What's All the Fuss about Social Work Syllabi? Action Speaks Louder Than Words in Addressing the Silence of Whiteness in Social Work Curriculum: A Game Theory Perspective

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Abstract

A cursory review of the mission statements of progressive Canadian schools of social work reveals that most have a commitment to anti-oppressive education. That is a commitment to social justice and the amelioration of multiple forms of oppression using a broad range of praxis-oriented approaches. In practice, questions remain regarding these schools' commitment to transformative education. To what extent do the pedagogical promises of a "progressive" education match the actions of education administrators? Can a school or curriculum be progressive if devoid of a critical analysis of the operation of Whiteness at the root of social injustice? The first author's experience teaching an elective undergraduate course and the curriculum tension experienced by students over the lack of content on Whiteness in their core courses are examined. We analyze two different events experienced by them using solution concepts drawn from game theory, to answer the question: Is the non-disclosure of course syllabi evidence that a school has something to hide? Action-oriented efforts—and difficulties encountered—in raising consciousness about the students' need for curriculum change to address this issue are discussed. Pedagogical implications and recommendations are included for transformative practice that might support the integration of content on Whiteness in mandated social work courses.

Keywords: social work curriculum and syllabi, racism and Whiteness, critical transformative pedagogy, game theory, Canada

Introduction

In Western industrialized countries, institutions of higher learning are discursive sites through which liberal values of democracy are interpolated into discourse, to deny and obfuscate racial processes that maintain the dominant hegemonic imaginary (Carr & Lund, 2007; Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005; Henry & Tator, 2009; Henry et al., 2017; Leonardo, 2002). Canadian institutions are not immune to this practice of domination since White supremacy—the belief in and acceptance of the White race as superior to non-White races—remains the most persistent social problem of the twenty-first century (Carr & Lund, 2007; Dumbrill & Yee, 2018; Henry & Tator, 2009; Henry et al., 2017). The essential problem in discourse regarding this legacy of European colonialism, buttressed by the current multiculturalism ethos of Canadian society, is one of disregard for critical discussion about the continuing prevalence of racism and material benefits of Whiteness (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Jeffery, 2007a; Wagner & Yee, 2011).

Racism, in its simplest sense, is the expression of racial prejudice by a White-dominant society against racial minorities based on phenotypic differences (e.g., race or skin color). This race-based attitude combines with the exercise of power to reinforce social structures that maintain systemic advantage for the dominant race (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Razack, 2012). Rooted in pseudoscientific racism, humans were classified into distinct races and judged as inferior or superior, based on the amount of melanin in their skin.

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Those with naturally lighter skin complexions were considered to have a high social status compared to their darker-skin counterparts. In this manner, individuals' abilities and qualities were subjectively determined by their race or skin color.

Whiteness, in contrast, can be defined as the structural advantage of race privilege; as a standpoint that informs how White people see themselves and non-White others, and relate to the world around them; and as an established pattern of unquestioned, taken-for-granted cultural practices (Dumbrill & Yee, 2018; Frankenberg, 1993; Mullaly & West, 2017). Although the privileges of Whiteness do not apply equally to all White people (Jeyasingham, 2011), Whiteness does shape access to material and symbolic resources, and antiracist attempts to critique or decenter White dominance is often seen by those in power as suspect (Allen, 2004; Dei, 2007; Giroux, 1997; Jeffery, 2005; Kincheloe, 1999; Wagner & Yee, 2011). As Carr and Lund (2009) have observed, Whiteness is masked with defences and refutations that constrict discussion of the continued benefit of oppression for White people. Fearing a diminution of their power and influence, the dominant racial group may resort to strategies of denial to contain or silence discussions about racism and the need for conscious examination of the meaning of Whiteness (van Dijk, 2002; Jensen, 2005; Lund, 2006). Allegations of reverse racism or discrimination by racial minorities against White people and the latter's deployment of violent invective illustrates this point.

In social work institutions (considered to be primarily a White, female majority, male-dominated profession) where promoting diversity and challenging discrimination and oppression are well-established professional values (Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Habibov, 2016; Mullaly & West, 2017), Whiteness operates to produce and reproduce practices that normalize White centrism (Dumbrill & Yee, 2018; Yee & Dumbrill, 2016; Yee & Wagner, 2013). For example, social workers are confronted in their practice with the reality of social inequality, and must be prepared to work with clients from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures (Este, 1999, 2007; James, 1996). Yet their education fails to provide them with knowledge to interrogate the salience of White power—that is, the everyday enactment of dominant rules that govern practice—and privilege, thus contributing to the perpetuation of social problems (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Nylund, 2006). Whiteness thus maintains a cloak of invisibility or innocence (Jeffery, 2005; Levine-Rasky, 2014; Rossiter, 2001; Wagner & Yee, 2011), allowing social work to be seen as a helping profession, pure and simple. The Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), the accrediting body for professional social work education in Canada, supports professional education that promotes social justice and the amelioration of structural sources of oppression (CASWE, 2014). However, because the accreditation process legitimizes institutions and curricular models superficially—without attention to specific course syllabi and their engagement or the lack thereof with White supremacy—it reinforces systems of oppression through the educational policy and accreditation standards that guide curriculum development and instruction in schools of social work. When social work students are not required to learn about enactments of Whiteness on themselves and on those for whom they provide services, they are denied the opportunity to use their education as a tool for social change (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). However, "courses that challenge students to reflect on their positionality and subjectivity in relationship to their practice [and] to explore their own narratives of oppression and [racialized] privilege [will] help create more holistic and socially responsible practitioners" (Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007, para. 32).

In this article we reflect on the first author's experience teaching an elective undergraduate social work course on racism and Whiteness at an urban university in southwestern, Ontario, Canada. Our purposes in doing so are: to interrogate Whiteness at the interstices of social work curriculum, to show how current programs of study perpetuate colonial practices that advance the status quo possessive investment in Whiteness (Lipsitz, 1998); to highlight the tension experienced by White and non-White students over the lack of content on Whiteness in their core courses; and to elucidate the challenges they and the first author confronted in getting those in positions of power in one department of social work to become attentive to this issue. This focus complements and extends existing curriculum discussions by moving beyond multicultural and antioppression discourses that insist focusing attention on populations at risk (e.g., people of color; for more on this topic, see Abrams & Gibson, 2007) in favor of a more critical analysis of institutional structures that maintain White dominance. We use game theory (GT) to explore power dynamics and an articulation of Whiteness in social work educational contexts. This theoretical approach provide an interpretive framework for injection of experiential, racialized cultural viewpoints about Whiteness as a system of racial privilege and domination (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yee & Dumbrill, 2016). The organization of this article is as follows.

First, an overview of the course on racism and Whiteness that the first author taught to undergraduate social work students is presented. Second, we describe what the first author observed as the students' expression of frustration about the inadequacy of their education to prepare them for practice, along with an outline of the curriculum issue identified as needing change. Third, the institutional difficulties encountered in advocating for a focus on Whiteness in students' core program units are outlined.

Fourth, using GT, we demonstrate how the refusal by some educational administrators to make course syllabi available for research purposes is indicative of a need to hide that their schools' curriculum does not adequately incorporate the theme of Whiteness. Fifth, we make a set of recommendations for social work educators and administrators in Canada regarding the need to maintain a critical gaze on our work in hopes of transforming social work curriculum and pedagogical practices.

Teaching about Racism and Whiteness in Social Work: An Overview of the Course

In the Winter 2011 academic session, the first author taught a four-month elective Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) course that incorporated the themes of racism and Whiteness in social work practice, at one of the most culturally heterogeneous institutions in Canada. Eleven of the students belonged to an ethnoracial minority group while two identified as White. All shared a commitment to social justice and equity, and demonstrated a strong interest for knowledge about how Whiteness—as an ideological construction and social marker of privilege/dominance—and racism operate in the contemporary Canadian social work context. Several exercises, along with documentary films shown throughout the course, allowed students to be critically and reflectively engaged on this important issue in social work. Reading materials addressed racism and Whiteness simultaneously, to avoid creating the wrong impression of them as unrelated phenomenon. For example, lecture materials at the outset considered the origin and social meaning of race/racism and Whiteness. Information from these early sessions were expanded on in subsequent classes, with students exposed to materials that troubled the operation of these concepts in social work practice with oppressed and marginalized groups, such as the overrepresentation of Aboriginal (Ma, Fallon, & Richard, 2019) and Black (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2016) children in the child welfare system.

In order to promote an awareness of self in the change process and increase understanding about the role of society's systems in maintaining oppressive power structures (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Christensen, 1996, 1999; Hillock & Profitt, 2007; Pon, 2009; Razack & Jeffery, 2002), the students examined how they inadvertently reproduced racism and White privilege. They were required to maintain a weekly self-reflection portfolio on course readings. In addition to summarizing content, a major component of the assignment was to ground the material in personal and/or professional experiences. These served to enliven classroom discussions that might otherwise have seemed depersonalized due to students' fear of being judged or perceived by others as saying the wrong thing (Fook & Askeland, 2007).

The students also were required to work in groups to complete an action-oriented project presentation on social work practice with oppressed and marginalized groups. This assignment provided a much-needed space for sharing and understanding, and also facilitated discussions about the implications of these lived experiences of oppression for discourse about racism and Whiteness in social work practice.

For their final assignment, students were required to submit an integrative critical analysis paper in which they demonstrated the operations of racism and Whiteness in one particular area of social work practice, bringing together materials covered in the course.

Students' Response to Learning About Racism and not Whiteness

The importance of learning about racism and Whiteness has been demonstrated in the social work literature (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Hollinrake, Hunt, Dix, & Wagner, 2019; Jeyasingham, 2011; Razack & Jeffery, 2002). In "White Dialectics," American scholars Todd and Abrams (2011) point out that a principal approach to the scholarship of multicultural research, teaching, and learning has been to focus on the conditions of oppressed non-White racial groups to the exclusion of those of the dominant White racial group. The authors imply that this approach fails to locate responsibility for social oppression and systems of racial privilege with the dominant White group, and is likely to blame people of color for its continuation.

Educating all students, especially those from the dominant racial group, about racism and White privilege can prepare them to work with people from diverse backgrounds, and avoid what Lowe (1996) and Pon (2009) refer to as the ontology of forgetting; that is, "the history of white supremacy, racism, and Western imperial projects that proved central to the states' formation and ascendancy" (Pon, 2009, p. 66). However, as students in the course remarked, such learning was not taking place in their core courses.

Many of the students indicated they had not previously studied Whiteness. Despite their understanding of the concept as a social construction (McLaren, 1997), they pointed out that the school's social work curriculum fell short in its engagement with relations of power.

For example, with regard to differential treatment, several described the ad hoc manner with which White professors often addressed issues of racial inequality encountered by people of color. Most professors seemed to shy away from discussions of racism and Whiteness, perhaps fearing its tendency to provoke difficult dialogues in the classroom (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Gillborn, 2008; Hollinrake et al., 2019; Razack, 1999; Redmond, 2010). Anonymous course and instructor evaluation form that students completed at the end of the term indicated that they felt the first author's course offered a reprieve, in its critical engagement with the important contemporary issue of White racial hegemony and its implications for their practice. They also indicated the importance of this subject being included as part of the core curriculum in social work. One student reported:

This course should be made into a core course for BSW students especially. The learning was amazing and being that the field is dominated by White social workers serving minority clients, it is essential that there is a critical understanding on Whiteness and racism which you do not get in any other core courses.

Likewise, another student commented on the significance of this course as an essential preparatory training for social work practice:

This course provides students with the opportunity to engage critically on topics of Whiteness and racism, something that is severely missed in the BSW program. This engagement is essential for future social workers.

Beyond gaining knowledge about Whiteness and racism, students felt they learned about themselves individually and professionally and better understood their own experiences of oppression and privilege. Commenting on the opportunity for critical personal and professional self-reflexivity, one student stated:

This course provides students with the opportunity to critically reflect on issues of Whiteness and racism. Learning about racism and Whiteness is essential in the practice of future social workers. I learned a lot about myself on both an individual and professional level.

Similar remarks were received from other students enrolled in the course. In essence, they welcomed a critical engagement of race and Whiteness that enabled them to grapple effectively with the oppressive conditions of White racial domination they would encounter in practice and beyond.

Advocating With Students for Curriculum Change

Getting Past the Initial Rejection

Based on the learning gaps identified in the course evaluations, the students—many of whom were in their third or fourth (and final) year—seemed motivated by a desire for curriculum transformation; they wanted to pursue the possibility of changing existing pedagogical practices that were devoid of a critical engagement with the discourse of Whiteness. Several of the students—and the first author—decided to prepare a presentation abstract for the yearly research symposium organized by the school. Their aim was to address the perceived discrepancy between the school's commitment to critical or progressive social work education on the one hand, and the ways this was overlooked in the actual core curriculum on the other (see Wilson, 2008, for related discussion). They also planned to write a journal article based on their presentation and research topic; publishing was a perk for presenting at the symposium. Unfortunately, although the symposium organizers had circulated a second call for abstracts, their submission was rejected.

The students and the first author redirected their energy toward planning for a research study. They proposed to undertake a qualitative content analysis (Morgan, 1993; see also Mostyn, 1985; Starosta, 1984) of undergraduate social work core course syllabi.

The utility of this research approach for curriculum evaluation and analysis in social work has been demonstrated in the literature (see Drisko, 2008; Walmsley, Strega, Brown, Dominelli, & Callahan, 2009). They decided to qualitatively content-analyze course syllabi because they are important pedagogical tools for instructors and students alike. Syllabi provide descriptive summaries of courses, their objectives and, in many instances, a detailed outline of the topics to be covered. As communication texts, moreover, they offer a window into the BSW curriculum as well as an opportunity to critique and offer recommendations for improvement.

Executing Curriculum Research Plan: Institutional Challenges

The first author and his students wanted to obtain course syllabi[3] from three schools of social work. They were able to download the documents for School 1 from its website, and approached two others by phone, in person, or via email, requesting access to their materials. In these requests, they explained their reasons for examining the course outlines and how they envisioned using the text analysis results. School 2 did not respond to either their initial or subsequent electronic and telephone requests for information. Connection was eventually made by the first author after a little over a month. Despite an affirmative response to the request, the materials were never received.

In our relations with School 3, the first author and his students adopted a twofold strategy. First, they assigned one student to email faculty members who had taught undergraduate core courses, to secure permission and copies of their syllabi for inclusion in the research. Of the twenty-two faculty members contacted, only two responded. Next, the first author made contact with the school's administrative team to make a similar request, and again the requested documents were not provided. Two main reasons were given. First, it was suggested that the school had no repository to which syllabi were stored and that staff could access the material from. Second, it was indicated that because course syllabi were considered intellectual property of the instructors,[4] they were not made available online and could not be shared without consent from their proprietors. Related to this point, it was also mentioned that if a committee or working group of the school decided to conduct similar research to the first author's, they would be able to do so (Dean of Social Work, personal communication, March 30, 2011). At the simplest level, the reasoning provided seem contradictory and raised several questions: Did the school have access to program syllabi it claimed it did not have? If so, what implications for teaching and learning would arise from not making these documents available for academic or public scrutiny? To what degree might ascribing intellectual property to course syllabi shield the school's faculty from academic accountability? Were we to be concerned about issues of transparency and openness if the school was the only one able to conduct oversight and research on itself?

To expose complexities in the decision-making processes of School 3 (where the first author taught and the students attended) administrators and the first author and his students, we analyzed two different events experienced by them using solution concepts drawn from game theory, to answer the question: Is the non-disclosure of syllabi evidence that a school has something to hide?

Refusal of Course Syllabi as Misguided? A Game Theory Perspective

Game theory (GT) was first established by von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944) as a theoretical tool to model human interaction. In their book, "*Theory of Games and Economic Behavior,*" the authors proposed solution concepts to predict the likely outcomes of interaction among multiple independent decision makers and to understand the mechanisms underlying decision making. Many of the solution concepts pioneered in the 1950s and 60s are still used today in fields well beyond the scope of economics (Brown & Kauchak, 2013; Sanfey, 2007; Swedberg, 2001).

GT employs a methodology that eludes the infinite regress and circularity in situations of strategic interdependence and enables researchers to solve for equilibrium strategies in which no agent has incentive to deviate. As a research tool, GT is intriguing because it provides a framework that boils down complex social situations into a manageable model, enabling researchers to uncover subtly clever forms of strategic behavior and gain valuable insight into human behavior and social interaction. The objective of GT is to solve for strategies that maximize the payoffs of each agent; this is what makes it well suited to analyze situations involving professional actors in issues related to the examination of Whiteness in social work curriculum.

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[3] Course syllabi are detailed subject documents that establish the course tone and provide students with full descriptions of all readings, assignments, and their assessments.
[4] Not because of any official university policies; it was indicated to the first author that none existed.

The following analysis considers the first author's and his students' attempts to obtain information from School 3. For the purpose of this analysis, the more conservative scenario is assumed, in which independent researchers (i.e., the first author and his students) approach the school of social work with a brief summary of their planned research, and request copies of syllabi for core courses taught at the school. In doing so, the researchers provide the school with a clear indication of their critical predisposition.

This sequence of events is structured as a simultaneous-move, imperfect-information game that reflects whether there is information in the syllabi that the school does not want released or uncovered. For purposes of the model, the game can be represented by two different types of "schools": one with something to hide and another with nothing to hide. This style of game reflects the need for agents to make decisions within the same information set, and with limited information about each other's beliefs; and also captures the imperfect nature of the information. The purpose of this approach is to prescribe one agent's best action while describing the remaining agent's expected behaviors (Camerer, 2003).

To solve for the equilibrium strategy, we first constructed a strategy set consisting of payoffs that factored all considerations affecting each agent given both agents' outcomes, and each agent employing their respective strategies. Next, we leveraged game-theoretic solution concepts to solve for equilibrium strategies. Solution concepts factor in all potential outcomes relative to one another. This requires that all strategies be included in the analysis, regardless of their likelihood. Due to the subjective nature of the factors considered in these games, varying degrees of the same variables in different payoffs were ranked using an ordinal scale (see Appendix A). All factors were an expression of what each agent would believe the results would be and only those that are common knowledge were included in the payoffs.

Nothing to Hide (NTH)

The following four payoffs assume that the school has nothing to hide. Its choice is whether to make the course syllabi available to researchers knowing that they are predisposed to writing a paper that is critical of its curriculum. Although the decisions are temporally sequential, they are modeled as simultaneous because the school does not receive any additional information before deciding whether or not to release its syllabi. Similarly, researchers do not know if the school will accommodate their requests for course syllabi when they form a position about the school's curriculum.

NTH[Disclose, Supportive] = [Rep_3 + App_3 + Acc − IID, Opp_3 + Cp + PS_1 + SC]. In this scenario, the school, having nothing to hide, decides to grant researchers' request for course syllabi. The researchers then analyze the data, determine that the curriculum adequately incorporates themes of Whiteness, and write a paper to reflect their findings. The paper will validate the school's position as a progressive or critical school of social work and demonstrate to the academic and general community that the school lives up to its reputation (Rep_3). Additionally, it will contribute to student enrollment and faculty applications to teach at the school (App_3) and support their case for accreditation (Acc). Researchers would foster a positive relationship with the school, leading to increased career opportunities (Opp_3). The publication of the research itself would serve as a form of career progression (Cp). Researchers would also receive an element of personal satisfaction (PS_1) from addressing the issue. The experience would act as a self-check (SC), which would be beneficial to the researchers in tempering their preconceived notions about similar issues in the future. The only drawback for the school is the negative internal implications associated with disclosing faculty property (−IID).

NTH[Disclose, Critical] = [− Rep_1 − App_1 − Rp − IID, − E_2 − Rep_3 − Opp_3]. In a second scenario, the school again chooses to disclose the information, only this time the researchers decide to write a critical paper, even knowing that the school has nothing to hide. Since the paper has no basis it will not be credible and will have no long-term repercussions for the school. The short-term effect of a critical paper would cause temporary damage to the school's reputation (−Rep_1) and with it, a minor loss in student enrollment and faculty applications (−App_1). The school would again be forced to address the internal implications of disclosing faculty property (−IID) in addition to expending the resources needed for publishing a rebuttal paper (−Rp). With proof that the school has nothing to hide, the researchers would face severe ethical concerns (−E_2) in addition to suffering great loss to their reputations and future career opportunities (−Rep_3 −Opp_3). This paper will not provide the researchers with any form of career progression and will ultimately be retracted.

NTH[Do Not Disclose, Supportive] = [Rep₁ + App₁, – E₁³ + Cp]. If the school chooses not to disclose copies of the requested syllabi, and the researchers write a supportive paper, the school would receive a lesser degree of benefits to its reputation, student enrollment, and faculty applications ($Rep1 + App1$) than if it had disclosed the information. The school would not incur any of the negative implications associated with disclosing intellectual property; however, the absence of independently verifiable results would limit the paper's credibility and could not be used by the school to support their case for accreditation. This strategy would provide the researchers with career progression (Cp), with little to no additional career opportunities.

The researchers would also face ethical concerns ($–E_1^3$) in supporting a curriculum that they genuinely believed to be devoid of content on Whiteness and in helping to reinforce the school's actions not to disclose information to researchers in the future.

NTH[Do Not Disclose, Critical] = [– Rep₂ – App₁ – Rp, Rep₁ – Opp₁ + Cp + PS₁]. If the school decides not to release the information and the researchers write a paper that is critical of its curriculum, the school will find itself compelled to mitigate the short-term loss of reputation by writing a rebuttal paper ($–Rp$) and having to defend its actions in not disclosing the information in the first place. By having their refusal to disclose information about their curriculum become public, the school will suffer a longer-term loss of reputation ($–Rep_2$) as a progressive or critical school of social work that does not promote transparency, and will incur a minor loss in enrollment and faculty applications ($–App_1$). It is assumed that the paper will make less of an impact than if it were independently verifiable and that the researchers would net a loss in career opportunities ($–Opp_1$) by alienating themselves from the school under investigation. By exposing a potential gap in the school's curriculum, the researchers would receive a benefit to their reputations and careers ($Rep_1 + Cp$). Lastly, the researchers would receive an element of personal satisfaction (PS_1) from knowing that the school was being held to account for what they believed to be a lack of congruency in the school's stated commitment to progressive or critical social work education.

Figure 1. Nothing to hide (strategic form).

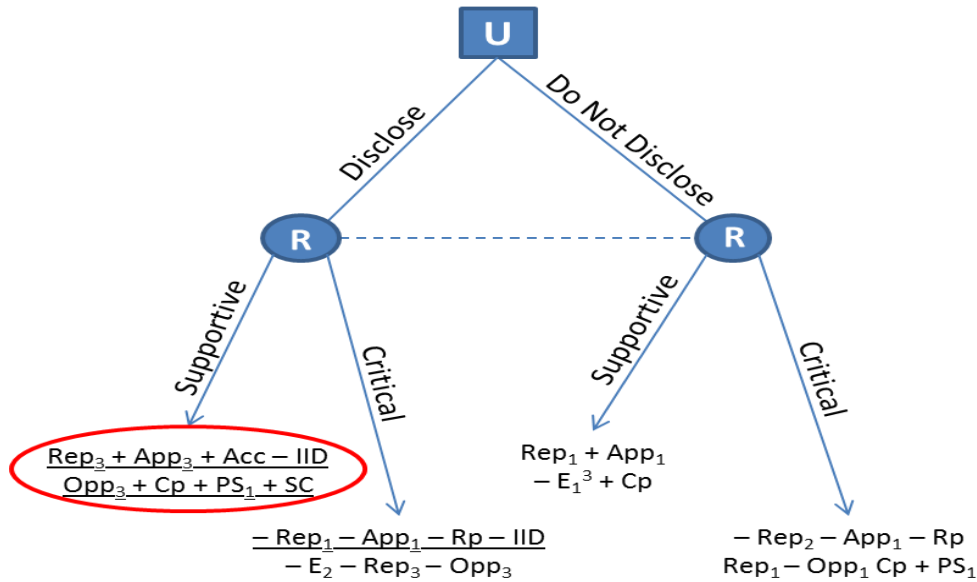|	Supportive	Critical
Disclose	Rep₃+App₃+Acc–IID , Opp₃+Cp+PS₁+SC	– Rep₁ – App₁ – Rp – IID , – E₂ – Rep₃ – Opp₃
Do Not Disclose	Rep₁ + App₁ , – E₁³ + Cp	– Rep₂ – App₁ – Rp , Rep₁ – Opp₁+ Cp + PS₁

Figure 2. Nothing to hide (extended form).

Solution. To expose dominant strategies that may exist for the school, we considered the payoffs of both of its respective strategies (whether to disclose or not disclose the information) while taking into account each of the researchers' available actions (whether to write a paper that is supportive or critical of the school's curriculum).

Provided that the negative internal implications of disclosing faculty property (–*IID*) is less than the difference between the benefits of a credible paper and one that is not independently verifiable [(*Rep₃* + *App₃*) – (*Rep₁* + *App₁*) + *Acc*)], the following solution shows that a school with nothing to hide will always choose to disclose the information:

U_U[Disclose, Supportive]>U_U[Do Not Disclose, Supportive]

Rep₃ + App₃ + Acc – IID > Rep₁ + App₁

IID <(Rep₃ + App₃) – (Rep₁ + App₁) + Acc

Similarly, if the school assumes that the researchers will write a critical paper, it will suffer short-term damage to its reputation regardless of its decision. It will again choose to disclose the information, provided that the negative internal implications of disclosing faculty property (*IID*) are not as bad as having to defend its actions in not disclosing the information (*Rep₁ – Rep₂*). The school will always choose to disclose the information, regardless of the researchers' intentions or predispositions, provided it has nothing to hide:

U_U[Disclose, Critical]>U_U[Do Not Disclose, Critical]

– Rep₁ – App₁ – Rp – IID > – Rep₂ – App₁ – Rp

– IID >Rep₁ – Rep₂

Since a school has a strictly dominant strategy to always disclose the information if it has nothing to hide, researchers will always write a supportive paper when faced with proof that the school has nothing to hide, regardless of any predispositions they may have:

U_R[Disclose, Supportive]> U_R[Disclose, Critical]

Opp₃ + Cp + PS₁ + SC > – E₂ – Rep₃ – Opp₃

The researchers in these games know that the school has a dominant strategy to disclose the information if it has nothing to hide, which implies that the nondisclosure of the information is an indication that the school's core curriculum does not adequately incorporate themes of Whiteness. The Nash equilibrium in the game where the school's nature is "nothing to hide" is *NTH[Disclose, Supportive]*.

Something to Hide (STH)

This next set of payoffs assumes that the school has something to hide about its curriculum, which may not adequately address the theme of Whiteness. The beliefs and strategies available to both agents (i.e., the researchers and the school) are the same as when a school has nothing to hide; however, the payoffs are altered to reflect the change in outcomes.

STH[Disclose, Supportive] = [Rep₁ + App₁ – RoE – IID, – E₂³ – Rep₃ – Opp₃]. In this scenario, the school discloses information showing they are not adequately incorporating themes of Whiteness into the curriculum, and the researchers write a paper that is supportive of the school's curriculum. Like *NTH[Disclose, Critical]*, this scenario is highly unlikely and the resulting paper will have no long-term implications for the school. Assuming, however, that the school does have something to hide, it would risk exposure should the disclosed information ever be re-examined (–*RoE*). The common-knowledge ethical implications for the researchers in this scenario are greater than any other, because not only are they writing a paper that is contrary to their findings, but they are also faced with the personal ethical concerns (–*E₂³*) in protecting an institution whose core curriculum lacks substantive, if any, content on Whiteness.

STH[Disclose, Critical] = [– Rep₃ – App₃ – Acc – Res – IID, Rep₃ + Opp₃ + Cp + PS₃]. The impact of the researchers exposing a gap in the curriculum after the school discloses the information would be far greater than any other scenario for both agents. In addition to having to address the internal implications of disclosing faculty property (–*IID*), the school would incur severe long-term damage to its reputation (–*Rep₃*) as a critical or progressive school of social work and, with it, a significant decline in enrollment and faculty applications (–*App₃*). This gap in the curriculum would likely result in some restructuring (–*Res*) and could pose a threat to the school's accreditation (–*Acc*). This scenario, in which researchers expose a gap in the school's stated commitment and taught curriculum, provides the researchers with the highest level of personal satisfaction (*PS₃*). The paper itself would again serve as a form of career progression (*Cp*) for the researchers and they would also benefit from a substantial gain in reputation and career opportunities (*Rep₃ + Opp₃*).

STH[Do Not Disclose, Supportive] = [Rep_1 + App_1, − $E_1{}^3$ + Cp]. The payoffs of this strategy are the same as *NTH*[*Do Not Disclose, Supportive*] since the information will never be released and there is no reason for the school to respond to the supportive paper written by the researchers.

STH[Do Not Disclose, Critical] = [− Rep_2 − App_1, Rep_1 − Opp_1 + Cp + PS_1]. If the school decides not to disclose the information, and the researchers write a critical paper that is not independently verifiable, the paper will make little to no impact. Knowing it has something to hide, the school would find it difficult to rebut the accusations and would suffer short-term damage to its reputation (−Rep_2) as well as a minor loss in enrollment and faculty applications (−App_1).

The payoffs for the researchers with this outcome would be the same as *NTH*[*Do Not Disclose, Critical*] since accusations against the school cannot be validated.

Figure 3. **Something to hide (strategic form).**

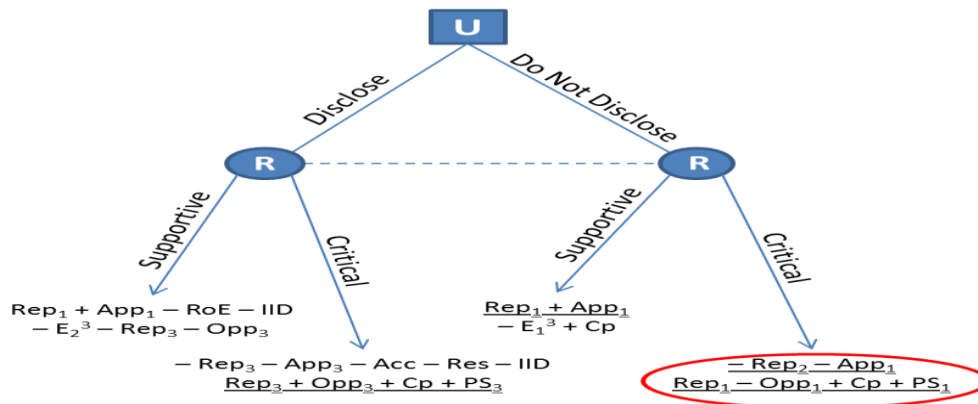|	**Supportive**	**Critical**
Disclose	Rep_1 + App_1 − RoE − IID , − $E_2{}^3$ − Rep_3 − Opp_3	−Rep_3 − App_3 − Acc − Res − IID , Rep_3 + Opp_3 +Cp+ PS_3
Do Not Disclose	Rep_1 + App_1 , − $E_1{}^3$ + Cp	− Rep_2 − App_1 , Rep_1 − Opp_1 + Cp + PS_1

Figure 4. **Something to hide (extended form).**

Solution. In the case where the school does have something to hide, we show that it has another strictly dominant strategy in not disclosing the information. The following solution shows that, if the school believes the researchers will write a supportive paper, there is little incentive for it to risk exposure and face the negative internal implications of disclosing the information. The second solution indicates that the school will also not provide damaging evidence to researchers, who it assumes, have the intention of writing a critical paper:

U_U[*Do Not Disclose, Supportive*]>U_U[*Disclose, Supportive*]
Rep_1 + App_1> Rep_1 + App_1 − RoE − IID
&
U_U[*Do Not Disclose, Critical*]>U_U[*Disclose, Critical*]
− Rep_2 − App_1> − Rep_3 − App_3 − Acc − Res − IID

The following solution shows that it is a dominant strategy for the researchers to respond to the school's nondisclosure of information by writing a critical paper:

U_R[*Do Not Disclose, Critical*]> U_R[*Do Not Disclose, Supportive*]
Rep_1 − Opp_1 + Cp + PS_1> − $E_1{}^3$ + Cp
Rep_1 − Opp_1 + PS_1> − $E_1{}^3$

Knowing that a school will always choose not to disclose the information if it has something to hide, researchers would weigh, to their personal satisfaction, the difference between the ethical concerns in supporting a school that does not adequately incorporate themes of Whiteness into its curriculum ($-E_1{}^3$) with the net implications for their reputations and career opportunities ($Rep_1 - Opp_1 + PS_1$). Although the value of ($Rep_1 - Opp_1 + PS_1$) is unknown, given the importance of social injustice to most social work educators, we can reason that a school would likely assume that the researchers' response to their refusal to disclose the information would be to write a critical paper.

The solutions we derived in the previous two simultaneous-move perfect-information games are useful in analyzing the strategies available to each agent, and in predicting outcomes in which neither agent has an incentive to deviate. To transform the two previously defined subgames into a single simultaneous-move game with imperfect information, which maintains the common-knowledge assumption, we need to express the school's private information as determined by nature. The probability that the school has nothing to hide is defined by (h) and alternatively the probability that it has something to hide is defined by (1-h). The dotted lines connecting the decision nodes indicate that the game is simultaneous.

Figure 5. Imperfect-information simultaneous-move game.
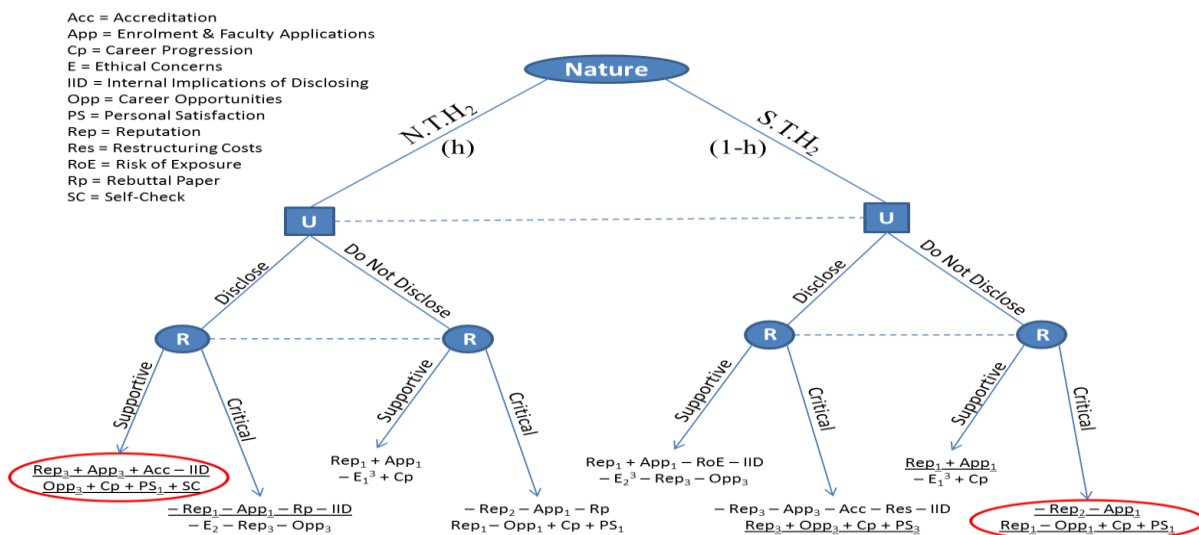
Solution. Solving for the Bayes-Nash Equilibriums[5] in this game involves determining what the school would do [*NTH; STH*], using the school's best responses to verify that each of the researchers' assumed respective strategies is in fact optimal:

$S_R^* = $ Critical

The school's best response to S_R^* is:

$S_U^* = (Disclose|NTH, Do\ Not\ Disclose|STH)$

The researchers payoffs to S_U^* are:

$U_R[S_U^*, Critical] = (h)(-E_2 - Rep_3 - Opp_3) + (1\text{-}h)(Rep_1 - Opp_1 + Cp + PS_1)$

$U_R[S_U^*, Supportive] = (h)(Opp_3 + Cp + PS_1 + SC) + (1 - h)(-E_1{}^3 + Cp)$

[(*Disclose|NTH, Do Not Disclose|STH), Critical*] is a Bayes-Nash Equilibrium when the expected payoff the researchers receive in writing a critical paper is greater than that which they receive from writing a supportive paper given the school's best response (S_U^*):

$U_R[S_U^*, Critical] \geq U_R[S_U^*, Supportive]$

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[5] There are limitations to complete information games, which led to criticisms over the predictive ability of these models. Since John Nash (1951, 1953) introduced the Nash Equilibrium, many game theorists have worked to refine the concept of equilibrium, what constitutes equilibrium, and how to solve for equilibriums in situations involving strategic interdependence. In 1965, John Harsanyi proposed a way to solve games of incomplete information by representing agents as being a limited number of different types determined by nature. These models propose that each type of agent has its own payoff and, since only the agents themselves know their type, agents with incomplete information must base decisions on subjective probabilities (Harsanyi, 1965).

which is true when:

$(h_2{}^C) \le (E_1{}^3 + Rep_1 - Opp_1 + PS_1) / (E_1{}^3 + E_2 + Rep_1 + Rep_3 - Opp_1 + 2\,Opp_3 + Cp + 2PS_1 + SC)$

Since (*Disclose|NTH, Do Not Disclose|STH*) is a strictly dominant strategy for the school, we can reason that there are two Bayes-Nash Equilibriums in this game, one in which (*h*) satisfies the condition above and another in [(*Disclose|NTH, Do Not Disclose|STH*), *Supportive*] when (*h*) satisfies the condition below:

$(h_2{}^S) \ge (E_1{}^3 + Rep_1 - Opp_1 + PS_1) / (E_1{}^3 + E_2 + Rep_1 + Rep_3 - Opp_1 + 2\,Opp_3 + Cp + 2PS_1 + SC)$

These Bayes-Nash Equilibriums imply that an equilibrium strategy that involves the difference between researchers writing a critical paper and one that involves them writing a supportive paper is determined by the common-knowledge subjective probability that the school has something to hide. Provided that the probability is low enough, the equilibrium strategy involves the researchers writing a critical paper. Once the probability reaches the threshold—denoted by (*h*)—the equilibrium strategy will shift to one that involves the researchers writing a supportive paper. In both cases, the school's dominant strategy is to always disclose requested information when it has nothing to hide and to never disclose such information when it has something to hide. This solution is consistent with the interests of researchers in general, who typically do not have strictly dominant strategies and will only commit to a position with good reason.

Although the ordinal ranking does not allow for the calculation of precise values, the size of the denominator relative to the numerator indicates that the threshold for the researchers' position must be relatively low, and that even critically predisposed researchers are inclined to writing supportive papers.

In summary, we have demonstrated that a school with nothing to hide will always choose to disclose the information knowing that the researchers will respond by writing a supportive paper. Only if the school has something to hide will it choose not to disclose the information, knowing that the researchers will respond by writing a critical paper. This suggests that the nondisclosure of information is evidence that the school's core curriculum or requested syllabi do not adequately incorporate themes of Whiteness. We have also shown that researchers are generally inclined to write supportive papers when faced with similar decisions, regardless of their predisposition, and that this inclination is affected by the likelihood that the school has something to hide. Notably, the ethical implications of researchers' actions play a significant role in our predicted outcomes and, while the school has a strictly dominant strategy in these situations, the researchers do not. Even if the researchers are known to be predisposed to writing a critical paper, when confronted with evidence that contradicts their initial position, they will respond by writing a paper that is supportive of the school's curriculum.

Towards Integration of Content on Whiteness in Social Work Curriculum:

Recommendations for Transforming Pedagogical Practices

This article offers a retrospective account of the institutional and systemic challenges the first author and his students faced trying to bring attention to students-identified curriculum gap within a school of social work. Using GT, we investigated whether the nondisclosure of course syllabi is evidence that a school has something to hide about the lack of content on Whiteness in its core curriculum. The results indicate that when a school has nothing to hide, it will choose to make its course syllabi available, with the opposite being true. That School 3 in our study did not make its syllabi available suggests its curriculum might not be inclusive of content on Whiteness. In this way, our finding contributes to a growing body of literature (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Hollinrake et al., 2019; Jeyasingham, 2011; Nylund, 2006; Razack & Jeffery, 2002; Yee & Dumbrill, 2016) that explores the need for better integration of critical Whiteness studies across the social work curriculum, for graduation of reflexive practitioners able to effectively meet professional practice demands of a diverse client population.

Based on the results of this study and mobilizing the experiences of the first author and his students with School 3, below we consider three pedagogical implications of Whiteness for social work education and practice, followed by some recommendations that might help this and other schools of social work align their program's progressive or critical philosophy with a vision for transformative practice.

Pedagogical Implications of Whiteness for Social Work Education and Practice

As Allen (2004) rightly argued, "we need to be engaged in a curriculum that decenters whiteness as a favoured epistemological vantage point" (p. 132). The likely marginality of Whiteness discourse in a social work school's core curriculum makes this goal extremely difficult to achieve.

We argue for an integration of this perspective across the program's core curriculum, and not only in diversity-designated courses, as was the case with the course taught by the first author. The practical implication of such a curriculum approach rests in its potential to "contribute to social work's purpose in meeting social justice and human rights principles" (Young & Zubrzycki, 2011, p. 170). These professional values are undermined in the absence of a direct and sustained attention to Whiteness (Nylund, 2006).

Sidelining a critical Whiteness pedagogy from the core curriculum of undergraduate social work is noteworthy for three chief reasons. First, the practice forecloses any serious discussion about the insidious power, privilege, and related implications of Whiteness (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Nylund, 2006; Yee & Dumbrill, 2016). Although one would expect that a serious analysis of the dominant system would entail a critical examination of White power, this is not always the case (Dyer, 1997; Lorde, 1984). In social work classrooms, for instance, discussions about racial inequity commonly signify a focus on non-White people (Jeyasingham, 2011).

The invisibilization of Whiteness in these discussions reifies its taken-for-granted, common-sense notion as a topic unworthy of scrutiny and yet Whiteness continues to function as the social yardstick by which all people, including non-White people, are measured (Ahmed, 2005).

Second, the failure to center a critique of Whiteness serves to reinforce the unimportance of learning about the historical and contemporary social production of Whiteness; this applies to all students, especially those from the dominant racial group. This is a crucial point, since resistance to critical pedagogy about White privilege is, according to Abrams and Gibson (2007), commonplace among White students. This observation could explain the relatively small proportion of White students who enrolled in the first author's elective course. Ultimately, however, social work administrators and educators risk perpetuating this resistance when the discourse of Whiteness is left unexamined or excluded from social work curriculum (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Nylund, 2006; Yee & Dumbrill, 2016).

Third, some schools of social work pride themselves on their critical pedagogical and philosophical leanings. But these leanings are inevitably called into question when actions and intentions do not match (Hollinrake et al., 2019). For example, as students at the school where the first author taught pointed out, their program's core curriculum needed to go beyond a superficial focus on racism and multiculturalism. Many worried about their fellow students' graduating from the program into direct practice, with minimal or no understanding of the pervasiveness and constitutive role of Whiteness in social work. As Allen (2004) has contended, the message sent by the school's leadership contributes to the maintenance of the status quo—the "normalizing [of] social space in a way that perpetuates white power and privilege while also making it look like this is not what is happening" (p. 126). By centralizing racism, multiculturalism, and the study of non-White racial Others (such as immigrants and people of color) as topics for teaching, the school was able to position itself as committed to the principles of social justice and equity even as it ensured that Whiteness occupied no conceptual center of analysis in core classroom teaching.

Recommendations for Actions That Support Transformative Practice

Beyond individual actions, institutional and historical processes are at work that contribute to the maintenance of Whiteness in undergraduate social work curriculum (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Hollinrake et al., 2019; Jeyasingham, 2011; Nylund, 2006; Razack & Jeffery, 2002; Yee & Dumbrill, 2016). Addressing this aspect of White dominance entails an analysis of the social systems that sustain this practice. Drawing on the experiential outcomes of the first author and his students, below are three actions that could be taken by social work educators and administrators to facilitate the inclusion of students in seeking solutions to existing curriculum challenges discussed here and, in turn, make possible the incorporation of Whiteness in all social work courses.

Provide opportunity for students to share their ideas in collaborative, scholarly forums.

Discussions about curriculum transformation can be polarizing and conflict ridden (Chiarelli-Helminiak, Eggers, & Libal, 2018; Payne & Smith, 2018; Razack & Jeffery, 2002), making change difficult if not impossible to realize. Rather than shy away from these conflicts, however, an alternative response would be to seize the opportunity for collaborative activities (Allan & Estler, 2005) that address the root source of the presenting issue. A collaborative process that supports ideas coming from multiple vantage points could prove a better approach to improving social work curriculum. For example, the students and the first author were keen to share with colleagues and members of the school's administration their concerns about the program's curriculum and to invite dialogues about the way forward.

Although they had planned to deliver their talk at a symposium being organized by the school, what they experienced, at least from their point of view, was a rebuff of their idea that ultimately shut down any opportunity for a difficult—but necessary—cross-dialogue. This response was contrary to the collaborative, supportive role that schools ought to play, and it generally reinforced the status quo.

Provide infrastructural support and encourage students' curriculum research effort.

It is not uncommon for institutions of higher education, like other public institutions, to engage in self-preserving behaviors (Kampen & Henken, 2018). The propensity for this type of conduct is heightened when an institution risks being called to task for things it knows should have been done, but have not been done. Where institutions are likely to be vulnerable, they will clamp down in certain areas as a matter of saving face. Such an approach could have the effect of masking structural barriers that serve to reproduce "the suppression and marginalization of scholarship that seeks its transformation" (Daniel, 2008, p. 24).

This was the situation that the first author and his students experienced. Their efforts to secure study materials for research were thwarted by internal practices they felt were aimed at dissuading them from pursuing an important line of enquiry.

As practitioners of social justice, social work educators and administrators could be effective agents in the process of curriculum change (Nandan, London, & Bent-Goodley, 2015), by making their course syllabi available for research and, in the process, contribute to the development of curriculum that is relevant to the racialized context of social work.

Evaluate assessment practices to identify areas for curriculum improvement and actions required for inclusion of Whiteness studies in all social work courses.

One tried-and-true approach to changing system practices is consistent, systematic monitoring and evaluation of change efforts (Hoefer, 2019). Academic departments and programs could benefit from such a process (Sellers & Neff, 2019). In Canada, the CASWE (2014) Commission on Accreditation is the primary vehicle through which schools of social work have their curriculum integrity assured by way of accreditation. However, this is but one model for curriculum evaluation, and there are limits as to what can reasonably be expected from this approach.

There is a need for alternative, complementary, methods for assessing the breadth, depth, and quality of content being taught to undergraduate social work students, which might better identify core curriculum gaps, and for recommendations to address them (see Drisko, 2008; Walmsley et al., 2009). Our proposed qualitative content analysis research, methodological limitations notwithstanding, was meant to instantiate an alternative method for curriculum evaluation and to identify ways social work schools might further develop their program's curriculum to include content on Whiteness.

Conclusion

While the payoffs and solution concepts used in this study were carefully considered, there are several limitations in the mathematical modeling of subjective outcomes and use of game-theoretic solution concepts to this scenario. First, the described payoffs are not readily observable or easily quantifiable, and the ordinal ranking of outcomes does not allow for the calculation of precise values. This is particularly evident in incomplete-information solution concepts, which do not allow for the calculation of objective thresholds. Second, the solution concepts used in this paper factor all potential outcomes relative to one another, which require that all strategies be included in the analysis regardless of their likelihood. Game theory is based on common-knowledge payoffs, which means that it considers only the available strategies and possible outcomes that are known to both the researchers and the school. While the researchers in this scenario know that they would not conduct research without having the data to substantiate their claims, the school does not; it must assume that there is some likelihood that the research will be conducted. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study contributes a game-theory perspective to addressing the lack of content on Whiteness in undergraduate social work core course syllabi.

Contemporary professional social work education operates in a globalized competitive market. Schools that self-identify as progressive compete, to attract the best and brightest with promises of a critical, transformative education (Wilson, 2008). In Canada, very little attention has been paid to analyzing these schools' claims vis-à-vis educational outcomes. We do not know, for example, whether the curricula of schools professing to be critical or progressive are so in reality.

Nonetheless, students in the first author's class did agree that young adults who enter social work do so intending to help others. They expect their education to be grounded in the racial and cultural reality of Canadian society, in which Whiteness is implicated. Unfortunately, echoing the findings of other authors (e.g., Jeffery, 2007b; O'Neill & Yelaja, 1991), these students reported inadequate educational preparation for practice in a cross-cultural context. Increased awareness of curriculum limitations brings into sharp focus the need for change (Dunn, Hanes, Hardie, Leslie, & MacDonald, 2008; Piovesan, 2010; Poon, 2011; Rossiter, 1995). Yet, as shown by the experience of the first author and his students, when they attempted to engage in a constructive dialogue on this topic, they were declined the opportunity for daring to question existing curriculum, perhaps because of the arduous tasks associated with evaluating degree programs (Coyle, 2011) and implementing change effectively. This sent a very unsupportive message.

Social work educators and administrators, in keeping with the profession's goal of empowering vulnerable and oppressed populations, must be willing to use their authority to promote social justice. This vision of solidarity and resistance to the culture of White dominance is important because, as Hillock and Profitt (2007) contend, social work educators "must work with students . . . to forge networks and communities of resistance to reduce our isolation and work more effectively for change" (p. 51).

If critical, progressive schools of social work are to legitimately lay claim to the ideals of social justice and transformative education, they must be transparent and open about their curriculum content and pedagogical methods. Making course syllabi available for research purposes and being receptive to research findings is essential to such transparency. Continuous systematic evaluation of curriculum materials for rigor and relevance, especially those of mandatory courses that go beyond accreditation, is necessary if academic and training programs are to adequately prepare students to work with all Canadians. Schools and their administrators cannot claim to be critical or progressive and act in ways that contradict these standards.

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Appendix A

Ordinal Ranking of Variables
Reputation – ($Rep_1 <$ $Rep_2 <$ Rep_3)
The School
Rep_1: Mild, short-term effects to the school's reputation resulting from a paper that is not independently verifiable.
Rep_2: Short-term effects to the school's reputation resulting from a paper that is not independently verifiable, in addition to the longer-term effects resulting from the school's unwillingness to promote transparency.
Rep_3: Severe, long-term effects to the school's reputation resulting from a paper that is independently verifiable.
The Researchers
Rep_1: Mild, short-term effects to the researchers' reputation.

Rep_3: Severe, long-term effects to the researchers' reputation.

Applications – (App_1< App_3)

App_1: Short-term effects to the school's future faculty and student enrollment applications resulting from a paper that is not independently verifiable.

App_3: Long-term effects to the school's future faculty and student enrollment applications resulting from a paper that is not independently verifiable.

Opportunities – (Opp_1< Opp_3)

Opp_1: Mild, short-term effects on the researchers' future career opportunities.

Opp_3: Significant, long-term effects on the researchers' future career opportunities.

Ethical Concerns – (E_1^i< E_2^j; E_k< E_k^3) where i=1, 3; j=1, 3; k=1, 2

E_1^3: Ethical concerns involved in possibly perpetuating lack of curriculum content on Whiteness and reducing accountability and transparency in addition to personal ethical concerns.

E_2: Ethical concerns involved in blindly accusing the school.

E_2^3: Ethical concerns involved in perpetuating a lack of curriculum content on Whiteness in addition to personal ethical concerns.

Personal Satisfaction (PS_1 <PS_3)

PS_1: Moderate level of personal satisfaction.

PS_3: Significant level of personal satisfaction in exposing a social injustice of personal significance to the researchers, in addition to the satisfaction in having preconceived notions validated.