Redefining Borders between Communities and the Classroom: How Community-based Social Activists can Transform Social Work Education

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Abstract In the context of **s**ervice restructuring that has gravely impacted quality of life for social workers and the people with whom they work, this paper considers the ways that social work education can better support social justice-based social work practices in urban communities in Canada. The paper's authors attended a fall 2013 Ryerson University forum that brought together critical social work educators and community-based activist social workers struggling to bring social justice-based practices to their work within restructured social services. Examples of social service restructuring include cuts to services, labour intensification, and increased managerialism, processes known as neoliberalism that have shifted discourses away from quality of life toward a focus on economic markers and efficiencies. The purpose of our forum was to explore ways in which social work curricula and pedagogical practices can be challenged and redefined in order to better support those efforts by social workers to resist such processes and to enhance social worker and client quality of life. Our paper presents the findings of this forum, including the presentation and discussion of a series of recommendations to reconfigure social work education so that it is more congruent with the needs of social justice-based practice in social work.

KeyWords social work education, social justice-based practice, social services, restructuring, neoliberalism, community-based research

This paper considers the ways that social work education can better support social justice-based social work practices in urban communities in Canada during a period of social service restructuring that has gravely impacted quality of life for both social workers and the people with whom they work. Examples of social service restructuring include cuts to services, labour intensification, and increased managerialism.

These transformations are part of larger processes that many critics describe as neoliberalism (Baines, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Dominelli, 1999; Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992), processes that have shifted discourses away from quality of life toward a focus on economic markers and efficiencies. Across Canada, all governments, to varying degrees, have enacted cuts to health and social welfare programs. These cuts have prompted rising pressures on social workers to provide more supports with fewer resources to a population that faces complex problems. In response to these growing pressures, service delivery systems have been re-organized, often along the lines of corporate-like managerial practices (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Service providers face new expectations to demonstrate a commitment to "efficiencies" and "accountability" within their work practices (Baines, 2004b, p. 6) without being allowed to focus on ways of truly responding to markers that define quality of life. As a result, social workers who wish to bring an anti-oppressive or social justice focus increasingly find that what they deem to be good practice has been effectively "squeezed out of their jobs" (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p. 173).

In order to begin a dialogue about the changing context of practice, the authors of this paper attended a forum at Ryerson University in the fall of 2013. Funded by a seed grant from the Faculty of Community Services, and hosted by three faculty members in the School of Social Work, this forum brought together critical social work educators and community-based activist social workers struggling to bring social justice-based practices to their work within restructured social services. Importantly, virtually all in attendance had ties to both academic social work education and community-based social work practice, contesting the traditional silos of academy and community as distinct spaces. The purpose of our forum was to explore ways in which social work curricula and pedagogical practices can be challenged and redefined in order to shift focus back to issues of quality of life. The forum sought to consider how to better support those efforts by social workers to resist neoliberal restructuring of their workplaces. Our paper discusses the findings of this forum, including insights generated by community practitioners and a series of recommendations to reconfigure social work education so that it is more congruent with social justice activism that truly considers pathways to fulfilled and empowered lives.

Participants in our forum were later invited to write sections of this paper, allowing each contributor to address areas of our findings which resonated most closely with their practice experiences. Out of our findings, authors have generated a rich and textured account of challenges facing social justice practice in the current context of practice. Included are accounts of how social service agencies are no longer positioned to address systemic problems so threatening to people's quality of life. Furthermore, those agencies who maintain a social justice mandate tend to be tokenistic and lack substantial capacities to enact this vision. Another author took up the problem of precarious work, now a predominant feature of restructured services, and how this shift has the effect of making resistance nearly impossible. An important part of this discussion is an analysis which questions nostalgic notions about social work's history

of social justice change.

The detailed accounts provided in this paper reveal the current social work agency setting to be characterized by complex contradictions and a never-ending set of dilemmas. Importantly, the quality of life of both workers and service users have been gravely impacted by neoliberal and managerial shifts. In response, the authors make compelling recommendations for transformative change to social work education. Key aspects of changes envisioned by our group include the need to prioritize community-based research beyond traditional research in order to resist the dichotomization of social work and social justice activism. It is also suggested that community activists should be brought into the classroom to speak with students directly. Going a step further, collaborative mentorship models are viewed as ideal mechanisms to bring community activists and social work students together. Finally, our paper argues that education in the social work classroom must go beyond current anti-oppression practice models to a deeper understanding of the effects of white settler colonialism and anti-Black racism in communities.

The paper concludes with critical reflections about how to shape curriculum in ways that foster better responses from the social work classroom to address the current context of restructured social services. It is suggested that such formal collaborations amongst social work educators and community-based activists and practitioners can strengthen social work education and better prepare students to contribute to, and participate in, activists' ongoing struggles for social justice. We begin, however, by considering the background against which our work is set.

Examining the Context of Practice

Within Ontario, critical scholars point to the Mike Harris Conservative government of the late 1990s as being a definitive moment in the "rightward" neoliberal shift in policies. Harris's *Common Sense Revolution* is viewed as having accelerated a downhill spiral in the quality of lives of poor people with its dramatic cuts to welfare payments and other public services, changes to disability criteria, and the adoption of workfare schemes (Jeffrey, 1999). The Harris government also reversed progress on employment equity enacted by the previous government through a campaign of misrepresentation that relied heavily on the incitement of fears and anxieties about "job quotas" and "reverse discrimination" (Agócs & Burr, 1996, p. 34). The ongoing legacies of the devastating effects of these policies, particularly on people who were already struggling at the margins of society—women, recent newcomers to Canada, Aboriginal peoples, minority communities, the working poor, and people with disabilities—has resulted in widening gaps between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in the province (Ricciutelli, Larkin & O'Neill, 1998; Wharf & McKenzie, 2004; Yalnizyan, 2005). These trends echo a broader cultural positioning of social work in the service of social control far beyond Ontario and Canada.

Efforts to understand the ongoing impact of Harris' restructuring policies on social service professionals highlight profound changes to how social workers now experience

and practice their work. Despite a professional commitment to social justice and substantive commitments to enhancing quality of life, increasingly social workers are understood to be pressed into privileging their social control roles at the expense of their capacities for activist social change (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Dominelli, 2004). For example, acting as early heralds, Fabricant and Burghard (1992, pp. 64-65) reported some of the first signals that workers were feeling frustrated and burning out. Citing daily tasks aimed at "accountability," these authors asserted that the new organizational forms risked undermining long-term organizational effectiveness. They concluded that the loss of autonomy and control in the utilization of skill was the most powerful force redefining encounters between social service workers and clients and declared that the changes would profoundly alter the processes and outcomes of social work.

Later, social workers in a study conducted by Aronson and Sammon (2000) report on the intensification and acceleration of their work, speaking to the diminishment of their own quality of life. As a result, they are constantly pressed for time during their contacts with service users. Administrative procedures that standardized the processing of service users reshaped practice boundaries and resulted in oversimplified approaches and fragmented labour practices. Baines (2004b) found that social workers described their changing work worlds to be about part-time and temporary jobs that accompanied increased workloads with an emphasis on administrative paperwork. Workers in her study reported regular participation in a number of unpaid overtime activities including working through lunch hours, coffee breaks, into the evening and on weekends, making work-related phone calls from cars, and finishing case notes at night. Baines (2004a) observes, "as the social service system continues to be downsized and full-time jobs are restructured into part-time and temporary employment, the extraction of large quantities of unpaid labour from precarious workers is likely to increase" (p. 22). The work done by contemporary social service workers in Canada and other Western countries is characterized in the literature on restructuring as stressful encounters with more troubled and complex caseloads while enduring processes of work intensification, fragmentation and deskilling of labour. As Baines (2004a) concludes, "What gets produced is social services and workplace stress; what is lost is worker control and integrity." (p. 3)

Despite the forging of strong alliances amongst organized labour, unionized public service workers, students, and social justice groups aimed at challenging the Harris agenda in Ontario, effective opposition was largely perceived as a "failure" in the face of the government's ongoing attacks on the poor and the services they relied on (See Munro, 1997 for a description of Ontario's "Days of Action"; Kozolanka, 2006). In an effort to help address these failures to achieve social justice in the province of Ontario, our paper presents the experiences and knowledge of activist social workers. The term "activist social worker" refers to those within the profession who would describe themselves in a variety of ways, including feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, radical, and critical. Typically positioning themselves as "linking the personal and the political" (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005, p. x), this diverse group adopts approaches to

practice that borrow from critical and post-structural theories in order to provide a critique of social work's complicity with existing unequal social arrangements while offering a corresponding emphasis on possibilities for emancipatory social change (Fook, 2002, p. 5). Activist social workers seek not only better ways to understand the world, but also how to change it using social justice-based practices. To this end, activist, social justice-based social work conceives of "quality of life" outside the narrow parameter of individual health and wealth, instead imagining sustainable and emancipatory practices across individuals, families, communities, and beyond. According to Baines (2007), social justice-based practice happens in a number of ways, including education and consciousness raising about oppression, community development and organizing, political activism and workplace resistance, and advocating for policy changes based on equity and fairness. An awareness of the backdrop against which we work provided the context for our dialogic forum.

Methodology

The authors brought together for this paper are academics, community-based practitioners, and activists who struggle to promote social justice-based practices within restructured social services. In addition to their valuable knowledge and experience as service providers, they also bring a wealth of experience as activists within diverse communities, including feminist, queer, labour, Indigenous, Black African-Canadian, and those concerned with disability rights. We believe that the findings of our paper make an important contribution to the literature on social service restructuring, but more importantly, that they will strengthen ways that social work education can contribute to ongoing struggles for social justice and equity that impact the quality of life of people and communities. A qualitative participatory action research (PAR) design was used as a means of situating the researchers within the activist social work community. Participatory action research allows for a reflexive stance that acknowledges the ways that researchers are embedded within their research and communities (MacIntyre, 2008). Additionally, a feminist, anti-oppressive, theoretical framework facilitated the recognition of social processes, experiences, and life situations, as well as mutuality in the research process, valuing research participants as "knowers" and resisting oppression (McLaughlin, 2007; Patton, 2002; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). As a result, this method allowed the principal investigators to contribute to the knowledge production alongside other participants, as well as allowing for an ongoing reflexive assessment of research directions.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit community-based social workers who self-describe as activist social workers. Letters of invitation were sent to social service agencies across Ontario that position themselves, through their mandates and community engagement, as feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, anti-colonial, radical, and critical. In addition, snowball sampling was used to reach additional participants from a diverse population. Participants represent the spectrum of social work policy and practice, including those from the governmental, non-governmental, academic,

and community sectors. The research brought together twelve social work activists, the three principal researchers, and two graduate student research assistants for a full day discussion forum in order to delve deeply into the relationship between social work education and social work activism in a community context. A focus group model was used to engage participants in discussion pertaining to the role of social work education and activism. Semi-structured qualitative questions were used to facilitate discussion in a series of round table sessions. Each session was audio-taped as well as having a note-taker who recorded the discussion at a high level and captured the major thoughts and themes of the discussion. Once focus groups were transcribed and coded for overarching themes, a second session was held wherein the principal investigators presented the emerging themes and facilitated further discussion and development of themes. For this article, interested participants, along with the principal investigators, took up key themes to weave them into a collaborative and coherent discussion about the state of social work and social change in neoliberal times. The key themes under discussion comprise the remainder of this article. We begin by looking at some of the constraints faced by activist social work practice, and then consider some of the possible pathways to an engaged pedagogy and the fostering of social justice-based practices for social work.

Understanding the Constraints on Practice

The Limits of our Capacity: Re-Configuring Social Justice-based Practice

Social workers need to figure out new and more nuanced ways of engaging with neoliberal trends. The Oxford dictionary describes activism as "The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2000). Neoliberal restructuring has placed this form of activism well out of reach for many social workers in human service organizations. A neoliberal context not only challenges those hoping to engage in more collective and structural approaches, but also undermines the values associated with traditional social work (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006). Owing to the constraints imposed by neoliberal managerialism, a more subtle, textured, and nuanced approach to social activism is needed to guide social workers in efforts to navigate workplaces that are rife with tensions and constraints, and characterized by intrusive forms of surveillance to ensure compliance with efficiencies.

Human service organizations that espouse neoliberal values and ideas can be stressful and destabilizing environments for many social workers. Pressure to conform and self-regulate to neoliberal expectations is often subtle, yet pervasive. In another sector, Ball (2003) describes how neoliberal restructuring within education calls for teachers "to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations" (p. 215). Faced with similar expectations, many social workers find themselves uncomfortably complicit with neoliberal ideas. Balancing the tension of remaining true to one's social justice ideals with the very real fear of jeopardizing employment is

a common reality of the work. Finding viable options within these spaces can prove difficult but necessary. Aronson and Smith (2011) describe how managers in human service organizations navigate neoliberal requirements by strategically engaging in "multiple and conflicting performances of self" (p.432) in order to advance or shield their more progressive agendas. Situating social activism as nuanced, complex, and contradictory helps to normalize the tensions and conflicts associated with the work. It also illustrates how compliance and conformity can, paradoxically, be an important strategy for advancing a more progressive agenda. Far from acquiescence, our research collaborators identified how forms of quiet, strategic, and more nuanced social justice-based practice can serve as powerful forces of opposition within work settings characterized by constraint and surveillance.

The challenge for social workers, particularly those entering the field for the first time, is to recognize social justice-based practice as a broad range of intervention responses and activities. Framing social justice-based practice as nuanced and complex; as small scale, subtle, well-timed shifts, or individual acts to deconstruct and disrupt the dominant discourse is vitally important for the profession, for social workers, and most importantly, for service users (Morley, 2004). Equally important is the recognition that social justice-based practice within human service organizations requires a vigilant self-reflexivity (Aronson & Smith, 2011), a constant questioning of privilege and position, and an awareness of when compromise or silence is a strategic choice, and when it is not. This form of social justice-based practice situates the inherent tension, self-doubt, and inner conflict experienced by many social workers, and especially social work students, as an important site of resistance, thus thickening and complicating the very concept of "quality of life."

Reframing our understanding of social justice-based practice creates possibility and space to navigate contradictory demands, requirements, and identities (Aronson & Smith, 2011). From this new vantage point, social justice-based practice honours and underscores the importance of the complex and complicated work that social workers do. It also offers hope that this hard, yet often invisible, resistance work matters.

"Squeezed from the Inside Out": The Implications of Precarious Social Work Labour

Having established the context of social justice-based practice, we now turn our examination to the ways that social work education and practice are caught up in, and defined by, globalized neoliberalism. In addition to the tokenization of social justice mandates, and the emerging emphasis on quantitative success, a fundamental aspect of neoliberalism is the shift towards *flexible* labour markets. As such, precariousness has become a defining feature of how our work is organized in both social work education and practice settings. Precarious work is described as the following:

> labour conditions that exist on the margins of employment. It is work that has been made temporary or contract; forcing workers to be "flexible" about earning

> a stable income, and "part-time"—when the difference between part-time and full-time work can be as little as one scheduled hour, and as much as vastly lower wages and no benefits. It is work that is hidden from regulation. (SteelCity Solidarity, 2014)

We are drawn to this definition because it highlights how the valorization of "flexible labour" under neoliberalism works to obscure the mounting struggles of workers now facing the stress and uncertainty of precarious employment.

As noted by numerous scholars in social work such as Aronson and Sammon (2000), Silver, Shields and Wilson (2005), and Baines (2007, 2011), increasingly our work is organized via contract, part time, or temporary positions. In university or college-based social work programs, the turn to part-time labour results in a reliance on sessional or contract faculty to provide the foundations of post-secondary education while simultaneously refusing these instructors access to the security and benefits of tenure track positions within the institution (Basen, 2014). Within social service organizations and related workplaces, there are ongoing efforts to restructure and reorganize work around short term contracts that are tied to particular funding streams or project mandates. Among other important outcomes, including the fragmentation of labour, such precariousness has the effect of making social justice-based resistance, as well as engaged pedagogy, almost impossible.

The critical social work educators and community-based activists brought together at our initial forum discussed a number of reasons that they struggled to bring social justice-based practices to their work amidst such precarious labour conditions. Primarily, this struggle exists because the central ethos of neoliberal restructuring is about cost saving, and not about social justice, equity, dignity, or a healthy quality of life. Therefore, those of us who seek to engage in radical social work find ourselves on the margins from the very outset; we do not compute with the fundamental orientation of neoliberalism and the precariousness for which it advocates. And, within this context of insecure work status, we are not being paid to do resistance work, let alone to take transformative or preventative actions aimed at creating social change.

More practically speaking, shifts towards flexibilization of labour result in diminished job security for social workers as *workers*. As a result, it takes an enormous amount of energy and time to persistently locate, apply for, and secure short-term work contracts. Beyond this challenge, it requires even more energy and time to organize and balance multiple work contracts simultaneously as we attempt to earn enough income while also cultivating connections that may lead to future opportunities. So much of our time and energy is spent organizing work to increase our job security that little of either remains available to devote to activism.

Not only must we be vigilant in securing employment, but we must also be vigilant in maintaining our employment. The context of precariousness means that we are increasingly engaged in our own labour struggles. These struggles include defending

our employment rights and making efforts to understand, analyse, and challenge the restructuring of practice. Neoliberalism ensures that we remain on the defensive—and, while we focus on advocating for ourselves and our work conditions, it is hard to make space for the critical reflection and imagining that is required to pursue activist practice beyond mere survival. Moreover, precarious labour markets mean that we are increasingly easily replaceable employees who fear the repercussions and reprisals associated with resistance. As such, "workers may find themselves in a bind: caught between a desire to advance radical social work, and a need not to jeopardize their jobs" (Ross, 2011). Which of these desires truly enhances quality of life? Can we truly thrive without *both* security and a commitment to justice? As educators, we struggle with attempts to empower our students as activist social workers, mindful that such philosophies may hinder their already perilous employment prospects.

The precarious nature of work further makes resistance difficult because the restructuring of social services and academia also reduces the resources needed to sustain and make social justice-based practices viable. Of the many diminished resources, a key one lost is organized "people power" due to the constant turnover resulting from positions that are part time, contract, and so forth. This loss constrains our ability to build relationships with each other, to develop trust with allies, and to develop mentorship between more experienced social justice activists and those newer to this perspective; all of which are integral to effective resistance. In short, while not absolutely impossible to do, social justice-based practice is significantly undermined by our precarious labour conditions.

Moving Forward: Embedding Engaged Social Justice Activism into Social Work Pedagogy

The Necessity of Community-based Research

Given the precariousness of our employment in both practice and academic environments, we have had to learn to be creative. The neoliberal era has implored us to utilize various tools to strive for social justice for the communities for, and with, which we work or belong. One such tool is community-based research (CBR), an inquiry and conceptual framework with critical, anti-oppressive, and participatory aims that is congruent with social justice-based practice (Greene & Chambers, 2011). As an action-oriented approach to research, community-based research mobilizes and empowers communities to work collaboratively with allied researchers in order to gather and utilize knowledge that can make instrumental changes in their lives (Reitsma-Street & Brown, 2004). Key principles of this conceptual framework include the following: to facilitate equitable partnerships amongst the research team, promote co-learning amongst team members, ensure knowledge generation informs action that has community benefit and utility, and cultivate relationships developed through the process of inquiry (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). We consider community-based research a form of *quiet social justice-based practice* as its democratic,

relational, and action-oriented approach positions social justice as a process of the research, as well as an overarching objective. We also argue that community-based research is a pedagogical praxis, whereby the knowledge gathered grounds a critical awareness of one's social condition. This new knowledge can inform personal and collective reflection which in turn can inform critical consciousness and transformative change (Freire, 1970).

While community-based research has become a popular approach to social work research, funding cuts to social service research have constrained participatory, community engaged research. Additionally, funding agencies are moving towards funding models that privilege research with *concrete outcomes* and *tangible returns on investments* (Rossiter & Robertson, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Given its commitment to social justice, community-based research is an incongruent inquiry framework for the neoliberal knowledge economy. As Rossiter and Robertson (2014) argue, for example, with the rise of economic rationalization of knowledge generation, knowledge has become both a commodity and a cost. In other words, knowledge as a commodity constructs research as justifiable if it offers economic or commercial benefit, such as cost-effectiveness research, or research that develops commodifiable goods or services. Knowledge as a cost has resulted in dramatic cutbacks to social science research whether direct (e.g., reduction in governmental funding programs) or indirect (e.g., increased non-research related responsibilities for social work practitioners and academics, thereby reducing work time allotted to research). However, the economic rationalization of research has positioned economic benefit over social beneficence.

It is our position that research as a critical exercise cannot be commodified, and that critical, or social justice-based research is integral to engaged scholarship. Within a research orientation such as community-based research, such research can shift theoretical interpretations into meaningful action. Community-based research cannot be converted into a tangible good; its costs and benefits cannot be readily quantified. Indeed, treating the knowledge as a commodifiable product can come at a significant social cost.

Given the social impetus for community-based research, universities, service organizations, funding agencies, and other institutions benefitting from social work research should foster the time and work required to facilitate community-based research as producing social justice both in process and in practice. Universities should regard the time devoted to this kind of research as part of academic service and students should be strongly encouraged to consider community-based research as sites of academic social activism. Social and health service organizations that provide field placements, and employ social workers should promote community-based research as an integral part of social work. Funding agencies should consider theory-building and collective consciousness as seminal to knowledge-to-action. Simply put, in our minds, a major aim of funders should be to promote and fund knowledge generation that is community driven and socially transformative.

While many critics contend that Canadian funding cuts and restrictions will be detrimental to social justice-oriented research, we argue that these funding changes are a symptom of our political concerns, not the source. In the neoliberal era, where knowledge is a commodifiable product, funding bodies, service organizations, and governmental institutions lack the political will to support research that shifts how we interpret, critique, and transform our society. It is this political deficit that is impoverishing social justice-based practice, including social justice activism vis-à-vis research. In order to further maintain ties between social justice activism and social work, however, we need to further consider our engagement in the classroom.

Prioritizing Direct Access to Social Justice Work for Students

Bringing community social justice activists into the classroom to share experiences with social work students can help avoid the potential dichotomization of social work and social justice activism. First hand accounts of strategies used by community activists to challenge and subvert neoliberal ideology within the workplace are an invaluable preparation for those entering the field. Sharing concrete examples of strategies not only highlights the complexity and tension of the work, but also helps to reframe social work as social justice-based practice.

These live, face-to-face conversations create a forum to discuss the challenges, tensions, and accompanying feelings of self-doubt, insecurity, and the questioning of self and purpose associated with contemporary social work. Bringing social justice-based activists together with students in the classroom provides an opportunity to unpack and explore, in depth, the complexity of this work. Hearing about practical survival skills can help students to balance the theoretical knowledge, idealism, and passion gained through university coursework. This is particularly relevant within the current context of the professionalization of social work (McDonald, 2006). Social justice-based practice within neoliberal organizations is not merely a set of skills or competencies that can be easily taught and learned. Rather it is hard-won knowledge, born out of struggle, encounters with tension and conflict, and a commitment to reflexivity. Normalizing tensions, challenges, and self–doubt can help prepare students for the difficult work ahead. Conversations with community social justice activists offer an important reminder that social justice activism is a necessary aspect of contemporary social work and is possible, at least in some form, even in the most constrained and hostile work environments. Neoliberalism requires a new way of working, a new way of engaging in activism that is more subtle and discrete. Social work as social activism involves tradeoffs, small victories (Aronson & Sammon, 2000), a continual repositioning of self (Aronson & Smith, 2011), and fostering strategic relationships with like-minded others (Smith, 2007).

Community social justice activists can benefit from sharing their experiences and stories with social work students. Neoliberal restructuring has pushed social justice-based practice within human service organizations underground (Smith, 2007). Social workers are forced to engage in social activism in more convoluted and contradictory

ways. This type of work can be exhausting and lonely and there are few opportunities to allow one's passions and social justice ideals to be fully expressed.

In addition to the isolating effects of restructured social services, social justice-based activists rarely have access to, or the time to keep up with, current academic literature. Opportunities to hear about new research and to situate their work in more theoretical ways may be useful for guiding their work and reinvigorating commitment and passion. Universities are uniquely placed to create opportunities for knowledge exchange among community social justice activists, students, and faculty. Bringing these voices together in the classroom may help to prepare social work students for the reality of the contemporary workplace, and may stimulate creative opportunities for students, faculty and community social justice activists to work collectively towards a radical agenda.

From Research to Classroom: The Necessity of Mentorship

As a group of critically engaged social work educators and community-based activist social workers, we focused in our forum on how to strengthen the academic environment for social work students. By challenging social work curricula and pedagogical practices available to students, we hope to better promote the use of a social justice-based, critical lens while promoting and encouraging resistance practices. We identified our respective social work programs as lacking a strong connection to the service providers who are in the field utilizing this social justice-based critical lens. Through this work we were able to identify a need for one-on-one mentorship and a formal structure within social work education programs to support professional relationship development that is grounded in critical, social justice-based practice. These activities set a bedrock for social work practice that prioritizes quality of life for both service providers and service users. There are some structured mentorship programs available within Masters-level social work education, and while these opportunities are useful for networking, professional guidance, and supporting the transition from the classroom into the paid-workforce, Bachelor-level social work students, in their pursuit to understand where they want to see themselves within the field, could also benefit from this relationship-building, beginning in their first year of program study.

While a strong social justice-based social work education provides students with a theoretical foundation for the challenges they will face in the world of social service work, the relationship between social work and academia faces its own challenges and barriers. Within the lens of our neoliberal political landscape, social justice-focused social workers identify having difficulty translating this theoretical foundation into transformative change within their practice. Healy (2001) recognizes that "there is an onus on critical social workers to recognize the differences in the contexts from which their ideals are drawn and the environs in which social workers typically practice" (n.p). Poole (2010), similarly observes the obligations felt by her Bachelor of Social Work students, emerging from an anti-oppressive, critical practice-focused curriculum, to

hide their analytical lens. Her students identified being scared of presenting as too radical, worried they'd have to distinguish between organizations where they could wear their social justice hat and where they needed to blend into the mainstream. We believe that our social work curricula are failing students if they cannot see a role for progressive, social justice-based social workers outside of the classroom. A formal practice of mentor-mentee relationships should be employed within undergraduate social work curricula to challenge this detachment between theory and practice, and support students' understanding of these barriers to critical practice within their professional world. As Rowen (2009) acknowledges, mentoring within social work is a "rare gem that should be documented" (p. 52). For the social work profession, this mentorship documentation should distinctly look at the challenges critical social workers face within mainstream organizations, and how these barriers to critical practice can be discussed more practically within the curriculum.

While social work practica and field placements have the intention of fostering these mentor-mentee relationships, supervisors, especially those labouring in restructured social services, do not always have the time, or the desire, to meaningfully mentor their students. In fact, many of us acknowledged knowing social workers and colleagues who see student supervision as part of their job responsibilities, but not as part of the greater development of the profession. As Riebschleger and Cross (2011) identify, "mentoring is an important mechanism to help social work students acquire the knowledge, skills, and values for entering social work education and/or practice" (p. 406). By creating a formal structure to connect social work students with social justice-based service providers who are supporting change in their communities, we can challenge social work curricula and the pedagogical practices currently in place, and further the promotion of social justice and advocacy in the social work education experience.

Thickening Our Analysis of Anti-Oppression and Social Justice

The group found that there must be a call to action for educators in the social work classroom to go beyond current anti-oppression practice models to a deeper understanding of the effects of colonialism and anti-Black racism in communities. Anti-oppressive practice (AOP), once heralded as being the remedy to all social injustices, is now critiqued for this very claim. Wilson & Beresford (2000) assert that "it is almost as if by appropriating the knowledges and experiences of 'oppressed groups'…[AOP] both denies the importance of the socially situated nature and also loses sight of its own situatedness within the structures and sanctions of both the academy and the social work profession" (pp. 557- 558). It is argued that AOP's conflation of multiple and interlocking identities and oppressions obscures the saliency of race in the oppression discourse and ignores the relative saliencies and intensities of identities based on varying situations and contexts (see Williams, 1999; Macey & Moxon, 1996; Dei, 1995). Indeed, critical scholarship explains that the emphasis on multiple identities and oppressions can lend a certain comfort and innocence to

educators, as it allows them to circumvent acknowledgment of and discussion about the impact of racism while appearing progressive (Pon & Phillips, 2009; Razack, 2002; Williams, 1999). Consequently, this allows examinations of white privilege and racist discourse, which provides the rationale for various oppressions and the basis for colonial dominance, also to be subverted in the classroom and in the field.

The focus on the multiplicities and confluence of oppression in anti-oppressive perspectives also holds appeal for the state, which has co-opted the framework (Pon, 2009; Mclaughlin, 2005). As a consequence, Mclaughlin (2005) explains, the capability of anti-oppression perspectives to challenge the state has receded. AOP approaches have instead "allowed the state to reposition itself once again as a benign provider of welfare" (p. 283). A pedagogy that fails to situate the pre-eminence of race and implicate whiteness in discussions about power and oppression is inadequate for equipping students to become purposeful agents of social change. Dei (1996) explains:

> antiracism has an academic and a political agenda, one that seeks to rupture the modus operandi of schooling and education. That is, to problematize and deal with how schools function to reproduce white (patriarchal) dominance. This academic and political agenda is one of educational and social transformation, and it proceeds from a critical understanding of how contemporary social formations provide the educational and institutional structures through which dominating values, principles and traditions are actualized in everyday experience. (p. 250)

A focus on the intricate and heterogeneous nature of intersecting systems of oppression may well dishearten social work students, as the task of bridging differences and building coalitions appears infinitely more challenging. That said, and in acknowledgment that power is diffuse and differentially allocated, it must be taught that choosing one particular entry-point from which to penetrate the matrix of oppression is most effective. This initial site of political action is not to the exclusion of other sites of oppression, but rather it is a starting position giving context to all other oppressions. This starting point is particularly salient in a white settler society such as Canada, where the legacies of colonialism continue to perpetuate social power imbalances. Overlooking the power differentials among oppressions concurrently reifies and re-articulates the very same power imbalances. Simply put, teaching social work students to confront, or stand against, all forms of oppression simultaneously, has a nullifying effect which is counter-productive and does a grave injustice to each form of oppression. Especially in a white-settler context such as Canada, understanding the centrality of colonialism and anti-Black racism to the complex systems of oppression is key to effective anti-oppressive practice.

Conclusion

After hours of thinking, writing, talking, laughing, and crying about these themes, we conclude that any approach to engaged social work education which is grounded in social justice-based practice must be rooted in a dialogic pedagogy. Simply put,

truly social justice-based, activist social work steers away from easy truths and asks us instead to confront uneasiness and messiness. This research allowed us to consider the blurred boundaries between activism, education, and practice and the ways we are each uniquely situated within this triangle. Such an analysis allowed us to consider ways to encourage our students to find their own place in this triad. At the same time, the struggles we identified, especially with respect to the stranglehold of neoliberalism, allowed us to acknowledge the challenging circumstances within which we live and work. In the intersection of this congruity and difference we found suggestions for how to move forward.

As a group, we conclude wholeheartedly that social work must embrace social justice-based practice, in its many guises, to ensure that the social justice mandate of the profession takes precedence over its commitment to social control, and to re-prioritize quality of life as a key consideration for both ourselves and those with whom we work. We grapple with distinct methods of infusing social justice practice into our classrooms, workplaces, communities, and personal lives, especially in this neoliberal moment. Fundamentally, however, finding the congruence of our commitment to social justice provided a great deal of comfort. Moving forward, we may do things largely as we have done before, but with a reminder of the communality of social justice-based practice, and our re-assertion of the need for a "big broad tent of activism" (Ross, 2011, p. 251). These themes inform our pedagogy, and renew our optimism for a revitalized and re-engaged social work pedagogy and scholarship in the interests of equity, dignity, and healthy quality of life.

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