Article

Voice from the field: Decolonizing subject for more just epistemology

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Abstract
This autobiographical reflection explores the author's transnational journey of decolonizing social work education, shaped by teaching experiences in Canada and Indonesia. The paper begins with the author's transformative encounter teaching Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice at McGill University, where engagement with diverse student identities and critical pedagogy catalyzed a deeper interrogation of positionality, power, and privilege. Upon returning to Indonesia, the author applies decolonial insights to reshape curriculum across three undergraduate courses—Introduction to Social Welfare, Social Work Theories, and Multicultural Social Work—within an Islamic university context. Drawing on literature and classroom practices, the paper critiques the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies and calls for the integration of Indigenous, Islamic, and local cultural knowledges. Through student-centered learning, critical reflection, field-based assignments, and engagement with concepts like *gotong royong* and *Ubuntu*, the author demonstrates how decolonial pedagogy can localize theory, disrupt colonial legacies, and foster culturally grounded social work practices. This work contributes to global dialogues on justice-centered epistemologies in social work education by highlighting the challenges and opportunities of advancing curricular decolonization in postcolonial, religiously rooted contexts.

Keywords
decolonization, epistemology, indigenization

Résumé
Cette réflexion autobiographique retrace le parcours transnational de l'auteur dans la décolonisation de l'enseignement du travail social, façonné par ses expériences pédagogiques au Canada et en Indonésie. L'article débute par la rencontre transformative de l'auteur lors de son enseignement du cours « Pratique du travail social anti-oppressif » à l'Université McGill, où la diversité des identités étudiantes et l'adoption d'une pédagogie critique ont suscité une interrogation approfondie sur la positionnalité, le pouvoir et les privilèges. De retour en Indonésie, l'auteur applique les enseignements de cette approche décoloniale à la refonte de trois

cours de premier cycle – Introduction au bien-être social, Théories du travail social, et Travail social multiculturel – dans une université islamique. En mobilisant la littérature et les pratiques en salle de classe, l'article critique la domination des épistémologies eurocentriques et plaide pour l'intégration des savoirs autochtones, islamiques et culturels locaux. Par une pédagogie centrée sur l'étudiant ou l'étudiante, la réflexion critique, des travaux de terrain et l'exploration de concepts tels que *gotong royong* et *Ubuntu*, l'auteur démontre comment une approche décoloniale permet de contextualiser la théorie, de déconstruire les legs coloniaux et de promouvoir une pratique du travail social ancrée dans la culture. Cette contribution s'inscrit dans les dialogues internationaux sur des épistémologies plus justes en travail social, en soulignant les défis et les possibilités liés à la décolonisation universitaire dans des contextes postcoloniaux et à forte empreinte religieuse.

Mots-clés

décolonisation, épistémologie, autochtonisation

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Learning by teaching

It is generally understood that we will learn, or at least be pushed to learn, when we teach. A new subject will engage us to delve into knowledge and theories, and a new understanding will empower our thoughts (Koh et al, 2018). That happened to me when I was assigned as a sessional instructor for the fifth time in the Social Work department at McGill University in Montreal during my PhD journey.

The winter semester of 2022 marked the beginning of my journey to decolonize my social work teaching practices. I was a sessional instructor in the School of Social Work at McGill University, teaching Anti Oppressive Social Work Practice. I must acknowledge that it was a transformative experience that not only deepened my comprehension of the intricacies of social work but also prompted me to reflect critically on the impact of colonial legacies on education. I came to recognize the significance of this approach in advocating for social justice and confronting various forms of oppression as a result of my engagement with the concept of decolonizing the mind. Research highlights that decolonizing social work involves challenging Eurocentric epistemologies and incorporating Indigenous knowledge to address systemic inequities (Gray et al., 2013). Scholars such as Fortier & Wong (2018) argue that social work in settler-colonial contexts like Canada is deeply tied to the perpetuation of colonial control, which necessitates a critical deconstruction of these practices within education to foster transformative change. In addition, Ortega-Williams and McLane-Davison (2021) emphasize the need to confront the dominance of White normative frameworks, advocating for anti-racist and decolonial pedagogies that challenge entrenched hegemonies in social work education.

In practice, my decolonial teaching began with an appreciation of the different backgrounds of my students in the classroom. Some of them were White, Black, and Indigenous students. This challenged me to incorporate varied perspectives into the curriculum and to ensure that social work education was not oppressive to less dominant voices and marginalized clients. Teaching this course also allowed me to reflect on and question my "3 P's" – positionality, power, and privilege – something I had not critically examined in the academic industry as a lecturer back in Indonesia before studying in Canada. This aligns with the idea that effective decolonial teaching must center critical self-reflection on power dynamics and systemic inequities (Yellow Bird, 2013). Given the students' diverse backgrounds, I carefully handled sensitive topics such as whiteness and white supremacy in social work, critical practice with Indigenous populations, cultural differences, and racism. Blackstock (2018) argues that addressing colonial legacies in social work requires explicit efforts to deconstruct Eurocentric narratives while incorporating Indigenous perspectives to guide anti-oppressive practices.

Returning to Indonesia and the challenges of decolonizing the curriculum

Upon returning to Indonesia, I resumed my position in the Social Welfare Study Program at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. While still completing my PhD dissertation away from Canada, I was assigned to teach three courses over two semesters for the academic year 2023-2024: Introduction to Social Work, Social Work Theories, and Multicultural Social Work.

As a brief context, the Social Welfare Study Program at this university – under the auspice of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia – is its first kind in Islamic Higher Education. To this day, it remains the only department offering social work education in the Central Java region. Established in 2009, the department welcomed me as a junior lecturer in its early days. As part of the university, which has integrative-interconnective values, this department is aspiring to integrate and interconnect the values and principles of Islam with social work teachings.

For the next nine years, from 2009 to 2018, I taught various courses, ranging from Social Policy & Planning to Child and Family Welfare, Industrial Social Work, and Social Legislation. This "tour of teaching," from one subject to another, offered me opportunities to explore the broad scope of social work while examining how its methods, practice, and intervention interlink with Islamic values and teachings.

Returning to my home campus in Summer 2023, I was motivated to apply the lessons I had learned in Canada, integrating a decolonial perspective into my teaching. I sought to foster critical thinking and self-reflection in my students, challenging dominant narratives imported from English-speaking countries or Anglo-Saxon social work tradition and promoting a more profound understanding of Indonesia's socio-cultural context.

Social work teaching in Indonesia presents distinctive challenges and opportunities, particularly when decolonizing the curriculum. Scholars such as Fortier et al. (2024) highlight how colonial frameworks in social work education not only reinforce systems of oppression but

also marginalize Indigenous and local epistemologies. These dynamics resonate strongly with the Indonesian context, where Western theories and practices dominate social work education, often sidelining the rich diversity of local cultural and religious traditions.

One key example is systems theory, which frames individuals within broader social environments and is widely used in social work education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While this approach is valuable, it often assumes a universal application, overlooking how social support operates differently in various cultures. For instance, in many non-Western societies, collectivism plays a much larger role, with family, religious communities, and informal networks providing crucial support—something that is not always fully accounted for in Western models.

Another dominant approach is evidence-based practice (EBP), which prioritizes interventions backed by empirical research, particularly randomized controlled trials (RCTs). While EBP is crucial for ensuring effective interventions, it can sometimes sideline Indigenous and religious-based practices that rely on oral traditions, spiritual healing, or community wisdom. These practices may not fit neatly into Western scientific frameworks, but they remain deeply meaningful and effective in many communities.

Research underscores that decolonization in education involves elevating Indigenous knowledge systems and addressing power imbalances perpetuated by colonial histories (Battiste, 2013). As a country, Indonesia has a complex tapestry of cultures, religions, languages, and histories, yet the country's social work education is still heavily influenced by Western theories and practices. Fortier and Wong (2018) highlight that colonial frameworks in social work are not limited to settler contexts but have influenced global education systems, often marginalizing local epistemologies in the process. It is not surprising given that in its early inception, the first School of Social Work in Indonesia, namely Sekolah Tinggi Kesejahteraan Sosial (STKS or College of Social Welfare) (now Politeknik Kesejahteraan Sosial or Polytechnic of Social Welfare) Bandung, which was run by the Ministry of Social Affairs, had strong engagement with social work teaching from the United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Although these frameworks, developed from Western experiences, provide valuable insights, they frequently fail to completely convey the intricacies and subtleties of Indonesian society. Consequently, a decolonial approach necessitates prioritizing Indigenous knowledge and practices that have been marginalized or disregarded and adapting these theories to local contexts. In Indonesia, Western theories and practices still heavily influence the social work curriculum. This mirrors challenges seen in other postcolonial nations where dominant frameworks often fail to align with local realities and cultural values (Gray et al., 2010).

Throughout Odd Semester of 2023-2024 (Odd Semester runs from September to January, and Even semester, from February to June), I taught a course I had never handled before: Introduction to Social Welfare. This course allowed me to engage with the fundamental concepts of social work, social welfare and many other things, which helped me examine the relevance of their Western interpretation to the current challenges or situation of welfare practices and studies in Indonesia. For example, I scrutinized the colonial content embedded in the course topics, such as the overemphasis on micro-level interventions in Western framework. In Indonesia, where

familialism and collectivism are cultural norms, greater emphasis on mezzo and macro interventions is crucial. I assigned students to discuss and analyze the historical development of social work in Indonesia and the colonial legacies embedded in policies, such as Dutch administrative influences on early welfare programs. These activities aligned with Mbakogu & Odiyi's (2021) call to recognize historical and structural contexts that shape contemporary practices while advocating for Indigenous and local knowledge systems.

Scholars argue that such discussions must actively challenge the normalization of settler-colonial frameworks embedded in social work education and practices (Lee & Ferrer, 2014). I sought to establish a connection between the theoretical knowledge and the lived experiences of communities in Indonesia by incorporating local case studies which varied based on religions, regions, and economic levels. Research on anti-oppressive social work also emphasizes recognizing colonial impacts on practice and advocating for culturally relevant approaches (Healy, 2014).

Reimagining social work theories

In the Even semester of 2023-2024, I was assigned another challenging subject, Social Work Theories. Given the limited Indonesian textbooks on the theories of social work, I ended up relying on the references in the book of Social Work Theories, mostly from Western scholars. For example, Payne (2014); Howe (2009); Connolly & Harms (2012); Thompson (2020). Unsurprisingly, the Indonesian context may not always be compatible with or pertinent to the many theories I teach in social work based on Western epistemologies. I urged my students to engage with these theories critically and to consider their relevance in addressing local issues. As part of their final assignment, students were required to identify a social welfare problem in their neighborhood or nearby community. They then analyzed it using at least two theories from different social work paradigms taught in class. Additionally, students critically examined how these theories apply in their local context, assessing their relevance and adapting them when necessary to better understand and address social issues within their communities. Through this assignment, we learned together how to investigate the potential for integrating concepts such as collectivism, community resilience, and spiritual well-being, which are essential to numerous Indonesian communities, into current theoretical frameworks. This approach reflects Mbakogu & Odiyi's (2021) emphasis on the need to adapt social work education to the cultural and social realities of the communities being served, ensuring that theoretical frameworks are both meaningful and actionable in local contexts. This also aligns with Blackstock's (2018) advocacy for indigenizing and contextualizing social work education to better reflect local realities.

Additionally, I introduced students to alternative theories and methodologies that originate from the Global South, particularly from local teachings. For example, Javanese wisdom has shaped the culture of collectivism in the Indonesian archipelago for centuries. This highlights the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives in the field of social work. I integrated alternative theories from the Global South, such as *Ubuntu* philosophy from African contexts, to highlight non-Western approaches to social work. In class, we explored *Ubuntu*'s core

principle—"I am because we are"—which emphasizes interconnectedness and collective responsibility. Students analyzed its relevance to Indonesian social work practices, particularly in relation to local traditions like *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) and communal decision-making. This approach aligns with Fortier and Wong's (2018) suggestion that decolonizing social work includes restructuring the helping practices back under community control. Other scholars suggest that decolonization entails reimagining social work theories to integrate community resilience, collectivism, and Indigenous epistemologies (Coates et al., 2006). Also, Ortega-Williams and McLane-Davison (2021) argue that reimagining social work theories requires disrupting the White normative paradigms that dominate the discipline, thereby creating space for diverse and culturally grounded perspectives.

In the classroom, when we talked about macro social work intervention, students explored concepts like *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) as a culturally resonant framework for community development. We also investigated case studies of Indonesian experiences in dealing with social work and social welfare issues. By cultivating an environment of critical inquiry and open dialogue, I sought to empower students to query and challenge dominant paradigms and develop their own culturally responsive approaches. What impressed me was when I found that my students were able to grasp the theories while acknowledging their limitations when it comes to communal contexts in many subcultures of Indonesian people.

Though easy to ask, the following two questions trigger more discussion: 1) what are the limitations of applying Western social work theories in local contexts? and 2) how can we integrate Indigenous values, such as *gotong royong* or spiritual well-being, into existing social work frameworks?

To integrate theory into practice, students were tasked to find a case involving social work/welfare problems at the semester's end. They had to explore the case and apply three social work theories to analyze and seek solutions based on their comprehension of the way the selected theories were applied. This assignment required students to apply theories to local cases, promoting a culturally grounded understanding of social work practices.

Multicultural social work: From theory to practice

In the Multicultural Social Work course, the primary objective was to comprehend and effectively resolve the requirements of Indonesia's diverse communities, which encompass a variety of ethnic groups, language users, religious minorities, and marginalized populations. This subject focused on addressing systemic inequality and fostering cultural humility. This aligns with research suggesting that multicultural practice should transcend token diversity to challenge privilege and systemic oppression (Dominelli, 2018). Students engaged in fieldwork with diverse communities, using intersectionality as a critical lens to examine how overlapping identities—such as race, gender, class, and religion—shape individuals' lived experiences and access to resources (Crenshaw, 1989). Rather than viewing intersectionality as merely a way to understand social work interventions, students explored how structural inequalities, historical power imbalances, and systemic discrimination intersect to produce unique forms of marginalization.

Decolonizing this course subject required moving beyond a surface-level celebration of diversity to a deeper analysis of privilege, oppression, and institutional barriers that impact social work practice.

In the classroom, we investigated how social workers can navigate the intricacies of working in a multicultural society by cultivating cultural humility and engaging in self-reflection regarding their biases and assumptions. Students were urged to create culturally informed interventions that respect and venerate the values and traditions of the communities they serve. This method enhanced their learning experience and equipped them with the skills necessary to be more effective and empathetic practitioners.

By doing this, I aimed for my Indonesian students to be kept alert and have more awareness of those "3 P's", how their positionality-power-privilege could operate and affect their perception, values, and perspectives in social interaction. This approach mirrors Mbakogu & Odiyi's (2021) and Blackstock's (2018) views. Mbakogu & Odiyi's (2021) advocate for culturally relevant social work practices that prioritize marginalized groups' lived experiences and perspectives in postcolonial settings. It was essential to foster critical self-awareness and dialogue around issues such as cultural biases, systemic oppression, and integrating Indigenous knowledge within the broader frameworks of social work. Blackstock (2018) emphasized that understanding and addressing systemic oppression requires engaging with marginalized perspectives to ensure that social work practices align with community values.

Approaching the end of the semester term, students in the groups were asked to visit community-based social service organizations that served different clients irrespective of gender, religion, ethnicity, and economic level. I used their presentation as a way to foster more active discussion in the classroom. Before the final exam, they had to present their findings from their visit and take away lessons from the field.

Reflections, implications & future directions

Continuous self-reflection, openness, dialogue, and a readiness to confront uncomfortable truths are all necessary components of the ongoing process of decolonizing social work education. Scholars emphasize that decolonizing the curriculum requires engaging with local traditions, spiritual values, and lived experiences to promote social justice (Dei, 2000). Fortier et al. (2024) stress the importance of disrupting settler-colonial logics in social work education to dismantle oppressive systemic and structures inequities. Similarly, Mbakogu & Odiyi (2021) highlight the transformative potential of centering marginalized voices and perspectives in postcolonial settings. Inspired by these insights, I remain committed to integrating local wisdom, Islamic principles, and Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum, fostering a more inclusive and just approach to social work education in Indonesia.

While in Montreal, I learned the significance of decolonizing the mind as a preliminary stage in challenging oppressive systems and structures. I learned from the spirit of decolonization in alignment with the indigenization of social work. I have found it rewarding and challenging to incorporate this perspective into my teaching in Indonesia as I navigate the intricacies of

integrating decolonial practices into an educational system still heavily influenced by Western conventions.

As for the case of the Indonesian context, the embedding of Islamic values into many spheres of life is a fact that should not be overlooked by social workers. Incorporating religion, particularly Islam, is essential in acknowledging its influence on Indonesian society—whether through critical analysis or appreciation of its role in shaping social values. At the same time, as a postcolonial state, Indonesia continues to struggle with decolonizing its teaching materials, which remain heavily influenced by Western perspectives and, in some cases, shaped by religious values, particularly from Islam.

Currently, out of 32 campuses across Indonesia offering undergraduate programs in social work or social welfare education, 11 are religious-based institutions. Among these, five campuses are affiliated with Muhammadiyah, a modernist Muslim mass organization; one campus is associated with Nahdlatul Ulama, a traditionalist Muslim mass organization; one campus is part of a Christian university; and four are State Islamic universities, one with which I am affiliated. This highlights religion's significant role and recognition in shaping social work education in Indonesia.

As a lecturer of social work at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, my work contributes to decolonizing social work education by drawing parallels between the challenges faced in integrating Indigenous knowledge in Canadian social work and the need to elevate local, cultural, and religious values within social work education in Indonesia. Reflecting on specific gaps in Canadian social work—such as the limited inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in accreditation benchmarks and the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics—I engage in several strategies that foster decolonial practices which I describe below.

Firstly, I advocate for the integration of local wisdom, Islamic principles, and Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum, ensuring that students understand social work as a culturally rooted and contextually relevant profession. By introducing frameworks that incorporate Islamic and Indigenous approaches to social welfare, I encourage students to critically examine colonial legacies within mainstream social work practices, both globally and locally.

Secondly, inspired by the gaps in Canadian accreditation benchmarks, I actively work towards developing alternative educational standards that prioritize cultural relevance and community needs. For instance, by organizing field visits as part of student assignments, I encourage the creation of practicum education opportunities that immerse students in local, Indigenous, or religiously significant communities, enabling them to learn from those with lived experience and apply decolonized approaches in practice.

Lastly, by examining the CASW Code of Ethics (2024), I reflect on how social work ethics can be reimagined to align with diverse cultural and spiritual values. Canadian accreditation often underrepresents Indigenous perspectives, resulting in a Eurocentric bias in curriculum design and pedagogical approaches (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). The CASW Code of Ethics, though progressive in many respects, lacks explicit directives for integrating Indigenous

knowledge and addressing colonial legacies. For example, the Code could more actively advocate for land acknowledgments, partnerships with Indigenous communities, and cultural safety training. These gaps suggest a need for reforms that incorporate Indigenous epistemologies and equip social work students with tools to navigate and dismantle colonial structures in their practice.

I am contributing to the development of a nuanced ethical framework that bridges Islamic principles and local traditions with universal social work standards, fostering an education system that respects and integrates diverse worldviews.

Student feedback and outcomes from these decolonial teaching practices have been both insightful and encouraging. For instance, during their final presentations, many students demonstrated a profound ability to critically analyze social work theories and adapt them to local contexts. One group highlighted how the concept of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) could effectively address community development issues in rural Indonesia, integrating it into a mezzo and macro-level intervention plan. Reflections collected after the semester revealed that students felt more confident applying social work theories to real-life settings, with one student noting, "I now see how Western theories can be a starting point, but they need to be adapted to our collective cultural values."

Through these efforts, I aim to demonstrate how decolonizing social work education is a global endeavor, drawing on insights gained through studying and teaching in Canada, with the unique sociocultural and religious context of Indonesia where I am now returning, while advocating for greater equity and inclusion in the field. This aligns with Ortega-Williams and McLane-Davison's (2021) call to develop educational practices that challenge entrenched hegemonies and foster equity and inclusion in the field of social work practice.

I am still dedicated to developing and refining my approach to decolonizing social work education to gain more just epistemology. This encompasses my ongoing commitment to collaborating with community members and activists, advocating for curricular changes reflecting Indonesian society's diverse realities, and engaging with Indigenous knowledge systems, particularly rooted in a religious-based system. I aspire to motivate other educators and practitioners to begin their own initiatives to decolonize their practice by sharing my experiences, thereby contributing to a more equitable and just world.

Global social work education can advance decolonization by integrating localized knowledge systems and culturally rooted frameworks into curricula. This includes collaborating with Indigenous communities to co-create materials, revising accreditation standards to incorporate non-Western epistemologies, and promoting cultural humility through anti-oppressive training. Practicum education in community settings and transnational dialogues between educators from the Global North and South can further foster inclusive and culturally responsive practices. These steps will help dismantle colonial structures and create a more equitable and globally relevant social work profession.

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Author biography

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