

# Repositioning Power Relations in Indigenous Social Work Education

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we present the history of social work education in Greenland, from a professional training school in 1985 to a university BA-level education in 2008 and onwards to the present day. Mainly, we discuss how the education of Greenlandic social workers continually reflects on the decolonising elements of the curriculum.

The latest step in this process has been the development of a new curriculum, which came into effect in the summer of 2022 after approval from students, external boards and the academic university board. The article will discuss the repositioning of power in the new social work curriculum, aiming to gradually make education more student-centred through a higher degree of collective responsibility for learning and by engaging in problem-oriented group work with self-determined research questions at the core of Greenlandic, thematic, social worker projects.

**Keywords:** *education; social work; decolonisation; empowerment; Greenland*

Received: July, 2023; Accepted: April, 2024; Published: June, 2024

## Introduction

Social work education in Greenland has a unique history that is deeply intertwined with the colonial past and the path towards decolonisation. In this article, we will highlight the importance of contextualising and decolonising social work education in Greenlandic culture and society.

This includes gaining an understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities facing Greenlandic communities, as well as the social, political and historical contexts that have shaped them. By grounding social work education in local knowledge and Arctic perspectives, students are better equipped to address the specific needs of their communities and to advocate for social justice. Furthermore, the article also discusses the latest step in this process: the development of a new curriculum that came into effect in the summer of 2022 after approval from students, external boards and the academic university board.

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Citation: Jensen, B. & Arnfjord, S. (2024). *Repositioning Power Relations in Indigenous Social Work Education*. *Nordisk tidsskrift for pedagogikk og kritikk*, Special issue: *Education and Coloniality in the Nordic*, 10(3), 206–217. <http://doi.org/10.23865/npk.v10.5881>

The article will analyse the repositioning of power in the new social work curriculum in the Department of Social Work at Ilisimatusarfik (the University of Greenland), with an aim to make education more student-centred through a higher degree of collective responsibility for learning and by engaging in problem-oriented group work with self-determined research questions at the core of thematic, student social worker projects.

The article employs document analysis as a method to investigate and analyse the dynamics of power and decolonisation. The focus was on the following areas: legislation, including relevant laws and regulations governing social work practice and education; curriculum, with a comparison of the most recent social work programme curriculum, with curricula from related programmes (e.g., social science); university guidelines, which are comprised of official university policies and guidelines pertaining to programme design and delivery; and student feedback, in which course evaluations were analysed to understand student experiences and perspectives.

The analysis involved a thorough reading of each document, followed by coding and thematic identification to uncover patterns, relationships and potential areas of alignment or misalignment within and across documents.

The article includes a review of relevant literature, establishing a foundation for the exploration of power dynamics. This step ensures that the research builds upon existing knowledge while identifying gaps that the article aims to address. Recognising the complexity of power dynamics, the methodology adopts an interdisciplinary approach. By drawing from fields such as sociology, political science and economics, the study aims to offer a holistic perspective on the repositioning of power.

The article's most important contribution lies in its efforts to decolonise social work education in Greenland. This involves incorporating indigenous knowledge, values and perspectives into the curriculum and critically examining the colonial roots of social work practice. The article proposes a shift towards more culturally-appropriate and community-based approaches to social work education. Specific examples of this include problem-oriented group work with self-determined research questions at the core of Greenlandic, thematic, social worker projects. This approach empowers students to become active participants in their education and take ownership of their learning.

### **Self-declaration**

For the sake of transparency, it is crucial to acknowledge that the authors of this article actively participated in the redesign of the social work curriculum discussed herein. In our roles as professors at Ilisimatusarfik, we are not only able to shape our personal perspectives but also to influence the perspectives of our students, the managers and our colleagues in the field of social work. This leads us to reflect on our own position as academics and acknowledge the privilege and experience we bring to the discussion.

Our engagement in the curriculum revision was motivated by a collective intention to propel social work education into the 21st century. We recognised the need for a modern university to confront its historical context and thereby designed a curriculum that aligns with contemporary needs and societal expectations.

In this light, it is also essential to underscore the ethical dimensions inherent in our roles as educators and curriculum architects. We are mindful of the responsibilities that come with reshaping the educational landscape, and our commitment extends to considering the ethical implications of our actions throughout this transformative process. Ethical considerations are paramount, especially when it comes to objectifying one's own development work for research purposes. In our work, we especially considered Paulo Freire's (2007) principles of empowerment, dialogue, critical consciousness and commitment to ethical considerations. We were also guided by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2022) to prioritise the inclusion of indigenous knowledge, actively engage with decolonisation principles, empower students through research and demonstrate a deep commitment to ethical and culturally-sensitive practices within the field of social work education. Smith's work also emphasises ethical research practices, particularly in the context of indigenous research, and it was most important to us in this process.

The authors' choice to use the term Greenlander instead of 'Inuit' throughout the article is deliberate, reflecting the specific context of Greenland and the nuances of identity and terminology. Some people identify as Greenlanders and some as Inuit, and while Inuit broadly refers to the indigenous people inhabiting the Arctic regions of Canada, Greenland, Alaska and Russia, Greenlander encompasses most people living in Greenland, regardless of their ethnic background. Using the term Greenlander in this context acknowledges the unique political and cultural identity of Greenland, which is both distinct from, and intertwined with, Inuit identity. Greenlanders have their own distinct history, language and cultural practices, while also sharing many cultural similarities with other Inuit groups. Hopefully, this consistency in terminology avoids potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations that could arise from using the term Inuit exclusively.

### **A brief history of colonialism and social work education in Greenland**

Greenland became a colony of Denmark in 1721 and was an official Danish region from 1953 until the Home Rule Act was passed in 1979. In 2009, Greenland gained self-governance (Gulløv, 2017). After the 1950s, Greenland underwent a forced modernisation, which was followed by processes of industrialisation and centralisation. Increased migration to the bigger cities led to a need to professionalise social services in the municipalities in the late 1960s.

Danish colonialism in Greenland has had a profound and lasting impact on Greenlandic society, including the creation of inequality in various areas, for example, the 'experiment children' (Jensen et al., 2020; Thiesen, 2023) the 'juridical fatherless'

(Grønlands Råd for Menneskerettigheder, 2014) and the ‘spiral campaign’ (Petersen & Klint, 2022). These three concepts can be briefly explained as follows:

*The experiment children:* In 1951, the Danish authorities sent 22 Greenlandic children to Denmark to be educated and raised in Danish families. Due to this event, the children were known as the ‘experiment children;’ deep scars were left on the affected individuals and the event created a distrust of the Danish authorities in Greenland.

*The juridical fatherless:* Before 1963, many Danish tradesmen worked in Greenland as a part of the modernisation process. Encounters between these men and Greenlandic women led to many children being born out of wedlock, and the Danish men were frequently absent from their children’s lives. Danish legislation did not recognise these children as the legal offspring of their Danish fathers, creating a group of ‘juridical fatherless’ children who were socially and economically marginalised.

*The spiral campaign:* In the 1960s and 1970s, the Danish authorities implemented a campaign to reduce the birth rate in Greenland. The campaign was characterised by a lack of informed consent and resulted in as many as 50 per cent of Greenlandic women of childbearing age being fitted with intrauterine devices (IUDs). The campaign has had a negative impact on Greenlandic women’s reproductive rights and bodily autonomy.

These three examples illustrate various aspects of inequality created by Danish colonialism in Greenland. There is often a tendency to talk about the colonial period as something that is now in the past. This is a way of locking coloniality in time and space, as well as a manoeuvre to claim that this point in time is after colonialism. The legacy of colonisation in Greenland is complex and multifaceted, with its impacts still being felt across various aspects of society today, for example, in cultural disruption and assimilation practices due to a suppression of traditional Greenlandic culture and language and the imposition of Danish norms and values. This assimilationist approach undermined the sense of cultural identity and contributed to social and psychological issues among Greenlanders, and we are still seeing the results of this today in the form of problematically high numbers of suicides, numbers which have an impact on the general health statistics and have led public health researchers to deem suicide a Greenlandic public health issue (Arnfjord, 2019). Thus, the spectre of colonialism casts a long shadow over social work education in Greenland. Established in 1985 as a professional training school, the initial curriculum mirrored Danish models, perpetuating a colonial perspective that failed to address the unique needs and challenges facing Greenlandic communities (Arnfjord, 2022). However, a critical turning point was reached in 2013 with the formation of the Social Workers’ Association (NIISIP), which fiercely advocated for decolonisation efforts. So far, this has culminated in the 2022 curriculum update, marked by a strategic shift towards student-centred learning. The new curriculum dismantles colonial power dynamics by emphasising collective responsibility for learning. This is achieved through

problem-oriented group work, where students choose research questions relevant to social work projects with a Greenlandic theme. By actively engaging in research and collaborating with peers, they are empowered to become critical thinkers and agents of change. This aligns with Paulo Freire's principles of critical consciousness and dialogue (Freire, 2007), fostering a learning environment that empowers students to challenge existing structures and advocate for social justice. This shift reflects a broader trend in curriculum theory, moving away from static, predetermined models towards dynamic, learner-centred experiences (Yaşar & Berna, 2021). By incorporating indigenous knowledge and empowering students through collaborative research, the new curriculum represents a crucial step towards decolonising social work education and equipping future social workers to address the complex realities facing Greenlandic communities.

### **Leveraging Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy**

Building on the ideas of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which focuses on empowering students to critically analyse and challenge oppressive structures, the article argues that repositioning power in the curriculum and making education more student-centred will foster a critical awareness of social issues amongst the students. Specifically, Freire's concept of student agency (Freire, 2007) resonates with the article's discussion of empowering students to take ownership of their learning through problem-oriented group work and self-determined research projects. This approach aligns with Freire's belief that students should be active participants in their education, not passive recipients of knowledge.

Freire's emphasis on dialogue (Freire, 2007) also aligns with the article's focus on incorporating indigenous knowledge, values, and perspectives into the curriculum. Dialogue, as Freire understood it, is a collaborative process of sharing and exchanging ideas, which can foster mutual understanding and respect for diverse perspectives. This approach is crucial for decolonising social work education, which aims to challenge colonial power structures and promote culturally-appropriate practices. The core point in Freire's approach is to have more openness and facilitate a critical awareness, thus combatting what he originally termed 'structural muteness' (Freire, 2007), which is now referred to as structural silence and the culture of silence. The renewed social work curriculum at Ilisimatusarfik encourages students to apply their knowledge to address social problems in their communities, empowering them to become agents of change. This approach is essential for decolonising social work education, as it promotes social justice and community empowerment.

### **Decolonisation: a journey, not a destination**

Decolonising the social work curriculum in Greenland is an ongoing journey, shifting the focus from a mere historical acknowledgment to a present-day imperative and

centralising indigenous knowledge. This involves dismantling the legacies of colonial practices, where imposing Danish norms and values resulted in cultural disruption, language loss and social issues like high suicide rates and youth unemployment (Arnford, 2019). As Fellner reminds us (2018), decolonisation is a noun, not a verb. Our efforts go beyond simply describing the colonial past and actively empower students through decision-making ownership within the curriculum. This includes developing research projects based on their own questions about welfare and social work, and fostering critical thinking and agency as we move beyond description and towards action.

### ***Repositioning of power***

Repositioning power within the classroom is crucial. In the former curriculum, absolute power lay with the teacher responsible for the different modules, which were covered during a semester (two semesters comprise an academic year at Ilisimatusarfik). This included everything from curriculum design, teaching plans and didactics to exams. Very little decision-making power was left with the students, whereas today the students select their own topics for projects, which form 33 per cent of the curriculum, within the thematic theme of the semester.

Five years ago, the students read about street-level intervention in Danish cities, the removal of children in Denmark and examples of social policy in England and Scandinavia. All teaching material was basically from Denmark, with very few examples that originated from Greenland. Thus, we were working with Westernised material that created levels of hegemonic injustice (Seckinelgin, 2023).

Today, we have literature to supplement the Western literature. The examples are now from street-level intervention in Nuuk, national studies of disability in Greenland, children's well-being and Greenlandic social policies. We have not repositioned how the research is conducted, and we cannot meet the ambition of either fully filling the reading lists with indigenous literature or making it available in Greenlandic, but the process is ongoing. The importance of the process of revising the learning material is reflected by the action and the intention behind it. We hope to accomplish what Stein calls 'to disrupt epistemic dominance,' as quoted by Parson and Weise (2020). Social workers in Greenland work by the global definition that states:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being. (IFSW, 2014)

We encourage students to create curriculum elements themselves, reflecting their unique perspectives and experiences. This aligns with Dahl's (1957) conception of

reflationary power, where power is visible, listened to and directed towards shared goals. However, the journey does not end within the university walls, empowering voices and reconciling realities. Graduates will encounter a public bureaucracy, health standards and regulations that may not always align with indigenous approaches. While Greenland holds autonomy over social policy, navigating a heavily Westernised global society presents a challenge. Decolonising the curriculum is one step; reconciling it with future employer expectations and global frameworks is another ongoing conversation.

The revised social work curriculum in Greenland presents a unique opportunity for reflection and action on decolonisation, moving beyond mere apologies towards concrete changes in teaching philosophy and content. As McElhinny emphasises, it is crucial to avoid the ‘age of apologies’ and engage in the repositioning of power and engagement with the students (McElhinny, 2016). This requires teachers to critically examine their practices, acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in the social worker role (Mik-Meyer, 2017).

A significant focus in the revised curriculum is on incorporating indigenous knowledge and perspectives, differentiating Greenlandic social work from contexts where Western dominance prevails (Azzopardi, 2020; Baltra-Ulloa, 2016; Hillock, 2005). Unlike situations such as those in Canada, where Inuit community workers often lack recognition and cultural understanding (Ives & Gabriel, 2022), Greenland’s autonomous government and social work practices are entirely Greenland-driven. This unique context necessitates decolonisation as an ongoing process, not merely a translation or adaptation (Mik-Meyer, 2017).

### **New curriculum and opportunities to learn**

However, acknowledging the importance of decolonisation is not enough. The revised curriculum must translate good intentions into tangible actions. Concrete examples of how the curriculum empowers students through inclusive learning, anti-discriminatory practices and engagement with power dynamics are crucial for demonstrating its effectiveness. For instance, incorporating student-chosen projects that address relevant social issues in Greenland could foster critical thinking and understanding of societal power structures.

While emphasising analytical skills and knowledge systems is valuable, it is crucial to address how these skills will be used to promote collective understanding and empowerment rather than reinforcing existing power dynamics. Perhaps incorporating critical pedagogy approaches and discussions on social justice and equity can mitigate these concerns.

By actively engaging in reflection, incorporating indigenous knowledge, and designing the curriculum for action, the revised social work programme can contribute significantly to decolonising social work education in Greenland. The key lies in moving beyond abstract concepts and translating them into concrete

teaching strategies and learning experiences that empower future social workers to navigate the complexities of their unique context and contribute to a more equitable society.

### **A student-centred approach**

Repositioning power and decolonising the social work curriculum are crucial steps towards fostering equity and justice within the field, aligning with the global definition established by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014). Social workers, as categorisers, decision-makers and creators of the very structures that clients navigate, hold significant power within the social work relationship. This power dynamic necessitates a decolonial approach that dismantles systems and practices rooted in colonial legacies, which often perpetuate marginalisation and contribute to the very social problems that social work seeks to address (Mik-Meyer, 2017). However, for these changes to be meaningful, they must extend beyond a theoretical framework and be translated into concrete teaching strategies that resonate with the specific context of Greenland.

One crucial element is integrating anti-oppressive and anti-racist frameworks, like critical race theory, intersectionality, and postcolonial theory (Benjamin, 2011; Campbell, 2005). This can be achieved by incorporating case studies that highlight the impact of colonisation on Greenlandic communities and analyse social issues through an intersectional lens, considering the interplay of factors like race, gender, class, and sexuality (Moore & Simango, 2021). For instance, role-playing exercises simulating interactions between social workers and marginalised communities can encourage students to critically examine their own biases and assumptions, promoting ethical considerations and reflexivity (Dominelli, 2002).

Furthermore, expanding the curriculum beyond a Western-centric focus requires engaging with global perspectives on social work practice. This can involve incorporating guest lectures from international social work practitioners, analysing case studies from diverse contexts and encouraging students to participate in exchange programmes or research projects with partner institutions worldwide. By learning about different approaches and addressing global inequalities, students gain a broader understanding of the complexities surrounding social work and their potential role in promoting global solidarity.

Finally, the true decolonisation of the curriculum necessitates incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices into the learning experience. This can be achieved through collaborations with local communities, incorporating traditional healing practices into simulations, or inviting indigenous elders and knowledge holders to share their perspectives in classrooms. By actively valuing and engaging with indigenous knowledge systems, the curriculum can move beyond simply acknowledging their existence and truly integrate them into the learning process, as advocated by Berliner et al. (2012) and Olcoñ et al. (2020).



By implementing these concrete strategies, the social work curriculum in Greenland can move beyond rhetoric and create a truly student-centred learning environment that fosters critical thinking, self-reflection and a commitment to equity and justice. This approach not only aligns with the global aspirations of the social work field but also empowers future social workers to address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Greenlandic communities.

### **Decolonising the curriculum – an unfinished process**

In this subheading, we are borrowing a concept from an epistemology found in the early Scandinavian understanding of action research by the Norwegian philosopher Thomas Mathiesen (1973), who wrote about ‘the unfinished.’ Mathiesen asks how we go further than just thinking about change – how do we make it happen in practice? According to Mathiesen, we dismantle the finished. In our work, we conceptualise this as making the finished unfinished. The current curriculum set in space and time is a finished product. Yet it needs to be an unfinished product and it needs to be a respectful, inclusive and relational curriculum. This is not an easy task and therefore, for a long stretch of time, it will be a process that needs to be kept active by constant reflections about the process of moving towards a curriculum in which the Greenlandic social worker society can envision itself.

Creating the document is an academic exercise; then comes the challenge of seeing it come to life in practice. It needs to be open for evaluation and a summative process of constant critique and development. The entire endeavour of reversing, reinventing and rephrasing will never end, such is the fragility of this process. It is a motion of trying to implement a strategy of decoloniality where the goal is not easy to determine. No one is claiming that it should be easy; the awareness cannot be constant, and the way forward will be through evaluating the progress of inclusion, relationality and empowerment, etc. The concept of satisfaction relates to Winnicott’s (1991) ‘good enough mother’ or Bauman’s (1988) concept of ‘freedom in globalised capitalism.’ The strong and important resolution to change the current situation through this new curriculum needs to be an ongoing process – it must be entrenched in a yearly cycle and be a part of universities’ organisational structures. We must ask: How are we checking if the process is inclusive enough? Are we then making sure that historically unheard voices are listened to when evaluating fulfilment or goal achievement? It must not be about satisfying a guilty conscience or ‘indigenous washing;’ we need to make sure that the processes are trusted and supported by all the involved and affected parties. Only then can we know that we are on a journey towards the unfinished.

### **Conclusion**

Social work education in Greenland has come a long way since its inception in 1985, with a gradual shift towards decolonisation of the curriculum and a greater emphasis

on student-centred learning. The development of a new curriculum represents an important milestone in this process, with a repositioning of power towards students and a greater focus on problem-oriented group work. By contextualising social work education in Greenlandic culture and society, students are better equipped to address the specific needs of their communities and to advocate for social justice.

The journey of decolonising social work education in Greenland has been a gradual process, with a focus on incorporating indigenous knowledge, values and perspectives into the curriculum. The former curriculum relied heavily on imported material from Denmark, which often failed to consider the specific needs and challenges facing Greenlandic communities. The new curriculum seeks to address this by incorporating Greenlandic-grounded research, perspectives and examples. The goal is to provide a more culturally-appropriate and community-based approach to social work education.

Repositioning power in the curriculum involves giving students more decision-making authority and encouraging them to create parts of the curriculum and develop their own projects through research questions that drive them to explore welfare and social work issues. This shift towards a more student-centred approach empowers students to become active participants in their education and prepares them to address the unique needs of their communities.

However, decolonisation is an ongoing process and the curriculum revision is just one step in the larger endeavour. While decolonisation may not be fully attainable, the process of repositioning power and incorporating indigenous knowledge is a significant step towards a more culturally-relevant and community-responsive social work education in Greenland. By recognising the colonial roots of social work practice and actively working to challenge and transform them, the aim is to create a curriculum that better serves the needs of Greenlandic communities and empowers future social workers to effect positive change.

To strengthen the students' responsibility for learning, it is essential to embrace the idea that if they want power, they must take power. This means encouraging students to actively engage in their own learning process, take ownership of their education and play an active role in shaping the curriculum. By being given the autonomy to create parts of the curriculum and develop their own projects, students become co-creators of knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Alongside the repositioning of power towards students, it is equally important to address the responsibilities of the educators. Teachers have a crucial role in guiding students, facilitating discussions and providing the necessary resources for a comprehensive learning experience. However, they also bear the responsibility of carefully selecting literature and teaching materials that reflect the cultural context of Greenland and incorporate indigenous knowledge and perspectives. This requires a critical examination of the existing literature and a commitment to seeking out and including diverse voices that represent the experiences of Greenlandic communities. By doing so, educators can create a more inclusive and culturally-sensitive learning environment that fosters a sense of belonging and relevance among students.

Moving towards a more culturally-sensitive education also involves recognising the importance of indigenous methodologies in teaching and learning. Indigenous ways of knowing, learning and problem-solving can enrich the educational experience and help bridge the gap between academic knowledge and community realities. By incorporating indigenous methodologies, such as storytelling, experiential learning and community engagement, educators can promote a learning environment that resonates with students' cultural backgrounds and enhances their understanding of social work practice in Greenland.

This article's contributions lie in its exploration of the decolonisation process in social work education in Greenland, the repositioning of power towards students, the incorporation of indigenous knowledge and the ongoing commitment to creating a more inclusive and culturally-relevant curriculum. The decolonisation of social work education in Greenland is an ongoing process that requires a collective effort from educators, students and stakeholders. By continuing to challenge and transform the colonial roots of social work practice, Greenland can strive towards a more inclusive, just and empowering future for the field of social work and the communities it serves.

### Author biographies

**Bonnie Jensen** is a social work academic with some 20 years' experience working with vulnerable children and adolescents. Jensen, born and raised in Denmark, is of Traveller descent herself and has a particular interest in Human Rights, Child protection and Child involvement.

**Steven Arnfjord** is a white middle class male. He grew up in Greenland and took his PhD at the University of Greenland. He is the director of Ilisimatusarfik's Centre for Arctic Welfare. He is married to Ivalo who is from the Adolfsen family of south Greenland. In their joint household with their two kids, they speak Greenlandic, English and Danish.

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