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**Podcast transcript:**

**Kyra:** Hi everyone, welcome back to the podcast. For this episode, we are in conversation with Amber Gabrielle Nyankson and Zelia Camelo, who are Social Work students at the University of West London. In this episode, we discuss Amber and Zelia's upbringing and their major influences, we talk about their different journeys into higher education and the choice to study Social Work. Amber and Zelia also shed light on the course at UWL, particularly their responsibilities as student social workers, and towards the end of the episode, we consider what it means to decolonise Social Work education and the practice itself.

So, I like to start things off with our guests just telling us a little bit about themselves, in their own words. So, where did you grow up and where are you currently? Zelia, maybe you could start us off.

**Zelia:** Yes, sure. I grew up in Oman, but I was born in Goa, based in India. When I was a few months old, my parents decided to go to Oman and settle there, away from my family. Oman was a small slice of heaven. One of the fondest memories I would like to share and I will always cherish, growing up in Oman, is that, in those days, we would barely get any rain, and so when we would have dramatic rains, I and the whole neighbourhood, from different backgrounds, age groups, would just come out, gather around, dance and play in the rain. Yeah.

**Amber:** I guess, for me, I've always lived in the UK. I've been based in London, South London specifically. I grew up with my grandmother, and mum, until we decided to move out and she sort of like bought her own house and everything. I still currently live in London with my husband and daughters. Yeah, so we've just always pretty much been a South London family. I don't know, nowhere else has kind of felt like home, strangely. It always sounds really strange when I say this, but like different parts of London have different vibes, and I don't feel like anywhere else in...in London has kind of matched South London's vibe, but maybe... maybe I'm just biased [laughing]! But, yeah, I've always lived in London and enjoy living in London. There's like...there's such a mash-up of different cultures, and, especially where I grew up, in Battersea, a lot of people from the Caribbean had come there, so like...sort of like during the Windrush season, and a lot of other cultures as well so...dotted around. Sort of like in Tooting, there were a lot of the Asian community that was there, and in Streatham,



a lot of the Somalian community was there, so it was like a real kind of like mash-up in South London of different cultures, and getting to know different...different backgrounds and different foods and... So, yeah, I know there are areas like that in other parts of London, but I've...I've never experienced it the way that it was for me, so yeah...

**Kyra:** Amazing. Thank you, guys. So, I guess, how would you each describe your upbringing in terms of how race was seen and felt at home?

**Zelia:** With mine, although I'm an Indian, the way in which I was brought up was from like a very strict Catholic manner, so I don't think so they...they really raised much important in...in terms of race, and from where I come from, but now, I'm more exposed to it, ever since I've come to London. But, if you want to know where...which race I belong from in India, it's known as the [Indo-Aryats], which are one of the most diverse groups of people in India.

**Amber:** So, we were...we were brought up as Christian as well, but there was...I guess, in London, in...it was like the '80s, so, em, there was like a heavy...a heavy kind of undertone of race. It was...although I don't sort of like remember or sort of like experienced any of this, but it was like...you could feel sort of like the undertones of...of race, em, in London, growing up not too far from Brixton, where sort of like the Brixton Riots were and everything else, and em...just...just being really aware that our family was black and that we were from the Caribbean and...having an understanding that the...the place that we lived had a really sort of like tight community of...of Caribbeans. So, in our house where we grew up, we lived on... oh god, what are they called...is it like a cul-de-sac? So, it's not a through-road; it sort of like ends. And basically, all of our neighbours knew each other from somewhere in the Caribbean and, em, it was like...you could leave your door open, you'd say "Morning, Mr Brown!" "Morning, Mrs Charles!" "Morning, Mrs Jones!" and everybody knows everybody and they all know each other's children, and it was... I really don't know how to explain it but it was an engrained thing, like we all knew we're from the Caribbean and we're here in... we're here in the UK but we are from the Caribbean and we're not like...we're not like everyone else, but our community s here and it's solid and we stick together. I hope [laughing]...I hope that's kind of like answered your question, yeah...but it was...it was...it was kind of like an unspoken thing, but a really...it had a really kind of like heavy dominance in our household. It was something that was...that was spoken about on occasion, but it was there, almost like a presence...almost like a presence. So, I don't know if anybody else has experienced that but it's...it's...it's...it's not something you speak about every day but it's something that's very...very well-known, like it's...yeah [laughing]!

**Kyra:** It's almost like it sounds like, yeah, like you guys created a kind of community – it almost felt like a home away from home.



**Amber:** Yeah, definitely.

**Kyra:** So, it was like, you know, we're from different parts of the Caribbean but we still have that kind of collective identity...

**Amber:** That's right.

**Kyra:** ...therefore this is like a small community that, you know, we...keep safe, we look after, we look out for each other. But yeah, I really love that – it's nice.

**Zelia:** Yeah, and just to add on, that's what I would call myself as being in a home, because I remember in India as well, like, Amber, you said, you know, I could literally just step out of my house and say, "Hey, Good Morning" yeah, like, "Oh, can I borrow some chillis from you? Do you have this? Do you have that?"

**Amber:** Yeah.

**Zelia:** You know, that sense of belonging, yeah...I get it [laughing]!

**Kyra:** And I think it's so hard to come by, like I feel like young people, they don't really play out as much, and obviously there's multiple factors affecting that, like, you know, the safety of outside and obviously kids sometimes just prefer to kind of be at home, and obviously Covid has kind of added to that feeling as well, but, yeah, I think those kind of...that kind of communal feeling and those spaces are really hard to come by now in communities in London, especially like with just the demographic as well, like you have a lot of people just moving in and out, moving far away, out of London, so it is hard to really find your kind of home away from home with people.

**Amber:** That's right.

**Zelia:** Yeah.



**Kyra:** So, I also wanted to ask, what shows and books did you guys watch and reading growing up, as I'm interested to kind of know like what were the representations that you were exposed to?

**Zelia:** Oh, with me, growing up, there was not any particular shows or book I watched or read, but, yes [sighing], I was exposed to Indian TV series, which my parents would often watch while I would study, being the only child back then, and they...these Indian TV serials, they mainly represented more about the gender roles in India. And now, to think of it, in one of my assessments for the podcast, I did it based on the gender roles in India [laughing], and it was only when I came to London and started going to school, I was introduced to others, such as Roahl Dahl.

**Amber:** I think, for me, we were really lucky growing up that, once we moved away from my grandmother's home, where we moved had a library, literally...it was a really small library, literally about...five doors away from where we lived, there was a small library, and, I mean, the resources were limited, sort of like black literature back then, but I remember...I remember there was one book that I loved, 'Why has a Very Long Tale'. I really can't remember who it was why – I'll have to Google it and find out, but it was...it had black illustrations and it was about a little girl that liked to ask why, and her parents, I believe, were from the Caribbean and liked to tell her that, you know, every time she asked why, "Why has a very long tale". So, I guess that's one of the books that really kind of sticks out from childhood, but I guess, as I got older, there wasn't really...there wasn't really much representation on British TV, em, for...for black children, I don't think. I think...is it Andy Peters from Blue Peter...was it Blue Peter?

**Kyra:** Yeah, I do remember Blue Peter.

**Amber:** Yeah. He was like one of like the first black faces that I remember seeing on TV, but, otherwise, sort of like growing up through my childhood, it was...it was kind of like you either had to have Sky or you had to have cable so that you could access like the American shows, and, you know, I remember watching things like Sister Sister and [Moesha] and...oh god, god, I'm really going back in time now, showing my age.

**Kyra:** Did you watch the Fresh Prince?

**Amber:** Fresh Prince, yeah, oh my gosh [laughing]! Yeah, those were sort of like the...the great shows that really kind of like depicted culture but also...showed us people like



ourselves, and...and that's kind of like from...from all kinds of depictions. You were more likely to see a plus-size person in those shows, which was like really important growing up as a young girl and not kind of having the body type that conformed to the skinny models that were going on in the '80s and '90s. So, it was...it was really important watching those shows because they helped form bits of my identity and not shy away from certain parts of me, so, yeah, it was...it was really important. I wish there would have been more shows over here that sort of like depicted us in a positive light.

**Kyra:** So, when did you both start to kind of think critically about social issues and injustices?

**Zelia:** When I joined a youth camp in Saint Anslem Church in London, one of the social justice issues in one of the sessions we discussed was climate change. I used to be that person, if I saw anything that came up on the news or social media or it came from someone I knew, like when we were having a discussion, I would literally be the first to think about whether that issue affected me or not. If it didn't affect me, then I shouldn't be bothered about it. And then I would see like rape cases in India which emerged as a social issue and, you know, why was it a social issue - because it is most often talked about as a problem that lies in the set of bad individuals. When I would see news on this, I would literally feel sorry and I would be filled with so much anger, without knowing the whole story behind it. And so, when I was introduced to theories, such as radical social work, by our lecturers, after joining UWL, the way I thought about certain issues completely changed. Now, as soon as I see an issue that is brought up, I would go research and equip myself with some background knowledge, with, you know, the questions of where, when, how, and why, which helped my ability to think critically.

**Amber:** I think you actually find, a lot of the time, like I knew I was starting to kind of come to the realisation like that, you know, there are certain systems out there that don't work for everyone in the way that they should be, or there's a lot of systems out there that promise one thing but they don't necessarily deliver. And I guess, when you're young, you don't always have the language to kind of...articulate how you feel towards kind of these certain systems or even kind of like your space within those systems, and, yeah, I think that's one thing that I'm definitely so grateful for, in terms of just education in general, because I feel like it really gave me the language to, yeah, just really kind of articulate how I feel and be able to kind of like analyse certain things and, yeah, I definitely can relate.

**Zelia:** Absolutely, yeah.

**Amber:** I think, for me, em...I think there was an awareness of social justice quite early on, to



be honest, in my childhood, but I just didn't really know what to do with them. So, I remember me and my friends picking up, quite early on, I'm thinking we were maybe like seven or eight, on teachers treating us differently from other kids in the classroom, or treating us more harshly. I remember there was a time I...I was asked a question in class, and, em, like just being a young kid, you hear things on TV, and it was like a geography question, and I think I said something like Bombay Beach, and Bombay Beach maybe wasn't where I thought it was in the world, and sort of like really being scalded and like rebuked, and I was just like...mmm...like something really didn't sit well with me about the way I was talked to, and I remember going home and sort of like complaining to my mum, and my mum having to sort of like come into the school. But there was another instance where my friends and I had, em, we were...we were being blamed for something – I can't even remember, it was such a long time ago, honestly, but we were being blamed for something, and in, em, I remember, in protest, because they made us stay in at playtime, we weren't allowed to go out at playtime, in protest, me and my friends decided that we were going to march around the centre table of the classroom, singing, oh my goodness...it was...oh my gosh, what's the song...? [Singing] "Let the wicked, carry us away in captivity, requiring of us a song..." and we were...we were so adamant! And I reflect back on that now, thinking like, oh my goodness...like that was such a young age but we were so aware. Like maybe...maybe we might not have handled it the right way or not have known the right channels to go through to have had something done about it, but it was a real awareness, the fact that we felt, as seven-year-olds, we should protest in some way to the way we were being treated. So, yeah, I think...I think I was very aware of that quite early on, and, actually, actually, I remember another instance where...where my grandmother and my aunt, we went to Blackpool, and we entered a pub and...they started throwing beer mats at us and telling us to get out. So, yeah, I had quite a... I think I was even younger then – I was maybe like five... maybe like four or five... But that's something that's kind of like stuck with me as well. So, like instances of racism and being treated unfairly have kind of stuck with me, but I think, in those days, it was...it was difficult because not a lot of people from different backgrounds had the information or the kind of understanding to be able to advocate for themselves in the way that they wanted to. You know, the minute you stand up for yourself, you're always seen as sort of like an aggressor or somebody who's rebellious, and that's not the case. So, yeah, I think that's what I'll say there...

**Kyra:** Yeah. And I think also to just even experience those things, like, yeah, like under the age of 10, like how much that can really kind of affect your self-concept and just the way that you even just process things, subconsciously, and I think, you know, just thinking about your story about how you were protesting with your friends as well, and I think, you know, the fact that you even were in a position where you felt like you all had to kind of really advocate for yourselves for something that you didn't do, em, like...yeah, like how that affects somebody, like in the long-run, and kind of, yeah, how you can think about it and reflect on it now is really interesting.



**Amber:** Mm. And I think it kind of...it can kind of reflect in...in so many of the services and the work that we do nowadays. A lot of people who, em, who experience this kind of treatment, or who have experienced this kind of treatment, often go into situations where maybe they can receive support or help, and they all, automatically, it's like they have a defence barrier up, em, because "This is how I've been treated previously" and "This is what I know you already think of me, just by looking at me – you already think that I'm aggressive, you already think that I'm ignorant or that I don't have the right social graces". So, it often... it often works against the...the people that we work with and can...can kind of like serve as a barrier, whereas, you know, it's...it's important to kind of like have an understanding of those experiences, em, so that you can work with people like this and be able to kind of like show them the opposite of that narrative. So, yeah, I fell like it's just so important in...in social work, to have that awareness that these are the things that...maybe they don't happen as much now, but those are things that have happened and they do have detrimental impact on people's lives and how they perceive the world, and how people themselves are perceived. So yeah...

**Kyra:** I wanted to dedicate some time to thinking about both of your individual journeys to and through higher education. I feel like all three of us are somewhat...I guess it feels like the beginning but also not really. What was your journey into higher education, and I guess what were some of the factors that shaped that for you?

**Zelia:** For me, soon after studying primary school, until Year 5, in Oman, me and my sisters, along with my sisters, had to move to India because the school fees began to rise. I studied for a year in India, where I completed Year 6, and then I came to London. So, this is where I was exposed to students and teachers from various different backgrounds, a different curriculum and a variety of subjects to choose from, which I never got the opportunity back in India or in Oman. Going into Sixth Form, I knew I wanted to be a social worker. There was a day in school I remember where we were looking at the causes of poverty, and one theory in particular, called the Cycle of Deprivation, and I said to my teacher, "That really explains why poverty goes from generation to generation, but it doesn't really explain how poverty came about in the first place." So, this curiosity was one of the reasons why it pushed me to choosing Social Work, so here I am now, studying Social Work [laughing] at the University of West London.

**Amber:** I think, for me, I had a very different experience, em... I...I always did well at school, but maybe not as well as I could have because I...I had ADHD, unknowingly, and actually my ADHD wasn't diagnosed until I started university with West London, the University of West London, sorry, and I think that really impact...it really impacted my journey through education. So, when I finished my GCSEs, many moons ago, I won't say the year, em, I...I was done with education, as far as I was concerned. I was just like, no, like I'm done, but,



somehow, my mum convinced me to go on to college, so I went onto college and, em, I did a...I did a BTEC, in those days, so I did a BTEC in Music, and then, after that, I... They asked me if I wanted to go on to university and I was like, “No, no...no, no, no, no, no, it’s all too much, no.” But not knowing I had kind of sort of like all of that overwhelm and all of that anxiety around sort of like studying, and everything humming around in the background, which was why it took me so long to kind of get back into education, em... There were a few setbacks along the way. In 2011, I did a...Access, that’s the word, Access Higher Education – so, it’s like an intensive one-year, and, at the time, I was going to [apply to be] a midwife. I passed that. I applied to university. I started a Midwifery degree, but then I had like a series of like family catastrophes, and I had to come out. But it gave me...it gave me some time to kind of look at things and like really reassess, and, similarly to Zelia, sort of like look at the systems that kind of like work in this country, and how they work, and if they’re actually, em, benefiting the people that they need to benefit. And I just felt like a stirring, a stirring within myself, just like, no, right, there’s got to be more to this, like there’s...there’s got to be a way that like people will...have the benefit of meeting professionals who don’t...who don’t look down at them in a certain way, who don’t believe that the reason that they’re in poverty or isolation, or whatever the circumstance may be, is their own fault. There’s got to be professionals out there that are sort of like willing to see the individual as an individual and work with them in that way. So, yeah, I got really sort of like...pepped up and zealed up, and, em, applied to be [laughing] a student again. So, later on in life, I’m now applying to be a social worker, through a Social Work degree. But it’s...it’s been...it’s been a rocky road, but I think, if...if you take my journey into consideration, I think there’s a lot we can still do, through...through sort of like our provisions, em, because they all work together, whether it’s Social Work, whether it’s healthcare, whether it’s policing, or whether it’s mental health, whatever it may be – they all work together, and, em, education is a huge part of a person’s life, and we have to make sure that we have the right things in place. There are so many young girls who are misdiagnosed, or not diagnosed at all, and, consequently, pushed out of education, and I’m [laughing]...I’m a testimony to that. You know, you’re struggling with something that makes you believe that you can’t do it, whereas you can do it – you just need the right strategies and tools put in place so that you can achieve in education, and I feel like that’s a really important part of our journey, and it shouldn’t be overlooked by...by social work, it shouldn’t be overlooked by education, because these are the...these are the advocates of the future. This is the next generation of social workers and politicians, and those that are coming to do...and make the right changes for society, so yeah...

**Kyra:** In your opinion, what does it mean to really study Social Work, and, I guess, does what you initially thought it was differ from your understanding of it now?

**Zelia:** Oh, to be honest, every bit of Social Work excites me, from writing reports to working with service users, which I’m currently doing at my placement, to working with other professionals, to bringing theories into practice, to being autonomous. To study Social Work,





it also means you have to have a lot of resilience because you are...you know, you are exposed to people who are dealing with a lot of problems, and you yourself are also dealing with it, at the end of the day, and it's about how you, you know, reach out and be with them and understand them, because I also believe that, if you cannot handle your own problems, you cannot...you cannot, you know, help them in any way. And it's also about trying to manage your work/life balance, so your personal life from your work life. Yeah, that's what I think it is...

**Amber:** Em...I think, for me, has it altered...my perspectives...? Em...yes and no. I say...I say yes, em, because...there's so much about being...being a social worker that...reflects on, like Zelia said, reflects on yourself. There's so many things that are...that are interwoven and that interlink, and all of that starts with you, as the professional. You know, how much...how much care and control you provide in a setting is up to you, and how you see your...the balance of power that you have. So, it's...it all starts with you. And also, sort of like how much...how you see yourself is...is how much of yourself you see reflected in your work, if that makes sense? So, if you...if you don't have a good grounding in yourself, you're going to see that, like your...the people you work with will be confused – you won't be communicating in a great way. There'll...there'll be misunderstandings. There'll be a whole heap of different things, you know. If you...if you...em...if you don't look at that balance of care and control, you can let the people that you work with not feel like they have, em, a say in their own life, but then you can...you can also, em, be working in a really oppressive way as well. You may think that, oh, I'm caring for this person, and, you know, I want to see the best happen for them, but you haven't given them an opportunity to speak about, you know, their wants and their needs. But then, at the same time, you know, if you give them...if you give them none of that, then it's controlling – you know, you're enforcing things upon people, and that's not great either. You know, if you're not able to reflect on who you are, and what your triggers are, what your personal circumstances are, you can let that reflect in your work. So, em, it's very much...it's very much about you having a great understanding of what your role is, but also how that affects you as a person, and be able to kind of call on your bias and challenge it, and call on the...the things that...that even make you afraid and make you anxious, em, be able to call on them. There are people that go into social work for all kinds of different reasons, people who have been treated badly in the system. If you've got a chip on your shoulder about being treated badly in the system, and you go and become a social worker, there are certain aspects of social work that are going to trigger you, and you won't bring out the best outcomes for the people that you're working with. You're, rather, replaying a scenario that's happening for you in life. So, it's...it's all about you having a great grip on yourself. Like Zelia said, you really have to have yourself in check. You really have to be constantly reflecting and thinking, "Why do I think this way? Have I thought of all the options? Am I just thinking from my own perspective? What's going on here?" You constantly have to challenge yourself in that aspect.



And, again, why I would say no is...I've always had an understanding that, you know, social work is about the people. It's about...it's about stewardship. It's about service. And those were the understanding that I walked into social work having, and, em, still glad to see that they stand in the teaching that we receive, in the placements that we've gone to so far, and, you know, the people with lived experience that we've spoken to. The greater majority is...is that...those things still stand. These are the...these are the goals and the initiatives that we're still working towards. But, don't get me wrong, there are still the few bad apples [laughing], but...I think that's...that's where we come in, the new cohorts that come into social work – it's our...it's our responsibility to challenge those bad apples, to challenge their narratives, to challenge what they think, to challenge what they do, to whistle-blow. It's all part of that. So, yeah...

**Kyra:** I mean, it's very relational work, and it's very much...I think I just didn't even kind of...I underestimated how much self-work is involved in also kind of being a social worker and how much you need to kind of...you know... There's a level of self-awareness that is needed, in a sense, like constantly having to kind of reflect on, you know, your past experiences, your own triggers, and, yeah, like...I mean, it's tough! It's not easy to do that work and to be, you know, confronted by that, potentially confronted every day, on the job, by that. What are some of the responsibilities and tasks of a student social worker at UWL?

**Zelia:** One of the main ones are to apply...to see which of the nine professional capabilities framework are relevant to each of the lessons we have. The professional capabilities framework sets out the profession's expectations of what a social worker should be able to do at each stage of their career and professional development, and also, like Amber said, whistle-blowing, because we have mandatory placements, em, we have to complete in our second and third year, so it's what you would normally do after graduating as a social worker, the same applies whilst you're a student. Also, understanding the power balance, the role that plays between you and the people higher than you.

**Amber:** I believe it's our responsibility to...uphold the profession, em, to be a positive representation of it - so that's whether you're in your placement, whether you're on campus, whether you're in public. Because I feel like a lot of people kind of forget that, that, you know, when you're doing your normal day-to-day life, I'm no longer a social worker, I'm no longer a student social worker, you are and you will be held accountable. So, yeah, just to be able to...to have the profession...be happy to know that you represent them in a way that is positive, that is professional, and, you know, that's in your...your day-to-day talking with people and interacting with people. It's in the quality of your work. It's in your listening your abilities and being able to like problem-solve and bring solutions. It's...it's...being able to connect with someone and make them feel...dignity and be able to feel like they're a human



being. You know, they may have issues, there may be things that maybe are not going so well in their life, but they are a human being, and they deserve to be treated with respect.

It is our responsibility to learn and continue to learn, to continue to seek knowledge and understanding of all the different aspects of social work. I think...it's not...it's not something you can kind of read a book about once and put down. You constantly have to be researching and reading and familiarising yourself with different bits of knowledge.

And I think it's...it's our responsibility to kind of understand the nature of human beings. It's a big part of what we do. We learnt recently about toxic shame and about how it can affect adults in their life choices, how it can sort of like result in certain things happening to people. But it's another example of...of how human beings work when, you know, when they're exposed to consistent shame about their choices, about who they are, about what they should be feeling or thinking, then it can...it can make someone spiral. I feel like I'm still hammering on the same point, but, you know, if you don't have an understanding of what makes people tick – I mean, like everybody's different, but if you don't have a general understanding of how human beings work, and don't try and apply that in working with people, I mean, being a social worker is not going to work for you, it really isn't. That's whether it's student social worker, that's whether it's, you know... You'll be lucky if you get to senior social worker if you don't know how to engage with people or you don't have any understanding of the things that can cause people to make certain decisions or be in certain situations, and not be judgemental. So...yeah...I think...I think, more than anything, from my personal, my personal opinion, that is one of our greatest responsibilities, to really try and find out...what human beings are like and, you know, what they go through, and, you know, the different...the different aspects of life.

**Zelia:** Yeah. Yeah, I completely agree with Amber because, you know, the way in which we all are being brought up were different. You know, we are programmed in such a way to think, and everything we see, hear, that it's so hard to unpick now. Like, for example, like if we get a family we have to work with and the parents are found to be alcoholic and they're so addicted, and they have children, and we might straightaway say, oh, you know, they're bad parents – okay, we put them to parenting skills hub or something. But then, it's about understanding, okay, like they...if they're still able to drop their kids to school the next day, even after drinking a lot, we cannot say that they're bad, if that makes sense? It's about how we think around certain situations, and it's almost...it's really hard to unpick things we've been taught about, and, you know, been told to, em, you know, say what is wrong and right. So, yeah, I think it's that, yeah... Challenging [laughing]!



**Kyra:** And I guess what you're both kind of saying also is that it's about kind of looking at multiple factors affecting an individual's life, not just looking at them...or looking at them kind of on a surface level...

**Zelia:** Yeah.

**Kyra:** ...or just one isolated incident or event. It's really about getting a kind of whole picture, a whole history, of somebody's life, and so it's a great responsibility, yeah.

**Amber:** Yeah.

**Kyra:** So, I wanted to dedicate some time to also...just really thinking about what it means to decolonise Social Work, education and practice. I know this is something that you've been doing already, kind of with [?], and obviously you guys were both with us last year to kind of do this work as well. But I guess I'll start off with the question of: what aspects of Social Work have you come to understand as having quite colonial or racist undertones?

**Amber:** I think...I think, for myself, one thing that I've noticed is that there seems to be this notion of collective understanding, em, whereas, you know, like Zelia said, we're from different backgrounds, we're from different countries, we're from different cultures and ways of life, so the way you understand things is not necessarily the way I will understand things, and I feel like Social Work education in this country very much leans towards that, this collective way of understanding, whereas, you know, that may apply or it may not even apply because, like I said, we all come from such vastly different backgrounds. Even if you took a class of 30 who were all born and bred in Britain, there's no guarantee that everybody would have that same understanding when it comes to issues of safeguarding, when it comes to issues of bias, when it comes to all the different things that you can come across in social work. So, in this day and age, where the UK is such a melting-pot of different cultures and backgrounds, it seems absurd to me that we still have this notion of collective understanding, like "everyone should know this". Why should everybody know this? Like what if I'm an immigrant who's just come to this country to study, and I've only been here six months – why would I know this? This is your way of doing things that you've lived with for how many centuries or whatever. I've just been here six months. Why am I supposed to know this? So, I feel like there needs to be more room in our curriculums for...for understanding, em, and especially sort of like different understandings of safeguarding..



I think we...yeah, it was in the conference that we had at the university recently, where, em, another lecturer from...I think it was Wolverhampton University, was talking about how international students' understanding of safeguarding is...is so different to what she thought it would be, and em, it's... I feel like there just needs to be so much more room for...for people to explore their understandings of safeguarding, and, you know, really explore how we safeguard in this country because I feel – and I used this as an example at the conference – I feel like the way we treat our curriculum here is very much, em, similar to the way we treat citizenship for the UK. That questionnaire that everybody has to go through, you know, with these random facts about being a citizen for the UK, where most people who were born in the UK [laughing] couldn't answer like a tenth of those questions on that thing, it's...it applies in the same way, like you're giving and expecting so much from a group of people, em, that not everybody understands. It just doesn't make sense! It's almost like you're setting people up to fail. And...I...I don't think it will...it doesn't benefit this country, it really doesn't, it doesn't. It, rather, narrows the view. It narrows...the opportunity for people to really influence, in this country, and really sort of like break through barriers and systems, because there are a lot of...there are a lot of...a lot of ways of doing things that have been so beneficial to this country – family group conferencing. You know, that came from...from...I believe it was aborigine families...I don't...I hope that I've said that right...and...you know... So, there's been different...there's different ways of doing things in different parts of the world that we can...you know, we can pull from and we can learn from, but if we're just always having this same expectation of everybody, then it just...it just doesn't make sense – we don't grow and we don't learn as a nation, or as a profession. So, yeah...

**Kyra:** So, do you guys think that it's possible to decolonise Social Work as a practice, or is it possible to create a kind of...Social Work that is anti-racist?

**Zelia:** Yeah, it is a process, I'd say, like, for instance, by using an approach based on postcolonial theory which guides the decolonisation of social work practice, by helping to create an awareness of the effects of colonisation and create less oppressive ways of delivering social services. And also, em, understanding the difference between colonisation and decolonisation, to make our way forward into understanding the importance of decolonising Social Work as a practice.

**Kyra:** And I guess, just to kind of bring that back to Social Work education, like how do you think lecturers can begin to kind of decolonise their pedagogies or teach decolonial content?

**Zelia:** Yeah. So, I feel, first, lecturers must understand their job as providing students with the means of grasping that the difficulties and struggles stem from an inherently inequitable system and culture, as well as ways of resisting and supporting such systems. Secondly, help



students to understand the importance of challenging systemic oppression, and acknowledging the collective experiences of marginalized groups. Third, I'd say bring in expert by experiences, which I think we've started to do, like, for example, doing workshops, who have experiences, who can then educate students more on decolonisation.

**Kyra:** Thank you, Zelia. Those are really great recommendations.

**Amber:** Yeah. There definitely needs to be a...a...room for...for.. Okay, I'll give you an example. Recently, I was told, em, for a module that we had, by a previous lecturer, that the reason I didn't understand something was because I wasn't engaging with the material. Now, this is a prime example as...as...for Zelia's first point, like know...know what your role is as a lecturer. Your role as a lecturer is to make me understand, and, if I am not understanding the material that you've put forward, and I come to you and I say, "I can't understand it – I've read it through, I've gone to all the links that you put there, and I'm still not getting it", you don't accuse somebody of not engaging with the material. You sit down – maybe you need to have a think, maybe you need to gather other resources, but it's your job to help me, as a student, understand. It's not your job to accuse me. So, I would say that is one of the firm foundations, I would say, like...be...just being aware of...of...of people's backgrounds and...and their ways of learning, and the difficulty and the barriers that sometimes come up in people, em, and the way that they learn. So, yeah, I feel like there's too often this kind of like resistance, that if somebody says they don't understand something, it's because they don't want to read the material, it's because they don't want to engage. It's...it's a poor way of working. Yeah, we should be doing better.

**Zelia:** Yeah, because I think it's very easy to assume, for lecturers, that, oh yeah, we all are attending the lecture and, you know, we all... just because we all are sitting in the classroom [laughing] doesn't mean all of us will have the same understanding to what one lecturer is saying to us. And so, it's that assumption which really kicks me and then, you know, really tells me that, you know, it's not good – they cannot assume that, you know, just because they've posted a variety of resources online, you know, they make us do, watch, read, doesn't mean that we'll get it right away. So, yeah...

**Kyra:** Absolutely. So, unfortunately, we are coming to the end of this conversation. I feel like I could talk to you guys for ages! But, as a question I like to end on, what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

**Zelia:** Oh...higher education must consider the diversity of the student groups and ensure learning content moves beyond Western to global frameworks. Maybe diversify the reading



list to begin the journey of decolonising the curriculum. Introduce workshops to bring awareness around decolonisation and its importance, and, like I've said, we have already been doing it, so it's a great start, yeah.

**Amber:** I think, for me, we've seen that there has been sort of some development in sort of new modules within Social Work, especially at the University of West London. I think I would like to see...a module that kind of centres around different cultures and how they can slip through the net, people from different backgrounds that have been treated unfairly by the system, and how we work with those people. I feel like, there, in the same way certain nations expect reparations, I feel like our...there needs to be reparations for the people who are the victims of social work, and have been the victims of social work, and the great majority of the time, it is people from different backgrounds and different nationalities, different cultures, often slip through the net. We...we are the...whether we like it or not, we're the generations that are coming to repair a lot of the damage that has been done in previous decades, and I feel like there needs to be room in the curriculum for that. There needs to be accountability for it, and we...maybe, you know, the Government is maybe not likely to do any kind of reparations in that sense, but I think we can offer representations as a profession – sorry, reparations as a profession, and, you know, bear these people in mind, these people from different cultures who have been treated awfully, whose families have been destroyed because, you know, things weren't done the way they were supposed to be done. And that's not to say that...that social work is a bad profession – it's not. And, you know, each one of us, we're only human beings. But, at the same time, we are a professional body, so we need to be accountable, we do...we need to be accountable.

**Kyra:** Amber, Zelia, I just want to thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today. It's been just a real pleasure to just hear about your kind of upbringings and your journeys into higher education, as well as kind of some of the ways that we might begin to decolonise and think about Social Work in anti-racist ways. But, yeah, thank you guys so much! I'm hoping like, you know, when you're done with your Social Work degree, maybe we can have you guys on here again!

**Amber:** Amazing, it was a pleasure!

**Zelia:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**Amber:** Yeah, thank you so much for having us.

University of Westminster - Pedagogies for Social Justice Podcast

Episode 45: Amber and Zelia

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