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‘Educating for peace’: conflict, division and social work education in Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

Social work practice and training in the context of political and ethnic conflict has seen renewed interest among scholars. Recent research has tried to shift focus away from simplistic interpretations of social work as an unshakably ‘benevolent’ profession. A recent emphasis on social work’s colonial legacies and the structural causes of political violence provide us with important new directions on how to rethink and reshape social work education and practice in these contexts. Cyprus presents a very interesting, yet under-explored, case study as it remains an island *de facto* divided, along ethnic lines. The division has resulted in the physical and political separation of the two most populous ethnic communities (Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots). United Nations (UN)-sponsored peace talks have gained momentum in recent years. This paper offers the first systematic exploration of the views of social work students across both sides of the divide. Through a mixed-method approach, students were able to express their thoughts and beliefs on ‘the other’ and on social work in the post-conflict realities. The study confirms the contradictory nature of social work education in Cyprus challenges the futility of nationalism and argues for the importance of bi-communal social work partnerships.

KEYWORDS

Political conflict; war; peace; education Cyprus; social work; reconciliation

Introduction

Social work education and practice in the context of conflict is an emerging, albeit still under-researched area of scholarship. This has also been the case of Cyprus, a country that has experienced ethnic conflict in different forms and intensity for a period of over 70 years. As a result of this conflict Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot social workers have never established formal links and the social work programmes have avoided, until recently, any form of collaboration. Following a number of informal, ‘low-key’ meetings at the UN-controlled buffer zone, in 2016, a group of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot social work created the first bicommunal social work platform in order to bring together social workers from both communities. This team of social workers, encouraged by the overall pro-peace momentum, was determined to reclaim the role of social work education as a peace-building, rather than divisive, institution. In order to do so, the team decided to explore Cypriot students’ views of the conflict, trauma and peace. A key aspect of that study was to

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understand emotions, perceptions, thoughts and ideas about social work education triggered through a shared space; an understanding of the structural 'otherisation' that post-war divisions had inflicted on social work. The findings of this research are presented in this article.

In order to better understand the Cypriot division along ethnic lines and its implications for social work, one has to trace the colonial origins of the conflict. In 1878, at the peak of what Hobsbawm (1987) described the Age of Empire, Cyprus, a small island in the South East Mediterranean and only a few miles away from Middle Eastern shore, was transferred by the Ottoman Empire to the British Empire. Such move was part of a wider set of colonial calculations in relation to the control of the Middle East, a region where the British Empire developed a renewed interest in the late nineteenth century (Neocleous & Ioakimidis, 2012). The Greek-speaking Christian majority at the time did not oppose the transfer as they considered this to be a step closer to the unification with mainland Greece. The gradual nationalist awaking of the Greek Cypriots awakening culminated to an anti-colonial struggle that intensified in the 1950s. Prioritising the unification with Greece also meant that the Turkish Cypriot community felt insecure and uncertain about their future (Mavratsas, 1992). The British colonial authority also utilised this – reasonable – fear in order to contain the anti-colonial movement. In fact, the competing interests of the United Kingdom, Greece and Turkey, ensured that even when Cyprus was recognised as an independent country in 1960, the administrative and constitutional complexity of the new Republic would render its administration dysfunctional and divisive (Trimikliniotis, 2017). Escalation of tensions between the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots culminated to a war and subsequent invasion of the Turkish army in 1974.

Since 1974, Cyprus has been divided *de facto* into two parts, the legal and internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus (south part), which controls two thirds of the island and the remaining one-third of the island in the north, administered by Turkish-Cypriots and the Turkish military forces. A UN-controlled 'buffer zone' divides the two parts of the island (Neocleous, 2018).

The aftermath of that war, which lasted for a total of less than two months, was the occupation of the north part of the island (37% of the land mass) by the Turkish army and the forced displacement of almost two hundred thousand people from both communities (165,000 Greek Cypriots and 45,000 Turkish Cypriots). Several thousands of people were killed, wounded or pronounced officially missing. The actual figures of casualties are still contested by the two sides and independent observers. Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots have been living separately ever since and crossing to each other's communities happens only through heavily militarised check point (Yiallouros, 2007).

After 31 years of complete physical and political separation, in 2003, several checkpoints across the green line were re-opened. For the first time, Cypriots from both communities were able to cross the line and visit their hometowns, meet their friends or merely witness how the 'other side' and its people 'look like'. The opening of checkpoints led to a rejuvenation of the peace (Ioakimidis & Trimikliniotis, 2019) and reconciliation movement.

Under the new circumstances created by the checkpoint opening and the subsequent revival of UN-brokered peace negotiations, the importance of Education, Health Care and Social Services institutions was re-defined as key in the prospect for of a re-united Cyprus. However, the increased interest in these institutions did not necessarily lead to an increase in academic research and debate (bar the field of primary and secondary education – see below). For example, research in the field of social work education is still very frail, despite the fact that social work practitioners will be expected to implement and deliver policies aiming at a sustainable peace process. The current study is the first of its kind as no researchers have previously attempted to document the perspectives of social work students and practitioners in relation to the peace process and bi-communal matters.

Social work practice in the context of conflict

Social work's reluctance to engage with research linked to sensitive political issues in relation to armed conflict is not new or unique to Cyprus. Coulter et al. (2013) while navigating students' views of armed conflict they identified how mechanisms of political control result in the 'silencing'

of social work students and educators. Despite the complexities of social work education and practice in the context of conflict, the long-lasting impact of war and violence is well established in social work literature. Communities affected by ethnic and political violence experienced severe psychosocial, economic and socio-political harms affecting individuals and their communities (Humphrey, 2000). Even at the 'post-war' or 'post-conflict' stage, high levels of insecurity and uncertainly characterises the transition. Post-conflict transitions tend to have hard to define boundaries as the experience of conflict not only causes actual physical and material damage through acts of calculated violence, but it also inscribes itself in the memories of individuals, families and communities long after the traumatic events have occurred. The damage incurred to communities, groups and individuals is often used to shape social identity, beliefs, values, knowledge and social reality (Humphrey, 2000).

As in the case of Cyprus, social work researchers have tried to highlight the fact that political and ethnic conflicts do often originate from their regions' colonial past (Campbell et al., 2018; Coulter et al., 2013; Duffy et al., 2019). Cyprus, Ireland, India and Pakistan, constitute solid examples of how the colonial past nurtured subsequent and extensive political conflicts and gross violations of human rights due to the re-ignition of historical ethnic and religious differences. In these contexts, social work practice is heavily influenced, if not a direct product, of the colonial legacies (Campbell et al., 2018; Waaldijk, 2011).

According to Campbell et al. (2018), even though sovereignty was transferred and established by newly created states, institutionalised divisions and nurtured sectarian politics were an inevitable product. Consequently, simplistic views of the past constitute a crucial challenge for social work, especially with regards to confronting the legacy of war crimes and chronic injustices. Under these circumstances, social workers do not seem to have a clear view of the complexities of such legacies. This is partly due to the fact that in many parts of the world, social work itself has been a direct product of these colonial legacies. Therefore, in such cases, the development of social work practice is constrained by the political context and the calculations political elites (Ramon et al., 2006).

Despite the assumption that social workers directly commit to supporting vulnerable service users, regardless of their ethnic background and political preferences, research suggests that in contexts of conflict professional attitudes may be less clear (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Duffy et al., 2019). As Ramon et al. (2006) explained in their seminal study of conflict, professional, personal and political identities are closely linked and it may be difficult to separate them even in post-conflict situations. There is an imminent danger that the professional role may be compromised by the need to demonstrate group cohesion and, conversely, when the 'other' is demonised and perceived as the enemy.

This can be explained by the fact that violent political conflicts do impact on people's beliefs, identities and values, thus evoking strong emotional reactions within the fabric of society where even social scientists, who are trained to be neutral, such as social workers, cannot easily separate and manage negative feelings. It is a challenging task not to be affected by violent images and a divisive atmosphere spreading across a society (Duffy et al., 2013; Duffy et al., 2019; Ramon et al., 2006). Therefore, social workers, practicing in such context, do face complex ethical dilemmas and may also experience bitterness and resentment towards service users from different backgrounds and opposing sides in which history taught them to view them as 'enemies' (Duffy et al., 2013). Relevant research has shown how social workers, as human beings, cannot be impervious to the violent imagery and the biased, resentful and vitriolic environments often produced by political conflict (Baum & Ramon, 2010; Duffy et al., 2013; Duffy et al., 2019).

Consequently, it is quite possible that negative cognitions and perceptions towards the opposition may infiltrate social work practice (Nuttman-Shwartz & Dekel, 2008). It can be argued, therefore, that social work's declared quest for a social justice-based practice, becomes an enormously difficult and often dangerous task to achieve in the context of conflict. This inevitably creates pressures for social workers willing to follow the internationally accepted codes of ethical practice. For example, during the conflict in Northern Ireland, social workers were very unlikely to challenge the causes and manifestations of sectarian violence because it was safer to adopt a 'technocratic' neutral stance

(Duffy, 2012; Pinkerton & Campbell, 2002; Ramon, 2008). On a similar vein, when examining the reasons for the relative silence of Israeli psychologists and social workers about the ongoing conflict among Arabs and Israelis, studies found that, like other social scientist in similar situations, they struggled to maintain a belief in the scientific enterprise which ideologically allowed them to ignore political and social matters (Ramon et al., 2006).

Inevitably, within such a context of uncertainty and instability social work education does not remain unaffected. Literature indicates that the political conditions and circumstances of one country can be infiltrated and engrained within the educational system (Coulter et al., 2013). For example, in Northern Ireland, as Coulter et al. (2013) stated, the negative impact of sectarianism was quite evident on social work education and practice. The author continues by stating that social work practitioners and educators in order to avoid disputes and feelings of discomfort which are associated with the political violence and social divisions that have characterised this society they performed their duties through a proceduralised and technocratic form of practice which ignored the troubles and the conflict occurred in the past among the people (Coulter et al., 2013). On a similar vein, Duffy et al. (2019) demonstrated how the majority of social workers practicing in Ireland during the troubles did not receive any sufficient training on how to navigate the complexities of the political conflict.

Other researchers also question the ways social theory and social justice are (if at all) promoted through the current social work educational system in countries which have been torn apart by political conflict (Coulter et al., 2013; Dekel & Baum, 2010; Duffy et al., 2019; Pinkerton & Campbell, 2002). It can be argued that traditional social work educational models fail to challenge the concept of political conflict and its impact on personal and professional identities. They do not take into consideration the negative feelings and stereotypes towards the opposition which may be expressed by the majority of the students. Most of these negative feelings are embedded subconsciously from a very early stage of one's life (Coulter et al., 2013; Duffy et al., 2019; Pinkerton & Campbell, 2002). Cyprus is not immune to these criticisms as the country's ethnic conflict has never been addressed or even taken into consideration within the field of social work.

Rationale of research methodology

As described above, the current study has two principle aims: on the one hand, it explores the views of Cypriot social work students and recent graduates of the historic and current implications of the conflict, with a particular emphasis on the construction of the 'other'. On the other hand, the current research aims at understanding the complexities Cypriot social work education faces in the context of ethnic separation. In order to do so, researchers employed a mixed-method approach which included a survey and a follow-up focus group. An ethical approval process was followed and obtained as per guidelines at the university of one of the key authors.

The use of a survey as a first data-collection layer was informed by two factors: (a) the need to 'map out' the diverse uncertainties, conflicts and dilemmas our participants may face before a direct engagement with each other and (b) a need to challenge the culture of silence and suppression of all meaningful discussions towards the Cypriot issue. The dearth of relevant research on social work perspectives on the Cyprus conflict required our research team to engage with a research technique that would allow us to map the extent of different perspectives among social work students and recent graduates. A survey – as a first stage of the data collection process – was selected as the most appropriate method for this purpose; it enabled us to capture diverse views while also engaging with a critical mass of participants who would otherwise be reluctant to participate in 'deep dive' qualitative approach. As mentioned in the previous section, access to participants is always an important challenge in social work research in the context of conflict.

While questionnaires do not explore themes in great detail or depth, where there is little opportunity to qualify the meaning of answers, the fact that questionnaires can be anonymous means that

respondents may be encouraged to answer questions truthfully in the knowledge they cannot be identified. This not only helps increase the validity of their responses (Trueman, 2020) but it is also of critical importance in politically contested contexts. The bicommunal survey also helped in ensuring that students developed a degree of trust for the research team and were more confident to move onto the next stage of our bicommunal focus groups.

Therefore, personally administered structured questionnaires were provided into participants in the majority languages spoken on the island (Greek and Turkish). However, the language of communication within our research team was English, as research team members did not speak the language spoken in the other community[1] and therefore the original survey was designed in this language prior to translating in Greek and Turkish. Through the questionnaires, we attempted to document the broad tendencies with regards to participants' perceptions of the conflict, the 'other' and the role of social work. Thirty Greek Cypriots (G/Cs) and 22 Turkish Cypriots (T/Cs) social work students participated to the survey. The overall number of Cypriot social work students, at the time of the research was approximately 110 (79 in the South and 30 in the North). Therefore, we are confident that our sampling was substantial enough to ensure representativeness and validity.

The second stage of our research allowed space for a more in-depth exploration of the participants' views through a bicommunal focus group. Students who had previously completed the questionnaire, from both sides of the divide were invited to participate. Unsurprisingly, the number of students who actually agreed to participate was significantly lower than the number of participants in the survey (all of the survey respondents were invited). Our plan was to organise different, one-off, focus groups depending on the number of potential participants. Fourteen social work students (six Greek Cypriots and nine Turkish Cypriots) expressed an interest and eventually participated to our qualitative part of the research. The relatively low number of participants allowed for the facilitation of a single, mixed focus group.

The focus of group discussion revolved around the following themes: (a) construction of the 'other' as enemy, (b) implications of the conflict for social work and social work education and (c) main issues that emerged from the questionnaire (impact of nationalism, social work curricula and shape of a future peace agreement).

The focus group was an extraordinary experience for researchers and students alike. For most participants, this was the first time ever participating in a bi-communal activity or even conversing with people from the other side of the divide. As we describe below, manifestations of different and intense emotions were evident throughout the discussion.

Our research team preferred the use of a bi-communal focus group rather than interviews due to the fact that the latter approach would not allow for exploration of group dynamics emerging in a collective form of data collection. Indeed, group dynamics and responses generated in a mixed group are of great analytical value in research focusing on conflict. Furthermore, the collective nature of focus groups can empower the participants, as they are especially useful for engaging people with limited power and influence, such as, for example, college students (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). The method utilises the interaction among research participants to generate data that are used in the study (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Kitzinger, 1994; Marková et al., 2007). The shared experience can be a powerful tool for expressing itself both negatively and positively, which the individual interview does not provide the same conditions for.

At the first part of the focus group, participants were invited to introduce themselves and speak about some of their interests in relation to their social work education and practice. The second part focused on 'giving meaning' to some of the themes that emerged through the survey. For most participants, this was a unique opportunity to not only discuss issues related to the 'Cyprus Problem' but also do so jointly with fellow students from the 'other community'. Through the discussion, we tried to decode the general attitude of participants and elaborate on whether the current educational system addresses the Cypriot problem and its various implications on social work practice.

Mapping Cypriot students' perspectives on social work in the context of division (survey research findings)

Greek Cypriot social work students

In line with international literature, our research demonstrates how nationalistic stereotypes affect students' views on social work and, most worryingly, how these internalised stereotypes can impact on their practice. With regards to their motivation for entering social work education, most Greek Cypriot students suggest that 'commitment to justice and helping other people' are the main reasons that let Greek Cypriot (G/C) social work students to study social work (76.7%). G/C social work students stated that job opportunities and language of instruction are also reasons that led them to social work (23.3%) but in lesser degree. Nevertheless, an obvious contradiction arises when a staggering 43.3% of G/C social work students state that they would refuse to work with Turkish Cypriot (T/C) clients.

Another important finding from the survey suggests that the majority of G/C social work students (86.7%) do not have friends or acquaintances from the other community. Unsurprisingly, the majority of G/C participants (70%) have not participated in any bi-communal events, and 40% of them indicate that they are not interested or do not wish to participate in any bi-communal events. Only, 23.3% of the students stated that they would participate in such events if they had the opportunity.

With regards to the opening of checkpoints that allows for interaction between the two communities, 46.7% of G/C participants have a positive opinion about it, although a 46.7% feel sceptical about the single most important reconciliation step that took place in Cyprus since the war. 33.3% of G/C students have not visited the north part of the island, while 43.3% went to the north less than three times. Only a handful of 6.7% visited the north part of Cyprus more than ten times. On top of that, 60% of the G/C participants believe that T/C should not have the right of possessing official documents of the Republic, such as identity cards and passports.

Ironically, all the G/C participants (100%) agree with the social work principles and code of ethics, that 'social workers are required to provide services unconditionally to various minorities, promoting the principle of respect and non-judgmental attitude towards them.'

86.7% of G/C participants admit that the current social work training system does not prepare them at all (40%) or very little (46.7%) to manage potential social problems faced by Cypriots coming from the other community.

Turkish Cypriot social work students

Reponses from Turkish Cypriot (T/C) students point a much more moderate picture. 'Commitment to justice and helping other people' are also the main motivations that drive T/C students to study social work (57.2%). T/C students stated that job opportunities and language of instruction are also important reasons informing their decision to study social work (42.8%). Unlike Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriot students seem significantly more positive with the prospect of working in ethnically mixed teams. According to our survey, no T/C student (0%) would refuse to work with G/C clients, while 85.7% would work with them like everyone else or would pay particular attention on their case (14.3%).

Students were also asked whether they have friends from the other community and their answers indicate that the majority of T/C social work students (57.1%) do not have G/C friends. Unsurprisingly, the majority of T/C participants (57.1%) in the survey has not ever participated in bi-communal events, with a 33.3% of them indicating that they did not have the opportunity while a 28.6% having no interest in such events.

With regards to the opening of various checkpoints across the buffer zone, 61.9% of T/C participants have a positive opinion about it, yet, a 38.1% disagree with it. Consequently, 23.8% did not visit

the south part of the island, while 23.8% went to the south from one to three times and 23.8% from three to five times during these 16 years since the opening of checkpoints. Only a 23.8% visited the south part of Cyprus more than 10 times.

A great majority of T/C social work students participating in the study indicated that, if in the social services they work, some of their service users were Cypriots from the other community they would work with them like anyone else (85.7%). Also, a 14.3% stated that they would pay particular attention to their case. Unsurprisingly to the above findings, the majority of T/C participants (90.5%) agree with the social work principles and code of ethics, that 'social workers are required to provide services unconditionally to various minorities, promoting the principle of respect and non-judgmental attitude towards them.'

In addition to the above findings, a 52.4% of T/C participants admit that the current social work education system does not prepare them at all (4.8%), very little (9.5%) and little (38.1%) to manage potential social problems faced by Cypriots coming from the other community. However, a 47.7% stated that they receive much (42.9%) or very much (4.8%) preparation, indicating a contradiction between the two different responses.

Making sense of 'transitions to peace' (Focus groups)

Greek/Cypriot (G/C) social work students

The most obvious difference between the survey responses and the view of G/C students expressed in the focus group was that the actual opportunity to discuss with T/C students allowed for a more moderate vocabulary and attitude.

In trying to explain some of the survey results suggesting that G/C students see T/Cs very negatively student ***A*** suggested that: 'The negative responses of Greek Cypriots are probably a result of ignorance. The educational system, primary and secondary, creates negative ideas for the other community'. He also reiterated that: 'Before the meeting, I felt anxious and stressed. This was because I had never met people from the Turkish/Cypriot community before and I was anxious about my reaction and also their reaction during the meeting'.

Student ***B*** pointed that:

> Before the meeting with the Turkish/Cypriots I had mixed feelings. Mixed feelings for a person whose parents are displaced. I did not feel any hate or superiority. Instead, the feelings I had before the meeting were curiosity, anxiety and fear for the content of the discussion. How uncomfortable would be to discuss about our feelings based on our origins and our ancestors? What do we really have to separate?

Student ***B*** also pointed that:

> All the fear, ignorance and propaganda in order to keep us separated and maintain hate among Cypriots is the reason that leads Greek-Turkish friendship to fade out. The fear for the unknown and people's opinion is a major factor that prevents the two communities from maintaining relationships.

All of the Greek Cypriot participants reported that despite the initial nervousness the opportunity to meet and discuss had a powerfully positive impact. Student ***C*** explained that:

> During the meeting, I began to realize how both ethnic groups have absolutely nothing to differentiate because we share a common sense, social justice and love for our fellow citizens as any social worker. As the discussion evolved, several things were said by students from both communities that may have bothered most of us. Expressing our true feelings and beliefs can often create negative emotions in individuals in a group, just as it was happened.

And then she went on explaining such change in attitude:

> I admit that as soon as I saw them [the Turkish/Cypriots] I became emotional and I tried to hold my tears, because we have more in common with these kids than differences. Thinking that they are not responsible for their ancestors' or the politicians' actions I said that: what the politicians failed to do, the social workers will do. I'm a 'wounded' child of war, displaced from my home and my village, experiencing endless fear and

> throwing responsibility to the occupation policy of Turkey and its partners in the occupied part of my country. Yet, I said that I'm ready to unite together for the freedom and restoration of justice.

Turkish/Cypriot (T/C) social work students

Turkish Cypriot students shared very similar sentiments. Their responses are presented verbatim in order to illustrate the actual image and atmosphere of the group meeting. Student ***D*** explained that: 'My primary and secondary school experience made me see Greek Cypriots as enemies'.

Other T/C participants, like Student ***E*** said that: 'I think the negative views stem from the influence of the community on us. We were told and peer pressured to accept certain narratives as true'. Student ***E*** explained that: 'The answers of the Greek-Cypriots made me feel uncomfortable. Why do they see us as the enemy? I have never seen the Greek Cypriots as enemies'.

Student ***F*** reiterated that: 'I admit I was prejudiced against Greek Cypriots and also very worried about their views towards us'. While trying to make sense of the G/C attitude she stated: 'I think they [the G/C students] used to be prejudiced against us but whenever we started to discuss and solve something together they have positive thoughts about us, as well'. Despite their worry and surprise about the more polemic views expressed though the G/C questionnaires, Turkish Cypriot students also felt that the opportunity to meet and discuss with social work students from the other community had an overwhelmingly positive impact.

Student ***E*** confirmed that,

> Before joining this event I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect and what kind of atmosphere there would be. Even though I have been involved in a number of peace-related programs, meeting with someone else was a little stressful. But, when I talked to everyone, I understood that the walls between us can easily be demolished, and even that we do not speak the same language, but we have many common features. I am sure that this event has brought me and everyone a very good memory and friendships. I hope to be in constant communication with each other and work together for a future of peace.

Likewise, student ***G*** emphasised that,

> I have always been a supporter of peace. I was told that the Greek Cypriots did not want peace and that Greek Cypriots instigated violence against the Turks, but thanks to this meeting I am very happy to see that they also actively seek peace. I hope that peace will come as soon as possible and I always think that we will achieve good things together.

These statements indicate that although there was a significant stereotypic approach among the two communities and most of the feelings and views were based on ignorance and misinformation coming, mostly by the educational system, still there is hope that education and bi-communal activities can bring social work students closer to each other.

What does the future hold? Educating for peace

During the analysis stage of the findings, one member of our ethnically mixed research team made used a metaphor from Ancient Rome in order to highlight the complexity of presenting and analysing data that are often contradictory and complex. She reminded our team of the Roman God of new beginnings and transitions; Romans thought of transitions as particularly complex and unpredictable processes that are shaped by both a desire for change and a fear of novelty. This why the god of Transitions, Janus, was depicted as having two faces: one staring at the past while the other is fixed towards what the future will bring.

Indeed such metaphor accurately, although slightly poetically, reminded us of the Janus-faced peace process in Cyprus what this means for social work. Indeed, one aspect of the findings focuses very much on the past-traumas and the powerful stereotypes underpinned by opposing nationalist narratives. The fact that education has helped enrich and amplify those narratives – so clearly represented in our survey results and focus group discussions are not confined to social

work but encompass nearly all institutions. A recent research study about co-habitation of the two communities indicated that younger Greek Cypriots are reluctant to live together with Turkish Cypriots (Psaltis et al., 2017). The education system seems to constitute the single most important predetermined factor for this negative attitude. History and citizenship courses in Cyprus' (south) primary and secondary education are evidently ethnocentric, developing a narrative of Greek-Orthodox continuity and often fail to differentiate between TCs and Turkish nationals (Psaltis et al., 2017). The school system as a transmitter of acceptable knowledge fails to present the facts from an objective point of view. Instead, teachers tent to produce and reproduce a more fictionalised version of history events presenting Greek Cypriots as the sole victimised community that is constantly under threat due to the violation of international law and human rights by the Turkish State (Spyrou, 2011; Philippou & Klerides, 2010; Psaltis et al., 2019).

Unsurprisingly, primary and secondary education in the north also promotes a view that is ethnocentric and articulates a narrative portraying their communities as the victimised community. Interestingly, the Trade Union of Turkish Cypriot teachers has repeatedly opposed such reading of history and called for the authorities to re-think the way history is told in the island. To elaborate even further, the school settings may affect the notion of national identity and how it emerges through education. To be more precise, Spyrou (2011) contended that teachers very often highlight national identity categories linking Cypriot identity with Greek identity in the process of setting up Greece and Turkey as polar opposites in order to serve national agendas. This strategy is applied in the Turkish Cypriot community, as well. It can be argued that this process creates further confusion as it highlights the differences among the two communities and simultaneously obstructs people from both communities of discovering their common identity as Cypriots. Research findings revealed that the school system may be considered as one of the most crucial contributing factors towards children's and young people's inability to make sense and differentiate GCs / TCs with Greek and Turkish nationals respectively (Spyrou, 2011). In addition, when the children were requested to express their thoughts on the Cypriot problem and express their feeling about the Turks, most of them gave a very negative description of the Turks such as barbarians, evil and invaders (Spyrou, 2011).

Social workers in both sides of the divide have not allowed for spaces that encouraged critical exploration of the conflict and its legacies. Our review of all social work curricula in Cypriot universities[2] indicated that not a single social work programme has included a module that openly discusses the Cyprus conflict. Although the curricula we reviewed seem to be on par with international standards offering robust and rigorous access to social work theories and practice, they simultaneously avoid to discuss the 'here and now' reality of the Cypriot society. One would not exaggerate when describing the Cyprus conflict as the 'elephant in the room' when it comes to social work curricula. Consequently, social work programmes seem to be failing in one crucial aspect of their mission, the critical engagement with structural socio-political and cultural issues.

This is not uncommon among tertiary and higher education in Cyprus. As various authors have stated, the Cypriot social work educational model was constructed on a post-colonial ideology (Askeland & Payne, 2006; Neofytou, 2011; Triseliotis, 1977). A technical and colonial version of social work education and practice was historically imported from, and influenced by, knowledge and ideas derived primarily from the British colonial administration (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2017). The current social work theoretical framework such as practices and interventions since their inception were never questioned to the extent that these interventions correspond to the Cypriot local reality. Consequently, the specific political, economic and social conditions in the country need to be taken into consideration so as to possibly reshape and redesign the provision of social work education.

This realisation brings us to the forward-looking face of Janus. The transition to sustainable peace does require challenging the old colonial and nationalist stereotypes. Most of the participants in our focus groups seemed to be able to grasp that power and influence of nationalist rhetoric and practice. What seemed to be lacking, most participants observed, was the utilisation of joint, collective spaces. Although the Green line is nowadays porous allowing for visits to the 'other side' of the island the structural and institutional separation of the two communities still exists.

Interestingly, the majority of participants identified social work as a potentially crucial 'tool' in the process of achieving sustainable peace and reconciliation. The social justice element of social work and the use of creative, relationship-based methods were seen in our focus groups as important concepts embedded into social work education and practice. Indeed, an approach that makes use of social work skills would also require the creation or utilisation of 'spaces of practice'.

A key aspect for a social work education that places peace and reconciliation process in the epicentre of its activity would be reclaiming the Common. The Common, in sociological terms, should not only refer to the narrow spaces of the social work curricula. Instead, it needs to be seen holistically as an effort to reclaim public space, politics, human relationships and, most importantly, capture young people's imagination about a shared future. As Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2019) suggested in their recent essay on Cypriot social work 'Cypriots must learn from the past and learn from other experiences as learning is the key in the processes of struggles ahead […] However, it is simultaneously essential that identities are not ethnicised and essentialized'.

The creation of this new, pro-peace momentum mentioned above is not seen by the authors as a wishful-thinking. The pro-peace sentiment that emerged in our focus group with social work students seems to be in-line with the broader trends in Cypriot society. A recent research study published while we were working in this article confirmed that there is now a positive impetus and suggested that the majority of Cypriots among both communities are in support of the reunification in Cyprus through a Federal settlement (Politis, 27/9/2020). It is our contention that despite the structural barriers a viable peace process is within reach and social work has a key role to play in its design and implementation. Our current research has allowed for much hope about the social work role in this much-needed peace and reconciliation process.

Notes

1. English is one of the three official languages in Cyprus according to the Cyprus Constitution
2. There are five social work programs currently in all Cyprus and during the study. Two are located in the south and three in the north part. At the time of the study, the overall number of students in the north is 50. However, only 15 were Turkish Cypriots, while the rest were from Turkey. The number of social work students in the south at the time of the study were 70.

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