

Dilate: A Reflection on How My Marginalized Experiences in Education Created My Call for Equity in Social Work Education

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Abstract: Creating anti-oppressive social work education and practice begins at the front door with admissions to social work school. Having had the unique perspective of being a child and adolescent that received social work services and later becoming a licensed social worker—then social work academic—myself, there is a direct connection between my experiences in public education, my experiences in social work education, and equity in social work school admissions. This piece seeks to demonstrate such.

Keywords: developing identity, equity, public education, social work education, race, poetry

After about seven years of unstable living environments and foster care—a blur of different beds, different school playgrounds, and no continuous attachment—I was adopted. I was born to a teen mother and absent father. My biological mother is White, the daughter of Greek immigrants. My father is Black and some part Native American. Neither one of them had an interest in or the ability to care for me or keep me safe, and this more than anything led to my foster care experience and eventual adoption. In some ways, race is like early childhood trauma in that it sets you apart from, and behind, your peers, then you spend much of, if not the rest of, your life trying to catch up—healing and learning, or self-sabotaging and yearning. I was adopted at the age of seven and spent my childhood with my adoptive family in a majority white suburban town in southern New Hampshire, about 50 minutes north of Boston. In my earliest elementary school years, I did not see myself as different from the other children, at least not by my race. I knew I was different because I had a new family, and I was sad and cried often, while the other children did not. Today I know I was living with significant trauma from early years of abuse, broken attachments, frequent changes in homes, and school disruptions. I was the only Black child in my first-grade class in Manchester, NH. The only Black child in my second-grade class, and in my third-grade class, and only one or two in each grade thereafter through to college.

Because I “acted out” often, cried often, daydreamed or “seemed distant, or had trouble following along during lessons and would ask the teacher to repeat questions or directions, I was sent to Special Education. Not because I had a learning disability, but because I was displaying trauma symptomatology. In the late 1980s and early 1990s this was where you were sent when you learned differently. Once or twice a week during the teacher’s regular lesson I was fetched by a school aide and walked to the Special Education room across a long corridor. I hated going. I felt even more different... even stupid. Why was a first grader who read at a third-grade level being walked down to the Special Education room? Was it because I self-isolated from the other children during recess? Because I did not trust adults? Because I would rush through my assigned schoolwork so I could take my book to the reading rug? At the time, books were the only place I felt safe. They were also the only place I saw Black and Brown people.

At home I struggled too, but not like I did at school. At school I did not trust what anyone said; at home I at least had my adopted mother, and I trusted her. Before I was ever aware of my race and how that marked me as “other” in America, I was aware of where I came from. What happened to me before my adopted home made me different. People do not understand different, especially my kind of different. Black and different. But was I different, though? Says who? On what authority?

In elementary school, these feelings of difference made me hypervigilant and aware, especially around fairness. I often thought the way I was treated was unfair. I had a sense that I was being treated differently by adults at school. Singled out. I was told it was because of my behavior. I did struggle with my behavior; I was unattached, living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and often overstimulated. I was also Brown or Black, depending on who you asked. When you are a Brown child, you must behave better than your White peers, or you are “trouble.” You must perform better, faster, in reading, in sports, and group activities, or you are struggling. Whiteness is the baseline for which we are all measured as children, and thereafter. When you are a Brown child, White adults see you as Brown first, especially when you are the only Brown child in a classroom that is a blur of alabaster. You are Brown, and then you’re everything else. I wrote a haiku (pictured below) inspired by personal reflections of my early education as I researched and wrote this article. I so enjoy parallel therapeutic process and critical scholarship, as well as the intersections of the arts and academia. Including my scholarship and my art cohesively in this piece felt within the spirit of the work.

Often, I would report moments I experienced as “unfair” to adults and would be met with resistance, gaslighting, and redirection. I was not wrong. I would be disciplined more regularly and more severely for engaging in the same behavior as my White male peers. In fact, as a child, White boys were my only friends and my accomplices in mischief. However, I would often be the only one punished, made to sit in the hall during lessons, or miss recess. My White male peers rarely stood up and took responsibility for their part in said mischief. I was both the troublemaker and the whipping boy. On one occasion in sixth grade, my teacher, fed up with incessant chatter between two classmates and myself, reprimanded us. She took it a step further with me, moving my desk out of the classroom and down the hallway, then placed a screen partition around the desk. My desk and I sat in this hallway location for over a week. I was literally segregated from the classroom. I was humiliated. Between classes, other students passed my desk, they would peek in and laugh, poke fun, giggle.

haiku for me in 1994

fragile like a bomb
skullduggery and my brown
body demarcate

“Nathan, what did you do?”

“I was talking during class.”

“Oh. But then why are you here?”

“I don’t know...”

No White student during my time at this school was ever segregated from their peers, especially not in a public space for others to scrutinize or gawk at. Humiliation was not an uncommon experience in both primary and secondary school. Racist microaggressions showed up in not just the aforementioned cases, but more blatantly and more frequently as I progressed through grade school. Comments were often made about my kinky/curly hair, larger nose, and lips. Some comments were more blatant like “don’t forget to smile or we won’t be able to see you in the picture.” These kinds of comments would be racist and damaging to any Black student, but the fact that I am light skinned, and frankly not much darker hued than many of my olive complexion White peers made it clear the intent was to use my race to demean and belittle me.

As a teenager, I wore my hair in an afro style and later in short dreadlocks. Outside of my home, I was self-conscious about my hair. Middle-aged White women would ask to touch my “beautiful curls,” sometimes running or swirling their hands in my hair without permission. Even worse would be people, sometimes grown adults, describing my hair as nappy, or comparing it to a Q-tip or Brillo pad. One day in eighth grade, my cisgender White male math teacher stated to me in front of a classroom full of my White peers that my hair looked “like a rat nest.” Many students laughed. I was mortified and ashamed. I was humiliated. I felt powerless. And small. By the time I was in college, discriminatory attacks went from teasing and microaggression to clear dislike or disdain for me because of my race or my queerness. On one occasion during undergrad while watching Beyoncé sing the national anthem for a baseball game in a room full of White students, a White male commented aloud “Why does she have to niggify the national anthem?” The majority of the room laughed, or agreed, or continued to sit complacent drinking their Coors Light. I felt angry. Unsafe. Hurt. Disgusted. Alone.

Through college I became more aware of the racial inequities and privileges between myself and my White peers. Comments or moments of discrimination or racism became less covert and more overt. I became accustomed to them. I thought, “As long as they don’t call me a nigger or faggot, it’s not that bad.” Black and Brown people in White spaces, or in spaces where whiteness is centered, learn to even gaslight ourselves. I often found myself wishing that experiences of discrimination were the covert kind, so as to save me from the embarrassment and fear of the overt kind. I would mentally rank and even prepare for the impending experiences of discrimination. In some ways, the overt experiences of discrimination served to make allowance for the covert experiences of discrimination—in and of itself another type of discrimination; it highlights what we understand in anti-oppressive work, that race-based discrimination is endemic in the social fabrics of American culture (Delgado et. al., 2017); as it has been in my experiences.

Even as a social work major (where I expected White professors and other students majoring in the subject would be far better in terms of racial difference), I felt again and again that my field supervisors preferred White people (particularly White women), over me and over what I had to contribute to the field. It was as though my Blackness and queerness did not have as valuable or as needed a place in social work practice. My first field supervisor often suggested that I was less motivated or able, as compared to White women she supervised. Other times she would ascribe aspects of my behavior that she perceived as problematic to represent that of my entire race. She actually said to me on at least two occasions, “In the future I am going to request a

[White] woman; they just work harder.” In response, I worked harder to prove myself, causing myself more stress and anxiety in the process, while never actually feeling valued. But did she understand that I worked two jobs while in college, in addition to taking full-time classes and arriving at my (unpaid) internship on time every day? Who was really working harder? Me or the privileged white women she was comfortable working next to?

Institutional, systemic, and intrapersonal forms of racism, that are embedded in society through laws, organization, racial preference, inequity, bias and so forth (Miller & Garran, 2007; Miller & Garran, 2017), had showed up in my personal experience from elementary school and remained intact and often undisrupted through each level of formal schooling including social work school. It was the frequency and magnitude of my discriminatory experiences that began my interest in learning both about my own racial identity and its development and the endemic nature of race discrimination in learning environments.

By the time I began my matriculation to social work school in Boston, where I pursued a Master of Social Work degree, I already had a keen lens for evaluating unfair and inequitable practices—skills that were refined in that very program, and later advanced in my Doctor of Social Work program, which I completed in 2017 at the University of Pennsylvania. Audre Lorde (1979) once wrote “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (p. 25). I find this true in almost every area of life except possibly social work education. A field and scholarship ubiquitous for teaching the values of diversity and concepts and practice of empowerment and social justice.

“The purpose of playing, whose end,
both at the first and now,
was and is,
to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature:
to show virtue her feature,
scorn her own image,
and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”
(Shakespeare, 1603/1825, 3.2.21–25)

In other words, contemporary social work education has told on itself. The very social justice, equity, and power analysis tools we use to evaluate environments, systems, and human experiences have shown us that social work remains quite colonized and severely inept at holding itself completely accountable to, well, itself. Many social workers, aligned with a liberation movement, and with motivation of our own lived experiences, have taken “the master’s tools” and shown the mirror directly towards the profession of social work. I would be remiss and guilty of perpetuating the colonial values that center whiteness and create oppression for those outside whiteness if I didn’t use the tools and skills achieved in social work school not just on my understanding of and action in the world outside, but, perhaps more importantly, to the world inside. The world that is social work education, which continues to center whiteness and uphold its idealized privilege.

For example, in my observation and engagement with peers while earning my Master of Social Work degree, it was clear that White applicants who never experienced intergenerational racial trauma, who were recipients of intergenerational wealth, and who had privileges I had never known, received merit and other scholarships, advanced standing, and even preferential treatment in practicum placement. This claim is large, but I can explain, and will, as these experiences have incited my call to action for the benefit and equity of all social work graduate students and the institutions for which they matriculate.

First, in examining the concept of equity, the condition of fair and just inclusion into a society: Equity exists when those who have been most marginalized have equal access to opportunities, power, participation, and resources. Equity requires restructuring deeply entrenched systems of power, privilege, and oppression that have led to the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens over multiple generations (Dyer, 2020). We can begin the application of equity principles to social work education admissions by conceptualizing who most benefits from advanced standing status, how they benefit, how others might hold deficit without the benefit, and the effects of offering the benefit to some while excluding others. We must look at advanced standing status as an institutional and consumer benefit.

When social work schools do not consistently if at all evaluate aid and benefits to students based on need, histories of oppression, or socially engineered trauma experience, they are in fact perpetuating the very systems responsible for inequity and relinquishing true equity. A universal requirement for advanced standing is GPA. GPA is often used to measure a student candidate's academic ability, success, and potential in an accelerated program. At Boston College in Chestnut Hill, MA, the required GPA for advanced standing in their Master of Social work program is 3.3—at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles it is 3.0, and other Master of Social Work programs at universities such as Washington University in St. Louis, The University of Illinois, and so on have similar criteria. What is in a GPA? Is a GPA a true measurement of intellect? Of motivation and resiliency? Of potential for contribution to the profession of social work? If GPA does predetermine these factors, how so?

GPA cannot measure perseverance or insight or overall ability. It can measure one's ability to use readily available resources to learn and comply with deadlines; it can measure scores on assignments; GPA cannot measure trauma history but can allude to the existence of trauma, or poverty, or barriers. I am not saying GPAs are null and void. I am saying that social work schools must look beyond the GPA number to explore factors that contribute to said GPA and, if appropriate, waive GPA requirements based on applicable histories and efforts shown. We know GPAs are influenced by student employment, trauma, or mental/emotional health histories or presence, and social abilities. Considering these factors coupled with achievement ability and potential future field contributions would be more inclusive. This is done in some part with admissions essays in traditional two and three-year programs but rarely in advanced standing when GPA criteria is pre-set. Social work programs have also used GPA to determine qualification for scholarship, again rewarding the factors that create high GPAs: rewarding privilege, and thus perpetuating colonial White supremacy ideologies.

There are socioeconomic benefits awarded to those receiving advanced standing status too, and that is what makes this a compounded equity issue. Advanced standing status often translates to

a major reduction in tuition cost for those that qualify for the program by allowing qualified students to complete a program in three semesters instead of four to eight. This reduction in education costs in the form of loans and their subsequent acquired interest and fees creates financial benefits to students that receive them. Further, students who leave graduate school with few financial burdens are well positioned for future homeownership and in the acquisition of business loans. Crippling student loan debt often results in major delays in home ownership and other ways of acquiring wealth (Elliott & Lewis, 2016).

I did not receive advanced standing in social work school because I did not meet the GPA requirement for my school of admission, despite having a BSW and impressive employment and volunteer experience. I even won an award from my undergraduate social work degree program for my outstanding community service contributions. I acquired this all prior to my MSW admission application. My GPA was just under the 3.0 requirement, but my work and volunteer experience were greater than many of the students awarded Advanced Standing. Things that make you go hmmm?? My academics always suffered when I was a pupil. I had to work multiple jobs just to afford to show up. It was not an option for me not to work. If I was going to go to school, I would have to work. I had to do without the resources, materials, and TIME that many of my privileged peers had afforded to them. I had to devote a portion of my time to therapy, to student support services, to academic guidance and planning, and to figuring out each month how I was going to financially “make it.” None of these realities are reported or recorded in my GPA records and were hardly able to serve as qualifiers in my admission application. I would never have received advanced standing in social work school because social work school could not see how my GPA was not a representation of my intellect or academic ability, but of my socioeconomic circumstance, lived trauma, and lack of resources.

The truth is, while I applied to social work school, and was not eligible for advanced standing therefore I did not apply for it, my application showed more resiliency, more determination, more work and volunteer experience, more passion for social work, and more importantly more insight into the populations and systems that social workers are charged with working with than most 3.5 GPA applications. Many of my colleagues today, of all diverse factors, who share a similar upbringing have shared with me their similar stories of admission, which says this is perhaps a more common phenomenon that is not limited to my experience alone. Social work schools must understand that there is a dire need to reevaluate admission criteria to include true equity, and that advanced standing in addition to being a marker of assumed ability within a program for success, thereafter, is also a huge economic and social advantage. We as faculty admission decision makers are choosing who shall be advantaged over others, who will be the recipients of post-graduation privileges, and if we will continue to perpetuate inequitable advantaging of the advantaged. Black and Brown people recognize this, applicants who come from less resources recognize this—we understand we have been victims of inequity, and we are feeling a disloyalty and distance with our schools of social work; it is grim and sometimes dubious.

I often use the example of advanced standing in social work schools to highlight missed opportunities to address equity (again, the condition of fair and just inclusion into a society), inclusion (the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity), and marginalization

(both a condition and a process that prevents individuals and groups from full participation in social, economic, and political life enjoyed by the wider society) (Dyer, 2020), because it is a relatable example for social workers. The admissions process to social work school is truly the beginning of social work systems—the front door of social work—and dismantling systemic inequity should begin at the front door.

A colleague at Clark Atlanta University noted that from her professional experience, even when candidates from traditionally oppressed or marginalized communities are offered a place in advanced standing programs, candidates often cannot accept the offer of admission because the demand for full time school and (UNPAID) practicum placement are unable to coexist with their full-time work needs and personal obligations. Additionally, students often experience fear, anxiety, and self-doubt at the prospect of having to struggle further. Many of these students delay admissions or opt instead for the two and three-year programs, relinquishing the economic benefits advanced standing carries. This is another barrier to break and piece to dismantle.

Dismantling means that we must take apart environments and systems that are harmful to people: systems that shame, embarrass, weaken, reduce, stigmatize, perpetuate false narratives, or oppress. I have sat with my experiences as a multiracial person in America, as a social work student, as a practicing clinician, and today as a social work educator and understand the dire need to not just reassess and readdress social work systems but to decolonize, dismantle, and rebuild them using a true anti-oppressive lens. Frameworks such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and diversity, equity, inclusion, intersectionality, power analysis, anti-racist (DEIPAR) allow us to thoroughly evaluate environments, systems, and instances. Even something as seemingly simple or unimpactful as social work degree admissions hold oppressive factors, and that is what our CRT and DEIPAR frameworks show us. Further action also includes the creation of social work admission, education, and support systems that are truly equitable—where DEIPAR initiatives do not exist symbolically or superficially, but are rooted, embedded, and steadfast.

The DEIPAR framework, particularly in social work practice and social work education, is not designed to be static in definition, but to evolve with the changing social definitions of each of its facets (Dyer, 2020). Social work practice/education must do the same: evolve with changing definitions. Social work has major work to do in radically revising and decolonizing social work curricula, centering healing and social justice interventions that are rooted in shared humanity, while alleviating structural constraints. It is my hope we can confront equity and all the DEIPAR facets in social work education so that new social work professionals will propagate these values and changes into all systems. It will be future social workers who will be charged with decolonization and anti-oppressive learning in public school systems. It will be future social workers who will be charged with advocating for the needs and humanity of students who otherwise would be treated unfairly, or even violently. It will be future social workers who create a safe and brave space for a future multiracial, adopted, queer, young boy in public school, and see that he is not punished more severely than his White peers, or separated from the learning environment for simply existing. Lastly, it will be future social workers who will most benefit from having had equitable access to affordable higher education, fair and equitable admission standards, and evaluation of their potential for field contribution over their historical

GPA. If social work faculties are the gatekeepers of the field, we must begin our anti-oppressive and equitable work at the front door of social work, social work degree admissions.

Some Final Thoughts for the Reader

- How does the idea of Whiteness create undue burden?
- How do White people participate, often unknowingly, in racism, holding of power, and inequity?
- How are schools of social work (and social work practice) addressing DEIPAR facets wholly and not just superficially?

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