Reflections from the Guest Editors: A Call for Social Worker Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism *Within* Social Work Programs (Issue 2)

Tiffany D. Baffour and Shonda K. Lawrence

Abstract: The second volume of a two-part Special Issue of a Trilogy on race and racism amplifies the narratives, experiences, and truths of social work faculty and students who are working to confront and dismantle systemic racism in social work programs and departments globally. Counter-storytelling, using teaching and learning as its central theme, is used to first name racist and colonizing practices and then offer strategies to improve institutional change efforts. Sustainable anti-racist efforts in social work education can be improved by incorporating knowledge, skills, strategies, and lessons learned throughout this Special Issue.

Keywords: anti-racism, systemic racism, social work education, reflection, higher education, pedagogy, decolonization, narratives, counter-storytelling

Tiffany

In 2022, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for US social work programs, issued a newly developed set of standards. CSWE standards must now clearly reflect anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) across program elements: mission, curriculum, learning environment, assessment, and inclusive practices and policies, including governance structure and resources (CSWE, 2022). These new standards present a critical opportunity for organizational development strategies that social work administrators, educators, students, and staff can collectively utilize to improve institutional outcomes within the profession. Importantly, they will impact how social workers are prepared to practice within institutions. Previous research illustrates that social work faculty can serve as a barrier to facilitating student learning around anti-racist content due to insufficient skill and preparation (Perez, 2021). Uniquely, this Special Issue presents knowledge, skills, strategies, and lessons learned to create organizational change within social work programs and higher education institutions.

While the 2022 accreditation standards represent a monumental shift in the implementation of competency-based education, we are simultaneously witnessing legislative intervention throughout the United States to dismantle ADEI policies, practices, and strategies within publicly funded institutions of higher education. Many of these policies seek to influence the right of faculty members to discuss pedagogically relevant viewpoints on race and racism within their classrooms (Honeycutt et al., 2023), while others seek to prohibit federal and state funding for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices, training, and hiring statements. For example, Florida's Senate Bill 266, signed into law in May 2023, prohibits the state's public colleges and universities from spending any state or federal dollars on DEI (Suarez & Royal, 2024). According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (*Chronicle* Staff, n.d.), more than 40 anti-DEI state bills have been introduced, seven have final legislative approval, seven have become law, and 29 have been tabled, failed to pass, or been vetoed. Despite the repudiation of DEI work

happening within US society, I find joy and purpose in my role as an associate dean of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Often, I work with students, faculty, and staff across disciplines implementing strategies for social change as well as assisting individual and groups through the development, implementation and assessment of recruitment and retention programming and initiatives.

My life has been a mosaic of experiences and choices marked by interactions with folks from all walks of life and diverse societies. Throughout my life, I have both travelled and lived abroad, my life experiences enriched by many. I have always chosen to build trust between communities of different cultural systems while remaining deeply rooted in the many layers of my own cultural heritage and identity as an African American woman. I have chosen to spend my time with people with both divergent and similar viewpoints. Both perspectives have helped expand my creativity and challenge the ways I think about social problems, social policies, and their solutions. I struggle to understand ethnocentrism and the rejection of alternate ways of knowing and viewpoints. However, as I think back to the numerous conversations and meetings with faculty, staff, and students over the past few years at my own institution, I recall the resistance to integrating diverse perspectives and content into the curriculum. While some faculty have supported the integration of ADEI, I have witnessed many remain silent. Additionally, I have observed (especially among a segment of the student population) consistent and aggressive advocacy for curtailing ADEI content. To the credit of the administration and faculty, they have implemented ADEI into the curriculum consistent with the requirements of CSWE. I echo the sentiments expressed by colleagues in this Special Issue; I am troubled that some social work students don't feel that learning about systemic racism and improving their skills to address it are important. In these troubling times, commitment to racial justice on campuses is critical to the institutional success of academic institutions. DEI policies and practices are not being dismantled because they are ineffective, but because they provide opportunity for equity, spaces for inclusion and belonging, and classrooms where faculty and students can express their identities and ideas. As social workers we must be on the forefront of protecting spaces of inclusion, belonging, and mattering.

Recently, I attended the closing plenary of the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) Racial Equity Conference. It was an uplifting experience in the face of the current vitriolic attempts to defund ADEI nationally. It reminded me that *anti-racism is a movement, not a moment.* As we continue the movement, how will we maintain safe spaces? How will we continue with the work of social justice in the face of sweeping changes in higher education? As a profession, how will we continue to engage in reformative and not performative action? How do we resist fear created by legislative overreach? We still need to model anti-racist practices to serve students. We can improve the success and sustainability of our efforts by incorporating the lessons learned and strategies identified in this Special Issue.

Thank you to the brave authors who chose to share their stories here. Read and re-read them! I learn something new each time I re-engage them. Importantly, please cite this work as well as share it with your administrators, colleagues, family, and friends. Use these articles in your faculty meetings and other academic spaces to help others name and dismantle racist and

colonizing practices. Colleagues, continue to envision bold new strategies for an anti-racist social work future. *Yebetumi aye* (We can do it)!

Shonda

Reflecting on my educational experience, in the past as a student and now as a faculty member, I have always believed that students should pursue education to become great thinkers. Moreover, professors should teach to expose and stimulate the inherent greatness in all students. I believe knowledge and discovery are perpetual forces in the evolution of mankind and, therefore, must always be supported and protected. Knowledge must be passed on for discovery to happen. To achieve this goal, we must sit in a space that allows and supports critical thinking, the discovery of self, and the connection of what is learned in the classroom with the realities of the world and all its imperfections. It is imperative to understand what we teach and why we teach it to be effective. Without this imperative, what we learn may be fundamentally flawed. Therefore, to be conscientious educators with a lens of social justice, we must grapple with and reconcile the fundamental flaws in social work education. For example, social work history clearly identifies pioneers like Jane Addams and Mary Ellen Richmond, with Whitney M. Young, Jr. and Ida B. Wells included in some discussions. This supports the redundancy of how people of color have been included in our history as anomalies. Sure, we can google African American/Black/people of color in social work and retrieve a listing of names with short biographies, but where are they in our curriculum? While I am thankful for the trails blazed, triumphs, and forward-thinking of social work leaders, I have also been baffled by the lack of inclusion of persons of color in the fight for an equal and just society in our curricula. This omission is especially troubling since many social work policies and programs target populations that include people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds and other vulnerable populations.

Historical positionality limited the involvement of people of color on a national platform. However, communities of color experiencing and witnessing inequitable treatment and injustices did not sit idly by; they engaged in community uplift. It is important to include and discuss the resilience, survival, and triumph of groups of people facing systemic racism not just from a victimization lens or deficit model but from a strength's perspective. For example, when African American children were parentless for whatever reason, family/community members took children into their homes, provided for them emotionally and financially, and raised them as their own. This intervention is known as kinship care or fictive kin today (Hegar & Scannapieco, 1995; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996).

The articles included in this volume highlight the need to revisit how we present our history, how we include the accomplishments of persons of color in the social work field, and whether an in-depth examination of what we require of programs justly meets our standards and Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). We also must contemplate what it means to embrace and give life to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging (DEIAB) for faculty, students, and staff. In this volume, readers may use this compilation to navigate the complexities of incorporating DEIAB into previously colonized curricula. I thank the scholars who have courageously contributed to this Special Issue by sharing their experiences and reflections.

Descriptions of Articles and a Special Tribute

In this volume, authors from academic institutions in the United States, Canada, and South Africa present reflective accounts that describe personal experiences with institutional racism within schools, colleges, and departments of social work. These narratives are both timely and timeless. Although racism exists in a historical and socio-political context, these narratives provide illustration of faculty and student experiences that depict present day conditions while also illustrating ties to historical themes in higher education including systemic injustice, discrimination, and oppression. Social work educators have a moral and ethical responsibility to confront and dismantle racism globally. These counter-stories indelibly stand in opposition to stock stories and meta-narratives common in our academic culture. This second volume demonstrates how theories, teaching strategies, and skills embodied in antiracist educational activism can be put into practice to confront and dismantle racism in social work education.

Both Best-Giacomini and Oba and Zerafa focus on decolonizing the curriculum as an anti-racist educational strategy. In "Teaching While Black: A Call to Decolonize the Social Work Curriculum," Best-Giacomini shares her personal journey in academia, including encounters with racism. She provides a call to action to decolonize the curriculum through the integration of anti-racist competencies, use of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and collaborating with organizations to create a more inclusive educational experience that recognizes the contributions of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color). "Who Positioned Social Work as the Noble Alternative to Policing," Oba and Zerafa delve into the complexities of social work's history inextricably tied to colonialism and white supremacy. By tracing the roots of social work in Canada to colonialism and racialization, they provide specific examples of the profession's complicity in sustaining anti-Blackness. The authors underscore the impact of race and racism, calling for solidarity and inclusive learning environments in academia.

Both Chikadzi and Ragudaran provide powerful narratives about colonialism and their experience within academic institutions. In "Guilty Until Proven Innocent: Reflections on Encounters with Whiteness in an Academic Institution," Chikadzi shares his lived experiences as a professor in a predominately white institution (PWI) in South Africa. Drawing from encounters and interactions with colleagues and students, he reflects on how being Black often results in unwarranted presumptions of criminality, incompetence, and the denial of privilege granted to white students and faculty. These incidents not only provide concrete examples of white privilege but also emphasize the necessity for dismantling the economic and educational structures that perpetuate structural racism in South Africa. In conclusion, Chikadzi underscores the necessity for policy changes informed by research as he asserts "a dismantling of [informal, biased] networks and the development of new pathways for recruitment which give a fair chance to black candidates, who largely lack social capital to access such privileged spaces, is needed" (pg. 9). Similarly, in "My Reckoning" Ragudaran reflects on her experiences in PWIs in the US, both inside and outside the classroom, to confront and disrupt racism. Ragudaran provides concrete examples of how she actively engaged in social justice movements and anti-racism efforts within academia following George Floyd's death while balancing the responsibilities of the tenure track. Facing many demands for teaching, research, and service, she continued to

advocate for genuine inclusivity and integrated racial spaces to foster honest conversations and action across campus in a variety of settings.

Likewise, there are several common themes in the three narratives of Campbell et al., Blakey et al., and Currie. Each counter-narrative speaks to personal and/or professional experiences with discrimination including macroaggressions, mega-aggressions, and microaggressions. These narratives, centering CRT and scholarship, counter the common portrayal that experiences with racism and discrimination within social work educational spaces are isolated incidents. In the article "From Intellectual Exercise to Facilitated Dialogue: How One Class Confronted Race and Racism in the Social Work Classroom," Campbell et al. discuss the longstanding goal of social work educators to prepare students for social justice work, including combatting racism, sexism, and other inequalities. However, students often perceive these issues as distant problems unrelated to their academic environment. The article presents the perspectives of a Black female instructor, an African American student, and a White student who share their perspectives on and debrief their collective experiences regarding racially charged events in a shared classroom. They underscore the need for social work educators (and students) to sit in discomfort to which will stir them "to seek, insist upon, and help create spaces that promote true diversity, inclusion, and equity particularly as it relates to race" (p. 57). In "Black People Are Not My Thing: Microaggressions Experienced by Black Graduate Students in Social Work Programs," Blakey et al. address the experiences of Black students in social work programs at PWIs. They provide definitions and examples to name the various forms of racism and aggression experienced by Black students and describe the psychological distress and disconnection these experiences can cause. The authors highlight the urgency for social work education to confront and dismantle racism and microaggressions by implementing anti-racist policies and practices including inclusive curricula and expanded support for recruitment and retention. In "Dilate: A Reflection on How My Marginalized Experiences in Education Created My Call for Equity in Social Work Education," Currie recounts his journey from foster care to higher education. He emphasizes the profound impact of early racial trauma due to bias experienced in a predominantly white suburban environment. Currie advocates for innovative strategies that foster equity-mindedness, integration of healing justice, and theoretical frameworks such as CRT and DEIPAR (diversity, equity, inclusion, intersectionality, power analysis, anti-racist). He asserts the need for greater inclusivity, emphasizing the re-envisioning of admissions procedures by considering criteria outside of GPA, such as trauma history, resilience, and work experience.

Both Slayter and Walker provide vital examples of social justice work taking place within social work programs. In "Tough Nuts to Crack: Initiating an Imperfect Racial Justice Accountability Process Within One School of Social Work from One Perspective," Slayter discusses an institutional plan to prioritize racial justice work. Her narrative describes efforts to engage faculty and staff in data-driven equity initiatives, leading to the discovery of racial disparities in low grades and dismissals, prompting personal self-reflection and systemic change. Within the reflective work titled "Participatory Program Evaluation: Focusing on Critical Perspectives for the Creation of Equitable and Collaborative Solutions," Walker engages themes of research methods, community engagement, and decolonization within the context of social work coursework and practicum. Walker highlights several challenges in engaging students in decolonizing work including inconsistency in instructional methods (i.e., what knowledge is

considered credible) across courses as well as lack of agency expertise in cultural humility to adequately support Native American clients which was reflected consistently in students' program evaluation assignments. The authors highlight collaborative solutions to improve social work education, such as course restructuring efforts, hybrid course formats, and engaging Indigenous territories in community engagement efforts.

Acknowledgement

We would also like to thank Angelica Uzoigwe undergraduate research assistant at the University of Utah for her support in compiling materials for this volume.

Tribute to Dr. Ruby Gourdine

We would especially like to acknowledge and honor Dr. Ruby Gourdine (1948–2022), Professor, Howard University School of Social Work, who passed away on February 1, 2022. She was incredibly encouraging and excited about this special issue "A Call for Social Work Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism *Within* Social Work Programs." She was a tireless supporter of *Reflections* and an incredible social work pioneer. She published a narrative in 2004 "A Beginning Professional's Journey Towards Understanding Equality and Social Justice in the Field of Social Work" reflecting her own journey into the social work profession which began shortly after the implementation of civil rights legislation. Her expansive teaching, research and scholarship experiences focused on child welfare, children with disabilities, African American adolescents, social work education, critical race theory, social welfare history and much more. She was an exceptional mentor to students and faculty across disciplines as well as to those at other Universities.

The reflections that follow about the life and legacy of Dr. Ruby Gourdine are largely from her school at Howard University, yet we know that they also convey the thoughts and feelings of many who knew her:

> She taught me to be strong and stand firm in who I am as a Black woman, especially in predominately white academic spaces where the topics, theoretical frameworks, research methodologies and perspectives that are central to my work were often not valued. She was more than a mentor, she was a source of constant encouragement, my confidant and second mother. My life as a scholar, mother and wife has been incredibly enriched by her presence. I think of her often and all the important life lessons she taught me.

> – Tiffany Baffour, PhD

> In reflecting upon 25 years of collegiality with Dr. Ruby Gourdine, several key qualities come to mind. Organized. Timely. Dedicated. Committed. Knowledgeable. Helpful. Loyal. Dr. Gourdine was consistently first to complete assignments because of her keen organization skills. She was extremely dedicated to the Howard University School of Social Work Black Perspective. These qualities were evident in her research, scholarship,

teaching mentorship, and friendship. Her knowledge of Black history was freely shared. Dr. Gourdine was unshakeable in her loyalty. I am grateful that our paths crossed.

– Sandra Edmonds Crewe, PhD

Long before "Black Lives Matter" the movement and use of the word "unapologetic" became popular, it is evident from her scholarship, practice, and research that Dr. Gourdine had always insisted that Black lives matter and anyone who came to know here, knew she was "unapologetically Black." As her colleague, I learned first-hand that she didn't arrive at these positions by accident or to seek personal glory or fame. Her lived experiences with entrenched systematic racism motived her to spend every living moment producing advocacy, research, and scholarship that affirmed Black people, highlighting their strengths, and amplified their contributions.

– Altaf Husain, PhD

Dr. Gourdine was a shining example of generosity. She generously shared her scholarship, support, experiences, time, opportunities, and intellectualism. She was a champion for the Black Perspective and the centering of the Black experience in the scholarship of the School. I am grateful to have benefitted so greatly from her kindness, experience, and support.

– Tracy Whitaker, DSW

References

Chronicle Staff. (n.d.). *DEI legislation tracker: Explore where college diversity, equity and inclusion efforts are under attack.* The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved July 14, 2023 from https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts

Council on Social Work Education. (2022). Educational policy and accreditation standards. https://www.cswe.org/accreditation/standards/2022/

Hegar, R., & Scannapieco, M. (1995). From family duty to family policy: The evolution of kinship care. *Child Welfare*, *74*(1), 200–216. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45399031

Honeycutt, N., Stevens, S. T., & Kaufmann, E. (2023). The academic mind in 2022: What faculty think about free expression and academic freedom on campus. *Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.* https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/academic-mind-2022-what-faculty-think-about-free-expression-and-academic-freedom

National Association of Social Workers. (2021). *Code of Ethics*. https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics

Perez, E. N. (2021). Faculty as a barrier to dismantling racism in social work education. *Advances in Social Work*, *21*(2/3), 500–521.

Scannapieco, M., & Jackson, S. (1996). Kinship care: The African American response to family preservation. *Social Work*, *41*(2), 190–196. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23718490

Suarez, C., & Royal, D. (2024, January 24). *Florida board bans use of state and federal funds on DEI programs at state universities.* CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/24/us/florida-universities-dei-spending-ban/index.html

*About the Authors***:** Tiffany D. Baffour, PhD is Associate Dean for Graduate Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Graduate School, and Associate Professor, College of Social Work, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT (tiffany.baffour@utah.edu); Shonda K. Lawrence, PhD, LMSW is Associate Professor, College of Human and Health Services, Department of Social Work, Governors State University, University Park, IL (slawrence5@govst.edu).

With Deep Gratitude...

Supporting Reflections

Ways to contribute to the publishing of *Reflections*:

- $$ (any amount) — FRIEND OF *REFLECTIONS*
- $250 or more — FRIEND FOR LIFE
- $1,000 or more — A THOUSAND THANKS
- $3,000 over a three-year period — Institutional PUBLISHING PARTNER

Please visit: salemstate.edu/reflections

THANK YOU!!