

Advancing Human Rights and Social and Economic Justice: Developing Competence in Field Education

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Abstract Social workers advance human rights and social and economic justice through their practice and policy work. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandates that social work students develop knowledge, values, and skills in this area, as one of the core competencies of their professional training. This qualitative study analyzed learning contracts of four cohorts of BSW seniors ($n = 114$) to identify the stated activities for advancing human rights and social and economic justice through field education. Fifteen of these students also provided their understanding of the connection between their activities and this core competency. The findings revealed the types of activities that social work students engage in to develop and demonstrate readiness for practice. More than other core competencies, some students struggled to identify specific activities related to their practice setting, client population, or social work role. Implications for social work education and the implementation of CSWE's 2015 *Education Policy and Accreditation Standards* are discussed.

Keywords Human rights · Social justice · Field education · Learning contract · Competency-based education

Human rights and social and economic justice are at the heart of the social work profession. In the USA, social workers are guided by the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW 2008) *Code of Ethics*, which states the mission of

the profession that is “to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (para. 1). Social workers carry out this focus in professional activities that advance human rights and social and economic justice in myriad practice settings. The code identifies social justice as a core value of the profession and conveys the ethical imperative of addressing social problems involving human rights issues (Reichert 2011).

One of the roles of social work education is to socialize students into the profession and its values (Miller 2013). Beginning in 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)—the accrediting agency for social work education in the USA—adopted a competency-based approach to education in its *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS). This approach emphasizes the outcomes of professional education and describes the core competencies needed for social work practice. CSWE (2008, 2015) includes a core competency on advancing human rights and social and economic justice; the 2015 version expands the competency to include environmental justice. CSWE-accredited schools are mandated to help students develop the competencies and assess their abilities to do so.

Despite the emphasis on human rights and social and economic justice, there is no consensus on the definition of these terms (Reichert 2011; Reisch 2002). In its *Code of Ethics*, NASW (2008) describes the core value of social justice as the impetus for effecting change and promoting equity and implies that the profession has a commitment to human rights (Ife 2012). In its policy statements, NASW (2004) endorses the fundamental principles set forth in the United Nations' (1948) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This document defines human rights as “rights inherent to all human beings, without distinction as to race, color, gender, language,

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religion, political, or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (United Nations 2016, para. 1). Human rights are indivisible, interrelated, and interdependent and encompass civil and political rights; economic, social, and cultural rights; and collective rights (United Nations 1948).

In this study, human rights and social justice are conceptualized using the description of the core competency in the 2008 EPAS, as this is the version that has been used in social work education for several years:

Each person, regardless of position in society, has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers recognize the global interconnections of oppression and are knowledgeable about theories of justice and strategies to promote human and civil rights. Social work incorporates social justice practices in organizations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice (p. 5).

Social work students demonstrate mastery of this competency and readiness for generalist practice through three practice behaviors: “understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination; advocate for human rights and social and economic justice; and engage in practices that advance social and economic justice” (CSWE 2008, p. 5). The 2015 EPAS refines this definition by integrating the “Understand” practice behavior into the description of the competency. Students are expected to develop an understanding of oppression, structural barriers, and human rights violations and apply this knowledge through advocating and engaging in practices that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice (CSWE 2015).

This definition conveys that human rights and social and economic justice can be advanced in social work practice and policy. Many social workers, however, are uncertain exactly how to operationalize these concepts in practice (Ife 2012; Libal et al. 2014; Rountree and Pomeroy 2010). For example, how do they use their understanding of oppression and discrimination in practice? What does advocacy for human rights and social and economic justice mean? Which practices will advance human rights and social and economic justice? The answers vary with each worker, practice context, and population; as with all generalist practice skills, there are countless ways to engage in this work (Ife 2012; Reichert 2011). Nevertheless, students need to know how to translate theoretical concepts into their fieldwork and to identify the basis for assessment of their competence. In their recent volume on human rights and social work education, Berthold et al. (2014) frankly state

Field instructors and social work interns alike often struggle to identify opportunities in field for students

to apply human rights to their assignments and develop practice behaviors to promote the advancement of human rights and social and economic justice in keeping with the EPAS standards (p. 500).

There is a real need for concrete, intentional ideas and guidance about opportunities for advancing human rights and social and economic justice at all levels of practice. This study provides such examples by examining how social work students planned to enact these concepts in the field and how they conceptualized the connection between these activities and the practice behaviors for this core competency. When students develop these skills in their social work education, they become equipped to enact the mission of the profession after graduation.

Literature Review

Human rights and social and economic justice are inextricably linked. In the literature, social justice is often described with the terms equality and fairness. O’Brien (2011) explored social workers’ ($n = 191$) definitions of social justice. Seventy-seven participants defined it with the term “equality”; 23 used “fairness,” and another 24 linked these terms. Equality was used differentially; some required identical treatment for all people, while others focused on different treatment to ensure equity. Fairness referred to how people are treated by agencies and within society, as well as the outcomes and activities of social institutions and social practices.

Human rights encompass social justice but focus on rights, rather than needs (Skegg 2005). According to the NASW’s (2004) *International Policy on Human Rights*, social justice may be the “profession’s fundamental value and concern,” but it is a “fairness doctrine that provides civil and political leeway in deciding what is just and unjust” (para. 12). A rights-based approach emphasizes universal entitlements, and thus conveys empowerment and a sense of worth (Skegg 2005). Often, the social work literature about human rights concentrates on indigenous worldviews or international issues (Bonnycastle 2011), such as the criminalization of homosexuality (Healy and Kanya 2014) or human trafficking (Androff 2011). Social workers tend to embrace human rights in practice on an international level (Ife 2012). Domestically, they may practice in a US-centric way and without incorporating cross-cultural concepts (Reichert 2003). Some workers may not recognize that practice focused on violence, poverty, corrections, education, and health can advance human rights (McPherson and Abell 2012).

The Role of Social Work Education

Social work education socializes students into the mission and values of the profession (Miller 2013), including

consciousness raising about connections between practice and human rights and social justice. Many social work activities can be framed as a means of advancing human rights and social justice (Funge et al. 2011; Libal et al. 2014). Those skills may reflect familiar approaches to practice; the explicit connection to human rights and social justice, however, may be a new way of conceptualizing practice. Many workers are not accustomed to analyzing human rights principles related to a social issue (Reichert 2011). If workers hold a narrow definition of justice-based or rights-based practice, they may overlook new opportunities or their current actions that do in fact advance human rights and social and economic justice.

Social work instructors can help students frame their work more expansively and build on individual interventions to influence policy change (Healy 2008). This larger context matters for true and lasting justice and rights work. O'Brien (2010) explored how social workers thought social justice informed their practice. Most workers focused on social justice in their daily work (e.g., improving outcomes for disadvantaged clients), instead of “affecting the economic, social, and cultural structures which create and sustain injustice” (p. 185). In this way, social workers may be steeped in social justice on an “individualized and personalized” basis (p. 182), rather than broader systemic change. A human rights framework can help workers remember the structural forces and inequities, while planning interventions or providing resources (Lundy and van Wormer 2007; Reichert 2011; Rozas and Garran 2015). In preparing new workers, instructors can model ways to enter this work as advocates for clients *and* for systemic change. The literature on social work education tends to focus on either social justice or human rights; therefore, these concepts will be explored separately in the following sections.

Social Justice and Social Work Education Despite its importance to the profession and prominence in social work policies, very few empirical studies have focused on social justice in social work education (Havig 2013; Hong and Hodge 2009). A first step is to identify what students are taught about social justice during a formative time of professional development. Hong and Hodge (2009) conducted a content analysis of syllabi ($n = 31$) from social justice courses in CSWE-accredited schools of social work. Their exploration surfaced an implicit conceptualization of social justice embedded in the syllabi, which is summarized as the following: “Based on the professional values of social work, social justice is a process of taking action to “do justice” and an outcome of achieving justice-related goals and overcoming injustices, particularly for vulnerable groups in society” (p. 215). Additionally, some social identity groups (e.g., racial minorities) were focused on more than others in syllabi for social justice courses. Other groups (e.g., social classes) were often mentioned but not explored in-depth.

Students are expected to take what they learn in the classroom and apply those social justice concepts in the field. Havig (2013) conducted qualitative interviews with field instructors ($n = 17$) about their understanding of social justice in practice. Field instructors saw their role as helping students move beyond an abstract theoretical notion of social justice and integrate this value in everyday practice. Their examples varied widely and included “giving voice to those unheard, the protection of basic human rights, fairness at the interpersonal and institutional levels, balancing power, valuing inherent human dignity, and ensuring equal opportunity” (p. 7). They identified three strategies to help students promote social justice: role modeling behaviors that promote social justice, initiating discussions that focus on social work values, and arranging contact with diverse groups and situations related to social justice. These pedagogical approaches require intentionality and awareness on the part of the field instructor who must see social justice as an integral aspect of practice. Field instructors can help students see how dynamics of oppression and privilege affect professional relationships. Supervision can promote social justice by exploring the power inherent in helping relationships, the effects of dominant discourses, and more expansive knowledge sources (Hair 2014).

Human Rights and Social Work Education Prior to the 2008 *EPAS*, few schools of social work infused human rights in their curricula. Steen and Mathiesen (2005) identified schools that offered MSW courses with “human rights” included in the title or course description. The vast majority (91 %, $n = 123$) did not have required or elective courses that explicitly addressed human rights. With the inclusion of human rights in the 2008 and 2015 *EPAS*, there may be more courses that incorporate human rights knowledge and advocacy. A replication study may show the development of human rights content in social work education.

Human rights content often focuses on the examination of international issues, particularly when students may otherwise be culturally unaware or insensitive or have a Western bias. Recent examples include helping BSW students use a human rights framework to understand female marriage immigrants in Taiwan (Chen et al. 2013) and devising study abroad opportunities and international field experiences that focus on human rights in the host country (Barbera 2006). Gammonley et al. (2013) described a violence-against-women delegation to Guatemala, in which BSW students “implement[ed] awareness campaigns, educational interventions, policy advocacy, and the documentation of human rights testimony” (p. 620). It is important to remember that students do not need to travel abroad to develop these practice behaviors.

Human rights advocacy has relevance and applications within the USA. Hancock (2007) noted that “very little is apolitical in social work curricula” (p. 3), and thus, discussions about “emotionally laden hot topics,” like marriage

equality or reproductive rights, benefit from deeper critical thinking and inclusion of human rights principles. Human rights issues have an impact on social work education itself. Ortiz et al. (2012) present race-based, anti-immigration laws as an example of a human rights issue that affects “students, recruitment of future students, and workforce development for the profession” (p. 198), among other major consequences for the Latino/a community.

Instructors can incorporate human rights knowledge and skills in social work courses. McPherson and Cheatham (2015) carried out a human rights project in a BSW macro practice class. Students ($n = 24$) were exposed to a national human rights campaign focused on education and advocacy about genocide and mass violence. These students, as well as a comparison group, had high levels of professed enthusiasm for human rights, which did not change significantly at the end of the course. Their knowledge of human rights principles, however, had a statistically significant increase compared to their peers. In another study with a non-social work sample of German adults ($n = 2017$), Stellmacher et al. (2005) found that the people who knew more about human rights and who considered human rights to be important were more likely to express a willingness to get involved and take action to advocate for human rights. These studies suggest that passion and knowledge about human rights may be related to motivation and action to advocate for human rights. These findings echo Swigonski’s (2011) steps toward education for human rights, in which “learning about” is an essential first step.

Application in Field Education

Designated the signature pedagogy for social work, field education is “the central form of instruction and learning to socialize students to perform the role of practitioner to connect and integrate theory and practice” (CSWE 2008, p. 8). Despite the importance of field education in professional training, the existing literature focuses on course design and teaching strategies in required courses, electives, travel abroad, and exchange projects used to educate about human rights and social justice, rather than field-based approaches (Deweese and Roche 2001; Libal et al. 2014). Classroom learning must be seen as merely the beginning; students need to transfer this knowledge into action in their field placements (Reichert 2011).

Students become steeped in the values and principles of the profession through their coursework. Once in the field, they may feel confused if their placements operate in ways that treat the values as irrelevant or optional. With respect to human rights, students whose training has focused on the micro level may not see the relevance of human rights in their practice; students who wish to intervene at the macro level may find themselves situated in agencies that do not contextualize their work with a human rights framework (Rozas and Garran

2015). Field placements vary greatly in terms of the services offered, population served, funding, and location, among other factors; such inconsistencies have an impact on the educational opportunities available and the connection to the core competencies (Boitel and Fromm 2014; Cooper-Bolinskey and Napier 2014). Field faculty can assist students in analyzing the setting and pursuing opportunities for advancing human rights and social and economic justice within mental health agencies, child welfare agencies, community development projects, and advocacy efforts (Steen and Mathiesen 2005). Further, students can be encouraged to reach beyond their everyday micropractices and attention to individual clients’ circumstances, in order to advocate and engage with issues on a national or international scale (Berthold et al. 2014; Reichert 2003).

Learning contracts are used as a tool for planning learning opportunities, connecting classroom content with fieldwork, and serving as a basis for evaluation (Boitel and Fromm 2014). Students complete learning contracts early in the fall and take into account the “expertise of the field instructor, the focus of the agency, the expectations of the school, and the expressed learning needs of the student” (Regehr et al. 2002, p. 57). Learning contracts can be individualized to meet students’ needs and standardized to ensure inclusion of the core competencies; this balance provides “higher student investment and maintenance of elevated professional standards” (Tapp 2012, p. 17). This study examines the documentation on learning contracts for activities that develop core competency 2.1.5.

With a competency-based approach to social work education in effect for several years, data now exist to describe how students articulate and plan to demonstrate human rights and social and economic justice in their field education. The present study extends the pedagogical literature by identifying themes in BSW students’ plans for enacting the practice behaviors in myriad contexts. The research aim is to inform instructors, both in the classroom and the field, about students’ intended demonstrations of this core competency and to support deep engagement with values and principles that are central to the social work profession.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of four cohorts of BSW students ($n = 114$) in one social work program located at a small, urban, private college. The focus on BSW-level students was intentional; in the USA, most social work students are pursuing a baccalaureate degree (CSWE 2014). By including undergraduate students in one program, it was possible to ensure that they began their field placements with similar levels of

experience and had fulfilled the same general education requirements. In aggregate, these BSW cohorts can be described as 91 % female and 9 % male; 49 % students of color, 44 % White students, and 7 % unknown racial background; and 83 % age 24 and younger and 17 % age 25 and older.

This convenience sample included all students who were seniors and completed a field placement during the 2012–2013, 2013–2014, 2014–2015, or 2015–2016 academic years. This period coincided with the program's transition to the 2008 *EPAS* and adoption of a competency-based learning contract and field evaluation. Their placement sites included schools, child-protective services, and disability services, among other agencies, and reflected the college's mission to serve children and families. All students were first introduced to the concepts of human rights and social and economic justice in the required Introduction to Social Work course. Students studied the United Nations' (1948) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and began to learn about the core competencies and related practice behaviors, including core competency 2.1.5: Advance human rights and social and economic justice (CSWE 2008). In subsequent courses and their field placements, students continued to develop and master the knowledge, values, and skills needed for generalist practice.

Procedure

The college's institutional review board approved the study. Data were collected from students' existing learning contracts and consisted of their descriptions of the activities and responsibilities that they planned to engage in to develop and demonstrate the three practice behaviors for core competency 2.1.5. Students complete the learning contract within the first 6 weeks of the semester and submit this assignment to their field faculty to be used during their midyear and final field evaluations. For each practice behavior, students listed activities and responsibilities that would allow them to develop and demonstrate competence in this area; across all learning contracts, 195 to 198 activities were listed for each practice behavior. The activities and type of placement were recorded in a spreadsheet, with identifying information omitted to maintain anonymity.

A subset of the sample was invited to explain their thinking about the connection between the activities they had listed on their learning contract and the practice behaviors for this core competency. These participants included members of the current BSW senior class. Led by a research assistant in their field seminar class, students completed an in-class exercise in which they explained how the activities on their learning contract were ways of demonstrating the three practice behaviors. Fifteen of the 25 BSW seniors consented for their exercise to be used as data. After the research assistant removed the students' names and any other identifying information, their explanations, paired with their activities, were recorded in the spreadsheet.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed inductively to determine the types of activities identified by students. Using the steps of thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006), both researchers separately coded data for each practice behavior and then discussed and agreed on a set of codes to use for each practice behavior. All coding was completed independently to ensure the credibility of the analysis and enhance trustworthiness with inter-rater reliability. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved. The specific examples of activities to advance human rights and social and economic justice were re-coded to more precisely describe the myriad ways students develop this core competency in their field work. Each theme needed to include at least 10 % of the data for that practice behavior. A colleague in the field education department reviewed the themes to enhance the credibility of the analysis; she suggested re-coding one example from one theme to another, which the researchers did, and otherwise confirmed the coding decisions. Exemplars were identified to illustrate the themes and are presented with a brief description of the agency in which the student was placed. In describing the connections between students' activities and the practice behaviors, the themes are presented with exemplars that included the explanations and the activities.

Findings

For each practice behavior, students identified activities that they would engage in to develop and demonstrate an ability to advance human rights and social and economic justice. Many students included activities that simply reflected aspects of good practice or expectations for all interns and were not explicitly related to the core competency. While it is noteworthy to mention these findings, they were not analyzed further as they do not deepen the understanding of how students advance human rights and social and economic justice in their field placement.

Two of the four cohorts ($n = 57$) were provided with a completed learning contract that served as a model and included examples of activities for each practice behavior. The examples were derived from former students' exemplary learning contracts and were deemed relatable across practice settings. A small number of the total students ($n = 26$) used one or more examples from the sample learning contract and included it along with their original ideas of relevant activities. These "borrowed" examples were not analyzed further.

The following sections describe the activities identified by students as ways to develop and demonstrate each practice behavior at their field placement and the connections made by students between those activities and the practice

behaviors. The themes across the data are described with examples in students' own words.

Understand the Forms and Mechanisms of Oppression and Discrimination

Students provided 79 activities that represent three themes. First, students ($n = 22$) planned to research larger systems issues, policies, and historical contexts related to oppression and discrimination. A student placed at a state disability service agency described, "Become familiar with Americans with Disabilities Act and policies around disabilities." Secondly, students ($n = 17$) anticipated becoming aware of oppression and discrimination in their clients' experiences. A student placed at an agency that serves women in recovery described, "Recognize challenges people face with homelessness." A student whose placement assists formerly incarcerated people wrote, "Understand the challenges clients may face in terms of housing [and] employment with a history of incarceration." Finally, students ($n = 10$) intended to talk with others about the presence and effects of oppression and discrimination. Some of these conversations occurred with clients about their experiences. At an early intervention and Head Start placement, a student planned to "ask clients about their own experiences with oppression and discrimination." Other students intended to use supervision to cultivate awareness of dynamics of oppression that may appear in the helping relationship or agency's work. A student placed at a public health agency planned to "explore in group supervision the agency's racial justice and health equity initiative and its meaning... to social work in a public health setting."

BSW students ($n = 15$) described connections between these activities and this practice behavior. The following three themes emerged and are explained below: noticing how oppression creates clients' need for services at the agency, recognizing how systems issues and inequities have an impact on clients, and researching clients' backgrounds in order to grasp how their social locations affected their lived experiences of oppression and discrimination.

Many students noted that experiences of oppression and discrimination often prompted clients to seek services at the agency. Through their activities in the field, students recognized how systems issues and inequities (e.g., insufficient funding, inconsistent quality, unequal access) have an impact on clients. A student placed at a child welfare agency planned to develop greater knowledge about the workings of systems with which her clients interacted; the student connected this activity to the practice behavior, saying: "Oppression, discrimination, and privilege are rooted in access to resource[s]. The amount of funding, variety of services, and location correlate with the amount of services offered." Another student placed with child protective services planned to use "knowledge of oppression and discrimination in working with clients," and related it to the practice behavior:

I observe patterns of oppression and discrimination in clients' stories of accessing police help, legal assistance, housing, etc.... Systemic oppression transfers from one generation to the next when clients are not supported in accomplishing their goals.

Finally, students researched clients' backgrounds in order to grasp how their social locations affected their lived experiences of oppression and discrimination. A student placed at an agency that serves formerly homeless people intended to research clients' backgrounds as a way to "examine intersectionality and notice how their diversity impacted their access to resources."

Advocate for Human Rights and Social and Economic Justice

Students provided 43 examples of activities that represent four themes. First, students ($n = 13$) described the need to become familiar with resources and policies related to their clients' experiences. A student placed at an agency that works with youth with disabilities intended to "research the community groups advocating for disability rights." Secondly, students ($n = 11$) sought ways to help their clients attain or access resources and services. A student placed at a child protective service agency planned to "refer families to services that could financially be beneficial, such as transitional assistance, housing, food assistance, legal aid, and immigration services." A student was aware that her anti-poverty agency may not be able to meet all of her clients' needs, and thus, she described: "When unable to offer resources at the agency, for whatever reason, [the] student must make sure to suggest to clients other resources that may be able to assist." Next, students ($n = 11$) described taking advocacy-oriented actions, such as letter writing. In the course of working with a child who may need long-term treatment, a student placed at a children's hospital intended to "write letters to receive additional support for child and parent/guardian." Finally, students ($n = 8$) planned ways to support clients toward education and empowerment. A student placed at a women's recovery agency intended to "create an informational sheet for clients on community groups advocating for women's rights in [the city]." At a mentoring agency, a student intended to "teach skills of self-advocacy for clients."

BSW students ($n = 15$) described connections between the activities and this practice behavior. The following four themes emerged and are explained below: finding—and struggling to find—resources for clients; raising clients' awareness and supporting them in speaking up for themselves; bringing a rights-based or justice-based perspective to contact with supervisors, colleagues, peers, and community members; and serving as an ally or witness for clients.

Through their activities, students found and connected clients to resources that were appropriate, available, and

culturally relevant. A student placed at child protective services planned to use supervision and collateral contacts to locate and provide clients with resources and described the connection to the practice behavior: “Advocating for clients is a big part of [child protective services] and the social work profession. Finding resources for clients that are local and financially suitable is a way to help people help themselves.”

In addition to locating services, students identified gaps in resources, especially for underserved or at-risk populations. A student working with incarcerated youth listed “education reform” as an activity and described the connection this way:

Everyone should have access to quality education, especially youth who are incarcerated, regardless of neighborhood, socioeconomic status, or race. Understanding the dynamics of school reform and championing them contribute to decreasing incarceration and poverty, too.

Students saw the activities as ways to raise clients’ awareness and support them in speaking up for themselves. A student placed with the public health department saw the activity “refer to resources” as a way to help clients “navigate a system that was designed to oppress the poor, and empower marginalized populations for social mobility.”

Students’ activities were vehicles for bringing a rights-based or justice-based perspective to contact with supervisors, colleagues, peers, and community members. Students also served as an ally or witness when clients are interacting with large, oppressive, and/or difficult-to-navigate systems. A student placed with a housing agency anticipated being “assigned tasks that support increased opportunity for social and economic justice” and described:

Clients in low-income areas face housing discrimination; it is my duty to advocate in and out of course on their behalf: researching programs clients can enroll in to better serve their needs, going over lease agreements, and making frequent home visits ensuring tenants’ housing is up to par.

Although the activity on the learning contract was written vaguely, the student’s explanation made an explicit connection to the practice behavior and need for professional development.

Engage in Practices that Advance Social and Economic Justice

Students provided 39 examples of activities that represent four themes. First, students ($n = 19$) sought ways to help their clients attain or access resources and services. A student providing case management for formerly homeless adults wrote, “Work directly with clients whose housing is in jeopardy to

maintain housing through use of community resources.” A student who was placed in a school described, “Use IEP [Individualized Education Plan] to advocate for student needs.” Secondly, students ($n = 11$) were actively involved in gatherings where social and economic justice would be promoted. A student placed at a shelter for teen moms wrote, “Prepare and participate in teen parent lobby day.” At a mentoring program for youth with disabilities, a student wrote, “Participate in meetings that effect micro-level and macro-level changes to ensure resources and services.” Next, students ($n = 9$) planned to complete agency projects, outreach, fundraising, and community-based work. A student placed in a residential youth facility intended to “assist with fundraising and other efforts used to advance quality care for at-risk youth.” A student placed at a public health agency wrote, “Assist in developing outreach methods that reach vulnerable populations in [the] city.” Students planned to educate or raise awareness with colleagues or clients about justice-based issues. At a high school, a student described, “Compile a resource binder with contact information regarding health, childcare, housing, and other factors that affect the students’ wellbeing.”

BSW students ($n = 15$) described connections between the activities and this practice behavior. The following four themes emerged and are explained below: providing necessary services for clients, especially those who are marginalized; improving access to resources and addressing discrimination in service delivery; helping clients empower themselves; and participating in supervision, trainings, and meetings related to human rights and social justice.

Through the activities, students provide necessary services for all clients, especially those who are marginalized. A student placed at a child welfare agency aimed to understand the available resources in the community, including the eligibility requirements, and described the relationship to the practice behavior: “As an outsider to the community, understanding resources and dynamics of a community allow you to evaluate [the services], engage with areas of improvement, and strengthen change potential.”

At times, students engaged in activities that would “level the playing field” with improved access to resources and track discrimination that need to be addressed. A student placed in an early childhood center planned to “work on a kindergarten initiative” and described the potential: “By tracking which charter schools [the kids] get into, we might also be tracking discrimination and unequal educational opportunities.”

Students considered many of their activities as ways to help clients empower themselves. Empowerment could include being informed of their rights, having validation of their lived experiences of oppression, and preventing further unmet needs. The activities often promoted collaboration with clients on work that would promote human rights and social and economic justice in their communities. At an afterschool

program, a student planned to engage the youth in a service project and described: “The youth and I are able to identify a social justice problem, learn, and help the best way we can while doing community service.”

Finally, students identified their participation in supervision, trainings, and meetings as integral to this practice behavior. A student placed with child protective services planned to “attend trainings and office meetings, including trauma-informed leadership and community-based collaborations.” The student made this connection to the practice behavior:

By participating in trainings, I am improving my ability to advocate, help, and assist clients. Office meetings give me a safe space to speak up about injustices I see at my practicum site. I learn about issues that are affecting my clients and how to speak up about them in the future through my work as a social worker.

Meetings and trainings provide a dedicated space for discussing these issues and developing a voice for human rights and social justice issues.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Although the sample consisted of four cohorts of BSW seniors, all of the students were from one social work program. Most of the data came from existing learning contracts. Students were expected to complete a draft of their learning contract before discussing this assignment with their field faculty. Their input, however, may still have influenced how students described how they would advance human rights and social and economic justice at their field placements. Current students were invited to elaborate on the connections between activities and practice behaviors, but it was not feasible to include alumni in this additional data collection to probe their understanding further. The 15 students who did participate account for 60 % of the senior class; two students were absent on the day of the class exercise, but it is unknown why the other eight students chose not to permit their exercise to be used as research data and may reflect bias in the data.

Discussion

This study described varied ways that four cohorts of BSW students planned to advance human rights and social and economic justice in their field work. Of greatest interest were the specific examples of activities and responsibilities for each practice behavior. For Understand, students researched and looked for signs of oppression in their clients’ lives. They viewed both clients and supervisors as having expertise about

how oppression and discrimination manifest. Students also sought to understand how these dynamics can play out in therapeutic relationships, agency contexts, and funding sources. For Advocate, students worked with and on behalf of clients to connect them with resources and services, as well as opportunities for education and empowerment. Students explored approaches to advocacy and participated in advocacy projects within larger systems. For Engage, students intended to directly help clients obtain resources and participated in indirect efforts through education, fundraising, outreach, and awareness campaigns. Students reached beyond their individual clients’ situations to help improve the overall quality of and access to resources.

By attending to human rights and social and economic justice in practice, many students appeared to grapple with larger social issues related to their clients’ experiences. The larger issues often include laws, policies, and institutions through which clients gain access to services and secure their rights. Students demonstrated awareness of barriers (e.g., a history of incarceration) and resources (e.g., an individualized education plan) affecting their clients. A systems perspective helps students integrate practice and policy, promote social change beyond an “individualized and personalized basis” (O’Brien 2010, p. 182), and connect human rights and social and economic justice to the profession’s ethical principles. With these analytical tools, students can explore “the unjust power plays that dominant groups are using to undermine human rights of subordinate groups” (Hancock 2007, p. 8) and ask complex, nuanced questions, such as “How can human rights apply to everyone if that means questioning longstanding cultural or religious norms? Even when a consensus exists on the application of a human right, what happens if no enforcement of that right occurs?” (Reichert 2003, p. 249).

On their learning contracts, students often offered an implied connection between their stated activities and the core competency. For the subset of current students who shared deeper insights, their explanations made their thinking more explicit. Students were aware of disparities in availability, access, funding, and quality of services and resources, which prompt the need for advocacy and engagement in activities to promote social and economic justice. Their explanations could be even more specific about particular human rights violations. For example, several students described housing discrimination or barriers to educational opportunities but did not pinpoint housing or education as human rights. Particularly with the Understand practice behavior, students identified the presence of oppression and discrimination in their clients’ lives but did not frame them as human rights violations.

In crafting clear and specific activities, students took into account the practice context, population, and role; analyzed the relevant human rights and social and economic justice issues; and identified ways of advocating with or on behalf

of clients (Funge et al. 2011; Ife 2012). Other students, however, included activities that reflected principles of good practice or expectations for all interns, without an explicit connection to human rights or social and economic justice. Some students may perceive this core competency to be a meta-competency or “generic overarching competencies, qualities, and/or skills that are of a different order or nature than procedural or operational skills” (Bogo et al. 2006, p. 590). A meta-competency, such as the ability to communicate or problem-solve, may be needed to use other skills ethically and effectively. In this case, BSW students may attend to human rights and social and economic justice along with other core competencies, such as “engage diversity and difference in practice” or “engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities” (CSWE 2008). Advancing human rights and social and economic justice cannot be reduced to a list of discrete skills, even though that approach would lead to straightforward field-based assessment tools (Regehr et al. 2012). Instead of a distinct skill set, this meta-competency affects students’ assessment of practice situations, planning of interventions, and overall professional development.

Implications for Social Work Education

The study revealed greater potential for the learning contract to be used as a teaching tool. Instructors could provide students with questions that stimulate critical thinking and reflection. Students could be asked: What are one or two human rights issues related to the clients served by your agency? How might clients at your agency be prevented from accessing services or resources that they are entitled to? In what ways could a social worker advocate on behalf of the rights of clients within the context of your field placement? The questions would prompt students to identify practices and policies for advancing human rights and social and economic justice at their agency (Funge et al. 2011).

Students will benefit from revisiting their learning contract frequently. It is intended to be a “flexible and dynamic document” (Regehr et al. 2002, p. 57) that does not get set aside by students or field instructors (Tapp 2012). Students could be encouraged to detail activities that are connected to their agency or client population and that are discrete enough to become the basis of evaluation. Such specificity helps them identify when and how they will engage in these practice behaviors and keeps the activities within the scope of a BSW student’s role in the agency. Learning contracts could be introduced during junior-year practice classes, as students anticipate the rich learning opportunity ahead and envision themselves in the field. This timing would spread out the orientation needed to be ready for field education and provide more time for the creation of thoughtful learning contracts.

It is important that the learning contract is one of several opportunities for making connections between classroom learning and field work for each core competency. Process recordings are another common tool for helping students reflect on the development of their knowledge, values, and skills (Medina 2010). The process recording form could be amended to prompt students to note their understanding of the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination or engagement in practices to advance social and economic justice (CSWE 2008). When students take field seminar or practice courses concurrently with their fieldwork, instructors can integrate field-based learning about this core competency with case presentations and course assignments.

Field faculty play a vital role in ensuring that students develop the core competencies, and yet, social workers may perceive some competencies as more relevant and applicable to their agency or client population than others. With ongoing training and support from schools of social work, field instructors could be more equipped to help students grapple with this core competency during supervision (Berthold et al. 2014; Hair 2014) and model practices that advance human rights and social and economic justice. Across all practice settings, students need to see workers intentionally engaged in micro and macro practice collaborating to “dismantle the systems and structures that function to preserve inequity” (Rountree and Pomeroy 2010, p. 293).

More studies are needed to measure students’ practices for advancing human rights and social and economic justice and to evaluate social work programs’ effectiveness at integrating these concepts across the curriculum, including field education (McPherson and Cheatham 2015). Studies could explore whether students develop an understanding of this core competency beyond what they articulate on their learning contract. The 2015 EPAS refines the competency by removing Understand as a practice behavior; instead, students are expected to possess and use their understanding of justice to “advocate for human rights at the individual and system level” and “engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice” (p. 7). The new EPAS also includes environmental justice. Future studies could identify activities for developing and demonstrating this aspect of the competency in the field.

Conclusion

Social workers can infuse their practice and policy work with justice-based and rights-based approaches (Ife 2012; Reichert 2003; Skegg 2005). Students need in-depth training in these approaches from the beginning of their social work education, as it may be challenging to wait to integrate the knowledge and skills at a later stage of professional development (Berthold et al. 2014). In order for social work graduates to

be equipped to advance human rights and social and economic justice, social work educators—in the classroom *and* in the field—need to support their development of this core competency through meaningful, context-specific activities and responsibilities. Their detailed plans may prompt even more accountability and momentum for advancing human rights and social and economic justice. Through development of these practice behaviors, social workers possess the passion, motivation, and experience to effect change and enact the mission of the profession.

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