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Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Approaches to Social Work Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Learning Institutions

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Abstract
This study explored culturally responsive social work pedagogy instruction and learning in South African institutions of higher learning. It explores ways to incorporate students' cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and native knowledge systems to improve inclusive learning and make social work education more relevant in a multiethnic society. The study employed a desktop qualitative approach, drawing on existing literature, policy documents, and scholarly publications. An initial search for literature yielded 120 records, which were screened, and 53 records were selected for the study. The thematic analysis was used to present the findings. The findings revealed that culturally responsive pedagogy has proven to increase student engagement, critical reflection, and the situating of social issues. The combination of indigenous knowledge, community-based learning, and dialogical teaching methods enables students to relate theoretical learning to local contexts. The study also emphasises that culturally responsive pedagogy aids in decolonisation of social work education by rupturing Eurocentric curricula and by promoting inclusive knowledge generation. The study shows that culturally responsive pedagogy is critical for effective social work education in South Africa's diverse and unequal society. This is necessary to make teaching relevant and inclusive. The study recommends that policymakers should integrate culturally responsive pedagogy into national curriculum guidelines. Specifically, higher education authorities should ensure that culturally responsive pedagogy is explicitly embedded in social work curriculum frameworks to match South Africa cultural context. There should be professional development at the higher institutions on culturally responsive pedagogy.

Introduction

Culturally responsive pedagogy is crucial in education, valuing diverse backgrounds to create inclusive learning environments (Lave, 2021). According to Guberina (2023), culturally responsive pedagogy is a student-centred teaching strategy that incorporates cultural references and acknowledges the significance of students' cultural experiences and backgrounds in all facets of learning. Culturally

responsive pedagogical approaches in social work education globally aim to integrate students' diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives into the learning process to foster equity and social justice (Yuliantari & Huda, 2023). These approaches move beyond traditional or Western models in Africa to embrace cultural humility, validation of learner identity, and inclusive, learner-centred pedagogy, preparing practitioners to work effectively with diverse populations (Well, 2025). Lave (2021) argues that embracing a variety of perspectives, recognising and fostering students' cultural assets, and validating students lived experiences can improve the learning environment (Guberina, 2023). Culturally responsive pedagogy can enhance engagement and enrichment and improve achievement for all students (Lave, 2021). Teachers who set high standards are dedicated to cultural competency and see themselves as both facilitators and students who are exemplifying culturally responsive teaching (Bragg et al., 2021). Thus, the goal of culturally responsive pedagogy is to create inclusive and stimulating learning environments that acknowledge students' varied origins and experiences (Well, 2025). According to Guberina (2023), this method goes beyond "good teaching" and highlights the necessity for teachers to integrate students' cultural identities and viewpoints into the teaching and learning processes (Yuliantari & Huda, 2023). Culturally responsive pedagogy seeks to enhance students' critical thinking, positive self-identity, and academic performance (Lave, 2021). Turner et al. (2023) maintain that social work students should acquire practice competencies to complete assessment requirements and be eligible, as well as to support a culture of leadership for culturally responsive pedagogy initiatives. Social work programmes can prioritise the development of clinical practice skills to achieve this (Bogo et al., 2021; Bragg et al., 2021). A specific in-class social work practice skills course connects theory to practice and aims to instil in students the knowledge and abilities necessary to apply complex human relational skills, such as self-awareness, empathy, and reflection (Turner et al., 2023). More significantly, though, alongside the field education experience, the adjunct instructor of in-class practice skills bears the vital duty of "socialising students to the profession and to the practice of social work (Varghese, 2020).

The growing reliance on adjunct or sessional academics in social work education has raised concerns about the quality and consistency of teaching practice skills within higher education institutions (Erlam et al., 2023). Internationally, and particularly in South Africa, social work programmes frequently rely on part-time, non-tenured educators, often referred to as adjuncts, sessional lecturers, or casual academics, to deliver practice-oriented modules (Well, 2025). Although these educators typically contribute substantial field experience, they may lack formal pedagogical training and adequate institutional support required for effective teaching (Erlam et al., 2023). Ongoing professional development and support are essential for effective implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy (Varghese, 2020).

Although there have been persistent calls for the decolonisation and contextualisation of higher education in South Africa, social work education remains predominantly influenced by Western epistemologies and pedagogical models (Varghese, 2020). These frameworks often fail to adequately represent the cultural realities of South Africa's diverse communities (Turner et al., 2023). Consequently, graduates are frequently underprepared to engage effectively with culturally diverse populations in professional practice settings (Erlam et al., 2023). Despite the promotion of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) as a strategy to address these challenges, its integration into social work education

within South African higher education institutions remains inconsistent, under-theorised, and inadequately contextualised (Erlam et al., 2023; Sanjombe, 2021).

Varghese (2020) and Howard (2021) argue that while culturally responsive pedagogy is widely discussed globally, there is limited empirical research focused specifically on social work education in South Africa. The existing literature is either general education, but it can be related to social work since they rely on Western approaches (Guberina, 2023; Well, 2025). In addition, the literature has focused primarily on other disciplines, such as teacher education and early childhood education, in South Africa (Gay, 2021). Thus, culturally responsive pedagogy in social work in Africa, including South Africa, remains underexplored (Guberina, 2023). The purpose of this study is to examine culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to social work teaching and learning in South African higher learning institutions. Hence, the question to address is: How are culturally responsive pedagogical approaches experienced and implemented in social work teaching and learning in South African higher learning institutions?

This study is significant at multiple levels. For instance, it will be invaluable to social work educators, professionals, and society, particularly within the South African context. It will also support the ongoing calls for the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa, which aim to transform teaching and learning practices by examining culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. The study also provides insights into how curricula and teaching strategies can better reflect the diverse cultural, social, and historical realities and demands of South Africa and the African continent.

Literature review

This section reviews the literature to align with culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to social work teaching and learning in higher education, categorising the information into the following headings: Contemporary pedagogical circumstances, approaches to facilitating culturally responsive teaching, challenging stereotypes, and promoting critical consciousness.

Contemporary pedagogical circumstances

Teachers have had to adapt their practices to a wide range of classroom contexts and challenges as they work to incorporate culture into their pedagogical identity. Although remedial education presents several instructional difficulties, the teachers were unable to clearly describe the challenges they encountered (Neogi, 2022). Saysi and Batuctoc (2023) identify key issues, including a lack of instructional materials, limited support for current curricular frameworks, insufficient knowledge about cultural appropriation, and time constraints for developing teaching resources. These findings are consistent with earlier research highlighting the ongoing difficulty of sourcing appropriate cultural references for instructional materials (Neogi, 2022). Teachers adapt their instructional strategies to provide diverse learning experiences, especially when the curriculum offers only a broad framework with limited detail rather than clear guidance (Saysi & Batuctoc, 2023). As a result, they often move away from traditional teaching approaches. However, teachers also expressed concern about the limited emphasis on culturally based learning and reported challenges in implementing the remedial education curriculum framework (Saysi & Batuctoc, 2023). According to Anderson et al. (2022), teaching strategies outlined in the curriculum can be difficult to apply in practice, as classroom implementation often requires greater teacher creativity to make learning materials meaningful for students. Furthermore, the curriculum

should explicitly support students' understanding of cultural diversity (Saysi & Batuctoc, 2023). Therefore, stakeholders involved in developing remedial education curricula should prioritise the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives and backgrounds during the design process (Neogi, 2022).

Approaches for facilitating culturally responsive teaching

In today's diverse educational landscape, implementing culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies is essential to creating equitable and inclusive learning environments where all students can succeed (Neogi, 2022). Culturally responsive education acknowledges and values students' cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences, recognising their significant influence on learning and development (Berlian & Huda, 2022). To implement CRT effectively, educators should adopt strategies that support the development of inclusive curricula and content, strengthen their cultural competence, and foster positive, respectful relationships between teachers and students (Howard, 2021).

The development of inclusive curricula and materials is central to culturally responsive teaching (CRT). To reflect students' cultural backgrounds and identities, the curriculum should incorporate diverse perspectives, voices, and experiences (Howard, 2021). Educators can achieve this by integrating multicultural literature, varied historical narratives, and culturally relevant resources into their teaching (Howard, 2021). For example, including texts by authors from different ethnic backgrounds or examining historical events from multiple perspectives helps students both see themselves represented and develop an understanding of others (Neogi, 2022). In addition, teachers should use culturally responsive materials that engage students and promote reflection and critical thinking (Howard, 2021). This can be done by incorporating case studies, media, and examples that are relevant to students' cultural contexts. For instance, drawing on examples from students' communities in science projects or mathematics problems can make learning more accessible, meaningful, and engaging (Hernandez, 2022).

Challenging stereotypes and promoting critical consciousness

In the classroom, dispelling myths and promoting critical thinking are essential for developing informed, open-minded students who can question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and engage thoughtfully with diverse perspectives (Howard, 2021). To further empower students, culturally responsive educators aim to cultivate critical awareness of social injustices and inequalities (Min et al., 2022). By incorporating diverse perspectives and encouraging critical inquiry, teachers can help students become active advocates for social justice (Chang & Viesca, 2022).

This theme aligns with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which emphasise addressing systemic injustices and engaging students in critical dialogue (Ava, 2020). Chang and Viesca (2022) note that culturally responsive educators create opportunities for students to challenge stereotypes that reinforce inequality and to critically reflect on their own biases. In addition, by providing space for students to examine social issues and power dynamics, teachers can foster the development of critical consciousness (Howard, 2021). This, in turn, empowers students to make informed decisions and take action to address societal injustices (Min et al., 2022).

Research shows that when students are exposed to critical perspectives and encouraged to challenge biases and assumptions, they develop a deeper understanding of social issues and are more likely to engage in positive social change (Rogerson et al., 2022). Min et al. (2022) argues that fostering critical consciousness in the classroom not only strengthens students' critical thinking skills but also builds their

confidence to question injustice and advocate for a more equitable society. Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), therefore, provides a framework for promoting critical dialogue and student agency, preparing students to become active change agents within their communities and beyond (Rogerson et al., 2022).

Method

The study employed a qualitative desktop review design, which entails the systematic collection and analysis of existing secondary data. This approach is suitable for examining established knowledge, identifying patterns, and synthesising literature without the need for primary data collection (Magrefi et al., 2018). The data were drawn from a range of credible secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and book chapters, policy documents and government reports, and institutional publications such as theses and dissertations. Thus, a comprehensive search strategy was employed, involving electronic databases such as Education Research Complete, Google Scholar, ProQuest, Scopus, and Web of Science.

The search strategy involved a structured search that identified relevant literature by using keywords and phrases such as culturally responsive pedagogy, social work education, South Africa, and higher education. In addition, we used Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine searches. For instance, social work and higher education (see Magrefi et al., 2018). The researcher limited the results to the last 10-15 years and to those written in English and relevant to the topic. The initial search was conducted in January 2026 and yielded 120 records, which were screened based on title and abstract to assess relevance to the topic. The researcher identified 67 duplicate and unrelated records during screening and manually deleted them, leaving 53 records for the study.

In relation to the inclusion criteria, the study focused on culturally responsive pedagogy and related concepts in the literature and synthesised the positives and gaps. The literature on social work education in South Africa was much considered. The researcher ensured that studies relevant to the topic were peer-reviewed for credibility. The researcher set the study date range to 21 years, from January 2005 to December 2026. However, theoretical concepts that are still older but still relevant were included in the study. The study excluded irrelevant disciplines, such as pedagogy and technological advancement, as well as unrelated topics. Moreover, non-scholarly, unverified sources and duplicate studies were excluded from the study.

Data analysis

The study was guided by Braun et al. (2024) thematic analysis. Thus, the researcher employed thematic analysis by gathering existing sources, such as journal articles, policy documents, books, reports and others. Secondly, the researcher familiarises himself with the data by reading and re-reading the selected documents to understand key ideas and concepts. Notes were taken on recurring concepts, including culturally responsive pedagogy, social work teaching and learning, and higher education. The researcher further highlights meaningful sections of text and assigns codes. For instance, information emphasising teachers' lack of culturally relevant materials was coded as 'Lack of resources'. Students felt more engaged when the content reflected their culture. This was coded as cultural relevance. The next phase involved grouping the codes into broader themes. Then, reviewing and refining themes. This phase involved checking whether the themes accurately represented the data and refining them as needed. It

moved to the findings writing phase, where the themes were explained and supported with evidence from the literature. Finally, the interpretation was where the researchers connected the findings to broader discussions.

Results

This section presents the result into themes. The first theme is culturally responsive instructional strategies, with its subthemes including: assessing and activating culturally bound prior knowledge, empowering students through cultural referents, and fostering learning environments that validate cultural identity and experiences. The next major themes are power dynamics and decolonisation in pedagogy; the advantages of culturally responsive teaching; cultural knowledge and teaching assumptions related to culture; and perspectives and skills as a resource for teaching.

Theme 1: Culturally responsive instructional strategies

Culturally responsive instructional strategies are teaching methods that acknowledge, respect, and integrate students' cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences into the educational process (Darling-Hammond, 2021). According to Guberina (2023), these approaches seek to enhance inclusivity, relevance, and effectiveness for diverse student populations. Culturally responsive practice views the culture, language, experiences and learning modalities of each student as an asset in the classroom, not as a deficit (Hammond, 2021).

Strategy 1: Assess and activate culturally bound prior knowledge

Education expert Darling-Hammond (2021) examines how teachers can help students apply what they already know to new settings, obstacles, or issues through a neurological lens. This guides teachers to connect what students are learning to the schemas (also called background information) that already exist in their brains, shaped by their experiences, cultures, and communities (Darling-Hammond, 2021). Guberina (2023) added that educators should provide real-world assignments that foster connections and a sense of purpose. Culturally responsive teaching and learning emphasise identifying and appreciating students' cultural knowledge and using it as a strength to support the best possible learning outcomes (Guberina, 2023). Students' learning progresses through this process from memorising concepts to critical and higher-order thinking about the course material, and to the development of learning opportunities that have personal significance for them (Hammond, 2021).

Strategy 2: Empower students by using cultural referents

Incorporating cultural references from students' backgrounds enables them to participate more fully in their educational journeys on an intellectual, social, and emotional level (Darling-Hammond, 2021). Decentering hegemonic norms like whiteness and maleness allows students to think and act in ways that affirm the cultural wealth of their community (Hammond, 2021). Guberina (2023) argued that using cultural referents to highlight the many facets of students' identities engages them holistically. Tahir (2025) added that, by learning about the linguistic, cultural, and historical connections of the material they teach and purposefully incorporating these facets of life into their instruction, faculty members actively challenge the status quo to employ this method. Culturally responsive teaching involves empowering students through cultural references (Tahir, 2025). It connects education to students' identities, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences in ways that promote empowerment, engagement, and success (Pasternak et al., 2023). In areas including values, customs, language,

communication, learning, and interpersonal norms, faculty members can play a significant role in validating and reflecting their students' cultures by preserving them throughout the course (Hammond, 2021).

This method honours the historical heritage and current contributions of racialised groups and communities to the course material while committing teachers to developing learning environments and experiences that represent their students (Tahir, 2025). Pasternak et al. (2023) maintained that purposefully designed course materials, tasks, and assessments that highlight students' varied cultures must be incorporated to affirm students' cultures. In this three-step method, students' cultural characteristics are identified, instruction is modified depending on the findings, and students' learning is assessed in a recursive manner (Pasternak et al., 2023). Using a rubric or equity review tool, faculty can collaborate with colleagues in their department to assess the cultural relevance of the texts (Webb et al., 2019). Culturally Responsive Pedagogy provides students from diverse backgrounds with opportunities to view course topics through their cultural lenses. Student voices and perspectives should be affirmed and sustained (Webb et al., 2019).

Strategy 3: Foster learning environments that validate cultural identity and experiences

According to Ciampa and Reisboard (2024), learning experiences that are both validating and effective value the complete student while also recognising and appreciating the variety of academic and personal backgrounds that students bring to the classroom. These classes deliberately prioritise the cultures, backgrounds, and skills of their students (Pasternak et al., 2023). Traditional methods can exclude students with racialised and marginalised identities; validating teaching techniques are aware of this (Webb et al., 2019). To challenge and subvert prevailing norms, standards, and ideologies, culturally responsive faculty incorporate asset- and strengths-based approaches that strengthen and preserve the cultural wealth and knowledge of Black, Latina, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Indigenous students (Webb et al., 2019).

Gay (2018) suggests that culturally sensitive faculty adjust their methods to better meet the needs of students of colour in ways that suit how they learn best. In addition, they change the expectations that students should adapt their learning to the methods that they are taught (Pasternak et al., 2023). Students' culture and interests become teaching and learning aids when teachers are prepared to help students of colour understand concepts and information (Gay, 2018). This method offers instruction in a cultural setting. The foundation of culturally responsive teaching and learning is the relationship between students and faculty. To establish genuine connections, it is crucial to get to know students and validate their cultures (Codding et al., 2021). Students should also be encouraged to interact with their peers in ways that remove obstacles and promote learning. Students feel that faculty members are interested in them as individuals when their relationships are based on mutual trust and rapport (Gay, 2018). According to Van Houweling (2021), social work education in South African higher education institutions operates within a diverse, historically unequal society that requires graduates to be culturally competent and socially responsive.

Burkhanova et al. (2020) argue that, to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to implement culturally responsive teaching techniques, professional development and training are essential. Studies have indicated that the more important trend is professional development that goes beyond one-off

seminars and encourages ongoing education and self-improvement. The literature shows that teachers who complete extensive training programs are prepared to manage the challenging circumstances of teaching in diverse settings (Burkhanova et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Power dynamics and decolonisation in pedagogy

Power dynamics play a crucial role as culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to social work teaching and learning in higher learning institutions in South Africa are slowly adapting to the local context (Burkhanova et al., 2020). Van Houweling (2021) argued that the assumptions, biases, and prejudices of white, Euro-American, middle- and higher-class men are manifested in education research, curriculum, educational practices, and privileged access selectivity. Historically, cultural trauma has followed the access that Native groups got to formal education, both in the US and West Africa (Reyhner et al., 2024). During this period, according to Reyhner et al. (2024), students had to abandon and renounce their native languages, traditions, and knowledge to adjust to the prevailing colonial culture. Native individuals were also being removed from their communities and homes, and most of the universities in the North were built on slave labour and/or imperial wealth (Van Houweling, 2021). In the United States, education was envisioned to provide white supremacy, as black students were taught the black ideology of subordination and white students were taught the white ideology of domination (Reyhner, 2022). These ideas were internalised by colonised people, who began to think that whiteness and masculinity are superior, thereby neglecting culturally responsive pedagogical approaches in higher education institutions (Van Houweling, 2021). With this, South Africa is not exceptional, as social work teaching and learning in South African higher education institutions follow Western approaches (Burkhanova et al., 2020).

The process of decolonising the classroom involves an investigation of the way power manifests in pedagogies, relations among people, course curricula, and personal histories and identities (Van Houweling, 2021). One should stimulate students to investigate their beliefs, values, and how they see the truth and normality (Omodan, 2023). A decolonising pedagogy shifts the methods through which knowledge is constructed and appreciated in a classroom (Van Houweling, 2021). It implies the forceful resistance of dominant discourses and representations to create space to encourage alternative and subordinated knowledges of the Indigenous populations, the Global South, and other marginalised communities based on social dimensions like sexuality, gender, race or class (Omodan, 2023).. According to Ribeiro Oliveira (2024), decolonisation means decentering European and Western consciousness, language, and cultural heritage as part of the broader quest to find a liberating perspective that can help us understand ourselves in proper perspective, relative to ourselves and to other selves in the universe. Decolonisation begins as an inward-looking process but gradually takes on a sociopolitical dimension, becoming actionable (Omodan, 2023).

Joining the dots leads to the realisation that the education system continues dominant power relations by stubbornly failing to recognise that every student has a particular history, culture, identity, and politics, and that they see the world and the learning process their own way (Van Houweling, 2021). Once a foreign student has been accepted to higher education in the US, he/she faces several challenges in adapting to a new academic system (Omodan, 2023). Besides the linguistic challenges of the second-, third-, or fourth-language students, these students might represent the graduates of non-US schools with pedagogical and sociocultural principles strongly contrasting with the ones established in the US, which

may evoke feelings of anxiety related to their participation in classes and challenges related to meeting the expectations (Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022). This is often the case for students from underrepresented groups in the US (Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022).

Theme 3: Advantages of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) plays an indispensable role in enhancing the quality and relevance of social work education, especially in a nation with a historically unequal, multicultural history such as South Africa. The ability of CRT to increase student engagement and optimise learning is among its primary advantages (Pasternak et al., 2023). The latter happens when students encounter content that reflects their cultural identities, life experiences, and local realities, and they feel more likely to be represented and motivated (Mpisi & Alexander, 2022). Culturally responsive pedagogy fosters a deeper connection to the subject taught and validates students from different languages, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds in South African classrooms (Pasternak et al., 2023). Besides, by resisting the overwhelming dominance of Eurocentric paradigms and giving voice to previously unheard concerns, CRT itself promotes equity and inclusiveness (Caballero, 2024). It would be significant in the post-apartheid educational context to overcome structural inequalities and ensure that every student, in particular the Black and Indigenous ones, feels a legitimate stakeholder in academic and professional discourse (Van Houweling, 2021). For example, social work theory and practice can be enriched by concepts of African thought, such as Ubuntu, in the social work curriculum, and the curriculum can be aligned with communal values esteemed by many South Africans (Van Houweling, 2021).

Students who undertake CRT feel more ready to practice social work professionally. The country's high cultural and linguistic diversity means that social workers must appreciate and understand diverse forms of communication and worldviews (Ali, 2024). Students in the culturally responsive course are assured they can manage cultural differences, regardless of the targeted population, organisation, or location within a country, whether rural refugees, urban informal settlements, or rural communities. This pragmatic preparation enhances the relevance and performance of their therapies (Van Houweling, 2021).

Moreover, culturally sensitive teaching promotes better relationships between the teachers and students (Ali, 2024). Caballero (2024) emphasises that lecturers who do their job of getting to know their students and use teaching elements relevant to students indeed come to respect one another and, reciprocally, trust one another. This makes the classroom friendlier, and children are at ease when it comes to asking questions, sharing and debating complex social matters (Ali, 2024).

Imperatively, CRT fosters a sense of social justice and advocacy, aligning with the core values of social work. It equips students with the knowledge needed to detect and challenge inequity in the classroom and the workplace (Pulliam, 2017). Community-based learning and exposure to multiple perspectives increase students' preparedness to defend culturally responsive policies, solutions, and ideas. CRT also encourages flexibility and lifelong learning, both of which are essential in the dynamic field of social work (Van Houweling, 2021). Social work should be ready to adapt to a constantly changing society, and culturally sensitive training helps develop a spirit of humility and inclusivity (Daftary, 2020). It also urges students to work with communities rather than impose models from external sources, thereby ensuring respectful, sustainable projects (Van Houweling, 2021).

The effects of the professional development that teachers receive on their cultural competency and capacity to use culturally responsive teaching methods have been the subject of numerous studies (Van Houweling, 2021). According to Oleson (2023), an ineffective training program should focus on helping teachers become more aware of their cultural biases, develop a lifelong learning mindset, and teach them how to create an inclusive classroom. Teachers' cultural responsiveness has been demonstrated to increase with learning models that prioritise teamwork and reflective activities (Gay, 2021).

Theme 4: Cultural knowledge and teaching assumptions related to culture

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs are important factors in determining their ability to impact a diverse group of students (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Gay (2021) added that teachers' personal perceptions, assumptions, and expectations of students also affect how they teach and the nature and frequency of their communication with students (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Secondly, students perceive themselves and their learning ability through their teachers' reflections, and their beliefs and self-efficacy are shaped by professors' proactive behaviour and words (Gay, 2021).

It is critical that educators assess their own discourse and beliefs about culturally diverse students and, if necessary, reposition themselves by drawing on critical insight (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Culturally sensitive teachers are passionate about social justice and about helping all students reach their full potential (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Teachers are not afraid to challenge the majority culture's knowledge, curriculum, and pedagogy, as well as their presumptions and ideas about culturally diverse communities, families, and students (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Moreover, teachers are prepared to explore new methods that might be more effective for every kid, going beyond tried-and-true teaching strategies (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Dominant classroom norms significantly influence educators' perceptions of students' abilities within the framework of culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to social work teaching and learning in South African higher education institutions (Gulzar et al., 2024). Students who adhere to conventional classroom behaviours are frequently perceived as more motivated and capable, whereas those who exhibit culturally distinct learning and interaction styles may be misinterpreted as less engaged or competent (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). These biases can disadvantage students from diverse cultural backgrounds and perpetuate existing inequalities. Lave (2021) noted that it is also critical to consider what is expected of students. Higher education students from diverse cultural backgrounds, teachers might not believe that every student has the ability to achieve at a profound level (Gulzar et al., 2024).

Theme 5: Use students' cultural knowledge, perspectives and skills as a resource for teaching

According to Lave (2021), when students' culture and experiences are central to their learning, they may elaborate on their prior cultural experiences and understanding. In addition, they may view the cultural diversity of a particular class as an asset to the whole group of students, as it serves as a launching pad for new information and experiences (Lave, 2021). To develop the curriculum, select instructional methods, and organise the classroom, accessing and using students' prior knowledge and experience are essential (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). There should be programmes which show an appreciation and understanding of other ways of knowing and being (Gulzar et al., 2024).

It is beneficial to learn the basic rules of the language children speak and understand, and to use it as a tool for conveying new ideas and concepts (Wenas et al., 2023). This also shows that, alongside cultural

tolerance, students are aware that their language is accepted as valid (Gulzar et al., 2024). Teachers must also ensure that classroom exhibits and furniture arrangements depict students' culture, not just on special days or months throughout the year (Ghamrawi et al., 2024). Include more in-depth information about numerous cultures and their contributions to the curriculum (Lave, 2021).

Moreover, teachers may begin the classroom with initial elicitation of student experiences and use them to create and understand new ideas in teaching students, that is, to and through their frames of reference (Lave, 2021). Discover students' interests and knowledge. When presenting a new topic, include surveys or discussions so students can connect what they read and hear at home and in the community with what they hear in the classroom (Morris, 2008). It further supports the curriculum in capturing and reflecting students' culture (Lave, 2021). Conduct a second discourse after class so that students can reflect on what they learnt Morris (Morris, 2008). All this discussion helps teachers understand students' past experiences and how they influence students' understanding in this manner (Morris, 2008).

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) has been a hot topic in educational research, particularly for improving student learning, fostering cultural competency, and cultivating critical consciousness among diverse student populations. Morris (2008), whose seminal work highlights the value of culturally responsive literature that authentically portrays students' backgrounds, suggests that teachers should use students' culture as learning resources to help them bridge the gap between their experiences at home and at school. Particularly in schools that are becoming more diverse and where immigrant children face difficulties adjusting to new learning settings, this viewpoint is essential (Lave, 2021).

Although training and development are important, there are obstacles to implementing culturally responsive education on a wide scale. The factors most frequently mentioned include limited finances, lack of acceptance, and lack of time (Gay, 2021). Systemic reforms in educational institutions are required to encourage and support teachers' ongoing professional development focused on enhancing cultural competency.

Student learning, cultural competence and critical consciousness

In relation to student learning, culturally responsive pedagogy directly enhances student learning by making education more relevant and meaningful (Jenkins, 2023). For instance, culturally responsive pedagogy connects course content to students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and realities (Jenkins, 2023). In the South African context, it may include recognising diversity, language, and socio-historical experiences (Mpisi & Alexander, 2022). In addition, when students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, they are more engaged, motivated, and likely to succeed (Jenkins, 2023). Hence, this may improve how students learn by making teaching inclusive, accessible, and contextually relevant (Chang & Viesca, 2022). Aside from that, cultural competence is both a goal and a skill developed through culturally responsive pedagogy and therefore, in social work education, students must learn to work effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Mpisi & Alexander, 2022). If the goal and skills are developed through culturally responsive pedagogy, students would develop awareness, respect, and sensitivity toward different cultures (Jenkins, 2023). This means educators are encouraged to model culturally competent behaviour in their teaching. In the researchers' view, students may develop the need to become social workers who can practice effectively in diverse South African communities (Wahed & Pitterson, 2023). Culturally responsive pedagogy may not be successful without

critical consciousness (Hannah Lawrence-Pine, 2015). This helps people to recognise and challenge social inequalities, power dynamics, and injustice. In addition, it encourages students to question dominant narratives and reflect on issues such as inequality, race, and marginalisation (Murdock, 2021). In the authors' opinion, this is particularly important in South Africa, given the country's history and ongoing social disparities. Hence, social work students need this awareness to advocate for social justice. Ramirez et al. (2018) contribute to the discussion by specifying the key components of culturally responsive pedagogy and emphasising the role of connections and reflective practices in enhancing students' learning. This corroborates the notion that educators need to analyse themselves critically to understand the cultural dynamics at play in their classrooms (Murdock, 2021). Floyd (2021) explains that culturally responsive literacy education is essential and adds that curricular materials must recognise students' cultural heritage and experiences. The perspective, reiterated here, asserts that students' cultural identities are central to the educational process and that CRP is required to eliminate disparities in opportunities (Lave, 2021).

Discussion

The discussion draws on a synthesis of the literature to understand culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to social work teaching and learning in South African higher education institutions. Darling-Hammond (2021) argued that culturally responsive instructional strategies play a central role in promoting inclusive and meaningful teaching and learning in diverse educational contexts. These strategies are grounded in the recognition, respect, and integration of students' cultural backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences into the learning process (Hammond, 2021). In maintaining culturally responsive pedagogy, the focus of instruction would shift from a one-size-fits-all approach to one that is responsive to the diversity of students in the classroom (Guberina, 2023). The findings of this study align with Guberina (2023), who argued that culturally responsive approaches enhance inclusivity, relevance, and overall effectiveness in teaching diverse student populations. Thus, making learning more contextually meaningful, these strategies contribute to improved student engagement and participation (Ghamrawi et al., 2024). This is particularly important in settings characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity, where traditional teaching approaches may fail to meet the needs of all students (Lave, 2021).

Darling-Hammond's (2021) study revealed that teachers can help students apply what they already know to new settings, obstacles, or issues through a neurological lens. This is a guide for teachers on how to connect what students are learning to the schemas, also called background information. Darling-Hammond (2021) added that this already exists in their brains because of their experiences, cultures, and communities. However, the findings suggest that power dynamics play a crucial role, as culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to social work teaching and learning in higher education institutions in South Africa do not align with the local context, despite an emphasis on Ubuntu (Varghese, 2020). Van Houweling (2021) argues that the assumptions, biases, and prejudices of white, Euro-American, middle- and higher-class people are manifested in education research, curriculum, educational practices, and privileged access selectivity.

The findings suggest that culturally responsive pedagogy would have played a significant role in enhancing the quality and relevance of social work education, especially in a nation with a historically unequal, multicultural history like South Africa (Varghese, 2020). Mpisi and Alexander (2022) maintained that when students encounter content that reflects their cultural identities, life experiences,

and local realities, they feel more likely to be represented and motivated. Darling-Hammond (2021) argued that CRT's ability to increase student engagement and optimise learning is among its primary advantages. For instance, the findings suggest that culturally responsive pedagogy directly enhances student learning by making education more relevant and meaningful (Jenkins, 2023). Additionally, culturally responsive pedagogy connects course content to students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and realities (Jenkins, 2023). In the South African context, it may include recognising diversity, language, and socio-historical experiences (Mpisi & Alexander, 2022). The study suggests that the emphasis is not only on students but also on teachers' attitudes and beliefs, which are important factors in their ability to impact diverse student groups (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). For instance, their personal perceptions, assumptions, and expectations of students also affect how they teach or the nature of their communication with students (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Van Houweling (2021) concludes that understanding cultural dynamics enables a teacher to influence students to perceive themselves and their learning abilities through their teachers' reflections, and to shape their beliefs to shape their professors after completing their studies. This resonates with the notion that educators need to analyse themselves critically to understand the cultural dynamics at play in their classrooms (Murdock, 2021). This will also help ensure the student provides services that are meaningful to their cultural demands (Murdock, 2021). Floyd (2021) explains that culturally responsive literacy education is essential and adds that curricular materials must recognise students' cultural heritage and experiences. This study has given meaningful insights into culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to social work teaching and learning in South African higher learning institutions, leading to policy recommendations.

Although desktop research plays a crucial role in efficiently gathering and understanding information, it has some limitations (Magrefi et al., 2018). For instance, the researcher has no control over the data collected in the previous research but can only address this issue by examining a sound methodology to determine whether the research was fit for purpose. In addition, it is difficult to generalise in desktop research (Magrefi et al., 2018). The researchers were also aware that secondary sources may not provide sufficient detail for complex decision-making or specialised research needs.

Policy recommendations

There are many policy recommendations for culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to social work teaching and learning in South African higher learning institutions. However, those related to this study include the following: Policymakers should integrate culturally responsive pedagogy into national curriculum guidelines. For instance, higher education authorities should ensure that culturally responsive pedagogy is explicitly embedded in social work curriculum frameworks. In addition, there is a need for professional development. Institutions should provide ongoing training for social work educators on culturally responsive teaching practices. Promoting the use of indigenous knowledge systems is another area to consider. For instance, policymakers and institutions should encourage the integration of indigenous knowledge into teaching and learning. Courses at the Universities should include local case studies, community practices, and African epistemologies.

Conclusion

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is more than just a teaching method; it is a way to promote equity, inclusion, and meaningful change in education. Within South African social work programs, CRP makes learning more relevant to students' lives, fosters stronger relationships between students and teachers,

and prepares graduates to engage respectfully and effectively with individuals from diverse backgrounds. When educators leverage students' cultural knowledge in their teaching, they create classrooms that are more inclusive and supportive of lifelong learning. To maximise the benefits of CRP, universities and colleges need to invest in teacher training, update their curricula, and implement broader reforms in educational delivery. These efforts will help ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, can thrive and make valuable contributions to their communities.

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