sphere and make other ways of knowing invisible or illegitimate. (Satour & Goldingay, 2021, p. 203)

Understanding the Importance of Relationality

Relationality and connectedness are critical concepts for Indigenous Peoples in many places, including Australia. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, this includes connectedness not just to people, but to land, sea, and air and all that lives and grows in these spheres (Green, 2019). Hence, decolonising the curriculum has been envisaged as a "process of relationships between social work curriculum, … professionals and the sovereign lands upon which they live" (Russ-Smith, 2019, p. 110) so as to create culturally responsive pedagogy, which is transformative and relational (Ryan & Ivelja, 2023).

Although there is an important role for non-Indigenous allies in decolonising the curriculum (Ryan & Ivelja, 2023), it is critical that non-Indigenous social workers do not race into action without establishing relationships with our Indigenous colleagues within and beyond the academy. Building relationality requires being able to listen to the pain and anger of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues:

> It is about engaging in a deep discussion addressing past social injustices and seeking dignity for the indigenised; a "cross-pollination" of ideas, a renegotiation between the Westernised and eurocentric knowledge systems, and Indigenous values and Indigenous knowledge systems. (Mahabeer, 2020, p. 103)

As such, we need to be willing to engage in processes which lead to cocreation of knowledge (Wilson et al., 2022), which will require developing personal relationships with Indigenous Peoples (Baskin & Cornacchia, 2021). For those of us who are non-Indigenous, we need to learn how we can enable Indigenous Australians to tell their stories or not, in ways that are for them culturally appropriate, rather than assuming it is our role as educators to tell their stories. When listening, we need to not just be aware of the explicit narrative, but be open to the possibility that it reflects "ways of knowing and being that are not dominant in Euro-western culture" (Satour & Goldingay, 2021, p. 200).

Reconsidering the Validity of Knowledge

There may be strategic reasons to champion decolonising the curriculum, but without real change beyond adding a new topic or some additional readings, such efforts are no more than superficial and tokenistic (Abu Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021; Hall et al., 2021). Ideally, decolonising requires us to go back and reconsider what knowledge is taught and why this is given preference over other knowledges (Choat, 2021). Importantly, this includes exploring the validity of non-Indigenous knowledges (Tuck & Yang, 2012). For example, it has been noted that First Nations communities in many countries value "group/clan", "extended family", "interdependence", and "cooperation" over the "individual", "nuclear family", "independence", and "competition" (Baskin & Cornacchia, 2021, p. 70). Such values hold for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Zubrzycki

et al., 2014) This is not only critical knowledge for social workers, but also explains why colonial methods of child welfare or mental health frequently have been inappropriate for working with Indigenous families (Freymond et al., 2021; Moss et al., 2022).

Changing content, but not pedagogy, demonstrates limited understanding of what it means to decolonise the curriculum (Sibanda & Young, 2020). Hence, it is not just what is taught and from what perspective, but how we teach, and what is it that we are preparing our graduates for, that need to be considered (Wilson et al., 2022). This includes our approaches to assessment. Although institutional guidelines or accreditation requirements may place limits on how assessment is redeveloped, one place to begin is considering what references students use when submitting written work. For example, in other countries it has been observed that students citing local references when writing about foreign contexts, particularly those not in the English language, are given feedback that this results in their work being assessed as being of a lower quality. Such actions seek to reinforce the relative importance of colonial knowledges (Abu Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021) as does prioritising citations from peer-reviewed journals in which scholars synthesise knowledge over the actual narratives of colonised peoples (Freymond et al., 2021). Similarly, given that Australian Indigenous knowledges often are not documented in written form (Zubrzycki et al., 2014), educators need to ensure they are not discriminating against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students for presenting work incorporating Indigenous knowledges, which until recent guidance (Faulkhead et al., 2023), often was considered unable to be referenced according to Western academic traditions.

Institutional Supports

Attempts to decolonise the curriculum are most likely to succeed when this becomes a priority for the whole institution and not just a few individual scholars and course teams (Wilson et al., 2022). In Australia, some education providers are working on embedding Indigenous knowledges in the graduate qualities of all graduates, irrespective of discipline (Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2019), with evidence of progress required to be presented in periodic reviews of programs (Hall et al., 2021).

Expecting staff to introduce content associated with decolonisation will require a significant investment of time and resources (Liyanage, 2020; Wilson et al., 2022), including provision of training to educators (Sibanda & Young, 2020) and developing a bank of curriculum resources that staff from across the institution can access (le Grange et al., 2020). In Australia we have had national curriculum initiatives that have developed learning materials for individual disciplines such as social work (Zubrzycki et al., 2014) and for professionals working in the mental health sector (Dudgeon et al., 2014). In addition to resources, provision of ongoing support to staff as they attempt to move from the theory to the practice of decolonisation is crucial:

> Colleagues have reported that fear of "getting it wrong" or "not knowing enough to act" was preventing action. The agency afforded by first, the institution's declared support for decolonising the curriculum, and secondly, the activities to support it in very practical ways, has been powerful. (Wilson et al., 2022, p. 148)

Students of all backgrounds need what they perceive to be safe spaces if they are to discuss their own experiences of privilege and oppression as they explore decolonisation

(Simon et al., 2022). How we enable non-Indigenous staff and students to reflect on the impact of colonialism but at the same time not allow this to become a key focus and decentre the voices and experiences of Indigenous people is tricky (Costandius et al., 2018). Having guidelines for how to open the classroom up to discussing these issues, and rules of engagement, is vital (Costandius et al., 2018).

Personnel

The question has been raised as to whether decolonising the curriculum can occur without changing the composition of the academic staff (Fomunyam, 2017). Hence, in recent years many Australian education providers have instituted Indigenous employment strategies with the aim of increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff (Larkin, 2019). This is consistent with the assumption that decolonisation requires the active involvement, if not leadership, of Indigenous staff (Rea, 2021). However, too much reliance on Indigenous staff to do the work of decolonising the curriculum not only fails to recognise what decolonising involves, but also perpetuates institutional racism (Doharty et al., 2021) by implying it is the duty of a specific group staff (Larkin, 2019). Furthermore, this approach fails to recognise that Indigenous staff may want the same options as other academic staff to focus on research and other activities that tend to bring more kudos, such as opportunities for promotion, than being involved in curriculum reform (Laakso, 2020).

Decolonising the curriculum is unlikely to become anything more than a good idea unless it gains widespread support within the education provider. Beginning by reflecting on the privilege bestowed on them in the wider society, white academics with a colonial background can contribute to decolonisation by becoming an ally (Hendrick & Young, 2017). This requires working with those whose lives continue to be affected by generations of colonialism, but not to take over the agenda (Land, 2015). In becoming an ally, the first step is to commit to learning about what it means to have experienced colonisation and the ongoing impacts of colonisation on individuals and communities (Pete, 2018).

Review and Evaluation

As with any major project, efforts at decolonising the curriculum should be reviewed and evaluated to ensure relevance (Mahabeer, 2018). However, attempts at decolonising the curriculum tend not to be documented, let alone evaluated (Bennett & Gates, 2021). Nevertheless, educators need to ensure that our chosen efforts are effective and appropriate in our setting and that the espoused rhetoric of decolonisation can actually be evidenced (le Grange et al., 2020). For non-Indigenous Australian social work educators, this may require a lifelong commitment to self-reflection and critique as part of the process of developing cultural humility (Phelan, 2021).

Discussion

As there are many facets, the need to first define what decolonising the curriculum means is critical to any initiatives seeking to achieve this aim. Nevertheless, decolonising the curriculum requires education providers as a whole, as well as their staff and students,

to ask fundamental questions as to what knowledges are to be recognised and prioritised. This not only impacts on teaching, but also on research and engagement with the wider society. Ultimately, decolonising the curriculum should not just change what is happening inside educational institutions, but also influence social, economic, and political systems in the wider society (Morreira et al., 2020). Decolonising the curriculum to this extent is extremely challenging and cannot be done in isolation, but must be accompanied by decolonisation of the school curriculum (Mahabeer, 2020) as students often have not been exposed to Indigenous perspectives prior to reaching higher education (Baskin & Cornacchia, 2021; Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2019). Although this is changing in Australia, school curriculums have tended to focus on celebrating and perpetuating narratives of glory and exceptionalism associated with colonial settlement and to ignore the achievements of Indigenous Australians (Boronski, 2022).

It is perhaps inevitable that there will be some people who object to decolonising the curriculum, particularly those who consider that they lose out as a result (Sathorar & Geduld, 2018). Specific fears include decolonising leading to a less rigorous curriculum (Liyanage, 2020) or graduates not having the expertise required of them in the workforce (Fomunyam, 2017). There is also the question as to whether expectations that the curriculum can be decolonised are realistic. First, "it is arguable whether colonisers can decolonise the higher education space or whether disciplines founded on Western epistemologies can decolonise their own curricula" (Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2019, p. 793). Second, Indigenous people may have legitimate concerns about how their knowledges are to be used and be hesitant about what they will share with others without first building trust (Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2019). Third, decolonising the curriculum is just one of many competing issues for the academy (Wilson et al., 2022), and unless it is championed by those of sufficient influence, it will remain aspirational but unlikely to ever be realised (Liyanage, 2020).

As a profession for which the promotion of human rights is central (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), it is unsurprising that social work is one of the academic disciplines that is grappling with what it means to decolonise the curriculum. It will be an incredibly difficult challenge if we are to achieve this goal, but not one we can opt out of if we believe that all members of our communities, including those who are most marginalised, receive what they need to flourish and live well.

Conclusion

There are roles and opportunities for non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous Australians in decolonising the curriculum. However, attempts to decolonise the curriculum ultimately must be accountable to Indigenous Peoples if they are to have any credibility. This need for accountability is further reinforced by the claim that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people do decolonisation differently. While reforming educational systems is an aim in itself, decolonising the social work curriculum forms part of a much broader project of decolonising social work. Indigenous social workers are actively promoting ways of doing social work that incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, but as with decolonising the curriculum, tacit support for their ideas is far more extensive than the implementation of these ideas into practice.

Disclosure Statement

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

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