TWIST

Challenges of Teaching the Application of Social Group Work Methods in South African Historically Disadvantaged Universities in the Post-COVID-19 Era

A Narrative Review

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Abstract
Group work modules in social work hold significant pedagogical value in enhancing students' proficiency in engaging with diverse communities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted conventional teaching approaches, necessitating the adoption of hybrid learning methods as an alternative. These measures introduced complex challenges, especially in the Historically Disadvantaged Universities (HDUs) in South Africa. Foremost among them is the digital divide; limited access to technology and the internet significantly hindered students' ability to participate in online classes and complete assignments. Consequently, many students encountered difficulty producing examinable portfolios, adversely affecting their semester evaluations. This study adopted a transformative learning paradigm underpinned by service-learning theory to examine the complexities of teaching group work methods at historically disadvantaged universities. Using a narrative literature review methodology, the thematic findings highlight critical challenges, including the digital divide, disruptions to practical learning, psychosocial difficulties among students, and infrastructural deficits. Therefore, by shedding light on these multifaceted challenges, the study seeks to enhance understanding of the dynamics shaping the application of group work methods in the HDUs during unprecedented circumstances. The paper will optimistically contribute to the ongoing discourse in social work education, offering insights into addressing the challenges posed by such crises.

Keywords
COVID-19, group work, historically disadvantaged universities (HDUs), psycho-social challenges, social work education

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Social work, according to the global definition, is a globally recognised, practice-based profession and academic discipline dedicated to promoting social change, development, cohesion, and the empowerment of individuals and communities (Boboyi, 2024; Matthewson, 2019; Ornellas et al., 2018). At its core, the profession seeks to address the fundamental needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities, aligning with the minimum norms and standards established by regulatory bodies such as the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) in the South African context. South African universities adhering to these standards aim to equip students with the requisite theories and skills to ensure global competitiveness in social work.

Evidence highlights the success of South African social work graduates, who have secured employment in diverse global contexts, including the United Kingdom and Australia (Engelbrecht, 2006; Naidoo & Kasiram, 2006). The comprehensive social work education in South Africa includes core modules in casework, group work, and community work, supplemented by electives from other disciplines that inter alia include psychology, criminology, sociology, and

anthropology. To achieve the objectives of social work in alignment with its values and ethical principles, students are trained in the theories, applications, intervention techniques, and group processes integral to group work (Toseland & Rivas, 2013). Axiomatically, group work has proven to be an effective method for helping individuals realise their potential by leveraging their strengths (Northen & Kurland, 2001; Qalinge-Okoro, 1998; Toseland & Rivas, 2013). This article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the teaching and application of the group work methods, focusing on how this essential aspect of social work education was adversely affected during an unprecedented global crisis.

The outbreak of COVID-19 precipitated a paradigm shift in education systems worldwide, with historically disadvantaged institutions being particularly affected (Mncube et al., 2021; Muhuro & Kang'ethe, 2021). The unpreparedness of these institutions to adopt blended learning approaches exacerbated the challenges posed by the pandemic, disrupting normal academic processes (Hedding et al., 2020). For many students from rural South Africa, the abrupt transition to strictly online learning created significant obstacles for HDUs (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012).

Skolnik (2019) underscores the transformative potential of social group work methods, noting their efficacy in fostering cognitive and behavioural change through small group interactions. By addressing social and psychological challenges through preventive and rehabilitative approaches, group work facilitates normal individual growth and development within community and school contexts (Sullivan et al., 2005). At second year level, social work students engage with the social group work module to develop skills essential for assisting individuals, groups, and communities in achieving their objectives. However, the onset of COVID-19 disrupted traditional face-to-face learning, compelling institutions to transition rapidly to online instruction in compliance with government regulations (McCutcheon et al., 2015). This article explores the challenges associated with teaching the social group work methods in HDUs, particularly the pandemic's impact on practical placements and learning outcomes.

Painstakingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented an unprecedented challenge to social work education, particularly within HDUs in South Africa (Afrouz, 2021). The sudden shift to online learning exposed infrastructural deficiencies and disrupted traditional pedagogies vital for the practical instruction of social group work methods (Mdiniso et al., 2022). This disruption raises critical questions about the preparedness of these institutions to address unforeseen challenges, the effect on students' practical training, and the overall resilience of social work education in the face of global crises.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to explore the challenges of teaching social group work methods in the post-COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the disruptions of the traditional teaching approaches, the limitations on practical placements, and the broader implications for social work education, the study aims to provide valuable insights. These findings will inform strategies for enhancing the adaptability and resilience of social work education amidst ongoing global uncertainties.

RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES
The study explores the challenges of teaching the application of social group work methods in the HDUs in the post-COVID-19 era. The following objectives guide the study:

- To use narrative literature to explore the challenges of teaching the application of social group work methods in the HDUs in the post-COVID-19 era.
- To suggest a way forward and recommendations for the study.

PARADIGM
The philosophical assumption of the study is rooted in the transformative learning paradigm and is discussed below:

Transformative learning paradigm
The transformative learning paradigm provides a pertinent framework for examining the challenges associated with delivering the social group work methods in HDUs during the post-COVID-19 era. This theoretical approach highlights how individuals can alter their perspectives and understanding through critical reflection, particularly when confronted with disruptions or unfamiliar circumstances (Enkhtur & Yamamoto, 2017).

The relevance of this paradigm lies in the significant shifts in educational delivery brought about by the pandemic, particularly within HDUs. Both students and educators were compelled to adapt rapidly to new modes of learning, often with constrained resources (Bryson & Andres, 2020). Transformative learning underscores the importance of critically reflecting on these changes, enabling individuals to grow both personally and professionally by re-evaluating their assumptions and approaches to learning and teaching (Enkhtur & Yamamoto, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
The applicable theoretical framework for the study is the experiential learning theory, and is discussed below:

Experiential learning theory
The study uses an experiential learning theory developed by David Kolb. This framework focuses on learning through direct experience, where individuals acquire knowledge by engaging in a cycle that includes concrete experiences, reflective observations, conceptual understanding, and active experimentation (McCarthy, 2016; Murrell & Claxton,

1987). The experiential learning theory is particularly significant for understanding the difficulties in teaching social group work methods in the HDUs. Social group work relies on learning through hands-on involvement in group settings, reflection, and practical exercises (Elwyn et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these essential activities, preventing students from participating in the face-to-face, experiential learning critical to developing social work skills (Davis & Mirick, 2021). The theory helps explain how the lack of practical, real-world experiences during the pandemic hindered students' educational outcomes. As HDUs faced technological and resource challenges, students lost vital opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real group work settings, a key part of their social work training (Al-Bakar, 2022). This disruption affected the quality of their education and limited their readiness for professional practice.

METHODOLOGY

This is a literature review study using a review of literature from eclectic contexts. The specific literature method is a narrative literature review and is discussed below:

Narrative literature review

A narrative literature review was selected as the primary research method. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of existing literature to identify key themes, trends, and gaps relevant to the topic (Boboyi, 2024; Boboyi & Kang'ethe, 2024; Pautasso, 2019). Many academic databases were searched to gather relevant literature, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Scopus. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports published between 2000 and 2024 were prioritised, ensuring both historical context and contemporary findings related to social work education, particularly within HDUs and in post-pandemic settings. The search terms used included "social group work methods," "COVID-19 impact on higher education," "historically disadvantaged universities," and "digital divide in education." These sources were particularly valuable in highlighting the strategies implemented to address educational disruptions and their success or limitations in the HDU context. The inclusion criteria for this review were:

- Studies that focused on social work education, specifically group work methods.
- Literature discussing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education.
- Research on historically disadvantaged institutions, particularly in South Africa or other developing contexts.
- Publications that analysed technological, infrastructural, or financial barriers in higher education delivery.

Exclusion criteria included studies that did not focus on group work methods or social work education, literature not relevant to post-COVID-19 challenges, and sources focusing solely on advantaged institutions with abundant resources. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

FINDINGS

Based on the narrative literature review, several themes discussed below emerged regarding the challenges of teaching the application of social group work methods in HDUs during the post-COVID-19 era.

Digital divide and technological barriers

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated the digital divide in HDUs, where students and educators faced significant challenges due to limited access to essential technology (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Bell et al., 2022). Studies have revealed that many students in HDUs lacked access to reliable internet, laptops, or digital devices, severely hindering their ability to participate effectively in online group work and remote learning activities (Bell et al., 2022; Ndibalema, 2022). Furthermore, the technological infrastructure in many HDUs was underdeveloped, complicating efforts to support the transition to online platforms (Ndibalema, 2022).

A 2021 report by South Africa's Council on Higher Education (CHE) underscored the worsening of digital inequalities during the pandemic, as online learning became the primary mode of instruction (Woldegiorgis, 2022). While well-resourced universities navigated the transition relatively smoothly, HDUs encountered significant delays and interruptions due to inadequate infrastructure (Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2023). Moreover, the lack of technical support and limited digital literacy among students and staff further compounded these challenges, as Fouche and Andrews (2022) and Hendricks and Mutongoza (2023) highlighted. These factors contributed to feelings of isolation and disengagement among students, particularly in group work activities that required active collaboration.

Underfunding and resource constraints

A persistent issue in HDUs has been underfunding, a more pronounced challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Mdiniso et al., 2022). The literature indicates that, compared to better-resourced universities, HDUs were less prepared to manage the rapid shift to digital platforms and adopt the hybrid learning models necessitated in the post-pandemic era (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Maphalala & Ajani, 2023; Mdiniso et al., 2022).

Universities South Africa (USAf) report highlights that HDUs receive less funding per student than historically advantaged institutions. This funding disparity results in shortages of essential resources, including updated learning materials, digital tools, and sufficient staffing (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Mdiniso et al., 2022). The financial strain is further exacerbated by the more significant proportion of students from low-income backgrounds enrolled in HDUs, many of whom rely heavily on institutional support, stretching limited resources even further (Boboyi & Kang'ethe, 2024).

The literature also underscores the inequitable distribution of government funding intended to ensure educational continuity during the pandemic, with HDUs frequently receiving less financial aid for technological upgrades (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2021; World Bank, 2021). This disparity widened the gap between institutions, significantly hindering HDUs' capacity to deliver practical and interactive group work methods, which require substantial resources for effective coordination and facilitation.

Disruptions to work-integrated learning (WIL)

Work-integrated learning (WIL), sometimes called experiential learning, a core component of social group work education, involves students participating in practical, face-to-face group work activities that simulate real-world social work practices (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread disruptions to this model, particularly within historically disadvantaged universities (HDUs), which struggled to provide alternatives that adequately replaced in-person learning.

The literature highlights that fieldwork placements and community-based group work were frequently delayed or cancelled during the pandemic, resulting in a significant skills gap among social work students (Das et al., 2024; Dempsey et al., 2021). HDUs, already grappling with resource limitations, were disproportionately affected as they could not establish online platforms for simulated group work sessions, which some better-resourced institutions adopted (Jefferies et al., 2022). As a result, students in HDUs were deprived of opportunities to develop critical skills such as facilitation, leadership, and the practical integration of theoretical knowledge, all of which are fundamental to social work practice.

Furthermore, the absence of hands-on learning during this period has raised serious concerns regarding the competency of graduating students from HDUs who could not engage in real-world applications of group work theory (Hamilton et al., 2020). These challenges have prompted calls within the literature to develop alternative pedagogical strategies to deliver effective practical training in resource-constrained environments.

Psychosocial challenges and student well-being

The pandemic's impact on students' mental health has emerged as a critical concern in the literature (Lalin et al., 2024). Many students attending HDUs come from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds, and the abrupt transition to remote learning exacerbated feelings of isolation, anxiety, and stress (Lalin et al., 2024; Reddy Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022). Elumalai et al. (2021) report that students in disadvantaged contexts experienced elevated levels of psychosocial distress driven by financial insecurity, a lack of institutional support, and the pressures associated with adapting to unfamiliar online learning environments.

Moreover, the inability to participate in group work, an integral component of social work training that facilitates peer interaction and emotional support, further intensified students' sense of disconnection from their academic communities (Zarowski et al., 2024). Without sufficient mental health resources or accessible counselling services, students in HDUs struggled to maintain motivation and engagement with academic tasks, including group work projects (Gerowitz et al., 2022; Nicholson et al., 2023).

Additionally, educators in HDUs reported challenges in addressing the emotional well-being of their students, compounded by the limited capacity of institutions to provide comprehensive mental health services (Morris et al., 2022). The literature underscores the necessity of addressing these psychosocial challenges to improve student outcomes and enhance the overall delivery of social work education in HDUs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, several recommendations are proposed to address the identified challenges and enhance social work education accessibility and quality:

- To reduce the digital gap in the HDUs, the government and university management should focus on improving digital infrastructure at HDIs. This includes ensuring reliable internet access, upgrading computer labs, and making digital devices more available for students and educators, thus supporting active participation in online group work and remote learning.
- To address resource shortages hindering social group work delivery, the government prioritise increased financial support for HDUs to help them purchase up-to-date learning materials and technological tools and offer adequate resources for facilitating group work.
- To manage the disruption of experiential learning and efficient components, the HDUs should consider a combination of in-person and online group work methods. Implementing virtual simulations and case-based learning will allow students to gain practical group work skills even in digital environments.
- To mitigate the psychosocial difficulties students face, the HDUs should prioritise offering accessible mental health support such as counselling services, peer networks, and workshops on managing stress. This will help students cope with emotional challenges, enhancing their academic engagement and performance.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores various barriers that have exacerbated existing inequalities within higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed critical challenges, including the digital divide, insufficient resources, and disruptions to

experiential learning, all of which have negatively affected the quality of social work education. Moreover, the mental health struggles faced by students, compounded by inadequate institutional support, have further hindered the effective implementation of group work. To address these challenges, the study advocates for a multifaceted strategy encompassing increased funding, enhanced technological infrastructure, and the adoption of innovative teaching practices. These measures aim to enable HDUs to better adapt to the evolving educational landscape. Additionally, prioritising student well-being by providing robust mental health resources is essential to ensuring holistic support throughout their academic journey. By implementing these strategies, HDUs can mitigate significant barriers to social group work education, equipping students with the necessary skills and practical experiences for professional success. Tackling these systemic challenges will foster a more equitable and resilient educational framework, preparing future social workers to navigate the complexities of a post-pandemic world.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

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