

No Time to Rest: Purposeful Approaches to Systemic Racism and the Ongoing Struggle for Justice in Social Work Education

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Abstract: This reflective paper explores our experiences as two social work educators confronting systemic inequities intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, political unrest, and ongoing racial injustice. Drawing from our classroom experiences and student narratives, we examine how trauma, marginalization, and disillusionment manifest in student behavior and engagement. We critically analyze how traditional academic policies and Eurocentric curricula can unintentionally perpetuate harm, particularly for students from historically oppressed backgrounds. In response, we implemented intentional, equity-focused changes in pedagogy, course content, and classroom culture to foster psychological safety, empower student voice, and promote civic action. Against the backdrop of a second Trump presidency and increased policy threats to marginalized communities, we underscore the urgent need for educators to move beyond neutrality. This paper calls for a deliberate, justice-centered approach in social work education to support students navigating oppression while preparing them to lead meaningful, systemic change.

Keywords: social work pedagogy, social justice, self-reflection, psychological safety, classroom culture

Introduction

If we're really trying to use education as a force for positive change, then we have to be constantly shifting and challenging ourselves to see the things we do that exclude or marginalize or devalue others.

—David Wick (as cited in Bowman, 2020, para. 10)

Two social work professors reflect on their shared journey, beginning with the profound inequities their students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and extending into the present marked by political polarization and growing threats to human dignity and rights. These evolving challenges continue to affect student well-being in complex ways. As educators in a master's-level social work program, we have wrestled with the meaning and responsibility of our roles—preparing students to become advocates and agents of justice while they themselves navigate deep injustices, personal fears, and uncertainty about their future in the profession. In this manuscript, we discuss how self-reflection led us to critically examine and alter not only the content of our courses to focus more squarely on systemic oppression, but also how we support our students. Creating safe spaces for students to express their impressions and experiences, allowing for reflection on their learning and growth, and providing them with opportunities to take action against injustice, are ways in which we have responded to student distress.

During COVID-19, our graduate social work students, like many across the U.S., faced significant inequities: limited access to technology, increased caregiving responsibilities, and exposure to the virus as essential workers unable to work remotely (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020).

Many felt overwhelmed, with some viewing withdrawal as their only option. This crisis deepened in our community with the police killing of Daniel Prude during a mental health crisis (Gold & Closson, 2021), exposing students to compounded trauma from both the pandemic and systemic violence.

These experiences revealed the urgent need for change. Students spoke of immense emotional strain, and we saw it reflected in the classroom through absences, late work, emotional outbursts, or discomfort with being called on. Rather than viewing these behaviors as violations of academic policy, we began to understand them as trauma responses (Hunter, 2022). Our policies around attendance, late submissions, and professionalism, though seemingly neutral, risked reinforcing the very inequities we sought to dismantle.

Now, amid a second Trump presidency and regressive federal policy changes harming people of color and marginalized communities, students face renewed fear and discouragement. Many feel powerless in the face of rising political hostility and assaults on rights and dignity. For students engaged in coursework centered on justice, human rights, and systemic oppression, this climate is not abstract—it's deeply personal and emotionally destabilizing.

As two White, middle-class, PhD-prepared faculty members, we committed to critically examining how our teaching practices and institutional policies either challenge or perpetuate inequity. We could not ignore our students' pain or the broader structures causing it. COVID-19 exposed deep-rooted disparities in higher education that are now widening under the current administration (Zafar et al., 2020). Contentious politics continue to harm mental health across the nation, with many reporting anxiety, hopelessness, and even suicidal ideation in response to ongoing political stress (Smith, 2022).

In this paper, we reflect on our responsibility as educators, not just to teach social justice, but to live it. We share how we've adapted our pedagogy and presence to support students navigating trauma, injustice, and disillusionment during these turbulent times.

Look Inside, Act Now, and Speak Up

When I (Grape) saw the call for papers on inequities, I was transported back to March of 2020. The college campus closed, and all classes were to be held online. I had just started my second career as a college professor and had been teaching two years in person—and now students were not going to return to the classroom after spring break, and neither was I. I had taken a few courses on online teaching methods as a PhD student a few years prior but felt a bit unprepared for the sudden switch. What I was really not prepared for was the stark contrast in student experience. Students of color, working students, and students who were parents had more barriers to attending class and completing assignments than many of their single, younger classmates living at home. I am sure this was always the case; I just hadn't noticed the systemic inequities in this way.

This heightened awareness sparked a shift in my approach. I began regularly reflecting on how systemic inequities showed up in my teaching and took steps to address them. I used to delay reaching out to students who missed class or assignments, assuming, “they’re adults and should be responsible.” I came to realize this mindset reflects psychological entitlement. Such assumptions create psychological danger for struggling students, perpetuate inequity, and discourage them from seeking help (Lederman, 2021).

Accepting this was difficult. I saw myself as an approachable faculty member, yet my implicit bias was creating an unsafe space—penalizing students without understanding their circumstances. I began reaching out immediately to ask what was getting in the way of attendance or assignments. Students shared stories of being called into work, taking family members to the ER, or needing mental health days. Many felt deep shame about falling behind, contradicting my assumptions about irresponsibility. I now check my thinking, listen first, and respond equitably based on each student’s situation.

Another area of reflection was how I taught human behavior theories to first-year students. Despite recognizing the major role of systemic forces in shaping lives, I spent more time on individual-level theories from our required textbook and less on critical theory, racism, and structural oppression. Social work education remains rooted in eurocentrism and White power (Anka, 2024; Debnam et al., 2023). While I can shift my own practices, I must also acknowledge how the curriculum itself marginalizes the centrality of race and inequity in students’ lived experiences.

It was up to me to make a change. I had left my previous professional work in a family service agency partly due to frustration with systemic barriers to clients being able to meet their basic needs and function effectively. Now I had an opportunity to take that frustration and channel it into what I knew to be the reality of my students’ experiences, their clients’ experiences and the focus of social work practice. During this exploration, I found inspiration in an article by Zuckerman et al. (2022) relating their experiences focusing coursework on the influence of racism and power on the human condition. I started by adding material on racism, colorism, and critical theory into class sessions and developed a new assignment that had students critically examine and reflect on the ways in which these societal structures influenced daily lives. This was a beginning.

With the Fall 2024 semester came lots of uncertainty about who would win the presidential election. With the new presidency, student concerns centered around doubt in the political system and the ability for citizens to make a difference. It became clear that students needed an opportunity to take action against the power elite, rather than focus on their own fears and helplessness. I designed an assignment for students to participate in a social action event locally and write a reflective essay on their experience in the hope that they would experience their power as citizens.

Many students were initially hesitant, either due to lack of experience with social action or doubts about making an impact. They participated in events such as police accountability board

meetings, protests against immigration policies, meal deliveries to homeless encampments, and calls to legislators opposing pending bills. In their reflections, students expressed surprise at how empowering these actions felt and recognized the influence individuals can have in driving change. Many reported a shift in their thinking and feeling. Feelings of helplessness were replaced by hope, gaining an appreciation for the slow process of change, and a newfound alignment with their role as advocates for change and giving voice to the voiceless.

Psychological Safety: Real or Perception

During a recent MSW group practice class, I (Lane) learned firsthand how vital psychological safety is to the learning process. As an instructor committed to cultural humility and inclusive practice, I entered the session ready to engage students in a discussion about group dynamics and mandated member participation. I did not expect the powerful lesson my students would teach me about the deeper layers of psychological safety—within our program, the scenarios I present, and other classroom experiences.

The discussion focused on how mandated group members might engage in dialogue, particularly when forced to participate. To prompt conversation, I presented a scenario in which a member expressed visible anger and resistance to being required to attend. I asked how a social worker might respond, intending to explore strategies for de-escalation and empathetic engagement. What followed completely shifted our conversation and deepened my understanding of the classroom environment.

A student of color raised their hand and, with a quiet but firm voice, said, “How do you handle a group member’s anger when you have this kind of stuff in your family history with family members who were mandated? And how do I handle my own anger, resentment, hostility, and psychological unsafety with another MSW instructor?” There was a pause. Then the student continued, “I’m speaking just for me, but this instructor shames us if we walk in five minutes late, shames us especially if we are not their favorite student, and belittles Black people’s questions, especially if we are seeking understanding or [questioning] how hard white people work to make us Black people feel like we belong.”

I was stunned.

In that moment, the theoretical became deeply personal. Our program prides itself on promoting cultural humility and inclusion, but a student openly acknowledged that they felt unsafe, unseen, and undervalued within our learning community. More importantly, they had the courage to speak up. As the room absorbed their words, other students began to voice similar concerns. A few shared experiences of being silenced, dismissed, or treated unfairly. Only one white student spoke up, noting that they, too, felt like an outsider, pointing to being neurodivergent and not fitting into the instructor’s “apparent mold of favorite.”

Psychological safety can be defined as the belief that you can speak up, make mistakes, and express your authentic thoughts without fear of being punished or humiliated (Smith, 2022).

This moment illustrated how essential safety is in a social work classroom. It is one thing to teach about group dynamics and another to live through the raw, unfiltered impact of a psychologically unsafe environment. My students were not just discussing group management within trauma theory; they were living it.

This experience forced me to recognize the gap between our stated values as a program and the lived realities of some of our students. I was faced with my Whiteness and the perceptions I must project being a white, educated, middle-aged female. That student's bravery opened a space for real dialogue but also exposed pain and disillusionment that had gone unacknowledged. The classroom became, if only briefly, a microcosm of both harm and healing. It showed me that psychological safety is not just a nice-to-have but the foundation upon which all meaningful learning rests.

For students from marginalized backgrounds, the classroom can replicate the very dynamics of power, exclusion, and oppression that we, as social workers, are trained to challenge. When students feel that their questions are belittled or their experiences dismissed, the message they receive is incongruent with their welcome into an advertised diverse MSW program. Still, in its place, they are wrestling with the fact that this space may not be for them. And yet, when psychological safety is present, students can bring their full selves into the learning process. They can question, reflect, disagree, and grow.

Reflecting on this experience, I realize how essential it is for instructors to create environments where students feel truly safe sharing their truths. This means listening without defensiveness, responding with empathy, and being willing to confront our own biases and blind spots. It also means creating accountability within faculty ranks and ensuring that no student is made to feel like "the other."

The student who spoke up reminded me that psychological safety is not passive; it must be actively cultivated. It requires trust, consistency, and a willingness to be uncomfortable. Their vulnerability transformed our classroom that day. It prompted real conversations, not only about group practice but about the kind of learning environment we all deserve.

I am grateful for the humbling experience, and I carry it forward as both a lesson and a call to action. Psychological safety must be more than a concept we teach—it must be a commitment we live. Only then can we truly model the values of social work and honor the diverse voices of all our students.

Conclusion

As social work educators, our journey through the COVID-19 pandemic and into an era marked by political upheaval has deepened our understanding of the moral and professional responsibilities we carry. The initial disruptions caused by the pandemic exposed longstanding inequities, limited access to technology, increased caregiving burdens, and heightened risks for essential workers, all of which disproportionately affected our students, particularly those from

marginalized backgrounds. These challenges have not subsided; rather, they have intensified within a current political climate defined by divisiveness, growing authoritarian rhetoric, and regressive policy shifts that threaten the rights and well-being of historically oppressed populations.

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency, along with sweeping federal policy changes, has once again placed vulnerable groups at risk and left many of our students feeling disempowered, afraid, and uncertain about their future roles in a profession grounded in justice and advocacy. These sociopolitical realities seep into our classrooms, often manifesting as trauma responses, withdrawal, anger, apathy, or resistance, that are too often misunderstood as disengagement or lack of professionalism. By reframing our understanding of student behavior through a trauma-informed, equity-focused lens, we have begun to create learning spaces that are safer, more responsive, and more attuned to the lived realities of our students.

This paper has detailed our efforts to rethink not only what we teach but how we teach. We critically evaluated curricular content rooted in eurocentrism, adapted assignments to foster reflection and action, and worked intentionally to create psychologically safe classrooms where all students, especially those who have been historically marginalized can speak, learn, and grow without fear of harm, retribution, or dismissal. When students see themselves reflected in the curriculum and experience empathy in the classroom, their sense of agency is restored.

In times of political instability and social regression, social work education must resist neutrality. We must model resistance, cultivate resilience, and equip our students to face injustice with critical analysis and collective action. The call to look inward, act now, and speak up has never been more urgent. Our students deserve more than a degree—they deserve an education that embodies the core values of our profession and prepares them to lead change in an increasingly inequitable world.

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