

From the Iron Law of Oligarchy to Building a Heart of Inclusion in the Schools of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores disability-inclusive practices within global social work education, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) to promote equitable and quality education for all. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as the Iron Law of Oligarchy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and backward curriculum design, the paper identifies barriers such as lack of safe spaces and ableist practices within social work institutions. It critically examines implicit and explicit curricula, highlighting the intersection of social justice, inclusive pedagogy, and equity in professional training. The authors propose the HEART inclusion check framework, which emphasizes holistic learning spaces, equity in engagement, accommodative assessments, reflection-based realignment, and transformative curriculum to foster effective inclusion. Practical strategies like reflective teaching, creative learning spaces, and non-discriminatory implicit structures are discussed to empower students with disabilities while sensitizing future social workers to anti-oppressive practices.

Keywords: *anti-oppressive practices, disability-inclusion, sustainable development goals, social work education, higher education*

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are 1.3 billion people with disabilities in the world, accounting for approximately 16 percent of the global population (World Health Organization, 2024). The medical model of disability defines a person with impairment as a condition that needs to be cured, eliminated or prevented (Kim & Sellmaier, 2019;

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DePoy & Gilson, 2004). However, it is the debilitating social structures which reinforce the oppression and bias, giving leeway for ableist narratives to grow. This bolsters the superiority of ability by establishing disability as inferior (Campbell, 2008).

The profession of social work emerged as a charity model to reinforce the belief that individual problems were due to moral fallacies and therefore, they must be strategically segregated based on race, caste, ethnicity, and physical abilities. The social worker was to 'civilize the communities' (National Association of Social Workers, 2024). With the growing conscientiousness among practitioners, the demand for social workers with a human rights approach increased (Nadkarni & Sinha, 2016). Social work education soon became a critical gateway to empower the incoming generation of social workers to understand how to democratize the oppressive forms of socio-economic and political systems they aspire to work with whilst acknowledging their privilege and biases. Although social justice is reinforced in the profession's guiding principles (National Association of Social Workers, 2024), the philosophical ideologies adopted by social work education en masse is yet to align with the profession's Code of Ethics (Atteberry-Ash, 2023; Kattari et al., 2019, p. 5).

This study draws on the 'iron law of oligarchy' developed by Michels (1962) which is an equivalent of an 'acid test' for organizations or professions that claim to be democratic. Using this measure, Baron et al. (1996) opined that social work is the one discipline that might be expected to embody an enabling ethos while training new recruits (Baron, Phillips & Stalker, 1996). This could be extrapolated into an argument that if social workers do not feel empowered as practitioners, the 'empowerment' tradition that the profession claims to have, cannot stand true anymore (Goldberg et al., 1985; Baron et al., 1996). Furthermore, if there are significant barriers for students with disabilities within social work institutions, then the situation would be far worse in non-social work training settings (Baron et al., 1996). In the light of this evidence, the authors felt the need to understand the extent of inclusion that can be consciously designed by the social work institutions to balance the rights of students with disabilities and the professional development of all student social workers.

As there is a limited body of research involving student social workers with disabilities (Baron et al., 1996; GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007; Poole et al., 2012; Ting, 2013; Hartrey et al., 2017; Kattari et al., 2019; Kim & Sellmaier, 2019; Sellmaier & Kim, 2020; DeZelar et al., 2022; Muraleedharan & PJ, 2023), this paper shall attempt to understand ableism in the context of social work education and further, map the inclusive practices that can be adopted by social work institutions globally, particularly in addressing the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities enrolled in these

institutions. The article will attempt to capture these best practices in the form of an inclusion check framework that can be further extrapolated by social work institutions to gauge their efficacy of inclusion in their implicit and explicit curricula. To adhere to the disability advocacy parlance, the authors will use person-first language (eg: 'students with disabilities' instead of 'disabled students').

Understanding Ableism in the Context of Social Work Education

A United Nations academic impact report states that learners with disabilities in higher education are consistently under-represented, marginalized, and excluded on campus (United Nations, 2020). Mackelprang (2010) argues that disregarding or diminutively viewing disability as 'something to be fixed or overcome is an implicit form of ableism' (p. 92). When it comes to social work institutions, studies revealed that most social work programs include a finite representation of disability-inclusive content in their curriculum, and they are designed in a deficit-model method (Kim & Sellmaier, 2019), resulting in ableism caused by omission. Kattari et al. (2019) further note that various forms of ableism are evident in higher education institutions, including schools of social work, such as having limited representation of persons with disabilities within teaching or non-teaching staff, classroom design and fieldwork placements for neurotypical/able-bodied individuals, and following conventional teaching and learning methods (Kattari et al., 2019). Considering the volume of students who enter the social work programs with an intention to 'help' their communities, aligning the social work education to view disability merely from the medical model lens is not just disempowering (Morgan, 2012) but also disenfranchising for students with disabilities who join the program assuming it is a non-judgmental space.

Sensitizing social workers to view discrimination through an anti-oppressive lens allowed for institutions like NASW to create safer spaces for honest reflections about social justice and equity. However, the finite references to inclusivity in a social work institution's implicit curriculum is partly due to the systemic inequalities of the higher education system (Jack, 2019; Yee, 2016), wherein the ecosystem is flooded with 'aging institutions' (Tillotson et al., 2021) that move away from social justice and march towards a clinical trend (Specht & Courtney, 1994). The social work profession has received criticism for being a double-edged sword for people with disabilities, and critical disability scholars have encouraged the profession to relook at how it engages with disability (Meekosha & Dowse, 2007). In spite of this domain seeking individuals who demonstrate resilient adaptation in the face of the adversities encountered by individuals, groups, and communities they serve (Morrison, 2007; Collins,

2007; Beddoe et al., 2014), it is astonishing to note that our social work educational practices often fail to take disability into account and there is barely any effort by the social work curricula to bring disability into the forefront in a profession that otherwise embraces inclusion and diversity (Mackelprang, 2010; Kim & Sellmaier, 2019). Poole et al. (2012) explained how students with disabilities are often made to comply with institutional norms in order to 'it' (their disability) not being a threat to their academic and professional standards (Poole et al., 2012). An example of this is evident in the study conducted by Sellmaier & Kim (2020) with students who were enrolled in Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), Master of Social Work (MSW), and PhD programs in CSWE-accredited social work schools in the United States. The students selected for the study were the ones who identified as having a disability. Out of the 262 respondents surveyed, 14.3 percent reported negative experiences while requesting field accommodations (Sellmaier & Kim, 2020, p. 881). This is similar to the findings of Ting (2013) and X (2023) where BSW students revealed that they experienced barriers in seeking support for their mental health needs, which primarily included a scarcity of resources (Dreyer, 2021), lack of training (Moriña & Fernández, 2017), negative attitudes (Charles et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2017), and fears about breaches of confidentiality (Kerschbaum et al., 2017; Moriña, 2022). Although there are studies that have evaluated the implicit curriculum of social work institutions to explore the invisible patterns of oppressive practices (Baron et al., 1996; Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005; GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007; Ogden et al., 2017; Kiesel et al., 2018; Kim & Sellmaier, 2019; Sellmaier & Kim, 2020; Muraleedharan & PJ, 2023; DeZelar et al., 2022), there are few that have focused on the opportunities leveraged by higher educational institutions (HEIs), including social work institutions, to enhance the experiences of students with disabilities. This study discusses the possibilities that can be explored by these institutions as inclusive practices in their implicit as well as explicit curriculum to support students with disabilities, thereby translating the rhetoric into much needed systemic transformations.

Following the Heart of Inclusion

The right of individuals with disabilities to an inclusive education at all levels, free from discrimination and with equal opportunity, is recognized in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2014), social work is a 'profession that promotes social change and individual empowerment by applying the values of social justice, human rights, and respect for diversity. That being said, as the number of students with various visible and invisible disabilities entering higher education

expecting support needs increases, social work institutions are obliged to protect the rights of not just the end users but also the students who take up this profession as a means of livelihood. With the institutional policies and practices being both explicit and implicit, the schools of social work ought to have a balance between maintaining their educational standards that meet myriad accreditation criteria, as well as being truly inclusive in their implicit and explicit curricula.

Given that human rights and social justice are at the core of social work training, it's only appropriate that the framework comprehensively addresses the strategies that would make the schools of social work conscientiously attuned to those fundamental aspects of the profession. Therefore, to create safe spaces in social work institutions for aspiring student social workers or educators with disabilities, the authors have conceptualized the *HEART framework of inclusion check* (see Fig.1) which identifies five key factors a social work institution can use to measure how inclusive they are: *holistic*

learning spaces, equity in feedback, accommodative assessments, responsive representation, and transparent actions. Some key practices identified

under each of these five indicators will serve as potential theories of change that can be extrapolated to and adopted by social work institutions to cater to the diverse needs of their students.

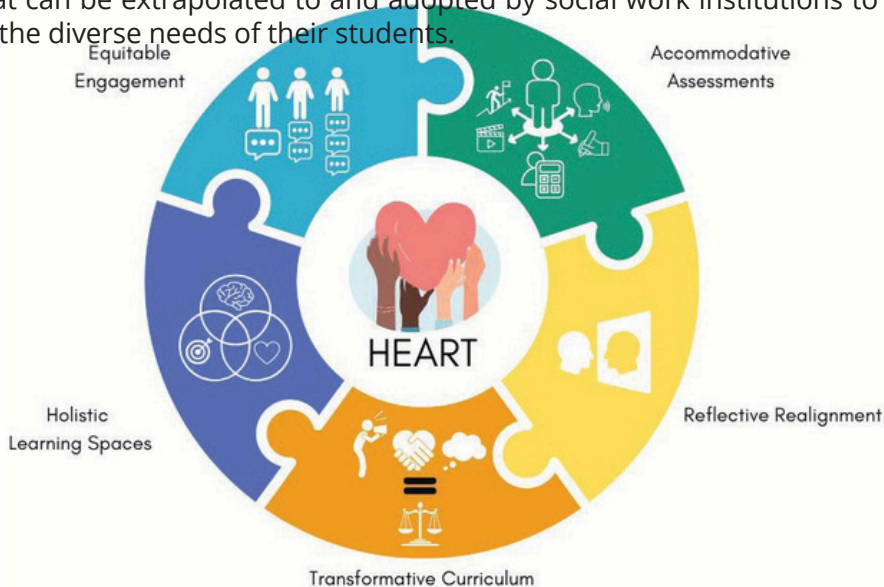


Fig1:HEART Framework of Inclusion Check

Alt. Text: The illustration depicts the HEART framework of inclusion check which includes five components essential for inclusivity in social work education. Displayed in a cyclical format, the five game-changing

components identified are holistic learning spaces, equitable engagement, accommodative assessments, reflective realignment, and transformative curriculum. There are corresponding icons reflecting each of the components and in the middle, four different hands are holding up a heart, symbolizing the idea of diversity and empathy.

Holistic Learning Spaces

According to the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2007), preparing for transitions into higher education demands more than just meeting the needs of academics and rudimentary self-care; it also needs to include preparing for the multiple institutional and social demands that come with participating in activities across the spectrum of campus settings (Kreider et al., 2015). Hence, engaging a student using a holistic approach rather than simply focusing on their cognitive development has become a significant policy shift in higher education. This also recognizes educational institutions playing a pivotal role in aiding and enhancing the well-being of their students, even more so after the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies observe that disabled students are at a greater risk of experiencing disconnection and a lack of sense of belonging which prompts them to drop out of their higher education programs compared to their non-disabled peers (O'Keeffe, 2013).

Another undervalued yet critical domain that must be highlighted for having a positive impact on the holistic development of all students in HEIs, regardless of their biopsychosocial abilities, is creative learning spaces (Rampersad & Patel, 2014). A study conducted by Zufferey & King (2015) explored the effectiveness of a 'Social Work Studio' which they developed from the 'good practice' literature of responding to student feedback seeking a hands-on social work program. The three-roomed Studio aimed at improving students' personal and professional identities using a two-way learning mirror segregating the classroom and the learning space. In addition to engaging in role plays and students developing their case studies, the Studio also utilized assistive technology, which encouraged the learners to observe and reflect on their skills from the recordings of these sessions (Zufferey & King, 2015, p. 395).

A similar study by Muraleedharan & PJ (2023) identified the outcomes of co-designing a theater club for and with first-year undergraduate social work students in an Indian social work institution. It demonstrated the relationship between the co-creation of such inclusive creative learning spaces with the students' mental health, which reflected a collective vision for holistic education. It further speaks about shifting from a

traditional learning environment to a dynamic space that mirrors the interdisciplinarity of the social work profession (Muraleedharan & PJ, 2023, p. 92). This study fosters a discussion on expressive arts being a tool through which HEIs become 'intentional designers' of classrooms taking into account the diverse learning needs of students, and enhancing their sense of self (Muraleedharan & PJ, 2023; Jin et al., 2023; Zufferey & King, 2015). By moving away from conventional ideas of what higher education should look like and instead, reimagining holistic learning spaces rooted in student needs, HEIs can transition into a culture where students feel a sense of belonging.

Equitable Engagement

Equity in education is a process that is fair and supports students to optimize their potential by removing learning barriers (Schleicher, 2014). However, with the advent of COVID-19, civil riots, and other socio-political issues that have been plaguing the global education scenario, fostering equity and inclusion have become a priority, especially for learners living with physical and neurodevelopmental disabilities. Although seen as a transformational equalizer, institutions often fall short of setting up implicit structures that allow equality of access, services, and outcomes to be achieved. However, when institutions become equity-minded, they can create strengths-based identity-conscious programs that can empower students from diverse backgrounds to embrace their true selves instead of trying to fix their deficits (Pendakur, 2020).

When institutions enhance a learner's sense of belonging as an equitable form of engagement, they contribute to their sense of self as well. Having a sense of belonging increases a learner's commitment to their education, thereby enhancing their resilience (Tinto, 1993), and academic engagement (Wilson et al., 2015). For inclusion, one's needs are satisfied when an ecosystem connects with the individual and vice-versa (Jansen et al., 2014). However, when groups are segregated based on homogeneity, it creates marginalization and exclusionary parameters for belonging.

To overcome such situations, one strategy that proactively seeks to engage students by honoring their individual differences is the universal design for learning (UDL) (Rose and Meyer, 2002). Using the three guiding principles of UDL — (a) multiple means of representation, (b) multiple means of expression, and (c) multiple means of engagement, learners can be a part of inclusive learning environments (Center of Applied Special Technology, 2024). For multiple means of representation, social work educators could offer diverse sensory-based information, illustrate examples through multiple media, and highlight patterns for effective information

processing (Capp, 2017). For multiple means of expression, social work institutions can enhance the capacity of the students by providing them with assistive technologies to communicate their knowledge, scaffolded levels of support for continuous learning; and avenues to self-monitor their academic progress (Rose & Meyer, 2006; Capp, 2017). For multiple means of engagement, institutions could create learning spaces that minimize distractions, differentiate resources to challenge the students at their optimal level, foster collaborative activities, provide equitable and quality feedback, and curate avenues for reflection (Rose & Meyer, 2006; Center of Applied Special Technology, 2024). By doing so, UDL eliminates the learning barriers and moves away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach (Westerlin & Folske-Starlin, 2024). Studies have also found that the implementation of UDL principles in the classroom results in increased levels of engagement among students with disabilities (Capp, 2017; Florian, 2015). Furthermore, a study conducted by Espada-Chavarria et al. (2023) demonstrated that explicitly stating academic objectives and expected results while proposing academic tasks to college students along with appropriate guidance towards establishing these goals using UDL principles led to higher student scores and improved student engagement. Additionally, by setting up welcoming learning environments to align with the UDL principle of multiple forms of engagement, students became more involved in the subject and felt they could approach their teacher with any issue related to their learning needs (Espada-Chavarria et al., 2023, p. 8).

Another significant practical approach that can be infused into the teaching repertoires of social work programs is the universal instructional design (UID) that shifts from an individual remedial intervention to a student-centric, accessible, and inclusive learning model (Goulden et al., 2023). Studies have shown that UID can support designing curricula to meet diverse learning needs so that there will occur fewer requests for modifications from students with documented disabilities as well as students who are yet to disclose as living with disability (Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005; Goulden et al., 2023). Akin to UDL, UID in social work education focuses on creating a ‘universally accessible educational environment’ for all social work students (Center of Applied Special Technology, 2024). Starting from developing a welcoming classroom and field work setting to setting up a non-discriminatory baseline of skills and knowledge checkpoints to test student mastery in the course or fieldwork to using a diverse range of multi-modal instructional strategies to providing flexible means of evaluation (discussed in detail in the next section on ‘adaptive assessments’) (Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005; Rose & Meyer, 2000). This design comes with the caveat that it requires a high level of time and resource

investment by the faculty (Johnson & Fox, 2003). It also assumes other barriers such as the technological support required to develop such inclusive and differentiated courses from design to evaluation besides the faculty's orientation towards inclusion, budgetary constraints, and administrative mechanisms (Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005; Johnson & Fox, 2003). However, if the social work educators and the social work community can prioritize universally accessible social work curriculum design, the more equitable will be the engagement of the program for all students.

Accommodative Assessments

Hanafin et al. (2006) claims that assessment practices are not prescribed but are designed and developed at an institutional, departmental or educator level. And every practice chosen is symbolic of its preference over other methods of assessments, which may or may not take into consideration the end users but rather succumbs to a largely acceptable norm. Either way, when assessments are not carefully and holistically curated, the consequences of that can be greater for some students than for others (p. 438). Therefore, if the learners and their learning can be variable, the ways they express their understanding must also be variable.

Even though frameworks like UDL pave the way for enhanced inclusivity in learning environments, studies still report assessment as a critical challenge within higher education (Hanafin et al., 2006; Tai et al., 2021). Faced with a scarcity of studies that focus on the grades of students with disabilities, the authors of this article did, however, find articles that talk about flexibility and choice as game changers in inclusive assessments. One such radical study was conducted by Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020) who demonstrated the use of UDL to teach a math course by replacing a summative assessment with a summative self-assessment. This self-assessment included a range of formative assessments, peer evaluations, rubrics, and exemplars handed out at the beginning of the course as a part of a digital Moodle environment (Nieminen et al., 2019). Another study rooted in developing a range of assessments was carried out by Matheson and Sutcliffe (2016) which drew on the concept of 'flexible pedagogy' (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013; Tai et al., 2021), and included assessments that were diverse but were also compatible with the larger objectives of the course. One of the assessment outputs was a 'Patchwork Portfolio' that included podcasts, group work, and reflective assignments (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013, p. 20). The formative components of this assessment provided the opportunity for students to be creative risk-takers and empowered them to detach themselves from the fear of failure and judgment. This learner empowerment was then further acted upon by encouraging them to be co-creators of their own learning with their peers, thereby enhancing their

agency and decision-making (p. 21).

To ensure there is seamless integration of inclusive assessment practices, collaborative processes such as co-designing of curriculum and assessments between students, faculty and disability support staff have been considered to be significant (Tai et al., 2021; Nieminen and Tuohilampi, 2020). This includes asking students how they would like to be assessed as it not only provides them with the autonomy of their learning but also places an onus on them to be the creators of their learning process. A similar case was made in the study conducted by Muraleedharan & PJ (2023) where the student social workers advocated in favor of moving from traditional classroom methods to the need for self-directed learning wherein they expected the support of their institutions in creating opportunities to practice and evaluate themselves on what they have learned (p. 91).

As per the 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the social work programs must have a systematic plan to assess the nine social work competencies explicitly using at least two instruments per competency, one of which must be a simulated demonstration of student achievement in their fieldwork (CSWE, 2022). This goes hand in hand with assessing student input and participation in the implicit curriculum as well. When students are empowered to move towards an inquiry approach to envision alternatives to the current scenarios, build trust with their co-creators of knowledge (faculty as well as peers), and test the ideas they have designed (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2016, p. 21), it extends social work education to becoming future-facing. Such layered inclusive way of holistic evaluation strategies lines up well with the internationalization model of social work as it too involves critical thinking, reflection, and a global mindset to innovatively solve modern social problems along with the service users.

Reflective Realignment

With the disclosure of disability likened to 'coming out', individuals with disabilities experience limitations in their horizontal and vertical mobility in HEIs (Dolan, 2021). The under-representation of staff with disabilities (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022; Dolan, 2021) poses a risk of limited role models for a student population that is becoming increasingly heterogeneous. The impact of such ableist hiring practices is just as pervasive as other oppressive systems that do not center the interests of persons with disabilities (Miles et al., 2017).

When dominant narratives about disability create an illusion of normative experiences within a particular context, marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, challenge those foundational assumptions

and make their voices heard by virtue of owning their storytelling process (White, 2004). This calls for a need to positively represent disability that ropes in critical stakeholders, including students with and without disabilities, along with the faculty and the non-teaching personnel, to put forth the best suggestions on how to address the challenges faced by the students with disabilities in HEIs (Devar et al., 2020). By bringing in every significant stakeholder into setting up implicit structures, the 'power of gaze' (Foucault, 1982) can be normalized, thereby creating opportunities to build positive representations that will ensure equitable access to infrastructure, processes, and resources for students with disabilities (Devar et al., 2020, p. 9).

One such authentic approach to building a positive and equitable representation of disability in HEIs is by constant realignment of the aforementioned structures using reflective practices. Dewey (1933) defined reflection as an 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends' (p. 118). The resurgence of this approach came about when Schön talked about 'reflection-in-action' in his seminal work on how professionals think in action and solve problems (Schön, 1983, p. 131-132). Reflective practice is an essential component of teaching in higher education (Clegg et al., 2010), one can claim that critical reflection takes precedence over other forms of reflection when it comes to teaching students with disabilities, especially in social work institutions, as it encourages thinking about one's actions in the context of social, political and/or cultural forces. The outcomes of social work institutions making a responsive effort to develop implicit and explicit curricula through critical reflections with themselves, their students, their peers, and their ecosystem can displace the hegemonic ableist narratives (Freire, 1974; Vodde, 2001). This can further make way for teaching and learning materials that reimagine how disability-specific social constructs are represented in higher education settings, thereby making the whole process empowering for all stakeholders involved. Social work programs that can preemptively design disability-inclusive structures for such reflections to take place can aspire to pass the acid test posed by Michels (1962), and then learn from the analysis to be reflective practitioners who can check their own personal and professional biases for and against supporting students with disabilities in mainstream institutions.

Transformative Curriculum

Unlike children who have finite frames of reference for their learning owing to their exposure, adults have multiple frames of reference (Mezirow, 2003) through which they synthesize new information. And that means,

there ought to be a shift from the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to a highly flexible, less rigid and individualized educational experience (Rose and Meyer, 2002). The ability to proactively react and respond to the rapidly evolving best practices specific to teaching and learning in HEIs would better deliver on the rapidly evolving needs of the learners as well. Like all programs, social work education too, can no longer rely on the traditional approaches in the post-pandemic world. What is needed is an approach to learning that advocates for emancipatory practice and does this in inclusive ways of information dissemination. The concept of transformative learning caters to unlearning the 'problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, open, and reflective' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). Only when the teacher and students engage in what Freire (1974) calls 'problem- posing dialogue' can the stakeholders devote themselves to attaining an emancipatory understanding of the issues being discussed (p. 118). One can even argue that this approach is even truer for the social work discipline as we now march towards the internationalization of this domain. In fact, let us assume that the schools of social work are fieldwork settings- where students are encouraged to integrate their behaviors with social work theory, values, and skills. In this case, the idea of creating a robust implicit curriculum along with an explicit curriculum ideally becomes a natural progression. Behaviors that can be 'taught' in a classroom (explicit curriculum) and behaviors that can be 'caught' by socialization (implicit curriculum) (Bogo & Wayne, 2013; CSWE, 2022) must, therefore, go hand in hand. In a social work program setting, the emphasis on the intentional design of the curriculum would be reflected in informal cafeteria chats, networking events involving faculty and students, teaching and non- teaching staff modeling professional behavior, or student representations in institution-wide program committees. The learning environment thus created becomes a conduit for students to observe and participate in the culture of human interaction (Bogo & Wayne, 2013).

As the needs of students become diverse, the emergence of difference-blind neoliberal perspectives poses a threat to providing an effective learning environment in which students' identities, communities, and agency are identified and respected (Price et al., 2023). To address this contextual misalignment, institutions can adopt a backward design process while designing the curriculum (see Fig. 2). Starting with the 'end in mind', educators can begin by interrogating and problematizing the ultimate objectives of the course in the light of recognized prior learning (OECD, 2023) of the students as well as their lived experiences and the identities they represent. This should be followed by a translation of the goals and questions into scaffolded resources where learners can make meaning by

comparing the new information that they learned with what they already know all the while ensuring that the scaffolding makes room for equitable growth.

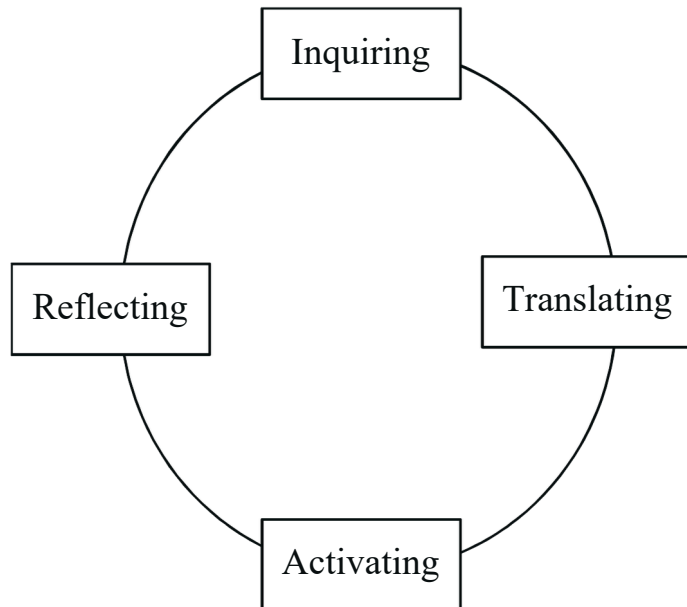


Fig 2 : Price, Smith, and Fox's (2023) backward critical design process cycle

AltText: The illustration depicts the backward critical design process as conceptualized by Price, Smith, and Fox (2023). The figure highlights the steps that can encourage educators to respect the diverse identities of the students. The four steps are inquiring, translating, activating, and reflecting.

Once the resources are developed, the educators support the learners in engaging with these materials and encourage them to become agents of their learning. The end of this process is reflection where one evaluates the outcomes and frames or reframes the strategies (Schön, 1983). This critical design process (Price et al., 2023) not only incorporates a Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2000, 2002) approach but also draws from culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018), which acknowledges and ties itself to belonging, inclusion, and social justice.

DISCUSSION

As the distance between local and global worlds have been shrinking, there is a push for the social work curriculum to be more globally relevant and to rediscover its rights-based roots (Androff, 2015, p.10). The more social

work becomes more nuanced as a profession, it is important to note that relying solely on institutional rankings and explicit curriculum surveys is not an exact measurement of the campus climate as it may lead individuals to believe that the institution is bustling with positivity and inclusion when it may not necessarily be the case. Making disability truly visible would mean practicing and embodying inclusion in both the explicit as well as implicit functioning of a social work institution. They must refrain from making accreditation a means of social work succumbing to providing mere 'lip service to the values of social justice and equity' (Corley & Young, 2018) by aiming to get an implicit bias audit that makes their invisible tenets discernable (Tillotson et al., 2021).

Implications for Social Work Practice

Using the HEART framework of inclusion check, the schools of social work can consider the following implications:

- y Develop inclusion metrics that can be used to substantiate their accreditation indicators along with using that as a barometer for continuous improvement.
- y Encourage co-designing of curriculum and assessment with inputs from students with disabilities, fostering ownership and catering to their specific learning needs in social work education.
- y Faculty incentivization programs wherein the schools of social work collaborate and adopt innovative recognition mechanisms for faculty members who adopt inclusive practices, emphasizing the HEART framework principles.
- y Advancing policy advocacy by utilizing the inputs from implementing this framework to influence national and international educational policies, especially in contexts where social work is yet to be recognized as a profession.

Implications for Social Work Research

The schools of social work can use the HEART framework to expand the scope of social work research in the following ways:

- y Conduct longitudinal studies on HEART Framework implementation and investigate if and how it affects student outcomes, faculty perceptions, and institution's implicit policies over time. The disability-inclusion metrics before and after adopting the framework can be compared to check the efficacy of the framework in the schools of social work.

y Consider intersectional and cross-cultural lens and explore how intersectional identities (such as race, gender, socio-economic status, cultural contexts) are addressed within implicit and explicit social work curricula using HEART framework

y Study the efficacy of assistive technology and differentiated strategies such as UDL, UID, and artificial intelligence in fostering engagement, accommodation, and equity in social work education, particularly within the HEART framework's parameters

y Evaluate the impact of HEART framework-based training for social work faculty on their anti-ableist practices, especially while hiring, curriculum designing, course delivery, and curation of assessments

Visualize a social work institution that provides a holistic learning space where multiple forms of engagement are utilized to enhance the sense of belonging of students with diverse needs. Their understanding is then checked based on the assessments of their choice, where they can take accountability of their own learning. Once checked, intersectional critical reflections take place that fosters collaboration and exchange of feedback through a rational discourse. This creates a newly transformed frame of reference which can then be utilized to further enhance the efficacy of teaching and learning practices. Such processes of transformative learning can help reimagine systems that are necessary for anti-oppressive and democratic social work practice, making the process purposeful.

HEIs can prioritize disability-inclusion by creating a non-disabling program and encourage educators to implement a diverse range of strategies that support all students. However, it is critical to note that unless institutions create such programs from scratch, the presence of an explicitly and implicitly anti-ableist program is a far-fetched reality. To fill this void and to conduct a critical self-analysis, they may adopt the HEART framework of inclusion check to reflect on their current practices. This research could serve as an assessment of what are some best practices that the social work institutions can emulate and learn from to move away from becoming yet another set of ableist ivory towers that militates against embracing diversity and inclusion. Clearly, the journey toward disability-inclusive social work education is far from complete, and this study serves as a pivotal step in bridging persistent gaps. The HEART framework establishes a solid basis for promoting inclusion, while also inviting further exploration of the institutional, pedagogical, and experiential aspects of inclusion in social work education. Future research should build upon these insights, moving beyond theoretical premises to produce practical knowledge that transforms institutional behaviours, empowers diverse learners, and redefines the core principles of social work education.

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