

TEACHING SAFETY; RETHINKING CLIENT VIOLENCE IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

**Dr Lucé Pretorius
North-West University
COMPRES Research Entity**



ASASWEI 2025: Advancing Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice, Peace building, and Sustainable Development through teaching, research and practice

THE KNOCK AT THE DOOR

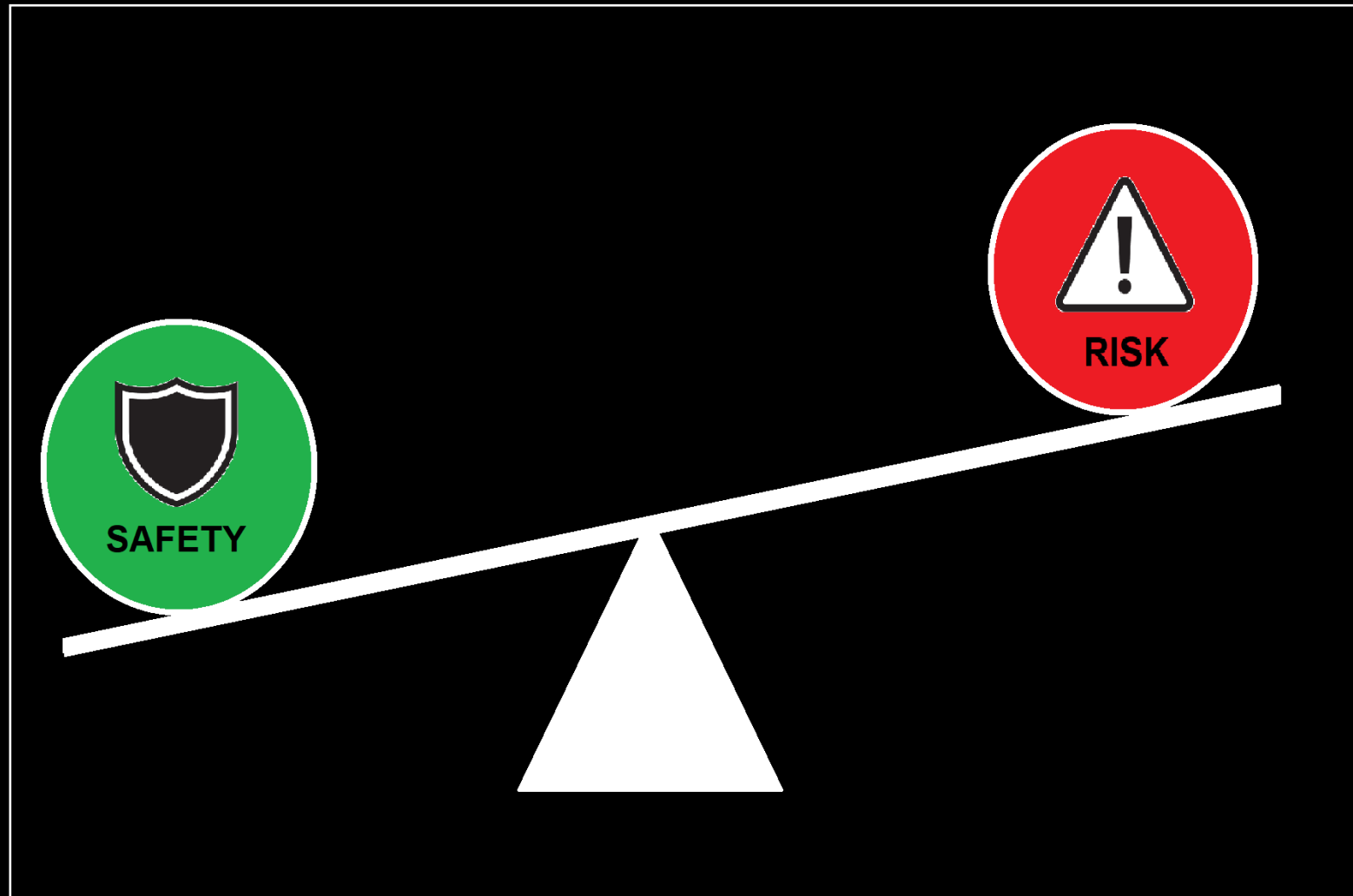
- First home visit = shouting, threats, and fear.

"They never prepared us for this in class."

- Not isolated → systemic challenge

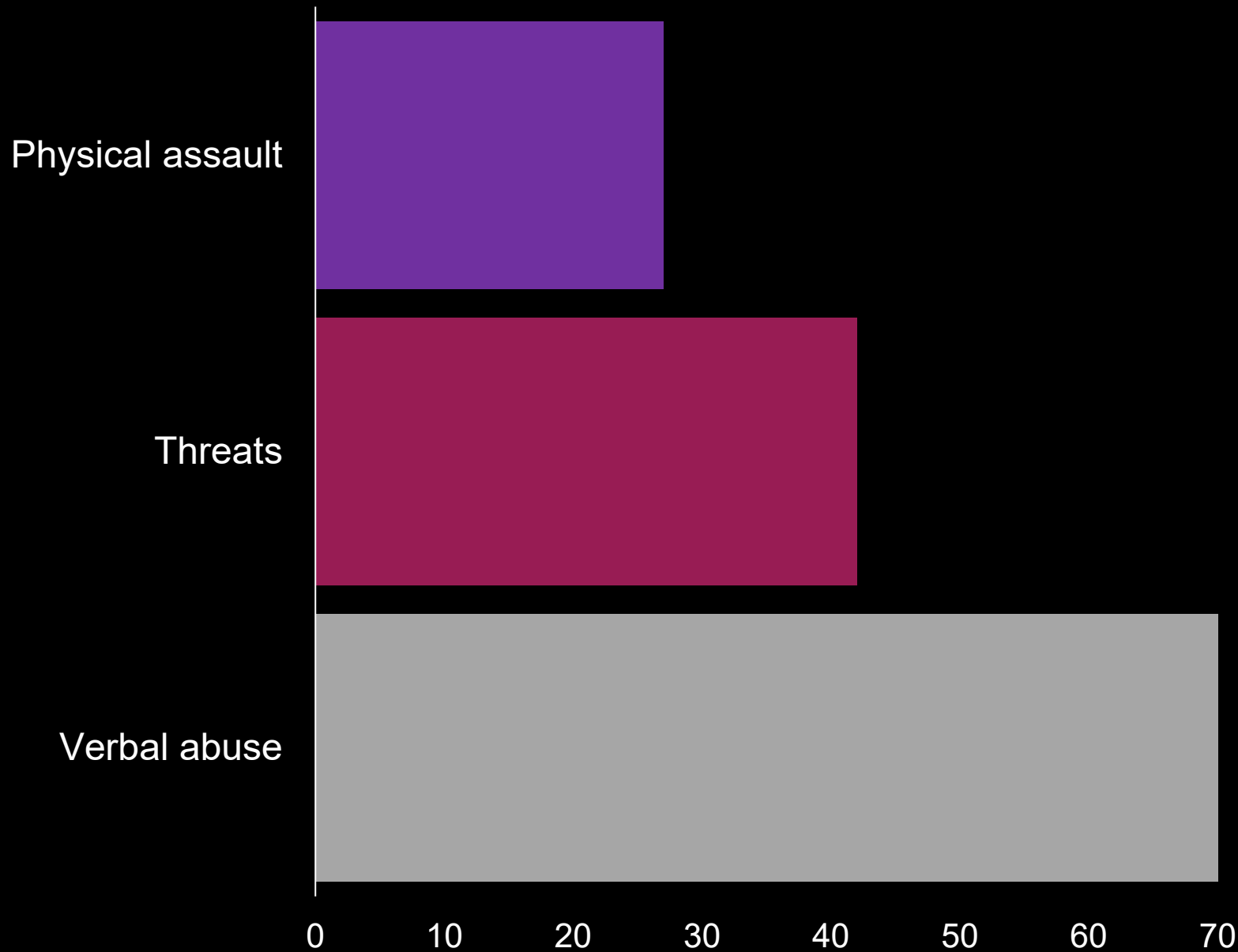


WHY THE KNOCK MATTERS



- Systemic, global issue in social work
- Risks → undermine wellbeing & retention
- Organisational culture eroded
- Curricula silent on safety

VIOLENCE IN PRACTICE



- The “knock” echoes daily across the profession
- Consequences: burnout • withdrawal • attrition
- Violence that “works” → reinforced and repeated



VIOLENCE IN TRAINING

Practitioners

Students

- Exposure begins early in training
- Students face risks → readiness & wellbeing harmed
- They often model supervisors' coping — or lack thereof
- Cycles of violence reinforced in the profession

Prevalence Among Students:

- 81% report non-physical aggression
- 56% experience physical aggression
- 40% encounter sexual harassment

Impact:

- Increased anxiety
- Disengagement from studies
- Feelings of being unsupported

CURRICULUM GAP

- Violence is pervasive, yet safety training is omitted
- Most programmes leave a critical void in preparation

UNPREPARED GRADUATES

A staggering 94% of students report feeling unprepared to manage aggression effectively after completing their studies.

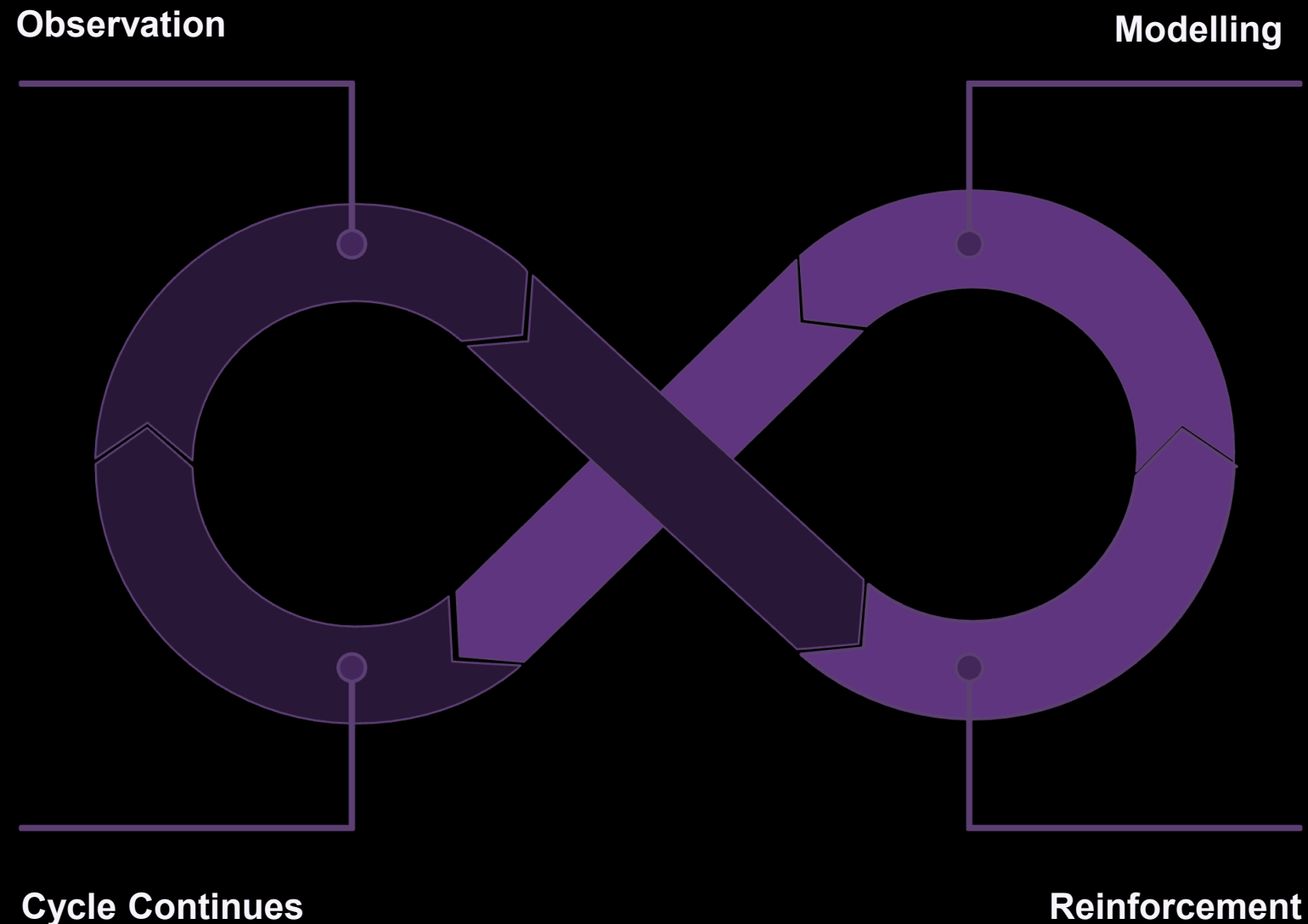
IMPLICIT LESSON

This omission sends an implicit message to future practitioners: "safety is secondary," reinforcing a culture of silence rather than proactive preparedness.

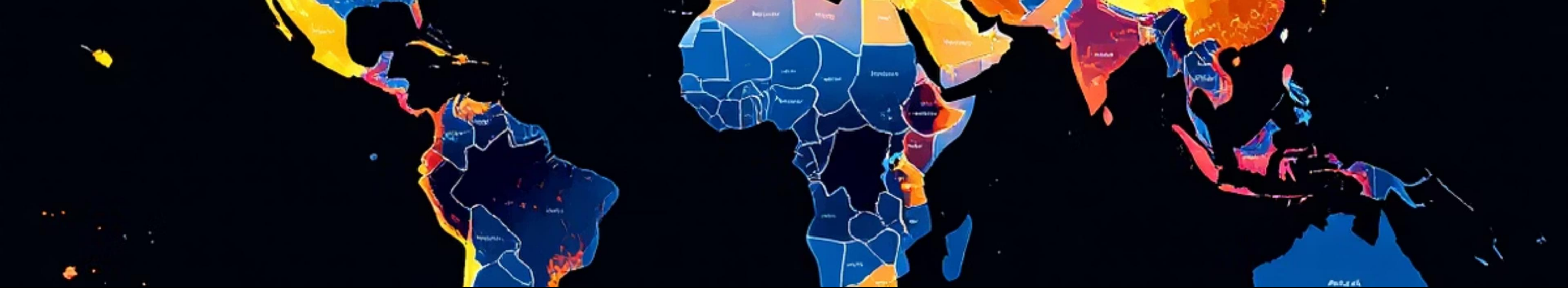
- The “knock” goes unanswered in the classroom
- Silence in curricula reinforces silence in practice



MAKING SENSE OF THE CYCLE: SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY



- The “knock” repeats across generations (Bandura)
- Clients, practitioners & students shape one another
- Observed → absorbed → Reinforced → repeated → Modelled → copied
- SLT = bridge between data and daily practice



RESEARCH PATTERNS

- 22 studies (1996–2023) → strong evidence base
- **Geographical bias: mostly USA, Israel, Slovakia**
- **Minimal research in Africa & Latin America**
- **Scholarship spikes after tragedies, then fades**
- **Research often reactive → silence reinforced**

Pretorius, L., & Herbst, A. G. (2025). Understanding client violence through social learning theory: A scoping review. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 11, 101513. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101513>

A woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a dark blue blazer over a light blue shirt, is seated at a wooden table in a classroom. She is wearing a VR headset and smiling. Other students are visible in the background, also seated at tables.

RETHINKING THE KNOCK: SIMULATION & INNOVATION

- Prepares students for practice realities
- Safe spaces to observe, model, and rehearse
- Builds confidence & appropriate responses before the field



Advanced Tools

Utilizing VR, escape rooms, and AI avatars creates immersive learning environments



Enhanced Outcomes

These simulations boost student confidence, refine practical skills, and increase overall readiness for real-world scenarios.

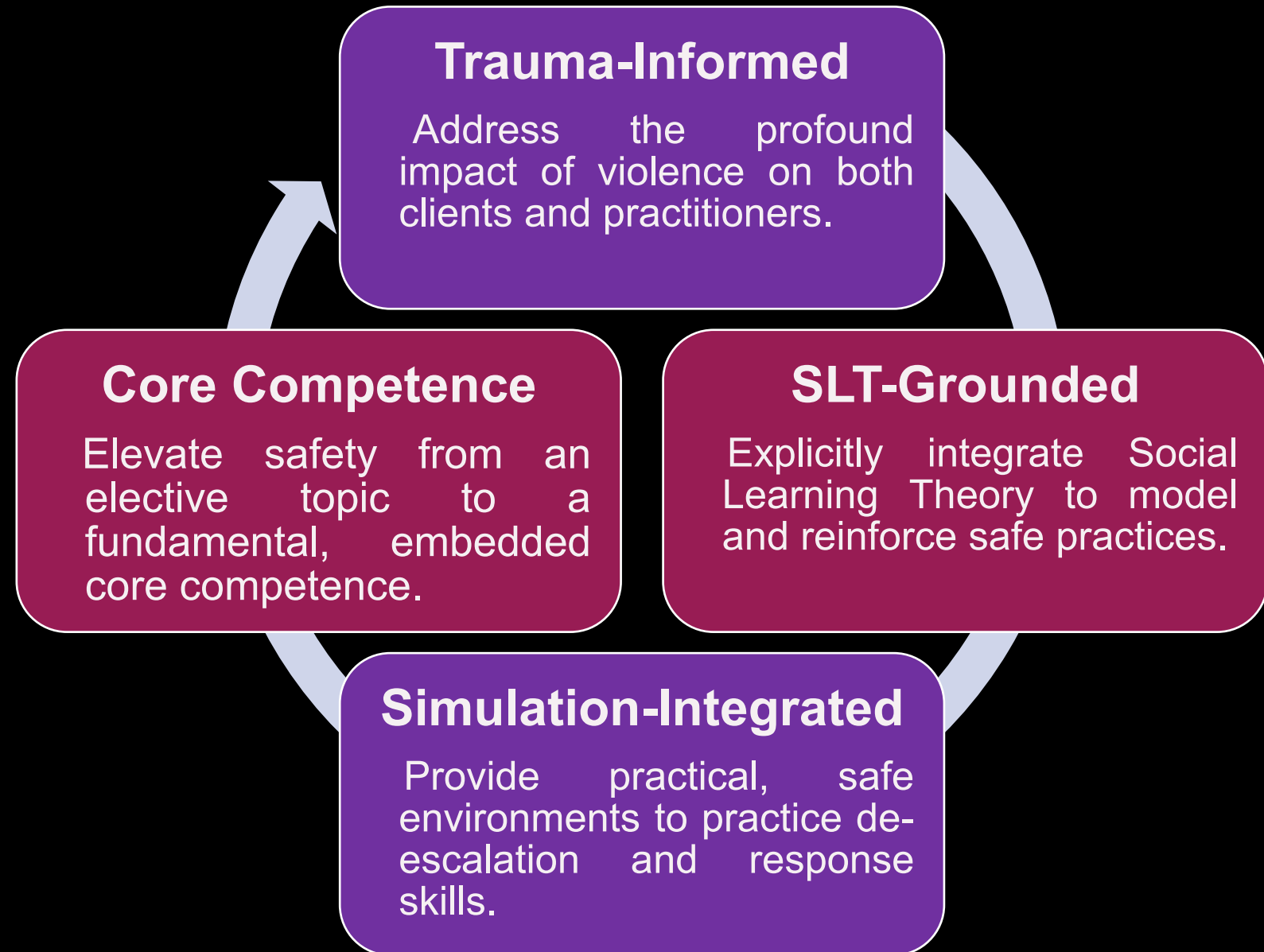


Addressing Gaps

While effective, ongoing work is needed to ensure equity in access and mitigate self-report biases in assessments.

ANSWERING THE KNOCK: FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONSIVE CURRICULA

- **Comprehensive model for responsive teaching**
- **Integrates knowledge + resilience**
- **Turns curriculum silence into proactive preparation**
- **Equips social workers for challenges at the door**





THE LAST KNOCK:

Prepared. Equipped. Supported.

- Violence will always be a part of social work.
- The question: fear or resilience?
- What we model in our classrooms and field placements is what we multiply in our profession.
- Embedding safety training → empowered practitioners



Dr Lucé Pretorius

Senior Lecturer
North-West University, South Africa

Luce.Pretorius@nwu.ac.za

+2716 9103428



WELLNESS WARDENS:

**A Social Service
Protection Initiative**

Phase 1: EXPLORE

Community Engagement Project | NWU COMPRES | Phase 1: EXPLORE

What is the project about?

The Wellness Wardens Initiative is a multi-phased participatory research project, aimed at strengthening the safety, well-being, and professional capacity of social service professionals. Prompted by rising concerns around client-perpetrated violence and systemic neglect, the project investigates safety across personal, organisational, governmental, and academic domains. The initiative is registered as a community engagement project at North-West University and designed to host multiple subprojects by students, faculty, and collaborators over time. Participatory Action Research (PAR) guides the methodological approach, with lived experience and co-ownership at its core.