



# Integrating Social Justice in Field Education

Author(s)\*

Amy S. Levine, MSW  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Andrea Murray-Lichtman, MSW  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

*\*Both authors contributed equally to this manuscript.*

## Overview

Historically, social work practice has occurred within the confines of what can be described as a bidirectional flow of social justice. Along with great strides forward, setbacks occur. Nevertheless, the unrelenting call for social workers to fight for social justice and to educate others for this fight remains the same. A deeply rooted commitment within the Grand Challenges of Social Work stems directly from the profession's fundamental principle of promoting social justice and equal opportunity for all (Uehara et al., 2013). Schools of social work strive to not only educate students to understand the ways in which privilege, oppression, marginalization, and powerlessness contribute to systematic inequalities, but also to fulfill the profession's mission by equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to promote social justice (Finn, 2016; Reisch & Garvin, 2016). Whereas classroom instruction can successfully teach the concepts of social justice, translating this theoretical knowledge to practice in real-world settings is an essential component of social work field education (Battle & Hill, 2016). Given the experiential, hands-on nature of the field practicum, field education programs are uniquely positioned to shape students' self-identities as social work professionals and enhance students' understanding of social justice work in action. During the field practicum, students gain firsthand experience in applying a social justice lens to their practice of social work through direct interactions with field instructors, client systems, field advisors, and other social work students.

Social work educators recognize that students often gain the bulk of their learning from their field education experience (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). While acknowledging this central role of field education in students' educational experience, social work educators must also accept responsibility for ensuring that field programs maintain a strong commitment to social justice education. Some critics have argued that without

explicit training on anti-oppressive practices, current models of field education run the risk of training social workers to maintain the status quo rather than advancing social justice (Dominelli, 1996; George, Silver, & Preston, 2013; Preston, George, & Silver, 2014). Therefore, using the field placement as a means of strengthening students' critical thinking skills and capacity for integrating classroom concepts in real-world practice is an essential element in fostering commitment to social justice.

Although most social work field education programs readily agree with the essential nature of a focus on social justice, fewer have taken actionable steps toward achieving that outcome. Such steps involve conducting an in-depth critical self-evaluation of the field program's efforts in promoting social justice in practice settings. To carry out this evaluation effectively, field education programs must identify both the challenges to making social justice a priority in the field placement and the strategies for overcoming those challenges. To explore this dual-pronged evaluation, the authors conducted a review of current literature on social justice in field education and engaged in a dialogue with field educators across the country. The authors aimed to better understand both the challenges and successes that field education programs have experienced in integrating social justice practice in their student practicums. The authors believe the results of this exploration will help inform and advance field educators' understanding and effectiveness in integrating social justice in social work field education programs.

### **Common Challenges Faced by Field Education Programs**

Although field education programs might acknowledge the importance of social justice in students' educational experience, several challenges can emerge posing barriers to achieving a field education experience in which social justice plays a central role. One of the primary challenges to achieving this goal stems from varying capacities of field instructors to both model social justice work in action and engage students in meaningful conversations about the role of social justice in field practice. Field instructors differ greatly in their abilities to address social justice in field practicums for many reasons, including: varying personal commitment to social justice, varying availability of time and willingness to engage in further training on social justice issues, and varying levels of skill and competence in engaging students in exploring the role of social work practice in advancing social justice (Armour, Bain, & Rubio, 2004; Havig, 2013; Jivanjee, Pendell, Nissen, & Goodluck, 2015). Likewise, field instructors might have limited positional power within their employing agencies and feel unable to challenge oppressive practices that are accepted as standard operating procedures. Field agencies often differ in their approach to social justice work and offer varying levels of opportunity for social workers to advance social justice through their practice. For example, a small non-profit agency focused on community organizing might consider social justice work a primary mission of their agency, whereas a large

healthcare system might not identify the charge to fight oppression as central to their mission. Therefore, social work students are likely to find a wide range of differing opportunities to engage in discussion and practice around social justice work within their field practicums.

Another challenge field education programs face when seeking to place social justice at the forefront of the field experience stems from the students themselves, specifically their level of interest and engagement in social justice. Similar to field instructors, students demonstrate varying levels of commitment to social justice and varying levels of interest in exploring social justice in practice as they enter their field practicums. Some students might feel comfortable or even compelled to bring up social justice concerns with their field instructor and include discussions of potentially oppressive practices in their field agency as part of ongoing supervisory sessions. However, other students might not recognize the same social justice issues or might not feel comfortable bringing their concerns to the attention of their field instructor, particularly if the field instructor is perceived as not being receptive to such discussions (Razack, 2001). If social justice is not a priority of the social work student or field instructor, the opportunity to explore issues of anti-oppressive practice is likely to be missed in the field practicum.

Field education programs must also face the conundrum of wanting to provide field experiences that advance social justice versus the reality of recruiting agencies willing to host student interns. Many field education programs report a perception that they are restricted in what they can ask of agencies willing to provide internships, especially when agencies and staff are stretched to their limits. Factors contributing to this perception include high turnover rates among field instructors and competition from other schools for placement sites, especially as more schools of social work offer online programs with field placements local to students throughout the country. Many schools have limited resources for recruitment and retention of field agencies, and field program administrators might fear that requesting field instructors place a greater focus on social justice issues will deter agencies from hosting social work students. In short, field education programs might find themselves balancing the reality of needing a placement opportunity with the desire to identify field instructors and agencies that will prioritize social justice work in the field practicum.

### **Innovative Strategies to Prioritize Social Justice**

Throughout history, social workers have stepped up to the challenges inherent in social justice work. Recent conversations with social work field educators from across the country have revealed that the current call to integrate social justice in student learning is equally urgent as in any prior era. Decades of research also emphasize the importance of strategically addressing the complex challenges to integrating social

justice in field education placements (Dominelli, 1996; Havig, 2013; George et al., 2013). Recent calls to re-prioritize social justice in field education have led to the generation of strategies to empower students and field instructors to actively integrate social justice into the field education placement. The first step in this process, as identified by most field faculty, is a commitment from the social work field education department to create an explicit and implicit social justice curriculum. Conversations about opportunities and expectations to implement social justice practice must begin with the first agency recruitment conversation. When a focus on social justice is set as a priority for recruiting student placements, students will have enhanced opportunities to integrate social justice into their field experience. In addition, using this strategy might require social work field educators to shift their focus to a recruiting process that examines specific social issues and marginalized populations (George et al., 2013).

The field education curriculum should also encompass required social justice projects completed in the field placement and supported by both direct practice and macro-level practice classroom assignments. For example, these projects could include students participating in local and national advocacy days that promote exposure to real-time social justice issues as well as community-oriented social justice action. Notably, this type of social justice practice will require a commitment from both the field education program and the placement agency to support social justice projects through flexibility in internship structure and schedules. In addition, social justice projects will require field education faculty and field instructors to provide hands-on support to students as they draft social justice activities for the learning agreement that can be implemented in the agency.

Field education programs should provide intentional training for field instructors addressing their identified needs and emerging social justice and equity issues, including the integration of current knowledge and research. Social justice and equity training delivered by an experienced facilitator provides an opportunity for field instructors to learn how to have difficult conversations about difference and social justice. This additional training not only enhances the relationship between the field instructor and student, but also promotes improved learning experiences by providing an opportunity for effective supervision and feedback regarding social justice issues. In turn, this greater focus on social justice can enable the field instructor to model a social worker's role in advancing social justice, discuss current social issues, emphatically support students around specific issues of social injustice, and explore mutual passions for social justice (Jivanjee et al., 2015). The field education program should provide ongoing support by fostering an open dialogue about field instructor and field agency strengths and needs, coordinating programming for workshops, and providing opportunities to partner with the community to combat current issues of social injustice.

Similarly, field education faculty must proactively use the field seminar course to encourage meaningful discourse and support for students around social justice issues and the integration of social justice practice into their placement experience. Field education programs should be encouraged to think outside of the existing agency placement model by recruiting student practicum opportunities with organizations that have offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These opportunities can be found by exploring local access points for marginalized communities (ex. local libraries to reach the homeless populations). Opportunities can also emerge from creating community social justice incubators that pull together community agencies around a specific social justice need within the community. Field education programs can make meaningful and conscious efforts to prioritize student learning about and practice in social justice by aligning their recruitment of field practicum opportunities, training provided for field instructors, projects and work assigned to students, and design of field seminar curriculum.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Social work education is undergoing a critical evaluation, and many in the field are calling for a renewed focus on anti-oppressive practice and social justice work within social work curricula (Dominelli, 1996; Finn, 2016; Harriman & Bailey, 2015; Reisch & Garvin, 2016). As previously discussed, field education programs have a clear responsibility to enhance students' understanding of social justice work in action. Although the authors have identified common challenges to prioritizing social justice in field education programs, they have also identified strategies to help ensure this goal. Nevertheless, additional research on this topic is needed. The literature has explored some aspects of how students are educated about social justice issues through field education (Richards-Schuster et al., 2015) and how students holding different identities might experience the field practicum (Razack, 2001). However, further inquiry into evidence-based models of training and support for field instructors, students, and field education programs is critical to better understand how to improve the effectiveness of field education in furthering social justice work (Jivanjee et al., 2015).

The existing research on integrating social justice in field education points to group training models for field instructors, with a focus on increasing cultural competence (Armour et al., 2004) and pedagogical methods to increase field instructors' competence in communicating social justice concepts to students they supervise in practice settings (Havig, 2013). However, other research goes further in challenging field education programs to look beyond the traditional structures and demand a reconceptualization of field education that shifts away from agency-based work to community-based work (George et al., 2013; Preston et al., 2014). This shift is considered necessary to remove field education from the constraints imposed by

agency policies that might be counter to the advancement of social justice. In these new models of field education, schools of social work pair with students and communities to identify pressing issues, and field liaisons work collaboratively with communities, students, and agencies to create interventions focused on mobilizing strategies (George et al., 2013). The implications of these models might challenge academic institutions to evaluate whether their field education programs are training students to maintain the status quo versus encouraging the next generation of social work practitioners to advance social justice through policy and practice.

Ultimately, field education programs hold a unique opportunity, and therefore a unique responsibility, to continually advocate for and evaluate the role of social justice education in students' educational experience. This responsibility involves collaborating with students, field instructors, community agencies, and universities to not only ask critical questions of field education programs, but also to engage willingly in self-reflection, innovation, and commitment to achieving the social justice mission of the social work profession.

## References

- Armour, M. P., Bain, B., & Rubio, R. (2004). An evaluation study of diversity training for field instructors: A collaborative approach to enhancing cultural competence. *Journal of Social Work Education, 40*(1), 27–38. doi:10.1080/10437797.2004.10778477
- Battle, S., & Hill, A. (2016). A qualitative study of BSW students' cultural competence preparedness to uphold client dignity. *Field Educator, 6*(2). Retrieved from <http://fieldeducator.simmons.edu/article/a-qualitative-study-of-bsw-students-cultural-competence-preparedness-to-uphold-client-dignity>
- Dominelli, L. (1996). Deprofessionalizing social work: Anti-oppressive practice, competencies and postmodernism. *The British Journal of Social Work, 26*(2), 153–175. doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a011077
- Finn, J. (2016). *Just practice: A social justice approach to social work*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- George, P., Silver, S., & Preston, S. (2013). Reimagining field education in social work: The promise unveiled. *Advances in Social Work, 14*(12), 642–657. Retrieved from <https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/advancesinsocialwork/article/view/2440>
- Harriman, K. K., & Bailey, G. (2015). Conversation with Gary Bailey on social workers' commitment to social justice. *Field Educator, 5*(2). Retrieved from <http://>

fieldeducator.simmons.edu/article/conversation-5-2

- Havig, K. (2013). Empowering students to promote social justice: A qualitative study of field instructors' perceptions and strategies. *Field Educator*, 3(2). Retrieved from <http://fieldeducator.simmons.edu/article/empowering-students-to-promote-social-justice-a-qualitative-study-of-field-instructors-perceptions-and-strategies/>
- Jivanjee, P., Pendell, K., Nissen, L., & Goodluck, C. (2015). Lifelong learning in social work: A qualitative exploration with social work practitioners, students, and field instructors. *Advances in Social Work*, 16(2), 260–275. doi:10.18060/18407
- Preston, S., George, P., & Silver, S. (2014). Field education in social work: The need for reimagining. *Critical Social Work*, 15(1). Retrieved from [http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/field\\_education\\_SW](http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/field_education_SW)
- Razack, N. (2001). Diversity and difference in the field education encounter: Racial minority students in the practicum. *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, 20(2), 219–232. doi:10.1080/02615470120044310
- Reisch, M., & Garvin, C. D. (2016). *Social work and social justice: Concepts, challenges, and strategies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Richards-Schuster, K., Ruffolo, M. C., Nicoll, K. L. Distelrath, C., Galura, J., & Mishkin, A. (2015). Exploring challenges faced by students as they transition to social justice work in the “real world”: Implications for social work. *Advances in Social Work*, 16(2), 372–389. doi:10.18060/18526
- Uehara, E., Flynn, M., Fong, R., Brekke, J., Barth, R.P., Coulton, C., ... Walters, K. (2013). Grand challenges for social work. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 4(3), 165–170. doi:10.5243/jsswr.2013.11
- Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2010). Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 46(3), 327–339. doi:10.5175/JSWE.2010.200900043