The Challenge of Integrating Social Justice Content; Making the Abstract Concrete

Simon Funge
Rashida Crutchfield
Lisa Jennings
The challenge of integrating social justice content: Making the abstract concrete
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• You will recognize the **impact of programmatic culture and faculty preparation and engagement on efforts to integrate social justice (SJ) content into social work education**
• You will distinguish the **challenges for both social work educators and students** to connect an abstract concept to concrete practices
• You will appraise the **practical implications** of this research for social work education programs and faculty
Check-in

• What brings you into this session? i.e., What interests you about this topic?
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).

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 SJ in their professional practice (CSWE, 2015).
• Educators may:
  1) Be unclear about what SJ practice means and where it fits in curriculum
  2) Need to more clearly conceptualize the concept
  3) Not have received adequate preparation to teach content

Sources: Hong & Hodge (2009); Longres & Scanlon (2001)
• Educators may:

5) Need to work through their own understanding of SJ while skillfully guiding students on their journey

6) Be confounded by students’ responses to the material

7) May require intellectual, affective, and administrative support

Sources: Abrams & Gibson (2007); Funge (2011); Jacobson (2009); Van Soest & Garcia (2008)
METHODS

• National online survey of F-T social work educators at CSWE-accredited social work programs in the U.S.
• 526 total respondents
• 139 (26.4%) respondents provided written responses to an open-ended item re: their assessment of efforts to integrate SJ content into teaching
RESULTS
SAMPLE \((n = 139)\)

- From all 10 CSWE regions
- Female \((71.7\%; \ n = 99)\)
- White \((76.3\%; \ n = 106)\)
- Ave. age = 53.9 years \((SD = 9.8)\)
- Ave. teaching exp. = 14.5 years \((SD = 9.6)\) (1 to 39 years)
- 47.4\% \((n = 65)\) taught both BSW/BASW and MSW/MSSW students
- Most freq. rank = Assistant Professors \((32.4\%; \ n = 45)\)
- Taught across curriculum; most freq. course = Micro-Practice \((57.6\%; \ n = 80)\)
- Integrated content related to: social and economic justice \((92.8\%; \ n = 129)\); oppression and discrimination \((92.1\%; \ n = 128)\); and human rights \((78.4\%; \ n = 109)\).
- 59.7\% \((n = 83)\) had taught a diversity course
A content analysis of respondents’ comments identified four key themes:

1) The effect of program mission and integration
2) The effect of faculty preparation and engagement
3) The effect of students’ positionality
4) The challenge of connecting an abstract concept to concrete practices
RESULTS
THE EFFECT OF PROGRAM MISSION AND INTEGRATION

- Program mission signaled an expectation that faculty members should integrate SJ content into their teaching across all courses
  - “Social justice is a key component of our school's mission. Faculty integrate social justice issues in all courses we offer” [#17]
  - “Our school has a strong orientation toward social justice, and we are encouraged and supported to integrate this material heavily into our curriculum” [#78]
Tensions were identified between a program’s expectations to integrate SJ content across the curriculum and actual implementation

- “A significant challenge is the amount of content that must be infused into the curriculum” [#118]
- A SJ-focused course may complement and enhance the infusion of SJ content across the curriculum:
  - “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]
• Are colleagues equally committed and capable of integrating this content?
  • “Much of my faculty report a lack of desire to teach courses with this content and question their ability to do so” [#133]
• Opportunities to engage in discussion, share resources, and build skills about teaching SJ content are needed:
  • “[We should] be equipped to handle [the] various challenges that arise from presenting/encouraging the advancement of social justice” [#106]
  • “An organizational culture that expects and sustains peer discussion, feedback, and collaboration around teaching and learning [is needed]” [#110]
Educators should remain open to the challenges to and opportunities when integrating SJ content:

- “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]
- “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]
• It is a challenge helping students translate an abstract concept into professional social work practice:
  • “My greatest concern in regard to educational content related to social and economic justice is that such content remains abstract and theoretical” [#68]
  • “It is only when students [see] the application of theoretical perspectives ... that they have the "aha" [moment when they] make the practice connection” [#6]
  • “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]
RESULTS
THE CHALLENGE OF CONNECTING AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT TO CONCRETE PRACTICES

• Deliberately situating students’ learning in the cultural context was seen as vital to effectively integrating social justice content:
  • “I use current political situations to create a sense of urgency for students to integrate this content into [their] practice” [#138]
  • “I try to draw from the history of the region to engage students” [#83]
RESULTS
THE CHALLENGE OF CONNECTING AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT TO CONCRETE PRACTICES

**Individual activities identified by respondents:**
1) Teach elective courses focused on vulnerable populations
2) Select textbooks that address oppression, SJ, and human rights
3) Integrate current SJ issues into lectures
4) Introduce assignments focused on historical figures who fought for SJ
5) Moderate community panel presentations on SJ issues
6) Show films that touch on SJ issues
7) Facilitate SJ-oriented experiential exercises and dialogue in the classroom
8) Students attend legislative meetings on SJ issues
9) Students volunteer with, advocate for, evaluate, and develop programs from a SJ perspective

**Program activities identified by respondents:**
1) Develop a SJ minor
2) Develop SJ tracks such as MC clinical practice
3) Ensure sequence text books and assignments include adequate SJ content
4) Using texts like Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or readings from CRT as foundation for curriculum
5) Develop mandated and elective SJ-focused courses (e.g., Diversity, Oppression, Human Rights and SJ)
6) Develop field learning contracts that incorporate SJ activities
7) Introduce a capstone project related to SJ
8) Offer a SJ symposium
DISCUSSION

• Which of any of those themes resonates with/aligns with own experiences?
  1) The effect of program mission and integration
  2) The effect of faculty preparation and engagement
  3) The effect of students’ positionality
  4) The challenge of connecting an abstract concept to concrete practices

• What’s missing? What barriers or facilitators were not considered?
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Need for a program-wide strategy to implement institutional practices that support educators effectively integrating SJ content
  - Conduct a curriculum assessment to determine whether to infuse SJ content in all courses or standalone courses (or both)
  - Plan how to make SJ more concrete for students
    - Cambraia Windsor, Shorkey, and Battle’s (2015) Diversity and Oppression Scale
  - Develop skill-building workshops for faculty or mentorship opportunities with experienced faculty members.
  - Include current students, grads, and community practitioners
  - When to plan?
    - Faculty meetings (Jacobson, 2009); CSWE’s reaffirmation of accreditation process
Training in a doctoral program should nurture future social work educators’ motivation and skills to integrate SJ content into their teaching.

1) Provide opportunities for doctoral students to develop and facilitate SJ workshops with their colleagues
2) Provide teaching assistantships in a SJ-related course
3) Provide opportunities to co-teach a semester-long SJ-related course under the supervision of a mentor
CONCLUSION

• In the end, students need “a greater degree of competence in – and comfort with – addressing oppression and discrimination and advocating for a better, more just society” [#43]
  • We must do better to ensure that this happens. The challenge of integrating social justice content is that we must make the abstract more concrete – not just the concept itself, but the teaching of it.
REFERENCES

THANK YOU!

- Simon Funge, simon.funge@wku.edu
- Rashida Crutchfield, rashida.crutchfield@csulb.edu
- Lisa Jennings, lisa.Jennings@csulb.edu