

## **Promoting Social Justice in Doctoral Education**

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***Abstract***

This initiative represents a case study of curriculum development in the area of social justice. It depicts a collective effort across student and faculty lines to "call" the historic value of social justice within social work education more decisively into the foreground.. This presentation invites audience members from various disciplines to grapple with the process of defining social justice. It then depicts the research and development of a doctoral social work course focused on defining this concept through considering theories of social justice. The development of the course will be discussed in detail, including investigation of other models of curriculum in the area of social justice as a means of informing the proposed model. Alternative forms of development, including theories and techniques for reflection as drawn from the Ignatian tradition, will also be considered in the larger context of education across a range of disciplines.

### ***Description of the Project***

The described innovation emerged out of an interest among social work doctoral students in reviving the profession's commitment to the principles of social justice. The development of this innovation commenced through bi-weekly meetings of a subset of doctoral students of a school of social work. During the first months of these meetings, students participated in a reading group focusing on the topic of social justice within social work. Students identified, read, and discussed theoretical and applied readings on this topic. Such readings drew from current social work discourse on social justice, including Finn & Jacobson (2003a, 2003b), Wakefield (1988), and Longres & Scanlon (2001), among others (e.g., Reisch, 2002). Conversations focused on the struggle to define and clarify the role of social justice within social work, both within the larger discourse as well as specifically applied to social work education.

From these meetings, the students pursued a more structured forum for examining the social justice question within the doctoral program. Students identified a faculty member to aid them in developing the curriculum for the workshop. The group then agreed upon a format and syllabus of readings, which included a range of social scientists (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998; Sabbagh et al., 1994; Walzer, 1983; Hochschild, 1981; Rubinstein, 1988) and broadened the lens to focus on fundamental theories in distributive and social justice. Four key objectives were identified for the course, including:

- to provide a basic understanding of fundamental theories in distributive justice and social justice;
- to grapple with applications of these theories for social work teaching and practice;
- to pinpoint areas where research, and specific research questions, would help illuminate how such theories might be more applicable for social work teaching and practice;
- to consider how research findings might lead to important theoretical revisions to make these theories more applicable to peoples lived experience.

While the workshop retained its structure (i.e., content organized around presentations, discussions lead by doctoral students, and supervision provided by a faculty member), it subsequently formed a formal linkage with other structures within the doctoral program (e.g., theory, teaching, and professional development workshops). This linkage allowed for multiple benefits, including interface around the issue of social justice with visiting scholars and more complete and explicit consideration of social justice in the context of theoretical and pedagogical training. For example, workshop participants were challenged to think about ways to apply the theories to their classrooms. Assignments were reviewed in order to identify ways through which required work could include larger consideration of justice issues within the context of the more immediate content at hand.

This workshop provided a forum for both doctoral students and faculty to develop a deeper understanding of how to apply notions of social justice in practice and to integrate such lessons into teaching. It also challenged the current context of doctoral education to more directly respond to the need and professed value of addressing concerns of social justice through work as educators. Readings incorporated from a range of disciplines (e.g., McCormick, 2003)

also identified models through which social justice could be considered within other areas of doctoral education.

Feedback on the workshop suggests that innovations such as this could provide a unique and vital outlet for students directly interested in the application of social justice principles to their scholarship and pedagogy. Formal implementation of a concentration on social justice within doctoral education has the potential to benefit the knowledge base in myriad ways. In the case of social work, this workshop offers integrity to the profession's claimed value of social justice. It seeks to unpack, scrutinize, and operationalize the amorphous but crucial conceptual understanding of social justice as it relates to research, teaching, and practice. In turn, it has the potential to improve the quality of research that is generated through doctoral education, as well as subsequently strengthening the positive impact of these fields on the well-being of marginalized and oppressed client groups. Among the broader range of disciplines, this workshop's draw from multiple perspectives allows it to have potential implications across other schools, as well.

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