

Culturally Relevant Curriculum (CRC) in Nigeria: Project Report

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Executive Summary

Funded by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), International Projects Fund (IP22-09), the Culturally Relevant Curriculum (CRC) Project sought to further the interests of social work educators in Nigeria endeavouring to develop an indigenous, culturally relevant curriculum. Though focused on Nigerian social work education, more broadly it sought to further the African and global discourse surrounding the decolonisation and diversification of knowledge valued and centred within academia, education, and practice. As the first comprehensive study of Nigerian social work academics' perspectives on cultural relevance, it provides a research model for use in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond, for those interested in developing a culturally relevant social work curriculum.

Following the compilation of a database on Nigerian social work academics, the researchers conducted a thorough, systematic review of the literature on or related to Nigerian social work published by Nigerian social work academics in international, African, and national journals. The researchers found 308 articles showing a wide range of research and scholarship covering a broad spectrum of locally and culturally relevant issues. The online survey sought further information on the social work curriculum, culturally relevant content in the existing curriculum, understandings of cultural relevance, and academics' views on a more culturally relevant curriculum. Mailed to Nigerian social work academics (n=160), it produced 49 responses.

The study found that Nigerian academics saw a need to generate more research and case examples of African and Nigerian social work; develop local and culturally relevant African and Nigerian social work practice models and theories; engage in the ethical dilemmas of working with traditional cultural practices; and integrate and value experiential knowledge in social work education.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum (CRC) Project

Introduction

Historically, formal social work in Nigeria came with a push from the United Nations to introduce the profession to non-Western regions around the world. British colonialism introduced social work to Nigeria in its thrust to train employees in its fledgling social administration. The British legacy left social work services underpinned by knowledge and practice models imported from Britain. Still heavily steeped in Western knowledge, social work programs across Nigeria's universities were working to create a more balanced curriculum with local and indigenous content relevant to Nigerian society. The National Universities Commission (NUC) that accredited and supported courses and curricula required a program review every five years that reported *inter alia* on progress in indigenising university curricula. There were several challenges for social work educators, not least instituting a unified process of curriculum review and achieving agreement on course composition and content given regional diversities across Nigeria and the ongoing dominance of sociology in many universities. While there was a burgeoning literature on African and Nigerian social work, there were not enough concrete practice examples for use in teaching. Against this backdrop, the purpose of the research was to compile material for a culturally relevant curriculum from a thorough review of literature published by academics in 12 institutions offering social work, who agreed to participate in the study.

Methodology

The University of Nigeria, Nsukka's (UNN) research ethics committee provided ethics approval for the research – UNN Ethics Clearance Certificate no. is UNN/EC/018-SC/SW/401/AUG-26 – on August 26, 2022. The study proceeded in five stages:

1. Compilation of a database on Nigerian social work academics
2. Systematic literature review
3. Online survey
4. Culturally relevant curriculum workshop
5. Reporting, development of project outputs, and dissemination of findings

Database on Nigerian Social Work Academics

Through direct contact with Nigerian heads of social work schools and departments, and web searches, the researchers compiled a database on 160 social work academics in 12 higher education institutions offering social work, including three teaching social work in other locations. In this process, the researchers informed the heads of social work about the research and the purpose of collecting information on Nigerian social work academics. All but one agreed to participate in the project and provide data on social work academics in their respective schools. The researchers compiled a blank spreadsheet for them to complete, including columns for name, title, age group, position, highest social work qualification, email address, courses taught, and web links to publications. From there, the researchers conducted web searches to fill in missing data, where possible (not all the universities had active up-to-date websites) though many academics had profiles on Google Scholar, Academia.edu, and ResearchGate.

Literature Review

The purpose of the literature search was to locate local literature, i.e., papers by Nigerian social work academics, published in international, African, and Nigerian social work and related journals that could serve as references for, and undergird, culturally relevant education and practice. The researchers compiled an annotated bibliography of the literature collected noting:

1. Areas of academic publications (problems and issues)
2. Social work focus (education and or practice)
3. Field or context (health, child welfare, social development, and so on)
4. Content relating to culturally unique features (of ethnic groups or cultures)

Online Survey and Focus Group

Data were collected (online survey and focus group) to elicit further information on social work curriculum content taught at Nigerian universities, social work academics thoughts on, and their experience of, and thoughts on, current and future use of a CRC. The researchers email an invitation to participate in an online survey to 160 Nigerian social work academics that remained for completion during October 2022; the completion rate was 20%. The CRC focus group took place in Lagos, Nigeria, in November 2022, with social work academics (n=10) from the Universities of Nigeria, Lagos, Ibadan, and Ilorin.

Project Outputs and Dissemination of Findings

The project outcomes included a comprehensive report, annotated bibliography, conference presentations, and publications in peer-reviewed social work journals, and chapter in the Levy, Okoye, Ingram, and Tanga (forthcoming) *Routledge Handbook on African Social Work Education*, as well as a website crcproject.org for knowledge dissemination.

Findings and Discussion

Literature review

The literature search found 308 articles written by social work academics that addressed issues on or relating to social work and social problems in Nigeria. Though many Nigerian academics did not publish directly on social work, they nevertheless published in related areas that might inform social work education and practice. They published in international (n=114), African (n=41), and Nigerian (n=47) social work and related journals. The researchers added 106 articles that met the search criteria, while conducting the review, mostly acquired through online searches of academics' online profiles and direct contact with academics in the database of Nigerian academics.

The researchers found a substantial body of literature showing a wide range of research covering a broad range of locally and culturally relevant issues published by Nigerian social work academics. Of the 308 articles reviewed, 186 reported on empirical studies, while 122 were theoretical or descriptive papers. Among the empirical papers, 107 used a qualitative research design, with small, targeted local samples, relying mainly on in-depth and key-informant interviews, and focus groups for data collection, while 58 employed a quantitative research design, drawing largely on a cross-sectional survey research approach collecting data from respondents at a single point in time. There were 14 mixed-methods studies and seven reviews of the literature. Collectively, the empirical studies reached close to 65,000 individuals.

The researchers grouped the papers into 22 themes, ranked according to the frequency of papers in each category. Thereafter, they grouped the themes to reach the main findings emanating from the systematic literature review, as shown in Table 1:

1. *Most published* (> 20 papers): covered areas related to established areas of practice (n=179), namely, health (n=69), ageing (n=44), child welfare (n=38), and social work education (n=34).
2. *Moderately published* (10-20 papers): concerned issues directly related to social work (n= 81), namely, practice (n=18), social work profession (n=17), community development (n=11), as well as issues related to gender and gender-based violence (20), and migration, refugees, internal displacement, and trafficking (15).
3. *Least published* (< 10 papers): related to emerging areas of practice (n=48), such as indigenous welfare (n=7), environmental social work (n=5), and religion and spirituality (n=3), or areas where social workers had failed to gain a strong foothold, such as disability (n=6) and addictions (n=2).

Table 1: Literature Review Themes by Frequency of Publication

	Findings	Theme	No. of Papers	%
1.	Most Published (>20 papers)	Medical, health, and mental health	69	
		Ageing	44	
		Child welfare	38	
		Social work education	34	
	Subtotal		179	58
2.	Moderately Published (10-20 papers)	Gender and gender-based violence	20	
		Practice	18	
		Social work profession	17	
		Migration: refugees, internal displacement, trafficking	15	
		Community development	11	
	Subtotal		81	26
3.	Least published (<20 papers)	Young people	8	
		Indigenous welfare	7	
		Disability	6	
		Crime, conflict, and peacebuilding	6	
		Environmental social work	5	
		Industrial social work	4	
		School social work	4	
		Religion and spirituality	3	
		Death and bereavement	2	
		Addictions	2	
		LGBTQi+	1	
	Subtotal		48	16
	TOTAL		308	100

The annotated bibliography distributed to Nigerian academics in the study's database listed the literature according to these main themes for matching to associated courses, providing URLs for online access, wherever possible. Overall, the thematic weighting of literature across areas directly on, or relevant or related to, social work education and practice suggested an imbalance between academic areas of research interest, the courses academics taught, and the practice context, as shown by the abundance of papers, in a very short time, on Covid-19. Academics responded opportunistically to the journals' interest in papers on the pandemic even though Nigerian social workers played little to no part in practice in this area. As regards *advancing culturally relevant issues*, many papers addressed sociocultural factors in diverse areas with the greatest focus on cultural relevance and indigenous social work in relation to social work education and many authors alluding to precolonial indigenous practices and support systems.

There would appear to be a growing awareness of the need for cultural relevance among academics that suggested a cultural shift within academia. On the criterion of *addressing social problems*, most scholars agreed on social work's role in addressing local issues and the large literature reviewed suggested a burgeoning scholarship on longstanding and emerging social problems, like human trafficking and displacement, seeking to carve out a path for social workers when avenues of practice opened in these contexts. The optimism of these social work scholars was commendable given Nigeria's minimalist welfare provision and poor service infrastructure. Though all the articles addressed social problems directly or indirectly, none provided a clear idea of the practice context or organisations employing social workers addressing these problems. There were no case studies of practice. The fact that problems related to ageing, health, and child welfare received widespread coverage suggested that these were established areas of social work practice, while other long-recognised practice contexts, such as disabilities, youth, and addictions, received considerably less scholarly attention, suggesting social work had failed to gain a foothold in these problem areas. Also absent were analyses of poverty and developmental interventions. As regards papers directly addressing *cultural and local relevance*, the papers collectively covered areas relating to:

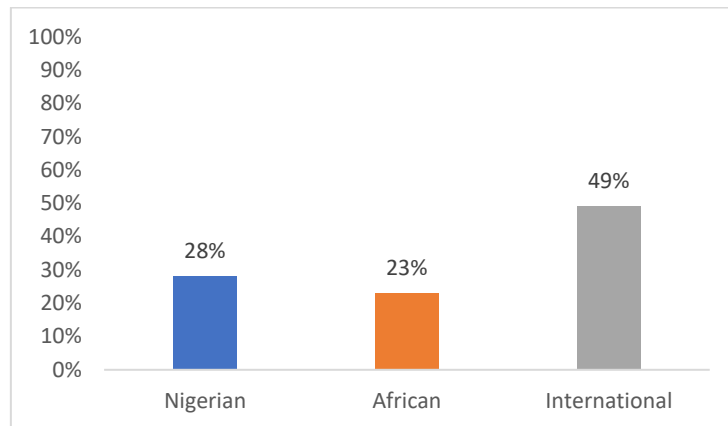
1. Theorising and contributing to indigenisation and cultural relevance
2. Professionalising social work and increasing recognition of the profession
3. Providing an evidence base for teaching and practice
4. Advancing a culturally relevant social work curriculum

The literature *theorising indigenisation and cultural relevance* discussed social work's responsiveness to Nigeria's diverse ethnoreligious and cultural groups and local social problems, including the development of local, culturally relevant education and practice models and approaches. There were many articles on the *social work profession* and the need for supportive legislation to raise its status in Nigerian society and the value of this. A common theme in the literature in all areas was the undervaluing of social work and the lack of appreciation of its actual and potential contribution to Nigerian society. While many authors mentioned the paucity of services and lack of policy implementation, few linked this directly to social work's struggle for recognition. There was widespread agreement on the need for professionalisation and the importance of ethics and practice guidelines to protect professional integrity, with many wanting the social work title to apply only to qualified (degreed) social workers. As regards an *evidence base for practice*, while the literature comprised 186 research-based articles, most provided little to guide practice, referring to social work roles with broad brushstrokes rather than attention to developing empirically based locally relevant practice models or evaluating the effectiveness of those in use. The literature *advancing cultural relevance in social work education* suggested teaching students about the Nigerian context; providing knowledge on local social problems and strategies to address pressing issues, including course content on cultural and ethnoreligious diversity and religion and spirituality.

Online Survey and Focus Group

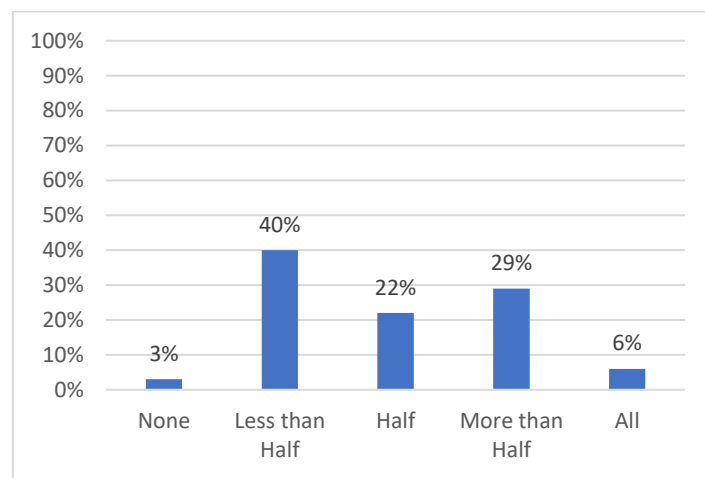
While the literature review revealed a large and growing body of Nigerian social work literature (308 papers) that educators could use in Nigerian teaching and course and curriculum development, key findings from the online survey showed that this was not happening yet. Only 28% of the literature used being Nigerian, 23% African, and 49% international and Western in origin, as shown in Figure 1. Furthermore, 40% of survey respondents stated that less than half the social work curriculum at their university was relevant to Nigerian culture, with 29% perceiving that more than half the curriculum was relevant to Nigerian culture, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Sources of Literature used in Social Work Education in Nigerian Universities



Source: CRC Online Survey

Figure 2: Nigerian Social Work Curriculum and Relevance to Nigerian Culture



Source: CRC Online Survey

Conclusions

The Nigerian literature conveyed the complexities of developing a culturally relevant curriculum, despite which there were concerted attempts to theorise what this might entail, the absence of concrete practice models and case examples, notwithstanding. Lacking in much of this literature was a close description of social work roles in contemporary practice environments. Much of the Nigerian literature discussed social work in general, hortatory terms, emphasising its value orientations and ambitious goals. The main conclusions were that

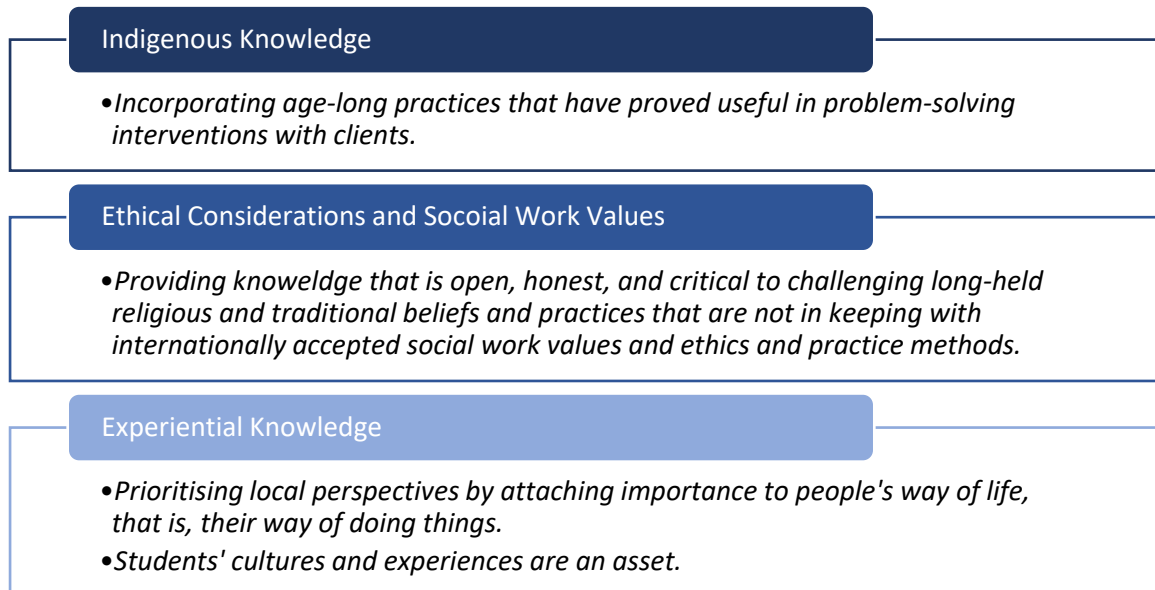
there was a substantial body of literature showing a wide range of research covering a broad range of locally and culturally relevant issues published by Nigerian social work academics. However, overall, the thematic weighting of literature across areas directly on, or relevant or related to, social work education and practice suggested an imbalance between academic areas of research interest, the courses academics taught, and the practice context. In the final analysis, Nigerian academics saw a culturally relevant curriculum as comprising three main areas, as shown in Figure 3:

1. *Indigenous knowledge*: Incorporating age-long practices that have proved useful in problem-solving interventions with clients, as well as reviewing and incorporating indigenous social work literature from other African countries.
2. *Ethical considerations and social work values*: Providing knowledge that is open, honest, and critical to challenging long-held religious and traditional beliefs and practices that are not in keeping with internationally accepted social work values and ethics and practice methods.
3. *Experiential knowledge*: Prioritising local perspectives by attaching importance to people's way of life; that is, their way of doing things, with students' cultures and experiences an asset. Integrating and valuing experiential knowledge extended understanding of indigenous knowledge, and offered a new approach to conceive a CRC within an African context.

Finally, the study led to the development of a new way of conceiving a CRC:

A culturally relevant curriculum (CRC) in social work education comprises courses that teach students to respond to local social problems, issues, and contexts that are based on, and informed by, local social work-related literature, experiential knowledge, and a critical understanding of culture. A CRC is relevant to social work education in the Global South and Global North, and aligns with global social work values and ethics to prepare graduates to work across and within different cultures.

Figure 3: Reconceptualising Culturally Relevant Curriculum



Source: CRC Online Survey and Focus Group

Recommendations

Our first recommendation relates to our project methodology that is easily transferable to other contexts for researchers in other settings to follow. To decolonise social work curriculum in the Global South and Global North, there is a need for more published literature from the Global South and access to this literature. This study has provided concrete evidence that there is a substantial literature on social work in Nigeria, but academics are not using this extensively in social work teaching. Based on our findings in this study, our further recommendations to guide other countries in the Global South to bring local and contextualised knowledge from the periphery to the core of social work education, as they continue to indigenise the social work curriculum, are as follows:

1. Review and use indigenous social work literature from other African countries
2. Generate more research and case examples of African and Nigerian social work.
3. Develop local and culturally relevant African-Nigerian social work practice models and theories.
4. Engage in the ethical dilemmas of working with traditional cultural practices, and that arise in teaching cultural relevance within a context dominated by international social work knowledge and practice.

Moving forward to achieve change, the researchers believe that educators need to harmonise indigenous and Western knowledge in the teaching of social work, since both are important in addressing social work's central principles of social justice, human rights, and respect for ethnocultural and religious diversities. For Nigerian academics, a culturally relevant educational strategy would engage key stakeholders in overcoming the challenges of indigenising the social work curriculum.

Dissemination to date

Gray, M., Levy, S., & Okoye, U. (forthcoming). Complexities involved in establishing a culturally relevant social work curriculum in Nigeria. In S. Levy, U. Okoye, R. Ingram, & P. Tanga (eds), *Routledge Handbook on African Social Work Education*. London: Routledge.

Gray, M., Levy, S., Okoye, U., & Amadasun, S. Culturally Relevant Curriculum (CRC) Project: Identifying local literature that addresses local problems to inform social work education in Nigeria. Paper in preparation for submission to *International Social Work*.

Levy, S., Gray, M., Okoye, U., & Amadasun, S. (2023). Decolonising social work through culturally relevant curricula. Paper presented at the *12th European Conference for Social Work Research (ECSWR): Social Work Research Through and Towards Human Relationships*, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy, April 12-14.