

Social work and welfare education without discriminationⁱ. Are we there yet?

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Abstract

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has identified education as one of five crucial issues relating to the settlement of African Australians into the Australian community from a human rights perspective (AHRC 2009:5). In this paper I advocate that social work and welfare work in Australia are placed in important and multi-dimensional positions in relation to our complicities, responsibilities and potentialities with this educational human rights issue. As a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) welfare and University social work educator, I offer an outline of the 'mutual respect inquiry approach' that developed between myself and Southern Sudanese Australian students as a basis for discussion, reflection and change. I seek to stimulate thinking and action, particularly among those welfare work and social work educators, practitioners and students who identify as critical and anti-oppressive, to consider how these approaches can be realised and reshaped in practice to enhance not only Southern Sudanese Australians' right to education that is 'without discrimination', but indeed all students in our diversity.

Key words: *Human rights, Southern Sudanese Australian students; Mutual respect inquiry approach; Critical social work.*

Introduction

There are three multi-dimensional positions occupied by social work and welfare work in Australia in relation to our complicities, responsibilities and potentialities with the issue of the human right to education. I use the experiences that Southern Sudanese Australian students and I have shared as a critical and important illustrative example in its own right, but believe this analysis has greater reach in the context of education and diversity.

The first position is recognising the fact that as educational courses, welfare and social work have attracted a significant number of African, particularly Southern Sudanese Australian students. I suggest this presents a wonderful opportunity, and responsibility, for social work and welfare educators to publicly align themselves with the values of diversity. This could involve using aspects of critical pedagogyⁱⁱ in our educational practice that demonstrates and models our commitment to critical and anti-oppressive welfare and social work practice (AOP) in the institutional education context. I provide an example of how this can be enacted in a brief outline of the 'mutual respect inquiry

approach' developed between myself and Southern Sudanese Australian students. It would also involve re-evaluating course curriculum, knowledge base, educational assessment content and processes, teaching loads and pedagogy in light of Sudanese Australians' specific educational human rights issues. There is broader relevance here, as welfare and social work courses consider the implications of the Federal Government's push for TAFEs and Universities to increase their numbers of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and the overall increase in diversity in the student population.

The second position is that, as professions that now have African Australian members, it is opportune to reflect with all colleagues on the professions' codes of ethics and course accreditation requirements to assess their ongoing relevance. The codes and accreditation requirements of social work and welfare work courses have been critiqued from a number of viewpoints, and need the embedded processes that support, expect and encourage ongoing challenge and change.

Thirdly, as professions that provide services to/with African Australian clients, groups and communities, it is essential that social work and welfare educators and practitioners create the opportunities and networks to work with African Australian colleagues, clients and communities to mutually review our experiences, practice and theory. I offer the modest example of the network I have been a part of with Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates as an example.

Human rights, social work and welfare work

The right to education, contained in Articles 13 and 14 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), is one of the human rights standards set out in international treaties and declarations through the United Nations that Australia has agreed to uphold. This includes the right to equally accessible higher education and the availability of all forms of education *without discrimination* (AHRC 2009:24).

The place of human rights generally in the social work and welfare work professions, although established, is also contested and critiqued (Skegg 2005; Nipperess and Briskman 2009). The International Federation of Social Work holds the principle of human rights as intrinsic to social work by its very definition (Hare 2004). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW 2010: 7) states that:

The social work profession ... subscribes to the principles and aspirations of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions derived from that Declaration ...

In addition, the AASW Code of Ethics (2010) requires social workers to:

promote human rights (p.9); respect the human rights of individuals and groups (p.12); ... oppose and work to eliminate all violations of human rights and affirm that civil and political rights must be accompanied by economic, social and cultural rights (p.13); ... respect others ... within a

framework of social justice and human rights (p.17); ... promote policies, practices and social conditions that uphold human rights and that seek to ensure access, equity, participation and legal protection for all (p.19); ... (and), ... recognise and acknowledge the religious, spiritual and secular world views of colleagues, within a framework of social justice and human rights (p.32).

The Code of Ethics that applies to welfare and community workers is the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers' (AIWCW). Although the AIWCW does not yet specifically include the term human rights in its code of ethics, the code is consistent with human rights practice. Many of the welfare courses delivered through TAFE in Australia make direct reference to a course philosophy that incorporates a human rights framework.

Although recognised, the value and relevance of a human rights perspective for social work is questioned. Skegg (2005: 671), among others, suggests that social work needs to guard against the potential misuses of a human rights framework.

Problematically, navigating the grey area between retaining cultural diversity and upholding human rights is not easy. If utilized wrongly, human rights discourse can be yet another form of western domination and another step towards a global monoculture.

I believe that a human rights framework does have much to offer social work, welfare work and education, particularly in the change from the welfare state to an advanced capitalist workfare state context (later explained). However, the right to education without discrimination needs to be understood in the context of the various human rights (civil, political, economic, social, cultural and collective) as an 'indivisible' (Ife 2001) package, each when present, mutually reinforcing, and each in absence, cumulatively oppressive and degrading. This warns educators, students and social work and welfare workers, that the right to an education that is non-discriminatory is not likely to be realised unless other human rights (to adequate income, housing, health care, a practice culture) are also realised.

Experiences and learnings with Southern Sudanese Australian students

My experiences and learnings from working with Southern Sudanese Australian social work and welfare students and graduates led to doubt and questioning, and sparked this work. The summarised, stylised (and inevitably author emphasised and particularised) accounts that follow, reflect my own partialised understandings of these cumulative events and discussions. The accounts do not intend to represent how Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates, and educators may have intended or understood the interchanges:

A meeting was conducted with a student to clarify the reasons why their (first ever) essay written for an introductory welfare unit did not quite meet all the

requirements. The student explained that the great value placed on education, and importance of getting the essay right, was the reason a family meeting comprising the children and other relatives was called, so that all could consider, discuss and contribute to, the submitted essay. I was impressed with the seriousness the student accorded the task, and thought what a wonderful process the inter-generational family meeting and sharing, learning and contributing seemed. I then wondered how this family collective approach to the writing of essays would fit, or not fit, in the Euro-western education environment. I started to think of explaining the notions of plagiarism, collusion and an individual being responsible for the writing and development of their own work – but stopped. I could not, at that point, actually say it.

After class, a student asked me how to read the information that was on the powerpoint and handout that was placed in columns. It was explained to me that columns had not been used in their primary school education in Sudan. The student described the process used to understand my class. He heard my English spoken words, looked at and read the English powerpoint and handouts, converted that in his mind to his oral Southern Sudanese tribal language, took notes in Arabic, and converted everything to English at home. He also clarified for me that Arabic is written from right to left (opposite to English) and this created visual learning challenges for him in understanding diagrams and columns, in particular. I reflected on how much of my taken for granted teaching practice was shaped by, and immersed in, Western thinking and presentation.

A teacher discussed with me the situation of a student who had not met some essential requirements in a counselling video assessment for a practice unit. The problems included: use of an expert directive, rather than the instructed client-centred, approach; referral of the client to a neighbour for help when that was not mentioned or appropriate in the interview context; and emphasis on the harmony needs of the client's family and community relations over that of the client.

A number of students explained that they needed information about how work is conducted in an office-based environment, as they had never had that experience. Their previous paid work experiences in Australia included: abattoirs, security, meat works and timber mills. Some had experience in Sudan and other parts of Africa in refugee camp related work; village related work including: care of cows; securing food, wood and water; crafting and building tools, household items, housing structures and weapons; family and village security; and the growing and harvesting of crops.

An agency supervisor expressed concern and possible fail potential regarding a student on placement who had not: taken initiative in asking workers for opportunities to observe or be involved in the case, group, family and community work of the agency; actively involved themselves in a variety of relevant discussions that occurred in proximity to the student in the office and the field; appeared comfortable with some of the Western clients.

Some Western client individuals and families had indicated they did not want to have Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates as their workers. This

worried the students and graduates. Additionally, some Sudanese clients had requested to see Western workers believing they had greater influence and power to gain resources for them. The students and graduates felt that their training had not adequately prepared them for these situations, and that agencies did not seem to know how to help them deal with this.

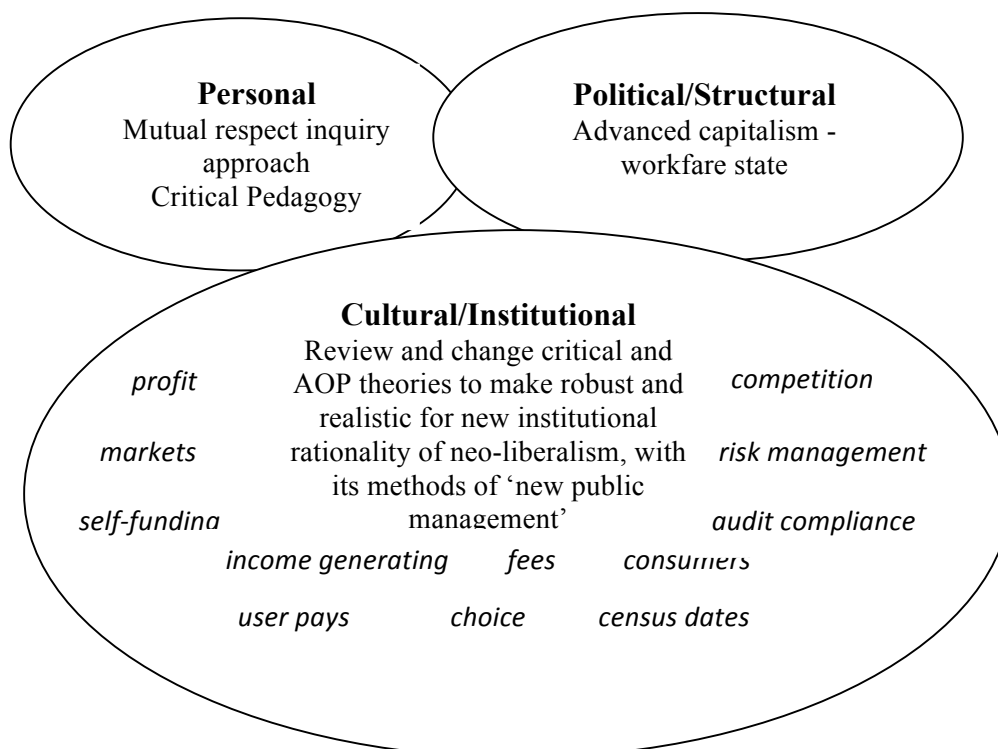
A graduate described a selection process for a welfare position that required a 'pass' in the first stage comprising psychological testing before proceeding to interview. The graduate did not 'pass' and stated much of the language, and many of the concepts, in the test were unfamiliar from study or past experience.

A number of graduates who were getting interviews but not securing jobs in welfare wondered if employing agencies were worried about taking them on as the agencies' mainly Western clients might be uncomfortable with 'non-Western' workers.ⁱⁱⁱ

The personal, institutional/cultural and structural/political domains

Diagram 1*

Personal, political/structural and cultural/institutional domains of oppression, and sites of analysis and change for social work and social welfare education to identify barriers to non-discriminatory education.



*Diagram adapted from Thompson 2006:27; content of diagram also draws from McDonald 2006

I suggest three combined domains (drawing from critical theory and critical pedagogy) that incorporate and illustrate the interconnected, usually concurrent and complementary

personal, political/structural and cultural/institutional levels of understanding, experience and action that I think are necessary ingredients for change. Each of the three domains are inter-related and 'co-constructive', and therefore potentially 'de-constructive'. Due to space limitations in this paper, I concentrate on the personal and cultural/institutional domains, whilst briefly acknowledging aspects of the importance of the political domain.

Personal

I am a working class-shaped and -committed feminist, critically inspired, Anglo-western, grassroots social work practitioner, and now educator. I have taught human rights and anti-oppressive practice approaches in welfare work and social work units at TAFEs and University. Over the last seven years, the opportunity I have had to teach and learn with a new cohort of students, Southern Sudanese Australians, in TAFEs and University has challenged the relevance of my social work professional theory and practice orientation, and my social work and welfare work education theories and teaching practices. I have been motivated to challenge and critically evaluate my own teaching practice for its ability to deliver on the human right to education, using the anti-discriminatory analytical framework (Thompson 2006) of the personal, institutional/cultural and structural/political domains of inter-related and mutually creating contexts.

Specifically, I wondered if the courses I taught in, and my own teaching practices, were without discrimination. What would the non-discriminatory knowledge, theory, pedagogy and 'day to day life' of social work and welfare teaching and learning look like? How does my desire to model anti-oppressive social work practice translate into education and teaching practice? Is critical and anti-oppressive theory and practice enough? What are the personal, institutional and structural barriers to constructing and delivering a unit, or course, of study that is without discrimination?

The knowledge and feedback from students and graduates seems particularly relevant to assisting the development of social work and welfare education. This process of privileging the knowledge and 'voice' of students, clients, user groups, the discriminated against, the 'oppressed', those who have personal experience, consumers, and locals has been promoted in social work, some examples being, in feminist social work (Dominelli 2002; Weeks 2003); social work education (Manning 2006; Gupta & Blewett 2008); community development (Kenny 2006); social work relevant social action and participatory research (Guerin & Guerin 2007; Westoby 2008), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research processes and ethics (AIATSIS 2000). There is a problem, however, with critical pedagogy and seeking to create the space for students' diverse 'voices' to be heard in classes, to be heard in the construction of units and courses, and to be heard in the institution. The problem is just who is listening, and are they those that need to listen?

In using a critical theory analysis, with aspects of critical pedagogy and a 'culturally friendly' (Engelbrecht 2006: 257) approach, respectful learning relationships developed between myself, a Western raised educator, and Southern Sudanese Australian students

and graduates. This led to experiences of teaching, learning and 'being' in education in which we became more aware of and responsive to, similarities and differences.

The refugee background students whom I have taught and learned with, have initiated and/or responded strongly to the value of a social work and welfare work human rights analysis (Ife 2008) and agenda, to help understand and explain their own experiences, and to develop a framework for practice with, and teaching of, others. The values of understanding and positioning all human beings as having intrinsic value and worth that should attract fundamental human right provisions and considerations resonates (and often contrasts) in a real way with many refugee background Australian student life experiences.

Anti-oppressive practice considers all discriminations and oppressions in need of understanding, challenge and change. Allan (2009: 74) provides an outline of 'doing critical social work' using an anti-oppressive approach that includes an explanation of empowerment having three dimensions: personal; interpersonal/ social/cultural; and structural/political, and states 'a critical perspective recognises the importance of all three'. My experience was that in the courses I taught in, alone or with others, that have at their core a commitment to social justice and change, we constantly struggled to empower ourselves, to model critical practice in pedagogy, and to challenge our own personal and cultural/institutional contexts.

Social work and educational theorists in critical theory (Allan 2009: 74) and critical pedagogy (Saleebey and Scanlon 2006: 4) do stress the need to understand how discrimination and oppression are created, experienced and changed at the personal, cultural and structural levels of society. In this framework the understanding and efforts towards educational change can be understood as necessarily linked to, and shaped by, a broader social justice mission that aims for transformation of the economic and social order that would lead to a more equitable society. This involves educators challenging themselves, and each other, to transform their own practices, courses and institutions to address issues of Western, patriarchal, elite, classist, hegemonic social work education; and power, race, language, gender and class in the context of the construction and experience of education and human rights. I suggest a process is needed that challenges educators, personally and institutionally, that is grounded in, and informed by relationships with those who have knowledge, experiences and vision, beyond, or different to, the educational hegemonic norm of the stereotyped (white) Western, heterosexual, rational, business-minded, middle and upper class male. To this end, there is mutual benefit in creating the opportunity for informal and formal networks with students, graduates and practitioners.

Further, actually creating space for diverse voices to be heard and understood at the classroom level (students and teachers), and at the unit and even course development and review level (student, teachers, coordinators, chairs, middle managers), is a good step. However, unless a strategy, commitment, funding, plan, and/or 'champion' with influence, has already been found that can resource and embed the changes at the institutional level, there is generally not sufficient resource and infrastructure sustainability for the changes to be realised.

Political/Structural

A significant impediment to the goal of working towards the provision of the human right to education that is ‘without discrimination’ at the personal teaching and unit construction level is the political allocation and prioritisation of time and resources, via federal and state policy and funding formulas, and the consequent managerial control by universities and TAFEs. The ability to create the environment to be open to having the discussions with students in which the mutual exchange of knowledge and skill can take place is not funded or supported in the educational institutional context. My experience is that teaching loads are often predicated on a funding formula that appears, at best, to allow for three to eight minutes of individual discussion with each student per unit of study. Although there are many words in documents in the education sector that state that students, partnerships and working with the community and industry are essential, there has been little resourcing to enable their enactment.

Institutional /Cultural level

Reshaping critical and anti-oppressive social work theory

In the search for ways to understand and construct social work and welfare work education that resonates more with what Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates articulate, one possible source of ideas is from critical and anti-oppressive (including anti-racist) social work theory that has sought to analyse and change the way power relationships construct oppression in society, and in social work organisations and social work practices (Thompson 2006; Dominelli 2008). Although critical social work is diverse in terms of practice approaches (Marxist social work; radical social work; structural social work; feminist social work; anti-racist social work; and anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory social work), these approaches ‘share an intellectual debt to the critical social science paradigm’ (Healy 2000:18 cited in Healy 2005:173). The ideas behind critical practice can be seen as stemming from several interrelated theoretical traditions, historically to the work of the Frankfurt School. Critical practice also resonates with social constructionism in sociology that views the social context in which people live not as an objective reality, but rather as having been created in the process of people interacting and (re)naming their human experiences (Glaister 2008).

Healy (2001: online no page number) defines critical social work as referring to a broad range of practices that share:

a recognition that large scale social processes, particularly those associated with class, race and gender, contribute fundamentally to the personal and social issues social workers encounter in their practice; the adoption of a self-reflexive and critical stance to the often contradictory effects of social work practice and social policies; a commitment to co-participatory rather than authoritarian practice relations; and working with and for oppressed populations to achieve social transformation.

Graham (2000:424) suggests that social work academics' and educators' interest in critical and anti-oppressive theory has not, however, really focused on, and challenged, the domination of existing social work knowledge and its symbiotic relationship to the social, political and economic mainstream thinking within welfare (and educational) institutions in the broader society. Graham argues for:

anti-racist and African-centred social work educators to critically examine cultural oppression within social work knowledge so that students can share spaces outside the dominant hegemony to critically explore alternative world views and their social theories for social work practice (Graham 2000: 424).

The call by Graham (2000) for social work to examine its Western colonial knowledge heritage and reconstruct itself to be able to acknowledge, and learn from, African-centred world views, aligns with similar calls from a range of people and groups that critique the patriarchal, classist, elite, Western-centred worldview that underpins mainstream social work. Graham's work is also understood in the context of a broader literature on an Afro-centric framework (Bakari 1997; Monteiro-Ferreira 2008) that challenges the taken for granted, or not even recognised, assumptions and 'superiority' of Western formulated social work (Pease 2010).

Key aspects of critical social work theory (Adams, Dominelli and Payne 2002) and postmodern critical social work (Pease and Fook 1999) including advocacy, human rights, anti-oppressive practice, emancipation, self determination and respect, offer promise for the development of an Australian social work and welfare work that can learn with, and from, the myriad of African, and more specifically, Sudanese-generated understandings and knowledges.

Although valuable, critical social work theory is still often shaped by, and/or translated by, class based patriarchal Western-thinking, and often creates undesired stereotyped 'others'. 'Writing the life out of things' (Lea 2008: 223) captures for me some of the difficulties with aspects of critical social work theory and anti-oppressive practice – the need to name the oppressions and the oppressed recreates the simplistic reified othering it seeks to undo. Although Lea is writing about the development of policy in a bureaucracy, the inherently flawed policy creation process she describes seems applicable to the creation of social work theories and models for education and practice.

While it is not possible to make plans without simplifying, this very failure to capture the complexity that stands beyond the plan renders impossible the desired correlation between pronouncements and effects. The vicissitudes of everyday life among the people being improved – a life that interveners may barely even know – inevitably snag the smoothness of their interventionary imaginings (Lea 2008: 227).

Lea's description fits with how some students describe many of the critical and anti-oppressive text books and articles as not seeming relevant to them. Many of these writings only seem logical when you identify they are premised on the unstated assumptions that: social workers, and by implication social work students, are middle class and white; it is only the 'clients' not the workers or students that are from discriminated against groups; or who have past or current experience of discrimination and marginalisation; and that there is a distinct identity or category of 'client'. An example of some writing from a critical social work text that has an unstated assumption that the social worker would be without oppression, therefore probably white and middle class is:

an understanding of the various forms of oppression allows structural social workers to make more sense of the situation of oppression of those they serve ... an understanding of personal or individual oppression and the various types of internalized oppression will enable the structural social worker to better understand how oppressed persons may be experiencing and coping with their situation of oppression. Through dialogue, this knowledge will assist the worker in sorting out with members of subordinate groups helpful and counterproductive responses to their oppression (Mullaly 2007: 284-5).

I suggest that a significant number of social work and welfare students, workers, educators, and various members of the community, who are not a designated 'subordinate group' member (read 'client'), may experience oppression and/or be 'clients' of social work or other 'helping' professions and services at some stage(s) of their life. It is often the case that people who are a bit more privileged by virtue of income or employment are able to choose to keep their 'client' status secret.

In light of this, it is not surprising that in academic units built on such texts relating to critical and anti-oppressive practice, some Southern Sudanese students have said the only place they could 'see' themselves in the unit readings, powerpoints and discussion was as 'subordinate group' members, as 'refugees', as the oppressed, as 'clients', as the 'other'. The skills, knowledge, strengths and resources of Southern Sudanese Australians were not made evident. The texts did not provide the platform or place for these students to imagine themselves as welfare and social workers.

The new institutional context

The brief critical review of the existing literature undertaken for this paper has focused on aspects of the constraints and potentialities of the critical and anti-oppressive theoretical underpinnings of social work and welfare work. In addition, the issue of the changed nature of the institutional context in which social work and welfare work is constructed and performed has been noted for its importance in shaping, and being the reality of, the environment in which these theories need to be enacted. The limitations of translating critical theory into pedagogical practice, and into social work and welfare practice are often related to the changed nature of the political, economic, ideological and institutional landscape in which it does not fit. As Mc Donald (2006:185).indicates:

... if we think about critical practice broadly defined as an expression of morality and politics, it will, in all likelihood, continue to occupy a larger position in the collective professional imagination than the realities of contemporary practice actually dictate.

I argue that there is a similarity in the needs for both welfare and social work practitioners, and welfare and social work educators, in understanding, challenging and negotiating their new institutional contexts. The higher education and welfare service institutional contexts are no longer shaped by a welfare state, but rather what McDonald (2006) calls the 'institutional rationality of the neoliberal workfare regime' of 'advanced capitalism', with its methods of 'new public management' involving establishing 'consumers, fees, user-pays, markets, choice, risk management, obligations, competition and profit' in welfare and education. It is not a context that readily facilitates the ideas discussed in this paper.

Conclusion

The combination of the considerable barriers to critical social work theory being practised, and the institutional change to educational and welfare organisations under advanced workfare capitalism, significantly contribute to the difficulties for social work and welfare work education in achieving the status of being 'without discrimination' for Sudanese Australian, and many other, students. It seems that much of current critical social work theory was constructed for the welfare state context. We need to creatively and honestly take up the task of changing this theory base (working with and learning from practitioners and community members) to assist workers to resist and challenge the contemporary workfare institutional contexts of welfare and social work education and practice. Otherwise, educators will continue to be wanting to create non-discriminatory education, but lamenting its unattainability.

It would be appropriate for social work and welfare work educators to 'practise what we preach', a human rights based education framework that embraces the challenge to interrogate itself, to find ways to resist and create institutional change in the new landscape of advanced capitalism and the workfare state. I think this is more possible when educators, students, practitioners and clients create opportunities for recognising our similarities and differences, and potentials in friendship, mentoring, alliances and exchanges of knowledge.

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Notes

ⁱ *The term education 'without discrimination' is as it appears in the legislation.*

ⁱⁱ *Critical pedagogy is a philosophical approach to education that examines the role of power in who gets to say what is valid knowledge, and identifies the purpose of education as the freeing of oppressed groups, involving the goal of power equalisation between teachers and students, communities and universities, and researchers and subjects (Saleebey & Scanlon 2006).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *I obtained permission from the Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates, and educators to write about my understanding of their and sometimes our experiences. They have favorably reviewed this work. I have not included their names in this particular paper due to the deliberate effort to combine and nuance the events and situations into more collective generated learnings.*

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