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Integrating Social Justice Content into Social Work Education: Making the Abstract Concrete

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To: Funge, Simon <simon.funge@wku.edu>

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Ref: The challenge of integrating social justice content into social work education: Making the abstract more concrete

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Thank you for your contribution to Journal of Social Work Education and we look forward to receiving further submissions from you.

Sincerely,
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Editor-in-Chief Comments to Author:

Thank you for your prompt and excellent revisions. We look forward to publishing your paper.
The challenge of integrating social justice content into social work education: Making the abstract concrete

**Abstract:** A national survey of social work educators teaching in CSWE-accredited social work education programs in the U.S. was conducted to explore their perceptions about integrating social justice content into their teaching. A content analysis of written commentary provided by 139 educators revealed four key areas relevant to their efforts: (a) the effect of program mission and integration, (b) the effect of faculty preparation and engagement, (c) the effect of students’ positionality, and (d) the challenge of connecting an abstract concept to concrete practices. Findings from this study have highlighted not only the difficulties educators face trying to make this abstract concept more concrete for students, but also the significance of the educational context as relevant to the challenges of meeting this obligation. Practical implications for social work education programs and educators as well as areas of further research are provided.

**Key words:** social work education; social justice; teaching efficacy; educational context; content analysis

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Professional social workers are ethically obligated to promote social justice by attending to the systemic causes of social problems and effecting social change with, and on behalf of people who are experiencing or are vulnerable to discrimination, oppression, poverty, or other social injustices (NASW, 2017). Social justice is “an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits” (Barker, 2014, p. 398), and requires the elimination of social, economic, and political inequities to ensure such a condition (Kam, 2014). As one of six core values identified by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), social justice underscores professional social workers’ responsibility to promote equitable access to resources and opportunities for disenfranchised populations (NASW, 2017). In turn, this professional obligation informs the educational policies and standards that guide social work education programs’ efforts to orient students to this value.

More concretely, Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited social work education programs are responsible for supporting the development of the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes students require to competently advocate for, advance, and promote social justice in their professional practice (CSWE, 2015). However, the extent to which social work education programs focus on social justice may vary widely (CSWE, 2008a). And by extension, social work educators may also vary in their efforts. In response, CSWE has developed a series of initiatives to begin to address this inconsistency. Since 2016, CSWE’s Center for Diversity and Social and Economic Justice has offered Faculty Development Institutes (FDI) at its Annual Program Meetings to specifically “explore how social work educators can address diversity and social and economic justice in the classroom” (CSWE, 2018, CSWE Faculty Development Institutes section, para. 1). In addition, the Center provides educational resources related to social work practice with diverse communities and teaching for
social justice, identifies model programs that are effectively implementing this content, and advocates for scholar representation among marginalized groups and development in social work programs as a means to better support students’ diversity and social justice competencies (CSWE, 2018). These are important steps toward fostering the development of students’ professional obligation to promote social justice in their practice; however, they are a relatively recent set of initiatives of which the long-term impact has yet to be determined.

This study, conducted prior to these initiatives, sought to identify social work educators’ assessments regarding facilitators and barriers to integrating social justice content into social work education. More specifically, the study explored: 1) The extent to which social work educators report that the educational context is conducive to integrating social justice content into their teaching; and 2) those factors in the educational context they report as affecting social work educators’ willingness and efforts to integrate social justice content into their teaching.

**Review of the Literature**

Social work educators play a key role in the preparation of students to practice in a manner consistent with their ethical responsibility to promote social justice (Gil, 1998; Hudson, Shapiro, Ebiner, Berenberg, & Bacher, 2017; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). For this reason, the effective incorporation of social justice content into their teaching can be instrumental (Bell et al., 1997; Bent-Goodley, 2008; Funge, 2011; Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; Gutiérrez, Fredricksen & Soifer 1999; Singleton, 1994; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). While the literature is replete with strategies for integrating social justice content into social work education (e.g., Bell, Moorhead, & Boetto, 2017; Cramer, Ryosho, & Nguyen, 2012; Crutchfield, Funge, & Jennings, 2016; Edmonds-Cady & Wingfield, 2017; Knight, 2017; Lane et al., 2012; Scott, 2008), multiple factors may complicate or stymie individual faculty member’s efforts. In spite of the availability
of these resources in the literature, educators may still be unclear about what social justice practice means for social work and where it can be fit into the curriculum and may need to more clearly conceptualize the concept in order to make a stronger link between their curriculum and the broader social justice aims of the profession (Bent-Goodley, 2008; Longres & Scanlon, 2001). And even with a clearer understanding of social justice, educators may find it difficult to translate their understanding into their teaching practices (Hong & Hodge, 2009). These challenges may be a function of social work educators not receiving adequate preparation to teach this content (Hudson, Shapiro, Ebiner, Berenberg, & Bacher, 2017).

Regarding preparation, the social identities of faculty may also influence their ability or willingness to integrate social justice content. For instance, Marbley, Burley, Bonner, and Ross (2009) found that African American faculty teaching in predominantly white institutions are uniquely positioned to teach courses on diversity and multiculturalism; however, their efforts to teach this content requires emotional readiness and resiliency in the face of pushback from students and, sometimes, colleagues. By comparison, Sue, Torino, Capodiupo, Rivera, and Lin (2009) found that as a result of their lack of experience as targets of racial discrimination or familiarity with the lived experiences of their students of color, some white faculty report not feeling – or being – prepared to effectively facilitate challenging discussions about race and racism in the classroom. And compared to faculty of color and female faculty, white male faculty are less inclined or comfortable with integrating content on diversity into their teaching (Mayhew & Grunwald, 2006). This may be because these educators are simultaneously required to work through their own understanding of social justice and the role of power and privilege while being able to skillfully guide students on their journey while managing the anger and fear students may express (Edmonds-Cady & Wingfield, 2017; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008).
Whether or not faculty are members of a privileged social identity, they “influence classroom dynamics by their awareness and use of self related to their personal experience in understanding the effects of diversity, oppression, social justice, privilege, and entitlement in their own lives” (Van Soest & Garcia, 2008, p. 105). But even those who actively integrate social justice content into their teaching are often confounded by students’ discomfort and resistance to the material as these students struggle to confront their own privilege (Bell et al., 1997; Deal & Hyde, 2004; Edmonds-Cady & Wingfield, 2017; Fleck-Henderson & Melendez, 2009; Garcia & Van Soest, 2006; Singleton, 1994; Tummala-Narra, 2009; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). For this reason, social work educators have a responsibility to promote a safe environment in the classroom when integrating social justice content into their teaching (Snyder, Peeler, & May, 2008).

Holley and Steiner (2005) assert that social work educators can play a key role in establishing a safe climate by: (a) establishing guidelines for effective communication; (b) modeling and encouraging active participation; (c) actively raising controversial issues; (d) demonstrating comfort with conflict; (e) being open to, and nonjudgmental regarding, divergent opinions; and (f) exploring how power and privilege have shaped students’ social identities. In this way, students are given the opportunity to learn about their peers, to develop critical thinking, to increase self-awareness, and to develop their communication skills. But educators who integrate social justice content into their teaching may require intellectual, affective, and administrative support of colleagues, program administrators, and others (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Funge, 2011; Jacobson, 2009; Marbley, Burley, Bonner, & Ross, 2009; Singleton, 1994; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). In this respect, Funge (2011) recommended that social work educators may need to clarify their role and responsibilities in engaging their students around
social justice. In addition, social work programs may need to assess educators’ implementation of CSWE’s social justice standard; the level of ongoing, structured support provided to social work educators to teach in this manner; and institutional norms and practices to determine if these practices constrain efforts to teach to social justice and identify alternatives.

Further, there may be a need to explore to what extent institutional structures are in place to adequately support social work educators in their efforts to cultivate the social justice orientation of future practitioners. Jacobson (2009) has argued that social work education programs need to create opportunities for faculty to support and work with each other (e.g., repurposing faculty meetings) to locate and address the contradictions that may emerge between the efforts of social work educators to center social justice in their teaching, the norms and practices of the institution, and the broader social justice mission of the profession. And, as part of these processes, it has been recommended that social work education programs explore their efforts to recruit and retain diverse faculty as instrumental to more effectively delivering diversity and social justice content in their programs (Deepak, Rountree, & Scott, 2015).

Clearly, the educational context is a key factor affecting social work educators’ efforts to integrate social justice content into their teaching. Therefore, the role of this context and its impact on social work educators’ efforts to integrate social justice content their teaching was explored in this study. As conceptualized in CSWE’s (2008b) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (and consistent with its 2015 revision), social justice content was defined as educational content designed to prepare students to competently address oppression and discrimination, advocate for human rights, and advance social and economic justice in their professional practice.
**Study Methods**

A 56-item survey was developed to assess social work educators’ teaching efficacy beliefs about their ability to facilitate student engagement and encourage student learning when integrating social justice content into their teaching. More specifically, the survey included a teaching efficacy scale adapted from an established instrument developed by Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy (1998). The modified scale focused on educators’ confidence in their ability to effectively integrate social justice content into their teaching. In addition, because the environmental context provides multiple sources of information from which educators determine their efficacy beliefs about teaching (Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006), items related to the educational context were included. With Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979, 1994) as a framework, these items focused on respondents’ perceptions about the role of the interpersonal, institutional, professional, and political context as it may have affected their efforts to integrate social justice content. A final open-ended item gave respondents the opportunity to provide additional information relevant to understanding their efforts to integrate this content. Respondents were prompted with the statement: “Social work programs typically include educational content designed to prepare students to competently address oppression and discrimination, advocate for human rights, and advance social and economic justice in their professional practice.” A second prompt asked respondents to “Please provide any additional information you feel is relevant to understanding the integration of this content into your teaching.” This prompt was purposively broad so as not to constrain respondents’ commentary. This question was initially considered as a potential opportunity to gain some clarity regarding study participants’ quantitative responses. The question, however, ultimately elicited such robust
qualitative data that the researchers chose to analyze and report the findings. This article is focused on the qualitative analysis of these written responses.

**Data Collection**

No comprehensive database of all social work educators was maintained by CSWE at the time of the study, so a database of 515 administrators was developed. This included contact information for the Deans and Directors (or equivalent lead administrators) of all CSWE-accredited social work education programs offering BSW and/or MSW degree programs in the U.S. (excluding Puerto Rico and Guam). Each of these administrators was emailed three times at two-week intervals to request that they forward an invitation to all of their full-time faculty members with teaching responsibilities inviting them to complete an online survey. Approved by the lead author’s institutional review board, the study was conducted between October and December of 2011.

**Sample**

Study participants were full-time, U.S.-based social work educators who taught in CSWE-accredited social work education programs. Five-hundred and twenty-six (n = 526) social work educators completed the survey. Of these, 26.4% (n = 139) provided written comments in response to the open-ended item. The preponderance of these respondents was female (71.7%; n = 99) and white (76.3%; n = 106) with an average age of 53.9 years (SD = 9.8). On average, respondents had taught for 14.5 years (SD = 9.6) with a range from 1 to 39 years. Respondents taught in programs in all 10 CSWE regions with the largest group from CSWE’s Region 5 (Great Lakes: IL, IN, MI, MN, OH, and WI) (20.9%; n = 27). Almost half reported teaching both bachelor’s level and master’s level social work students (47.4%; n = 65), and the largest group of respondents were *Assistant Professors* (32.4%; n = 45). Thirty-five (n = 35,
25.2%) were Associate Professors, 33 (23.7%) were Professors, and 24 (17.3%) were Instructor/Lecturers. Two (1.4%; \(n = 2\)) identified as Other (a department chair and a field education coordinator).

Respondents indicated which social work courses they taught and could select more than one. The largest group taught Micro-Practice courses (57.6%; \(n = 80\)) followed by Macro-practice (54.0%, \(n = 75\)), Policy (50.4%, \(n = 70\)), and Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) (49.6%, \(n = 69\)) with the fewest indicating that they taught Research courses (38.8%; \(n = 54\)) and/or a variety of Other courses including law and ethics, diversity, and nonprofit leadership (46.8%; \(n = 65\)). The overwhelming majority of respondents reported integrating content related to social and economic justice into their teaching (92.8%; \(n = 129\)) and/or content related to oppression and discrimination (92.1%; \(n = 128\)). The fewest indicated that they integrated human rights content (78.4%; \(n = 109\)). Over half of the respondents (59.7%; \(n = 83\)) reported that they had taught a course with a specific focus on diverse populations.

Data Analysis

A content analysis of respondents’ comments to the open-ended question was conducted. The full dataset was initially downloaded as a Microsoft Excel file from the online survey platform, SurveyMonkey. Respondents’ written comments were transferred into Microsoft Word for open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The data were organized and read, and analytic memoing was used to note emerging ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Informed by the theoretical framework of the larger study, the first cycle of analysis focused on those factors in the environment that respondents explicitly reported as affecting their efforts to integrate social justice content into their teaching. These included respondents’ reports about factors at the
personal level (e.g., the impact of their life experience), at the interpersonal level (e.g., the impact of students’ reactions and colleagues’ attitudes toward integrating this content), at institutional levels (e.g., the impact of programmatic, departmental, university, and/or accreditation policies and practices), and at the cultural level (e.g., the impact of political support for – or in opposition to – the integration of social justice content in teaching). From this, preliminary codes and themes were developed (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2017) and then the data were reorganized for further analysis into three general areas: (a) their individual efforts to address social justice in their teaching; (b) how their social work program addressed these content areas; and (c) their perspectives regarding the educational context as relevant to this integration.

In a second cycle of analysis, data were re-coded and clustered into increasingly refined categories. This process required maintaining openness to all ideas presented by the participants (Saldaña, 2009). This systemic investigation drew out explicit and implicit patterns to fully capture the manifest and latent concepts in the data (Krippendorf, 2004). Further, the second cycle allowed for the development of more accurate conceptualizations for previously imprecise codes, the discovery of new codes, and the merging of redundant codes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2009). This process continued until a point of saturation had been reached when it was determined that the range of core ideas revealed by the respondents’ commentary had been adequately captured and organized. Careful documentation of each step in the process provided an important audit trail that served both as a part of the analytic procedure and as a measure of trustworthiness (Rallis, Rossman, & Gajda, 2007). In addition, the process was conducted in consultation with a secondary experienced qualitative researcher and confirmed by the second author who reviewed the original and final categorization of the data.
Findings

The completed analysis yielded four key themes: (a) the effect of program mission and integration, (b) the effect of faculty preparation and engagement, (c) the effect of students’ positionality, and (d) the challenge of connecting an abstract concept to concrete practices. Respondents’ direct quotes are provided to reveal their perspectives in their own words. (The number in [brackets] at the end of each quote is the unique identifier for the particular respondent who is quoted.)

The effect of program mission and integration. The link between program mission and educators’ efforts to integrate social justice content into their teaching was identified among respondents as important. For example, one respondent stated that “Social justice is a key component of our school's mission;” and, as a result, “Faculty integrate social justice issues in all courses we offer” [#17]. Another provided feedback that her institution made a commitment to integrating social justice across educational programing, stating that “Our school has a strong orientation toward social justice, and we are encouraged and supported to integrate this material heavily into our curriculum” [#78]. For these respondents, the expression of a program’s commitment to social justice – via its program mission for instance – signaled an expectation to faculty members that they support this commitment by integrating social justice content into their teaching, not just in specified courses, but also as a lens in all courses.

Many respondents discussed whether social justice content was or ought to be integrated throughout the social work curriculum versus very few who integrated into only particular courses. Related to full integration, one respondent stated, “This content should be covered in every social work course taught.” [#85] while another stated that “It is an absolute imperative that social justice content be integrated into social work content [and that faculty] clearly
demonstrate to students it relevancy to assisting oppressed populations” [#136]. But how and where to infuse this content and by whom were reported as challenges. As one respondent noted, “A significant challenge is the amount of content that must be infused into the curriculum” [#118] implying that educators faced competing demands related to the breadth and depth of the content they were expected to cover in their teaching. Another respondent, possibly acknowledging this point, stated that "infusing other courses with the content can be difficult” and argued, instead, that infusing this content into “separate course-work has been the most beneficial” [#14]. These comments revealed a possible tension between a social work program’s expectation of its faculty members to integrate social justice content into their teaching regardless of the course being taught and the practicality of doing so given the range of other content educators feel obligated to focus on in their teaching.

Related to specific courses, the integration of social justice content was most frequently discussed in the context of policy and macro-practice courses. However, separate social justice-specific courses were also identified as valuable by some respondents – but not necessarily to the exclusion of integrating content across the curriculum. For example, as one educator noted,

Fortunately, the social work program of which I am part emphasizes infusion of all of these content areas. In addition, we have a specific course which solely focuses on human rights and another which solely focuses on issues of diversity (oppression, power, discrimination, etc.). [#51]

Similarly, another respondent reported that one program included “social justice across the curriculum,” but also offered courses focused on “human diversity at the undergraduate level and cultural competency at the graduate” in addition to “focused courses such as human trafficking, culture of poverty, and human trafficking interventions” [#32]. For these respondents, a social
justice-focused course complemented and enhanced the infusion of social justice content in the program.

**The effect of faculty engagement and preparation.** Multiple respondents commented on educators’ willingness or capacity to effectively integrate social justice content into their teaching. In particular, respondents questioned whether their colleagues were as equally committed and capable of integrating this content and expressed concern about the implications of such a disparity. In particular, several focused on those who primarily taught clinical courses. One respondent, for instance, who saw social justice content as “a foundation and mandate” for his teaching of macro-level coursework, wondered “how well my colleagues, especially those teaching clinical courses” [#107] were integrating this content into their teaching. In a similar vein, another respondent asserted that “micropractice predominates” in social work education and expressed concern that her

Faculty colleagues who specialize in clinical intervention with individuals, families, and groups have a hard time incorporating [social justice content] – and, indeed, it seems to me, into their own understanding of the roles and obligations of social workers in clinical practice. [#42]

And a third respondent provided a broader critique arguing that “the social work profession has done a poor job of keeping social justice central to our educational mission” adding that she knew “many [social workers who] talk the talk but are more interested in promoting the clinical aspects of the profession.” She attributed the reasons for this to “discomfort and lack of focus on social justice in [the] social work curriculum” and expressed concern that social work education programs were “graduating a group of professionals not equipped to focus on issues of advocacy and social justice” [#133]. The overall implication of such commentary was the perception that
those who primarily taught macro-level course work were more committed and better able to effectively integrate social justice content into their teaching. However, it is important to note that it was not clear from their commentary whether respondents’ perceptions about their colleagues’ abilities and commitments were based upon any direct observation or formal evaluation of their colleagues’ teaching.

Beyond expectations about who should be able to – or is expected to – effectively integrate social justice content in teaching or where in the curriculum this content should be integrated, five respondents identified the value of having opportunities for faculty to engage in discussion and share resources about teaching this content. One respondent asserted that “faculty development in learning to teach is fairly important” [#41]. In a context where several respondents described educators needing to, in effect, “be equipped to handle [the] various challenges that arise from presenting/encouraging the advancement of social justice” [#106], this kind of faculty development was identified as relevant to helping educators strategize about content integration. One respondent called for “an organizational culture that expects and sustains peer discussion, feedback, and collaboration around teaching and learning (including course-specific assignments and activities)” [#110]. This same respondent, however, lamented that “there [were] very few formal or informal mechanisms that promote faculty discussion and enhancement of teaching and learning within [her/his] social work department” [#110]. These sorts of mechanisms may have been especially important for another respondent who stated that “Much of my faculty report a lack of desire to teach courses with this content and question their ability to do so” [#133] while another expressed frustration that s/he “had insufficient training” and did not feel “able to teach this content” [#124]. Taken together these comments reflected a
view that adequate preparation and an environment that cultivated said preparation were crucial to the successful integration of social justice content into teaching.

**The effect of students’ positionality.** Beyond the culture of the institution or educator preparation, respondents linked the potential challenges educators face when attempting to integrate social justice content to students’ responses to this content. As one respondent noted, “The teaching-learning of this content is complicated. I know that (regardless of my ‘expertise’) students bring their own positionalities to the experience. Therefore, sometimes the material is not going to be well-received and students are going to be uncomfortable” [#36].

While students’ specific ‘positionalities’ were unspecified by this respondent, several others noted the significance of students’ identities and experiences as relevant to efforts – particularly those students who these educators identified as conservative and religious. For instance, one respondent observed that “I have taught where religious values are very important to many students and they have been raised in areas where religion is valued. Many struggle with issues surrounding working with LGBT individuals and having personal values that are conservative” [#38]. In reference to her conservative Christian students another respondent argued that “In my experience, it's not one's politics that are the most disruptive in this discussion – it’s religion.” However, she also recognized the importance of engaging these students, reporting that she used “writings from progressive Christian groups (like Sojourners) to illustrate that not all Christians come to the same conclusion,” which she argued permitted her to demonstrate “respect [for these students’] religious viewpoints while at the same time opening the discussion around oppression, discrimination, social and economic justice, and politics in a more productive way” [#5].
Though she did not identify any specific strategies, another respondent noted opportunities for engagement with students who held conservative religious views stating that, “Although it is challenging and sometimes difficult to teach in a conservative part of the country . . . there are opportunities to try to facilitate learning opportunities. Many of the students are simply following the religious and parental teachings that are so familiar to them, but they seem to be able to articulate the realization that we need not impose our values on our clients and often there is an evolution (though minor).” [#113]

Conservative students presented a different kind of challenge for two other respondents. For one respondent, he discovered that his conservative students may be “afraid to express their conservative views in class for fear of being marginalized” [#15]. A second respondent noted that her “Extremely conservative/religious students voluntarily come talk with me, away from their classmates, with feelings of their views being oppressed, devalued, or even attacked by other more liberal students within the classroom environment” [#22]. Though her students’ identities were unspecified – but likely sensitive to these kinds of issues – another respondent observed:

“It is important to get an understanding of student beliefs and values regarding oppression and justice early on in the course. This way, I can better meet the students where they are and approach economic and social justice content in a way that they can best hear the material.” [#56]

Essentially, these respondents highlighted the significance of the relationship between students’ social identities and their perspectives about social justice, and how this may impact students’ reception of educators’ efforts to integrate social justice content. They also
underscored the importance of educators remaining open to the possibility for student learning as instrumental to the successful infusion of social justice content into their teaching.

**The challenge of connecting an abstract concept to concrete practices.** Specific to content presented when teaching about social justice and associated concepts, almost all of the respondents commented on the challenge of connecting theory to practice. As one noted, “My greatest concern in regard to educational content related to social and economic justice is that such content remains abstract and theoretical” [#68]. Another respondent stated, “The concepts of rights, justice, etc. are extremely complicated concepts and often students do not have the liberal arts preparation that facilitates their ability to grapple with these concepts in a critical manner” [#132]. Complicating this, respondents noted that “There are a variety of meanings and varying philosophical roots of social justice” [#28] and “multiple views exist for how to best understand and implement activities [and] interventions that reflect social justice” [#104]. According one respondent, this resulted in students’ understanding of social justice becoming disconnected from “the fundamentals existing in the everyday lives of our children and families” [#137]. These views reflected, in part, respondents’ perspectives about the complexity of operationalizing social justice so students could grasp the practical relevance of this concept.

The general view of these respondents was that students “are looking for more practical, concrete guidance to lead them toward what to do to address social, economic and political issues” [#111], because as another respondent observed, “students can understand and apply it when shown real life examples” [#19]. In fact, as a third asserted, “It is only when students [see] the application of theoretical perspectives ... that they have the "aha" [moment when they] make the practice connection” [#6]. But some respondents questioned whether they had the tools to help students make this connection. For example, a respondent observed that “There aren't really
Evidence Based Practices you can refer students to address these larger issues, so we are kind of left with the question of, ‘ok, what do we now do with this knowledge?’” [#24]. Similarly, another complained that “I have a difficult time finding good raw data to show examples in my research classes” [#87], while another expressed that they were “always interested in good case examples and new literature” related to social justice and human rights [#90]. In effect, these respondents were looking for concrete ways to help their students translate the abstract concept of social justice into professional social work practice.

**Individual activities.** In contrast, many respondents described a variety of methods they individually engaged in to integrate social justice content into their teaching thus, in effect, translating theory into practice. These strategies included: (a) teaching elective courses focused on vulnerable populations; (b) selecting textbooks that addressed oppression, social justice, and human rights; (c) integrating current social justice issues into lectures; (d) having students complete assignments focused on historical figures who fought for social justice and human rights; and (e) engaging students in dialogues about social justice issues affecting oppressed groups. In addition, respondents identified the value of: (f) moderating community panel presentations; (g) showing films related to social justice issues; (h) facilitating social justice-oriented experiential exercises; and (i) requiring students attend legislative meetings and to volunteer with, advocate for, evaluate, and develop programs from a social and economic justice perspective. This latter group of activities was highlighted as critical to social justice education by seven respondents including one who asserted that “The more I can incorporate community-based learning (i.e., real-world projects and experiences), the more students are able to comprehend being an agent of change!” [#7].
Related to this last point, almost half of the respondents emphasized the value of situating students’ learning about social justice issues in the historical, political, cultural, and regional context. For instance, one respondent reported that “I use current political situations to create a sense of urgency for students to integrate this content into [their] practice” [#138]. Another advocated for education that “focuses on current events [and] global and local issues” [#115], and a third stated that “I try to draw from the history of the region to engage students” [#83]. At the programmatic level, a fourth respondent was context-specific, reporting that because her or his program served a large Latino population, “border issues [and] immigration” were highlighted in his/her program’s curriculum [#29]. For these respondents, deliberately situating students’ learning in the cultural context was vital to effectively integrating social justice content.

**Program activities.** In addition to these individual activities, respondents also described a diverse set of program-level activities. These included: (a) a program that offered a social justice minor; (b) a program that developed social justice-oriented tracks such as multicultural clinical practice; (c) programs that used specific texts like Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or readings from Critical Race theorists as a foundation for students’ education across the curriculum; and (d) programs that has developed mandated and elective social justice-focused courses (e.g., Diversity, Oppression, Human Rights and Social Justice). Further, respondents described (e) programs that worked to ensure that sequence text books and assignments included adequate content on social justice; (f) a program that ensured that students’ field learning contracts incorporated social justice activities; (g) a program that included a capstone project related to social justice; and (8) a program that sponsored a social justice symposium.

Whether reliant on the individual or the programmatic efforts described, the shared view of respondents appeared to be that the role of social work education should be, as one respondent
reported, to prepare students with “a greater degree of competence in and comfort with addressing oppression and discrimination and advocating for a better, more just society” [#43].

**Limitations**

The analysis of respondents’ written comments was necessarily limited by the ability of respondents to clearly convey their ideas in a written format and the inability of the researchers to clarify or follow-up on key concepts provided by respondents. And because the open-ended item was positioned at the end of the survey, the extent to which educators’ written responses to this question were influenced by prior items in the survey is not known. Further, those who held stronger views on the subject matter may have been more likely to complete the qualitative portion of the survey as only 26.4% (n = 139) of 526 study participants provided written comments. For these reasons, their responses may not reflect the perspectives of all study participants.

Because this study’s sample was predominantly white, the perspectives of faculty of color was not sufficiently represented in the findings and therefore could not address the literature that references the specific costs and benefits for faculty of color who engage in social justice pedagogy. Furthermore, the largest group of respondents were assistant professors who, by virtue of their position, were likely to have had less exposure to the educational context than their more senior colleagues. In addition, they were likely to have had fewer teaching experiences. It is possible that their more limited experience affected their ability to make a full assessment of the educational context or of their colleagues’ commitment and capacity to integrate social justice content. And, for the group as a whole, it was not clear whether respondents’ perceptions about their colleagues’ abilities and commitments – particularly related to assessments of those who primarily teach micro- and/or clinical practice courses – were based
upon any direct observation or formal evaluation of their colleagues. As such, generalizability of this study is limited and inferences from these observations should be viewed cautiously.

**Discussion**

Accredited social work education programs are responsible for addressing social justice content in their curricula (CSWE, 2015), and social work educators bear much of this responsibility. There are instructional and institutional barriers; however, that impact the ability of programs and educators to effectively meet this requirement. Among them are faculty preparation, skills, and willingness to teach material, environmental context, institutional support, difficulty operationalizing the construct of social justice, and identifying clear frameworks to help learners study and understand social justice.

Though the findings may not be based upon their direct observation or formal evaluation, some educators expressed concern that their colleagues may not be dedicated or prepared to teach this material – a potential barrier that is consistent with literature that has suggested that educators may be under-invested in or ill-prepared for the effective incorporation of social justice content into their teaching (Bell et al., 1997; Bent-Goodley, 2008; Funge, 2011; Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; Gutiérrez, Fredricksen & Soifer 1999; Singleton, 1994; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). And although teaching this content can be challenging (Bent-Goodley, 2008; Jacobson, 2009; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008), findings reinforces the need for social work faculty to demonstrate the motivation and skills required to successfully integrate social justice topics into their teaching while simultaneously being attuned and attentive to students’ interest, openness, and responses to this content.

Possible institutional barriers that can prevent the integration of social justice content include educational context, focus of program mission statement and institutional support. First,
the educational context may not be optimally conducive to supporting these educators’ efforts – a finding that is consistent with CSWE’s (2008a) report that program development, training, and research are needed in this area. In fact, some respondents observed that there is a need to purposefully create an environment that cultivates educators’ capacity to effectively teach social justice content. Further, comments suggested that the sanction of a program – via its mission statement – is an important signal to both educators and students about the centrality of social justice in students’ education. Mission statements serve as guides for focus of programs and curriculum. Finally, several respondents indicated that creating a program environment that fosters collaborative engagement among educators was essential. This supported the view that collegial or institutional support is invaluable for teaching social justice content (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Funge, 2011; Singleton, 1994) and reinforce calls for actively creating a time and space for faculty to support each other in their efforts (Funge, 2011; Jacobson, 2009).

A final institutional barrier to consider is defining the frameworks in which social justice content can be developed and taught. Although CSWE (2015) specifies the social justice practice behaviors that social work graduates are expected to demonstrate, cultivating students’ understanding of an abstract concept like social justice, let alone operationalizing the concept for social work practice, was indicated as a challenge for educators. Some educators expressed the view that there was a need to connect the abstract with the concrete in terms of helping students apply social justice concepts to practice. Data suggested that this may be particularly true for students who hold more conservative beliefs. This view reasonably reflects Reisch’s (2002) argument that the profession of social work may need to identify more coherent frameworks for achieving social justice and Longres and Scanlon’s (2001) conclusion that there is a need to more narrowly and more clearly conceptualize social justice for social work education. While
difficult to establish from the written commentary, it may have been that the reported struggles some students expressed when learning about social justice – particularly those students who held more conservative views – was a function of the educator having difficulty making this concept clear, not fully understanding or appreciating students’ own conceptualizations of social justice, or having trouble providing concrete practice examples for her students.

**Practical Implications**

It is important to note that the educators in this study were subject to the expectations outlined in either the 2001 or 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). However, even with a shift from specific program content to competency-based education between the 2001 and 2008 EPAS as well as a shift toward a greater focus on human rights and needs in the 2015 EPAS, it is argued that educators’ responsibility to foster students’ competency to advance social justice has effectively remained the same. Therefore, findings from this study continue to be relevant.

To address programmatic barriers, social work education programs can consider the institutional mechanisms that are in place or could be created to support educators in their efforts to integrate social justice content into their teaching. Social work education administrators could facilitate program-wide discussions to identify those institutional practices that either support or hinder educators effectively integrating social justice content into teaching. In addition, faculty might consider how to support colleagues as they develop the skills they need to effectively integrate this content into their teaching. Funge (2011) has recommended structured opportunities for educators to critically explore the appropriate role of the social work educator relative to CSWE’s social justice standard. CSWE’s reaffirmation of accreditation process provides one such opening for exploration (Holloway et al., 2009), but faculty meetings may be a
more frequent and accessible venue for these discussions (Jacobson, 2009). Whether to infuse social justice content into all courses, particular courses in the foundation curriculum, or in stand-alone special topics courses, how to make social justice more concrete for students, as well as the preparation and support required to effectively doing this could be a part of these discussions. Where appropriate, it is recommended that current students, recent graduates, as well as established practitioners from the community are included in this exploration.

The faculty development efforts of CSWE through its Center for Diversity and Social and Economic Justice may be instructive. In part, the Center links its goal of developing the capacity of faculty to incorporate social justice in teaching to the recruitment, development, and retention of faculty of color (CSWE, 2018). The implication here is that social work education program efforts to build a more diverse faculty will effectively enhance its ability to cultivate students’ social justice competency. This is critical when fewer than one-third of full-time and part-time faculty members are from historically underrepresented racial groups (32.6% and 28.5% respectively) (CSWE, 2017). In fact, a lack of racial diversity amongst faculty members has been cited as a barrier to the effective integration of social justice content (Deepak, Rountree, & Scott, 2015), and is a key concern in CSWE’s (2015) accreditation assessment of program learning environments. For this reason, social work education programs ought to assess their recruitment and retention practices for diverse faculty – not just for faculty of color, but for faculty across all underrepresented social identity groups.

Furthermore, programs should consider how they might provide and support their educators by providing skill-building workshops for faculty members or mentorship opportunities between experienced faculty members who have successfully incorporated social justice in their course with those who are novice in this area. Social work programs can consider
developing a Pedagogy and Diversity (P&D) seminar series that includes peer support for faculty integrating social justice content into their teaching (Garran, Kang, & Fraser, 2014). In addition, programs could conduct assessments of their curricula to determine whether infusing social justice content across the foundation curriculum and/or in a complementary social justice-focused course best fosters students’ mastery of social justice practice behaviors. Cambraia Windsor, Shorkey, and Battle’s (2015) standardized instrument to assess social work students’ alignment with expected social justice practice behaviors has utility in this regard.

In terms of concrete strategies in the classroom, Cramer, Ryosho, and Nguyen (2012) have recommended utilizing experiential activities as a pedagogical strategy to teach social justice. These activities help students link theory with engaged learning through experience and self-exploration. These were noted by respondents as instrumental to incorporating social justice content into the classroom. Also reported by respondents, service learning opportunities outside of the classroom were beneficial. Service learning that involves participatory community engagement can offer a mutually beneficial service to community stakeholders while also giving students opportunities to learn and reflect upon course concepts (Seifer & Connors, 2007). Further, service-learning projects influence students’ understanding of social justice in practice and their confidence in their ability to effect social change (Scott, 2008; Crutchfield, Funge, & Jennings, 2016). For these reasons, programs and faculty should explore incorporation of both experiential and service learning activities into their curricula.

Lastly, providing more robust pedagogical training to doctoral students who intend to teach in social work programs is critical (Drisko, Hunnicutt, & Berenson, 2015; Maynard, Labuzienski, Lind, Berglund, & Albright, 2017). Whether they are pursuing a PhD or a Doctorate in Social Work (DSW), offering specific learning opportunities focused on the
integration of social justice content into teaching could prove invaluable in cultivating the social justice orientation of bachelor and master level social work students. Training in a doctoral program could nurture social work educators’ motivation and skills to integrate social justice content into their teaching. This includes (a) opportunities to develop and facilitate social justice workshops, (b) opportunities for teaching assistantships in a social justice-related course, or more intensive opportunities such as (c) co-teaching a social justice-related course under the supervision of a mentor. Hudson, Shapiro, Moylan, Garcia, and Derr (2014) proposed social justice learning objectives for doctoral programs, suggesting that doctoral education needs to infuse a social justice orientation into their programs to prepare the future social work professoriate to approach teaching, service, and research from a social justice perspective.

Further Research

Further investigation into the types of education and training that social work educators need or have received in preparation for effectively integrating social justice content into their teaching is warranted. Best practices in doctoral education generally and social work doctoral education (PhD and DSW) specifically should be identified and evaluated. In addition, evaluating the specific programmatic strategies social work education programs have employed to promote an organizational culture that supports educators’ efforts to foster students’ social justice practice behaviors is necessary. The challenges and opportunities experienced by these programs highlight best practices in this area. Moreover, an exploration and evaluation of the specific program and in-class activities that programs and educators utilize to establish an educational program that supports social work students’ competence to achieve social justice is merited. Finally, an exploration of social work students’ cognitive and affective needs when learning about social justice is essential – also in service of identifying best educational
practices.

**Conclusion**

Social justice is a core value of the profession of social work (NASW, 2017); and, as such, social work education programs are obligated to integrate this value into the education they provide (CSWE, 2015). Findings from this study have highlighted not only the difficulties educators face trying to make this abstract concept more concrete for students, but also the significance of the educational context as relevant to the challenges of meeting this obligation. As one educator observed: “The teaching-learning of this content is complicated.” While this may seem an obvious statement, it highlights the complexity of the challenge. Social work programs must consciously and thoughtfully establish a clear, coherent, and concrete approach to integrating social justice content. They must be responsive to the confusion, frustration, and anger students experience as they struggle to learn. And it requires programs develop effective strategies for recruiting, preparing, and supporting all social work educators in this endeavor. As a result, social work students will be better prepared to competently demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and cognitive and affective aptitudes required to engage in social justice practice. They will enter the field of social work with a clearer social justice mandate; and perhaps as a consequence, they will be more likely to deliver a range of concrete and practical examples social work educators can use to illustrate the ways in which social justice can be operationalized for social work practice.
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