

Teaching Social Welfare Policy through a Practice Informed Assignment in Baccalaureate Social Work Education: Utilizing the Topic of HIV/AIDS Towards CSWE Competency Based Education

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Social workers are called to advocate for the oppressed and marginalized groups of persons who face social injustices because of poverty, health conditions, and discrimination. Some Christian social workers might experience a dilemma when the call to advocate is for a specific group of individuals, such as the GLBT community, often regarded as living in contrast to Biblical teachings. This article provides an example of a policy class assignment for baccalaureate level social work students on the topic of HIV/AIDS and its relationship with the GLBT community. It offers constructive approaches to helping students maintain integrity with their personal and social work values and develop competent practice skills.

IN LOVE IS AN ORIENTATION: ELEVATING THE CONVERSATION WITH THE GAY Community (2009), authors Andrew Marin and Brian McLaren introduce us to the term, *the judgmental lifestyle* as opposed to the term *the gay lifestyle*. These contrasting terms emphasize the conflicting judgmental at-

itudes which people who identify themselves as gay or lesbian often face. The book conveys the need for Christians to be Christ-like in their approach to members of the gay community. “Whatever your opinion on same-sex orientation, you have to admit that Jesus didn’t say, ‘They’ll know you are my disciples by your firm stance on divisive social issues.’ No, he said we’ll be known as his disciples for another reason” (p. 78). What is the other reason? Perhaps love, perhaps acceptance, perhaps a commitment to social justice for all individuals who are discriminated against and marginalized. Although the gay lifestyle and the virus referred to as HIV/AIDS are not mutually inclusive of each other, the members of both groups share the consequences of oppression within society. Unfortunately, the oppression endured by these groups is often imposed by the Christian community.

Marin and McLaren (2009) encourage Christians to “willfully plant themselves in the middle of some very uncomfortable places, making a conscious commitment to stay in that place with the GLBT community” (p. 240). Likewise, Christian social work faculty in higher education should not shy away from uncomfortable situations. In fact we should embrace them because when we are uncomfortable we can learn the most about ourselves. Through our willingness to be uncomfortable, we can model to our students the lack of fear required to seize the opportunity to experience how others live. Students can then follow in our footprints and not fear the unknown. When we are willing to face the fear that so many oppressed individuals confront daily, we can begin to understand how to promote empowerment to those who need it the most.

This practice note reflects on a baccalaureate social work education class assignment for students engaged in policy analysis of programs directed towards individuals with HIV/AIDS. While reviewing legislative policies related to HIV/AIDS, students also gained an awareness of the oppression and lack of social justice often faced by the GLBT community, the population group most often associated with the virus. The assignment provided students the opportunity to analyze policies for groups of people who are often in the center of the quandary between Christian beliefs and the NASW Code of Ethics because of their sexual orientation.

Literature Review and Rationale for Assignment

Faculty in higher education are charged to teach social work competencies as prescribed by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). These competencies are believed to give students the ability to engage in client interventions that promote social justice and empowerment among marginalized and oppressed groups, including individuals diagnosed with HIV/AIDS (National Association of Social Workers, 1999). Although HIV/AIDS is not restricted to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) community, homophobic and heterosexist stereotypes are well documented

among health and human services workers when working with those infected by the virus (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Cochran, Peavy, & Cauce, 2007; Harris, Nightengale, & Owen, 1995; Krieglstein, 2003). Lack of experience and encounters with groups of persons who are marginalized, such as those who carry the HIV/AIDS virus, often lead to negative attitudes among social work practitioners because of lack of coverage of this topic in social work education (Bergh & Crisp, 2004; Longres & Fredriksen, 2000).

Although HIV/AIDS is not limited to the gay community, skeptics often designate the virus as the gay community's illness and thus the stigma sometimes prompts a conflict within the Christian community. Faculty at CSWE-accredited social work programs provided within Christian based institutions of higher learning may experience a challenge in promoting social justice towards a population perceived by some as engaging in sinful behavior. The GLBT lifestyle may be seen as inconsistent with commonly held Christian beliefs.

However, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics makes it clear that social workers are to promote six basic core values. These core values are service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationship, integrity and competence (NASW, 1999). While all six items of the code are critical for social work practice, the elements of social justice, dignity and worth of the person and importance of human relationships align most directly with practice towards members of the GLBT community. The ethical principle of social justice is applied to individuals who are vulnerable and oppressed due to discrimination. The ethical principle of respecting the inherent dignity and worth of all persons is demonstrated through treating each person in a caring and respectful manner while being mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity, thus recognizing the individual's right to self-determination. A third ethical principle, the importance of human relationships, can be observed when social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people. Christian social workers can demonstrate compliance with the NASW prescribed code of ethics while simultaneously responding to the Christian call to love others. Social workers seek to understand relationships between and among people as an important vehicle for change (NASW, 1999). The dilemma arises when Christian social workers are called upon to demonstrate the NASW Code of Ethics while also answering the call to bring others into the kingdom of God. This quandary lays the foundation for potential conflict between the NASW Code of Ethics and the Christian underpinning.

A view of rejecting members of the gay community is often thought to be sanctioned in the Bible. Common verses that are cited to promote this belief are contained in Genesis 19: 1-9, Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9, Romans 1:26-27, and 1 Timothy 1:10. Well-meaning Christians often use these verses as evidence that homophobia and heterosexism are scriptur-

ally normative. Noting these references lends insight into the environmental foundations of many students who come to the field of social work with a Christian orientation. This orientation may cause conflict in promoting social justice and diversity while professing faith-based beliefs as related to members of the community who are viewed by some as living in sin.

As described above, social justice is one of the six core values included in the Code of Ethics as prescribed by NASW for the profession of Social Work, (NASW, 1999). Therefore, despite the conflicts, Christian social workers are ethically obligated to confront the root of social problems to promote social change. This can only happen through advocacy for persons who are unable to advocate for themselves because of being marginalized and oppressed (NASW, 1999). Critics within the social work profession often refer to their belief that Christian social workers fall short of this commitment to the core values of the profession (Chu, Tsui, & Yan, 2009; Gil, 1998; Karger & Hernandez, 2004; Reisch, 2002, Reisch & Andrews, 2001).

However, scripture provides a strong, clear call for Christians to uphold social justice as prescribed in Micah 6:8, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God" (New International Version). The Christian social worker attempts to balance the NASW standards with the integration of their faith. The Christian social work educator can encourage this balance by incorporating experiential assignments for the students to provide exposure to persons facing oppression in both direct and indirect means.

The CSWE accreditation policies and standards require the inclusion of diversity and social justice competencies within the social work education program's curriculum (Council on Social Work Education, CSWE, 2008). The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) were rewritten in 2008 with a strong emphasis upon policy practice as a core competency for social work students. The new standards mandate that undergraduate and graduate social work programs need to prepare students to "analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social well-being" (CSWE, 2008, p. 6). The need for social work education programs to promote social justice is not new. The 2001 EPAS indicated that CSWE-accredited programs must "provide content related to implementing strategies to combat discrimination, oppression, and economic deprivation and to promote social and economic justice.... [And] prepare students to advocate for nondiscriminatory social and economic systems" (CSWE, 2001, p. 9). The 2008 EPAS builds upon the foundation set forth in the 2001 EPAS by stating the requirements in terms of competencies rather than content. The newer EPAS indicates that students will develop the competencies to "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).

Social workers are required through the NASW's Code of Ethics to tackle acts of social injustice by fulfilling the role of social change agents through advocacy for the vulnerable and oppressed general population within the client base of individuals served (NASW, 1999). The skills needed for social work practice and advocacy are acquired through the achievement of experiential learning and gaining the knowledge base of policies promoting social justice. Social workers began their profession through a strong belief in social reform (Janson, 2008). Practitioners often lack the skills needed to affect policy practice and this can negate the benefits to marginalized groups. Policies that are created to benefit those most affected by social injustices often result in negative unintended consequences. Baccalaureate social work curriculum has a clear mandate to develop policy practice skills. The challenge which faculty at Christian institutions sometimes face in addressing this directive often comes from institutional administration. Empowering students to analyze legislative policies which create injustices for members of the gay community can be viewed as encouraging a political stance which might be seen in tension with the mission and values of the higher education institution (Weiss, Gal, & Katan, 2006). The role of faculty is to educate the baccalaureate student on the skills needed to objectively analyze policies while simultaneously empowering them to identify their own belief system through the integration of their faith with practice. There is room for legitimate disagreement among Christians and social workers about what specific policies and programs are most effective in promoting social justice.

As the director of the CSWE-accredited BSW program at Huntington University, a faith-based institution in rural Indiana; I thought it was important to develop student policy practice skills using an experimental advocacy assignment. This exercise provided the foundation for students to gain the skills needed to become future change agents in promoting consequential social advances. Facing a worldview that may disrupt their sense of themselves, students are often resistant to lead social justice-related initiatives as a consequence of their anxiety and discomfort with the material (Bell, Washington, Weinstein, & Love, 1997; Deal & Hyde, 2004; Fleck-Henderson & Melendez, 2009; Garcia & Van Soest, 2006; Tummala-Narra, 2009). These reactions may be informed by their social, economic, and cultural backgrounds (Sciame-Giesecke, Roden, & Parkison, 2009) and/or their cognitive, behavioral, and affective capacities to handle this content (Deal & Hyde, 2004). In light of the challenges dually faced by students and faculty alike, the foundation of "knowledge, values, and skills" (Gutierrez, Fredricksen, & Soifer, 1999, p. 418) and "substantial personal and professional insight, risk taking, communication, and process skills" (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000, p. 37) requires the effective teaching of social justice related content. I selected the topic of HIV/AIDS and the GLBT community as the focal point of this assignment because of the conflicts often

experienced for the Christian social work education student. Acquiring the skills needed to promote social justice for all individuals was the desired goal of this assignment. I believed that this could be achieved by providing students the opportunity for experiential learning in an area where a good number of them have inexperience and a minimal knowledge base.

The overall goal of this practice assignment was to enable baccalaureate social work students to analyze legislative policies enacted to support the challenges faced by individuals diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. A secondary goal of the assignment was to prompt students to determine if these policies had unintended consequences such as creating stigma for individuals with HIV/AIDS along with the GLBT community.

The Assignment

The assignment, which was contained within a social welfare policy class, looked at policy formation related to HIV/AIDS. Consultation with HIV services researcher, Allison M. Tan, MSSA, Ph.D., provided the foundation for a research component within a policy-based class in BSW education. Based on the recommendations received from Tan (2010), five topic areas were selected:

- An Analysis of the AIDS Confidentiality Act
- Cost-benefit Analysis of Treatment versus Prevention for HIV/AIDS
- Should People with HIV be Eligible for Government Benefits: SSI and SSDI?
- Analysis of the Ryan White Treatment Modernization Act
- Analysis of the CDC recommendations for HIV testing

The students were assigned one of these HIV/AIDS topic areas. The assignment had dual components—a written portion and an oral portion as part of a classroom presentation for their peers. The students were required to analyze a policy broadly, including the purpose, applicability, and scope of the policy statement, evaluation criteria, and strengths and weaknesses of the policy. Students were then required to summarize with strong position statements regarding whether or not the policy is meeting its intended purposes and to provide suggestions for alternative policies as applicable.

Impact of the Assignment

Social work education is central to supporting the core objectives of the social work profession, including its social justice mandate (CSWE, 2001, 2008). Social work educators can be expected to play a key role in helping students to align their practice orientation with their ethical responsibility to promote social justice (Gil, 1998). Finding an appropriate measure is the first step in assessing whether an assignment was successful in enabling

the student to integrate social justice content related to diversity and oppression into their knowledge base for social work practice.

I measured the knowledge of HIV/AIDS content by conducting pre- and post-testing concerning knowledge of HIV/AIDS using a questionnaire entitled *The HIV Knowledge Questionnaire* (Carey, Morrison-Beedy, & Johnson, 1997). The questionnaire contained questions related to HIV transmission, prevention, and HIV treatment. Higher scores indicated greater knowledge. Within a class of junior level social work majors, the average test score of correct responses was the same for both pre- and post-testing. The lack of a higher score achieved in the post testing over the pre-testing was a discouraging outcome. It was hoped that a higher score at the end of the assignment would reveal increased knowledge acquired on the topic of HIV/AIDS knowledge. However, the use of this questionnaire, as related to the topic in a policy class, caused the students to experience the need to fully understand a particular subject prior to engaging in policy advocacy for a cause.

As a secondary measurement of the assignment's impact, I conducted interviews with each student. They were asked to reflect upon the 10 core competencies prescribed by CSWE in the EPAS standards (2008), which are as follows:

1. Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.
2. Apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice.
3. Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments.
4. Engage diversity and difference in practice.
5. Advance human rights and social/economic justice.
6. Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research.
7. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment.
8. Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services.
9. Respond to contexts that shape practice.
10. Engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

Students were asked to reflect upon the ten (10) core competencies of social work education and to identify which ones were addressed by this HIV/AIDS policy analysis assignment. The competencies which the students listed the most often were: 3) apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments, 4) engage diversity and difference in practice, and 6) engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research. Specific comments which the students made regarding these competencies were:

3. Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments.
 - This assignment required me to use critical thinking during the review process of the multiple resources I found on the topic of HIV/AIDS policies. I acquired the skills needed to distinguish between reliable resources.
 - I utilized critical thinking in delineating the contrasts between legislation that surrounds the needs of those infected with the HIV/AIDS virus and the actual programs that have been put into place to support people with the virus.
 - I looked at the confidentiality act and discovered the contrasts between policies to promote confidentiality and anonymity. This assignment caused me to think critically in understanding the difference between the two and how this knowledge base will be used in practice.
 - I learned who Ryan White was. Even though his life was short, he made a major impact on how our society responds to the HIV/AIDS virus. He is a person who at a younger age than me made a major difference in the government's response to HIV/AIDS that continues to be a focal point today for policies related to this population group.
4. Engage diversity and difference in practice.
 - We often think that diversity is only reflected in skin color, religion variations or language spoken. This assignment enabled me to see that many people are discriminated against for only one reason and that is a disease. This assignment caused me to reflect upon the oppression that people faced at one time when leprosy was an epidemic. Jesus responded to the man who came to him asking for healing from his infliction with leprosy, by stretching out his hand and touching the man, saying, 'I will; be clean' (Matthew 8:3).
 - When I began this assignment, I realized that I had formed some personal biases towards individuals with HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately, I held the view that people with HIV/AIDS had this disease because they engaged in risky behavior. This assignment helped me to address my personal biases.
 - The HIV/AIDS project taught me about culture, the culture of living within a community of people who all share the common challenge of a non-curable disease. I realized that culture is much deeper than the culture one is born into but rather a culture that is often acquired by life changing events that marginalized people often encounter.

- This assignment afforded me the opportunity to visit the AIDS Task force organization and to become knowledgeable on the services they provide. Without this assignment, I'm not sure that I would have acquired this knowledge. I am now more fully aware of the services this organization provides. I will be able to fulfill the role of brokering as a generalist social worker in making referrals to this organization if in my future I am working with a client who is HIV/AIDS positive.
 - Our HIV/AIDS project allowed me to learn what it is like for an HIV positive person because of a firsthand encounter with someone with this virus. I learned more fully about the policies which help but also hurt people with the virus to be treated equally.
6. Engaged in research-informed practice and practice-informed research.
- This research informed me how to engage in ethical practice through advocacy for persons with HIV/AIDS. The research will be used to inform practice in my future career as a social worker.
 - The specific policy assignment provides a basic understanding of the policies created for persons with HIV/AIDS. The oral portion of this assignment enabled me to understand all five policies which were analyzed by members of my class. I'm sure there are many more policies than these five which influence services to persons with HIV/AIDS but at least I have a solid foundation through the research completed on these specific ones.
 - I strengthened my researching skills through our project.
 - I learned that even though research is long and can be boring, it is really good to do because you learn so much more and discover things you didn't think you could. I learned so many things about HIV/AIDS that I didn't know before from this project.
 - This research paper caused me to learn a significant amount about HIV/AIDS. I saw the importance of presenting information to make others knowledgeable about what I have learned
 - This project helped me to see the value in sharing research information with others. I was surprised at how much my peers and I learned from sharing our research with each other. This assignment taught me that informing my coworkers about information I gain through research will be an important skill to exhibit when in social work

practice. We used research that had already been done and compiled information in a way that was coherent and relevant to each other.

- I learned how to use resources through research. Resources are not always found in the library or on the internet but through visiting an agency such as the AIDS Task Force.

Traditional age baccalaureate social work students appear to have a foundational knowledge base of HIV/AIDS in regards to transmission, prevention and treatment as revealed in this assignment. Simultaneously, this assignment discovered that students' understanding of how to advocate for legislative support for policies which sustains individuals with this condition was lacking.

Students participating in this project have now graduated with their BSW degrees and are either working in practice or enrolled in graduate school. Recent alumni feedback revealed the following comments about this assignment:

- I learned that it is important to understand the topic before approaching a legislator about it.
- Creating policies regarding HIV/AIDS is difficult because you have to consider not only the research needed to understand the policy but marginalized individuals and their unique stories.
- I learned how important informed consent is when it comes to a person with HIV/AIDS and their anonymity. While data is important to convince lawmakers of the importance of specific legislative action, protecting the privacy of clients is critical, too.
- Prior to this assignment, I had no idea how much work goes into policy development. I researched the Ryan White Act. It taught me how much thought and effort is needed to assure that the law benefits the individuals it is intended to support.
- As I reviewed all the various legislative policies related to HIV/AIDS it made me realize how many policies are needed for one specific cause in order to assure that a wide variety of areas are addressed, e.g. confidentiality, housing, employment, disability eligibility, etc.
- Researching policies about HIV/AIDS made me realize how the government allocates funding for specific causes and that those efforts can also create oppression for the very people it is to support.
- Researching policy related to HIV/AIDS gave me an understanding of how important it is for social workers to be knowledgeable about legislation and how it pertains to their clients.

Policy analysis on the topic of HIV/AIDS provided two key knowledge and skill set areas for students. It taught them the need to understanding how policies are developed. Simultaneously, the specific details which go into a policy in order to assure that it supports the individuals it was intended to reach. Researching a topic such as HIV/AIDS provided students the opportunity to experience oppression, alienation and marginalization often faced by groups of persons experiencing life-threatening conditions.

Reflections for Social Work Educators

The early 1980s introduced society to the HIV/AIDS virus. Initially, the population most affected by the HIV/AIDS virus was the male gay community, primarily white gay men. Incidence has now reached women, minorities and socio economically disadvantaged citizens (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). A disease previously viewed as only affiliated with the gay community, is now attached across a variety of population groups. This prompts faculty in higher education to have an urgent need to promote practice to a broad spectrum of the population who face injustice and discrimination in federal and state policies associated with HIV/AIDS.

There is an increase in the prevalence of HIV/AIDS which is due to the lower mortality rate for HIV/AIDS patients. The downside of this decrease in fatalities associated with HIV/AIDS is the increased importance of public, government programs. As the victims of the disease are living longer, they need more resources to cover their needs. Therefore, social work students need to understand more fully the policies associated with assuring that all victims of HIV/AIDS are receiving the services needed (Levi & Kates, 2000). While there are federal mandates requiring coverage for services to HIV/AIDS patients, many decisions on actual program structure are left up to state governments. This makes it imperative that social work students know how to advocate for services needed in a variety of settings rather than just focusing on the federal base for legislative actions.

A significant risk factor for acquiring HIV/AIDS is the socioeconomic status. According to the CDC (2009) people living in low incomes have a higher risk of becoming infected with the HIV/AIDS virus. This is partially the result of a lack of public education available to people in poverty stricken areas on the topics of quality of health care and prevention strategies. Social workers are called to serve people facing social injustice and social problems. Given attention to acquiring skills in work with people living in poverty, students are equipped to address the victims of HIV/AIDS from this social economic status.

Faculty in higher education need to be concerned with teaching policy in such a manner as to inspire students to seek to understand policies, especially for such vulnerable groups as the gay community, those infected

with HIV/AIDS and those living in poverty. As Christian faculty in higher education, we should strive to provide our students with the tools needed to be effective advocates of social welfare policies. Equally important is our task to enable our students to focus on all members of the community; regardless of sexual orientation, we will model advocacy skills across all spectrums of sexual orientation. In this manner, we can assure that the needs of individuals are addressed without consideration of whether one is or is not living in a lifestyle which follows the teachings of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as we might understand them. The focus can rather be on service, portrayal of social justice, dignity of all persons, and the importance of human relationships. Through our commitment to the NASW core values, and our Christian faith, we can successfully integrate faith with ethical professional practice and be empowered to bring all to the kingdom of glory.

Conclusion

The students' quotes illustrate the relevance of a practice project assignment on HIV/AIDS that promoted a method for addressing the competencies of critical thinking, engaging diversity and differences in practice and the importance of acquiring skills needed for informed practice. Future social work practitioners are socialized into the profession through their formal education in CSWE-accredited social work education programs. When given these types of experiential learning opportunities, students can develop, promote, and perfect the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed for a future competent practice. To do so, faculty in Christian-based institutions of higher education with CSWE-accredited social work programs will need the administrative structure to support their efforts to cultivate the social justice orientation of future social work practitioners. Support and awareness are needed in acknowledging that these experiences may raise dilemmas between the NASW Code of Ethics and the integration of faith within the social work practice. Trust will be a vital element. Trusting the Christian social work faculty can assure that preparations are made for students to be adequately prepared for the challenges the Christian social worker will face in future practice. ❖

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