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The teachable moment: engaging students in social justice movements

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Abstract

Social justice has long been at the forefront of the core values of the social work profession. Social workers are charged to confront social injustices and advocate for social change. In 2014, there was a societal response across the United States to the deaths of two African American men, Mike Brown and Eric Garner, and the decision to not indict the police officers who killed them. The collective reaction was reflective of a country unsettled by the criminal justice system's ongoing acceptance of structural discrimination. This article will focus on one university's social work faculty's collective response to the brutal killings of African American men by police officers. With a main campus located in the suburbs and a satellite campus situated in a major city, the faculty felt compelled to guide students from both campuses through an understanding of what was happening locally and nationally by facilitating forums and programs to engage in dialogue, not only in the classroom, but throughout the campus community. The concept of the living classroom is introduced and applied as a way to combat discrimination and advocate for social justice and human rights.

Keywords: community engagement, social justice movements, social work response

The Teachable Moment: Engaging Students in Social Justice Movements

The social work profession has a history rich with leadership in social change movements, from Jane Addams to Inabel Lindsay to Leymah Gbowee. Unique to the social work profession is a commitment to promoting social justice (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012) puts forth that social work practitioners have a duty to promote social justice through actions such as "challenging negative discrimination" and demanding attempts to rectify a history wrought with discrimination against marginalized groups. The IFSW also compels social workers to act in solidarity to confront societal norms that prohibit inclusion. United States-based social work educators are charged to help students "apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels; and engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice" (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015, p. 7). Continuing application of our profession's social justice mandate in social work education is not only timely, but necessary.

In August of 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, MO. It is significant that Brown was an unarmed African-American male and the white officer who shot him was not indicted for his murder. Diverse individuals in communities across the country were outraged by what they perceived as a lack of justice following Brown's death. In reality, there were multiple cases before and after Brown's death in which unarmed African-American men died as a result of excessive force by police officers. The collective reaction reflected a country unsettled by the criminal justice system's ongoing acceptance of structural racism and inequality.

Many social work programs across the United States responded to the call to promote social justice and human rights (CSWE, 2014) in the wake of #BlackLivesMatter movement. Unfortunately, some educators and students were also willing to stand by and remain silent in the social work classroom, essentially accepting excessive, often lethal, force being used against African-American males. Bogo and Wayne (2013) promote human interchange as a vital component of the social work implicit curriculum both within the classroom and field settings as means to promote students' professional development. Engaging students in social activism that promotes commitment to diversity, student development, and human rights and challenges social injustices, enhances implicit curriculum as social work educators are able to model professional behaviors and values. The implicit curriculum is also influential on students' professional empowerment (Peterson, Farmer, & Zippay, 2014), an important characteristic if the next generation of social workers are going to respond to social injustices and violations of human rights.

The purpose of this paper is to present how social work educators at one United States-based university applied pedagogic approaches, within and beyond the classroom walls, to guide students through an understanding of the social and racial injustices related to the shootings of unarmed African-American males by police officers. The paper further details the strategies used to engage social work students in advocacy efforts locally and nationally.

University's Context

The public university referenced in this paper is a predominately white institution in the United States. The university has separate undergraduate and graduate social work departments. Its main campus in located in a suburban setting, where the majority of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students identify as white, the undergraduates

are made up of mostly traditional college-aged students, and the graduate students have limited

social service experience. The university also has a satellite campus located in an majorurban

setting, where the majority of the BSW and MSW students identify as African-Americans, the

undergraduates are made up of mainly non-traditional students, and the graduate students have

significant direct practice experience. The satellite campus has fewer students enrolled in both of

the social work programs than on the main campus. The social work educators involved in this

learning experience represent both social work departments and are from diverse racial and

ethnic backgrounds.

Creating the Living Classroom

In a living classroom environment, ideas and concepts must be socially valid,

consciousness-raising, and resonant with the lived realities of the students and educators. The

creation of this environment was crucial for both campuses to ensure that it was a safe space for

students and educators to share their thoughts, experiences, and opinions related to current and

historical social and racial injustices. The core tenets of the living classroom emerged from a

long history of professional studies programs (e.g., social work, psychology, education, and

business) that integrated experiential learning theory into curriculum and teaching strategies

(Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010).

Social work's unique pedagogical contributions come from a fundamental belief that the

environment influences every aspect of human life. No one can claim to understand a person's

biological, psychological, social, and spiritual functioning without knowing the context of their

lived reality (Miller & Garran, 2008; Rothery, 2008). A person's lived reality includes their

racial and ethnic identities, sexual orientation and gender identities, immigration and

acculturation statuses, socio-political capital, history of oppression and trauma, financial

stability, physical and mental health statuses, religious and/or spiritual orientation, and the quality of their relational networks (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2010; Miller & Garran, 2008). Social work explicates this belief through the teaching and implementation of Critical Eco-systems Theory. As stated by Rothery (2008), Critical Ecological Systems Theory:

> is above all a relational perspective …The person and the environment are unceasingly, intricately, thoroughly (and more or less successfully) reciprocally sustaining and shaping one another. When we try to understand ourselves, our clients, or our work by focusing on one at the expense of the other, we become reductionistic and prone to mistakes. Properly employed, an eco-systems focus is on the mutual contribution and response of each to an unending transactional process on which both are altogether dependent (p. 91).

In concert with Critical Eco-Systems Theory, the social work faculty involved in this process emphasized the importance of critical thinking, historical context, legacies of power/oppression, and methods for liberation and justice. These concepts resonate with Paulo Freire's (2014/2000) examination of the "banking" method of traditional education, the relationship between education and oppression, and the methods for transforming education into a tool for liberation (p. 72). Freire argues that liberating education is born from "dialogic action," true communication between the educator and the student as they co-construct knowledge. Unfortunately, the banking method of education is "anti-dialogic" in that it prevents communication and promotes the students' passive receipt, memorization, and internalization of information provided by the educator. According to Freire,

> Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories
>
> and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communication, the teacher issues
>
> communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and
>
> repeat….. Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves
>
> knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing (p. 72).

The banking method privileges the worldviews of socio-politically and economically powerful groups while diminishing the worldviews, identities, and agency of marginalized groups. The marginalized groups are socialized into object identities and react to an oppressive societal reality with powerlessness, hopelessness, and resignation. These concepts resonate with Carbado's (2010) linkage of privileged identities and oppression:

> There is a link between identity privileges and our negotiation of them, on the one hand,
>
> and discrimination, on the other. Our identities are reflective and constitutive of systems
>
> of oppression. Racism requires white privilege. Sexism requires male privilege.
>
> Homophobia requires heterosexual privilege. The very intelligibility of our identities is
>
> their association, or lack thereof, with privilege (p. 392).

In his theory of liberation, Freire (2014/2000) argued for dialogic education that focuses on the re-awakening of critical consciousness (conscientization), the fostering of subject identities, the shedding of object identities, and the co-construction of knowledge. Dialogic education is consistent with culturally competent pedagogies that emphasize the intersectionality of identity, student-centered teaching methods, and the co-construction of knowledge (Miller & Garran, 2008; Sue, Rasheed, & Rasheed, 2016). This approach has several benefits. First, the students and the teacher develop a relationship based on mutual trust, respect, and empathy. Second, the teacher tailors the educational experience to the specific strengths and needs of their

students. Third, the students and the teacher identify current human rights issues that affect them

and their community. Fourth, students increase self-awareness regarding their beliefs, their

social identities, and their roles as agents of change in society. Lastly, the students and teacher

establish a foundation for in-depth experiential learning. A graphic model was created (See

figure 1) to illustrate the intersectional relationship of theory, students' lived realities, and

experiential application to human rights issues in the living classroom.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Planning and Implementation of the Living Classroom

The planning and implementation of a living classroom requires a strong faculty

commitment to dialogic action. Specifically, the faculty model the living classroom principles in

their departmental discussions about human rights violations, the integration of human rights into

the curriculum, and the departmental responses to human rights violations. Leading by example,

the faculty demonstrate the skills of critical reflection, social action, and reflective practice for

the students. At this university, the BSW and MSW faculty demonstrated these skills through

the following activities:

- Engaging in inter-departmental dialogue regarding incidents of the police brutality,
  including our personal and professional responses;

- Developing a departmental statement in response to police brutality in communities
  of color;

- Providing multiple opportunities for students to dialogue about the incidents of police
  brutality in communities of color and process students' reactions across their social
  identities;

- Facilitating human rights-based discussions in courses across the curriculum (i.e., practice, individual/family life cycle, policy, and research courses); and

- Empowering students to use their voices in person and through social media to testify about the social injustices.

Through these actions, the faculty created a learning environment that promoted dialogue about challenging social problems, nurtured critical reflection, and inspired students to participate in social activism. This educational process culminated in the living classroom as a response to the crisis of police brutality in communities of color, specifically related to the shootings and the unlawful detainment of African-American men, and the intensified public discourse about institutional racism within the legal system in response to these violations of human rights.

The living classroom experiences at both campuses were shaped by the students' social identities, life cycle stages, and employment statuses. For example, the BSW and MSW students at the satellite campus predominantly identified as members of underrepresented minority communities, primarily as African-Americans; were older on average than the main campus students; and were in a different life cycle stage, predominantly multigenerational caregivers raising children and caring for elder family members. As older students, many of the satellite campus MSW students had significant post-bachelors work experience in social service agencies. In addition to these life factors, many of the satellite campus students lived with fragile financial stability and complicated health statuses. With cultural responsiveness to the lived realities of the students, the faculty attempted to create social activism opportunities that were socially valid, feasible, and resonant with the students' lives.

Engaging Students in the Classroom and in the Community

The social work faculty engaged the students in multiple ways on both campuses following the decision to not indict Officer Darren Wilson, the police officer who killed Michael Brown. The events were over a span of three months on and off campus. Working in collaboration with students on both campuses, the faculty facilitated a learning environment which included: (a) community dialogues; (b) critical classroom discussions; (c) social media advocacy; (d) campus wide panel discussion; and (e) intensive training on nonviolent action. The following sections will describe each method in depth.

Community Dialogues

The day the decision was announced that Wilson would not be indicted for shooting Brown (McCalm, 2014), a demonstration was planned in the city where the satellite campus was located. It was the end of the semester, a time when many faculty are trying to fit remaining content into their courses, but all BSW and MSW social work instructors met several hours before the rally and cancelled classes to give interested students an opportunity to attend the demonstration. Several professors, including the chair of the MSW program, accompanied students from both campuses to the rally. This was the first time many students took part in an organized public demonstration. In order to ensure students were able to return to campus, they were provided with fare for public transportation.

After the demonstration, all satellite campus BSW and MSW students gathered for a community dialogue to debrief the protest as well as the larger Black Lives Matter movement. While BSW and MSW students on the main campus rarely interact because the programs are larger and located on different areas of the suburban campus, the satellite campus, being much smaller, allowed for greater interaction and collaboration between the two programs. To ensure that all voices in the room were heard and acknowledged, the faculty created a living classroom

environment where students could feel supported and comfortable to share their thoughts and

feelings about the decision not to indict Officer Wilson. A Power Point presentation framed the

discussion by providing context for the human rights violations and social justice concerns, and

the resulting impacts on individuals, families, and communities. Prepared questions were used to

guide the discussion; however, students were encouraged to be active participants in the

conversation. Students' responses were meaningful and emotional, and included their lived

experiences related to incidents of excessive force being used by law enforcement. For example,

African-American students described personal concerns related to the safety of their sons, and

being targeted by law enforcement based on their skin color or the clothing they wore. Students

were also challenged to critically think about the legacies of racial power and oppression in the

United States, and how social workers can respond to social and racial injustices such as the

Brown case.

Critical Classroom Discussions

Smaller scale community dialogues occurred through critical classroom discussions. The

issue of African-American students feeling like they do not belong at predominately white

institutions in the United States, is a long-standing issue in higher education. Researchers have

shown that students of color who attend predominately white institutions feel alienated, ignored,

and have no cultural ownership on their campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Mendenhall &

Lewis, 2010). African American students at the main campus expressed that they felt ignored

and targeted following the Mike Brown incident. For example, after one student-organized

protest on the main campus, someone posted on Yik Yak, an anonymous social media page, that

they "wished the African American students would go back to Africa." Many African American

students were upset about this and other racially offensive comments and responded by hosting

more rallies and die-ins on the main campus. An African-American student created a video that documented the concerns of the students on the main campus and posted it on YouTube [web address will be added after blind review]. The video captured the rallies and die-ins held on the main campus. It also highlighted personal commentaries from students, faculty, and staff about the killings of African American men in the United States. A social work student sent the link to a BSW faculty member and suggested that it be shown in classes. This video was shown in BSW and MSW social work classes on both campuses to elicit a dialogue about the implications for inclusion, social justice, and the importance of being a change agent. Faculty engaged in dialogic action, as an example of the living classroom, by facilitating a genuine exchange of ideas with students to awaken their awareness of human rights issues and empower them to addresses social injustices. Although the efforts and voices of the students at the satellite campus were not included the video, they responded in solidary and respect for the peers efforts on the main campus. Interestingly, the students at the main campus seemed to focus their efforts of awareness and social action on the campus, whereas students at the satellite campus focused their efforts in their residential and social communities.

Social Media Advocacy

In modeling the living classroom, social action through the use of social media is a key domain in today's society. The advent of the Internet and the proliferation of social media have drastically increased the number of ways in which individuals can advocate for social change. From posting articles on Facebook to Tweeting local legislators to Instagramming rallies, social media have created spaces for individuals to creatively draw attention to issues they care about. Additionally, the democratization of media has allowed a broader range of voices, including students, to contribute to public dialogue, thus fitting well with the Critical Eco-Systems theory.

According to the Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, and Madden (2014) of the Pew Research

Center, 85 percent of adults use the Internet, and 73 percent of them use social media. Of

Internet users between the ages of 18 and 29, close to 90 percent use social media. Therefore,

using social media to teach policy practice can be a way to engage students on platforms with

which they are already familiar. Additionally, about 93 percent of nonprofits use social media,

indicating that the use of social media is a growing part of social work practice (Guo & Saxton,

2013).

People have critiqued the role of social media in creating social change, claiming that

online advocacy is a lazy form of activism that accomplishes little, leading to the term

"slacktivism" (Morozov, 2009). Slacktivism is a modern version of what Kristofferson, White,

and Peloza (2014) called token support, meaning that people affiliate themselves with a cause

with little effort, often in order to gain social approval. Examples of token support include

wearing a colored ribbon to bring awareness to a social issue or putting a bumper sticker on a

car, as well as Internet-related actions such as liking a Facebook page.

While these actions alone may not lead to meaningful change, they can be used to

leverage individuals to become involved in more meaningful action (Kristofferson, White, &

Peloza, 2014; Shirkey 2011). Preliminary research has shown that there is a positive correlation

between online activism and engaging in other types of in-person activism (Christensen, 2011).

For example, in 2015, students at the University of Missouri recognized the power of social

media when they created a media-free zone, where they shut out members of the mainstream

media from their protests regarding racist events on campus. Without the presence of

mainstream media, the protesters were able to have greater control of the narrative through their

posts on social media (Starr, 2015). Social work professors can work with students to make such connections more explicit.

To engage students in social action through social media, Twitter was used in an undergraduate course that serves as an introduction to social policy. There were three sections of the class: two on the main campus and one on the urban campus. Students in all sections created Twitter accounts and followed organizations and individuals who were engaged in advocacy work in their areas of interest. During that semester a group of students on the main campus, predominantly leaders from the black student organizations, began organizing around the Black Lives Matter movement. They articulated concerns about national issues, such as police officers using excessive force, as well as concerns about issues occurring on campus, such as police officers' hyper-surveillance of black student groups' events. The student groups arranged rallies, die-ins, and a day of wearing all-black through social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They created unique hashtags to publicize the movement and associated events. The purpose of such demonstrations was to allow for a space where all students could express their feelings of hurt and disappointment. It was also a way to make a statement about the impact of the killings on African-American students who needed to be supported and wanted their perspectives to be acknowledged by the university community. Social work students were encouraged to attend the demonstrations and some faculty took their classes to the rallies. Students in the policy course on the main campus were able to get involved in publicizing and attending these events on campus through the Twitter accounts created for the class. Urban campus students were able to use Twitter to stay connected to rallies and other social justice events happening in the city. In addition to becoming aware of local movements, students were

also able to follow national movements and gain a wider range of perspectives than they would have through the mainstream media.

Campus-Wide Panel Discussion

In an effort to continue the exchange of ideas from the fall semester, BSW faulty organized a campus-wide panel discussion in collaboration with a prominent multicultural organization comprised of a diverse group of faculty, staff, and administrators on the main campus. The partnership demonstrated solidarity among faculty and staff across the campus, and their commitment to addressing social justice issues. Although it was held on the main campus, students from the satellite campus were encouraged to attend.

To set a symbolic tone, the panel was scheduled on the university's recognized Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) Day. At the university, MLK Day includes activities focused on King's legacy and service to humanity. The panel discussion was advertised through social media and promotional materials as a campus convocation for students, faculty, and staff seeking to draw from King's work as a social activist fighting against unjust laws and social and economic practices affecting oppressed groups. Inspired by Alexander's (2012) book, the panel was entitled, *The color of justice: A conversation about the Ferguson, MO, case and the intersections of race and social and economic inequalities.* Alexander (2012) addressed discriminatory racial practices evident in the U.S. criminal justice system and their impact on African-Americans in impoverished localities. Relevant to the focus on the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO the panelists discussed their perspectives on the case and the intersectionality of class, race, and gender from philosophical, social work, historical, and legal perspectives.

The BSW faculty, undergraduate social work students, and members of the multicultural organization determined the composition of the panel members. Professors from diverse

disciplines at the university were invited to take part in the panel based on their research and

areas of interest. Two panelists were from the undergraduate social work department; one's area

of expertise focused on the mental health and criminal justice systems and the other faculty

member highlighted American race relations and violence prevention with African-American

males. Two faculty were from the philosophy department; one was an attorney active in the

ongoing civil rights struggle as a criminal defense lawyer and the other identified as an activist

scholar and community organizer. The final panelist was a professor from the history

department whose interests included African-American history, civil rights, and the white

supremacy's pipeline-to-prison agenda. In addition to the diverse disciplines, interests, and

research agendas, the panel was also diverse in terms of race, gender, geographic backgrounds,

and age. Diversity was important to ensure different perspectives and stimulate meaningful

conversations and questions among students, faculty, and staff audience members.

Consistent with the living classroom, the importance of liberating education through

dialogic action was a highlight of the panel promoting an exchange between faculty, staff, and

students to co-construct knowledge and process their reactions to racial and social inequities.

Singleton and Linton's (2006) strategy of courageous conversations was adopted to set the tone

of dialogue among the panelists and the audience. Courageous conversations "engage those who

won't talk; sustains the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted; [and] depends the

conversation to the point where authentic understanding and meaningful action occurs" (p. 16).

The panel was planned in a way that panelists had a limited time to present their views but ample

time was allowed for a question-and-answer session with the audience. The panelists'

perspectives on the issues of racial brutality in the United States appeared to empower students

to boldly voice their opinions. While white students acknowledged they have different

experiences and interactions with law enforcement than African American students, the white students stood in solidarity by voicing their frustration and disappointment in the criminal justice system. Although there seemed to be some tension on the main campus due to the Yik Yak posts and other racially charged incidents, the atmosphere at this campus-wide program was very positive. At the end of the program one student unapologetically challenged faculty, staff, and students to continue conversations and programs around racial and social inequalities present on campus and in society.

Departmental dialogue. Following the campus-wide panel, the undergraduate social work department gathered on the main campus to engage students in a dialogue about on-campus racial tension, as well as the media centered on the killings of African-American males by the police. BSW faculty canceled classes and most students were excused from their field placements to attend the discussion. Faculty prepared guided questions and social media clips to facilitate the discussion. Similar to the earlier dialogue on the satellite campus, the goal was to discuss the social and racial injustices, as well as ways to advocate for change that would support affected individuals, families, and communities. This was the first time in the 45 year history of the department that all students in the program, from freshmen to seniors, gathered to address a social issue; it presented a unique opportunity for younger students to learn from their more experienced peers. Students currently in the field were able to share how they were, and more often were not, addressing the issues raised by the recent series of police-involved shootings of unarmed African-American men. The discussion also addressed the racial tension on the university's main campus, which was brought to the forefront after student-led protests and die-ins were carried out on the main campus and in the community around the satellite campus.

Intensive Training on Nonviolent Action

After the initial student protests, die-ins, and campus-wide panel discussion, students were interested in continuing to organize on campus. Undergraduate black student leaders instrumental in organizing the protests on the main campus requested a training on the history of nonviolence and skills for facilitating nonviolent collective action, which then took place in February 2015 on the main campus. The goal was to train a core group of students who would then become co-trainers for larger student groups. The intense weekend training was limited to 10 student leaders from a variety of academic disciplines, including social work.

The training was organized by activist scholars who were also experienced nonviolence facilitators. The training was a collaboration among the peace and conflict studies program, the MSW program, and a local political activist, who combined brought several decades of experience as trainers and nonviolence practitioners. Yet, they were merely faculty supporting the student-led activism on campus. The week before the training, each participant received a binder with a variety of resources, including readings selected from authors such as King (1963), Baker (1960), hooks (1995), and Anderson (2014). Students were encouraged to look over, but not necessarily read the binder, as it was designed to be a resource guide. The workshop included 15 hours of training which incorporated meals together. While a dinner was optional, most participants attended and found that time together instrumental for community-building.

Each day was structured to maximize time with participants. Reflective activities began and ended each day, creating bookends for participants to commit to their learning and practice. The workshop topics included an overview of the philosophy of nonviolence, systemic racism, and nonviolent action (Harding, 1990; Holsaert, Noonan, Richardson, Robinson, Young, & Zellner, 2012; King, 1963). Participants were provided technical training on organizing and

facilitating meetings and direct action (Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2001; Boyd, 2012; Hedemann, 1986). They also developed an action plan for continuing the movement on campus.

Overall, participants rated the workshop favorably. They indicated on a post-workshop survey that they gained an understanding of the history of nonviolence, social change methods, leadership skills, group norms, organizing meetings, and community action planning. Areas for improvement included strengthening the content in the areas of conflict resolution and personal self-care. Based on responses to open-ended questions, participants stated they were given the tools necessary to continue the movement and bonded along the way. A participant stated, "One thing I really enjoyed about the weekend workshop was the information that was given, so much knowledge has been dished to me and I have eagerly consumed. I now feel like I can continue on and do the same for others." Not only did students want to learn more about the local context, but they wanted more time. As one participant stated: "I wish the weekend could be longer. I can never get enough of knowledge, guidance, and insight."

This intensive training incorporated the tenets of the living classroom in a number of ways. First, given the amount of time spent together over the course of the weekend, mutual respect, trust, and empathy developed within the group. Second, the training was tailored to address the abilities, strengths, and needs as expressed by this group of student activists. Third, the group identified the current issue as a human rights violation appropriately in relation to the ongoing civil rights movement in the United States. Fourth, the students self-identified as local leaders and change agents in the context of their campus community. Finally, the weekend was the foundation for ongoing experiential learning and activism on campus.

Participants continued to organize an active presence on campus after the training. Student leaders organized a series of events throughout the remainder of the semester including

ongoing weekly protests, co-facilitated campus teach-ins, and demands placed upon the

university president for a more civil campus environment with the threat of a sit-in in the

president's office. While not all of the participants involved in the nonviolence training were

social work students, they embodied Bent-Goodley's (2015) call for renewed activism in social

justice movements.

<div align="center">**Implications for Social Work Practice**</div>

Actively engaging students in current events enhances classroom learning and the

mission of the social work profession. Providing spaces, such as the living classroom, to engage

students in conversations about current topics that pose a threat to the realization of human rights

and social justice, is crucial to professional growth.   The collective efforts among these social

work educators evoked meaningful dialogue around social and racial injustices in the United

States, related to the killings of unarmed African-American males by law enforcement.

Additionally, the faculty emphasized the importance of responding in the moment to social

inequalities by addressing current issues not only in the classroom, but by facilitating timely

community and departmental dialogues.   Social work education that encourages social justice

requires diverse curricular frameworks and creative pedagogic methods to support students'

learning (Grise-Owens, Cambron, & Valade, 2010). The authors incorporated community

dialogues, critical classroom discussions, social media advocacy, campus-wide panel

discussions, and non-violent trainings to enhance BSW and MSW students' understanding of

ethical and innovative ways to address social injustices on all levels of practice. Exposure to

diverse methods that respond to social problems is key for social work students' growth towards

the integration of social work values, knowledge, and skills into practice. Consistent with

CSWE's (2015) focus on implicit curriculum, students participated in a learning environment

that extended the educational experience beyond the classroom. In line with the explicit

curriculum, students were able to recognize systems of racial and economic discrimination in

their local social reality and they were able to actively engage in advocacy efforts to advance

global human rights and social justice issues..

By piquing students' interest in current affairs that impact the larger society, the faculty

were able to create opportunities for students to apply the lessons from their social work courses

to real life social issues. The series of activities on both campuses provided an opening for

shared learning to occur among diverse students, faculty, and staff. Many students who

participated in the dialogues, protests, and classroom discussions came from communities similar

to Ferguson, MO, and related to some of the concerns among law enforcement and African-

American men. Creating the living classroom where social work students and educators from

diverse social, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds could gather, provided a meaningful

discourse for students to exercise the concepts of empathy and cultural humility. Carter-Black

(2007) suggested that social work programs should integrate storytelling experiences of diverse

cultural groups into their curriculum to help students gain a thorough viewpoint on different

groups. Students' ability to apply and transfer an empathetic viewpoint of diversity and the

significance of differences that influence life experiences is crucial to social work practice

(CSWE, 2015).

Conclusion

Although the activities detailed were successful in the context of this one United States-

based university, one challenge when responding to emerging social problems and events in real

time is that there can be little time to plan. An area for future direction entails creating ongoing

opportunities for greater involvement in community-wide actions. The strengths-based approach

to policy practice calls upon students to focus on existing community strengths and to include those who were impacted by a social problem to be directly involved in efforts of social change (Chapin, 2014). While this university's students were not immune to the excessive use of force by police in African-American communities, there are many individuals and groups who have important knowledge to share outside of the academic context. There are opportunities for student to engage in dialogues and advocacy efforts with community leaders and members to address the issue of police officers' use of excessive force on African American men. Despite the challenge of time, the social work educators in this example were able to work together and reach out to other faculty and students groups to collaborate. The financial resources for the efforts where minimal as departmental funds were leveraged to pay for the minor expenses incurred. The space for all the events took place on university property. the most challenging aspect was communicating event information to the campus community and social work departments.

Advocating for more community involvement from the university could also forge standing partnerships. Academic institutions can offer resources and expertise to communities affected by systematic oppression. For example, universities could provide space on campus for town hall meetings not restricted to students, particularly when there is a crisis and communities need to gather. While social work programs may not be able to anticipate the next police shooting of an African American male or related community events, they can build community-based relationships to call upon when an event occurs and allow for flexibility in scheduling to promote student engagement in advocacy. Finally, social work educators can create the living classroom that promotes the exchange of ideas to eliminate societal barriers for marginalized groups, cultivates critical reflection, and empowers students to participate in social activism.

While the location of the activities presented in this article were based in the United States, the reality is that systemic oppression is present around the globe. More specifically, Razack (2012) highlights the importance of recognizing racism as an issue impacted by globalization. Social work educators, especially in the United States, need to be aware of this reality in the local and global context. As a profession charged with advocating for social justice and the realization of human rights, we must be attentive to the focus of this journal's special issue and work toward combating discrimination through social work education.

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