



Exploring Social Work and Disability in U.S. Schools of Social Work

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Introduction

This article pertaining to social work education and people with disabilities in the United States is a continuation of research carried out by Carter, Hanes, and MacDonald (2012) wherein they investigated schools of social work in Canada. We now are extending this research to the international scene, namely the United States. In recent years, social work academics in Canada, including Carter, Hanes, and MacDonald (2012); Dunn, Hanes, Hardie, and MacDonald (2006); Dunn, Hanes, Hardie, Leslie, and MacDonald (2008), have joined their U.S. counterparts, such as Mackelprang (1993, 2010), Tomaszewski (1993), DePoy and Miller (1996), Liese, Clevenger, and Hanley (1999), Jurkowski and Welch (2000), Depoy and Gilson (2002), and Laws, Parish, Scheyett, and Egan (2010), in highlighting the importance of increased disability-related curriculum, disability-specific research, greater inclusion of people with disabilities both as students and faculty, and better preparation of social work students to work with people with disabilities. Yet, despite the research done throughout Canada and the United States, the literature suggests that schools of social work in both countries have not prioritized disability, be it with accommodations, affirmative action admission processes, or curriculum design (Dunn, Hardie, Hanes, & MacDonald, 2006; Mackelprang, 2010).

Over the past two decades, universities throughout Canada and the U.S. have made great strides toward the promotion of inclusive education, accessibility, university-based disabled student support centers, and the development of disability studies programs which have had a very positive influence on greater inclusion of people with disabilities within the academy (Dunn, Hanes, Hardie,

Leslie, & MacDonald, 2008; Carter, Hanes, & MacDonald, 2012). Canadian research findings do show a trend toward greater inclusion over the years. For example, in 1993 across Canadian schools of social work only two programs contained disability curriculum, compared to the current day where 85% of schools reported at least one course pertaining to disability (Carter et al., 2012). The authors questioned if this trend is similar across North America. They surveyed U.S. schools of social work focusing upon disability curriculum, accessibility, student organizations, field placements, program collaboration, and recruitment and retention of faculty and students with disabilities. The following article relates the findings of this investigation.

The history of the disability rights movement and the development of disability legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, provide a context from which to explore disability in U.S. schools of social work. An exploration of American social work literature and disability reveals a disconnect between what schools of social work practice and the philosophy of the disability rights movement and consequential legislative developments. This suggests that U.S. schools of social work may be largely stuck in the medical model of disability (DeJong, 1979; Depoy & Gilson, 2002). The authors indicate that much needs to be done in U.S. schools of social work to evolve from a medical orientation of disability to reflect the intent of the disability movement, progressive legislation, and the social model of disability.

Disability and U.S. Schools of Social Work

The Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), the U.S. governing body for social

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work, has policies requiring faculty to be aware of diversity. Educational policy 3.1 states that educational programs must maintain a “commitment to diversity-including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation” (CSWE, 2012, p. 11). These elements of diversity must be supported and reflected within the learning environment and include the “institutional setting itself; selection of field education settings and their clientele; composition of program advisory or field committees; educational and social resources; resource allocation; program leadership; speaker series, seminars, and special programs; support groups; research and other initiatives; and the demographic make-up of its faculty, staff, and student body” (CSWE, 2012, p. 11).

The Council on Disability and Persons with Disabilities is an entity operating under the umbrella of the Commission on Diversity and Social and Economic Justice (CSWE, 2012). Primarily, the council functions to increase understanding of disability, to improve the experiences of people with disabilities in educational settings, and to assist them in fully participating in social work education, including all issues related to disability within the social work field (CSWE, 2012). Further, the council serves as an advocate assisting people in social, political, and economic capacities within the social work education sphere (CSWE, 2012).

The Council on Disability and Persons with Disabilities mandates development, consultation and advocacy. Specifically, the council addresses disability curriculum development and inclusive policy recommendations. Members of the council serve in a consultative role with the CSWE regarding increased participation of persons with disabilities. The council also serves to identify any unjust practices within schools of social work toward people with disabilities, crafting inclusive policies and procedures that would accommodate and support people with disabilities. Although it is positive that disability is included in the category of diversity, Lum (2010) observes

that the CSWE Curriculum Policy Statement says social work curricula can be organized by either “population” or by “problem area.” Vulnerable groups identified by race, ethnicity, or gender were included under “population,” but disability—along with racism and sexism—is listed under “problem area” (Lum, 2010), essentially linking disability to a problem category rather than a unique, accepted, and supported population.

Disability Content in U.S. Schools of Social Work

Historically, U.S. schools of social work have viewed disability through the medical model that focused predominately on disability as a deficit (DeJong, 1979; Depoy & Gilson, 2002) rather than the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) where responsibility is placed upon socially constructed barriers. Recently, U.S. schools of social work have begun to view disability as a part of diversity (Depoy & Gilson, 2002). In a review of the disability content in schools of social work, however, Depoy and Gilson (2002) found that the social model may fall in line with social work values and ideals, but it gets very little attention in the curricula, and the medical model remains the default perception.

The number of people with disabilities is increasing and anticipated to grow (Jurkowski & Welch, 2000). In fact, by 2020 there is expected to be a 38% increase in demand for community-based services for people with disabilities (Laws, Parish, Scheyett, & Egan, 2010). Despite this growing demand, significant problems persist in recruiting and retaining qualified employees to work with persons with disabilities (Laws et al., 2010). In order to have qualified social workers in the field with competence in disability, schools of social work must educate students in disability rights and advocacy (Carter et al., 2012; Dunn et al., 2006; Dunn et al., 2008).

Jurkowski and Welch (2000) studied 492 American and 32 Canadian schools of social work, revealing that social work educators pay little attention to disability. They found only 35% of the schools offered some course content pertaining to disability, with just 14% offering specific disability courses (Jurkowski & Welch,

2000). The scarcity of disability content dealing with advocacy and healthcare could undermine the success of a social worker in working with disabled clients. These findings indicate that it would be beneficial to integrate disability content across all sequences in social work curricula (Jurkowski & Welch, 2000) as the likelihood of social workers working with a person with a disability in some capacity is very high (MacDonald & Friars, 2010).

Gourdine and Sanders (2002) explored disability content in social work curriculums by discerning if disability content was infused into general courses on diversity or presented in specialized courses. They found 21% of schools offered courses specifically on disability, including 3% of schools that offered courses specializing in developmental disabilities. Most disability content was infused within broader topics and presented as a minority status within a diversity curriculum (Gourdine & Sanders, 2002). Incorporating disability content into broader topics can run the risk of it becoming diluted or minimized.

Gourdine and Sanders (2002) suggest U.S. schools of social work re-evaluate their course content, emphasizing content pertaining to people with disabilities as a major concern. They aim to “raise the professional consciousness of social workers to their responsibility to the treatment and policy development for those who have disabilities,” urging “schools of social work to rethink their course offerings or reorganize course content to include more information on disabilities” (p. 207). They contend the dearth of scholarship, leadership, and attention paid to disability contributes significantly to the low numbers of students choosing to work in the field of disability. Social workers have missed opportunities to be leaders in the area of disability. Gourdine and Sanders (2002) note the paucity of research, publications, and presentations at national conferences by social work scholars and practitioners and the lack of effort in encouraging students to enter social work to work with persons with disabilities.

In a study of 50 top-ranked U.S. schools of

social work accredited by the CSWE on disability content, Law et al. (2010) found that there was slightly more opportunity for social workers to get exposure to disability issues in their educational program. In reviewing new developments in the workforce and education related to people with developmental disabilities, the authors demonstrate that “schools are not meeting their obligation to train students to serve this population” (Law et al., 2010, p. 317). Law et al. (2010) found that 37% (or 18 schools) offered at least one course addressing disability. Of these 18 schools, 50% offered courses that focused specifically on intellectual or developmental disabilities, and only 10% of the schools offered more than one course on disability (Law et al., 2010). The University of Chicago School of Social Work was the only school to offer three courses specific to the topic of disability (Law et al., 2010). Close to 60% of the schools reported that at least one tenure-track faculty had a research concentration in disability, and 19% had two tenured faculty members with disability research interests. Only Boston University and Portland University had more than two faculty members focusing on disability (Law et al., 2010).

Law et al. (2010) noted that just over a third of the reporting schools offered courses dealing with people with disabilities, even though 50% of the schools of social work reported employing faculty with expertise and research interests in the realm of disability. Given the faculty expertise available with respect to disability, it is up to these schools of social work to strengthen their commitment to provide these courses. Greater curriculum development is needed in training social workers to work with people with disabilities (DeWeaver & Kropf, 1992; Gordon, 1994; DePoy & Miller, 1996; Liese, Clevenger, & Hanley, 1999).

Russo-Gleicher (2008) interviewed masters of social work (MSW) graduates who work in the field of disability. These graduates indicated that they received minimal training to work with people with disabilities, reporting that disability content in their MSW programs was either absent or minimal with “very little if any exposure to this

population through class assignments and field placements” (p. 141). As a point of disconnect, schools offer field placements in disability-related agencies without offering course content related to people with disabilities (Russo-Gleicher, 2008; Carter et al., 2012). Participants felt ill prepared to work with the disabled population and disappointed in their schools for not offering disability content. In their opinion, “MSW programs are discouraging students to some extent from working with this population and taking away respect from social workers who do this work” (Russo-Gleicher, 2008, p. 141). Russo-Gleicher (2008) supports the research of others in calling for curriculum development and further training of social workers to work with people with disabilities, both in the classroom and in field placements (DeWeaver & Kropf, 1992; DePoy & Miller, 1996; Liese et al., 1999; Tomaszewski, 1993).

The lack of training in disability at U.S. schools of social work is reflective of the Canadian experience (Dunn et al., 2006; Dunn et al., 2008; Carter et al., 2012). Mackelprang (2010) suggests schools of social work increase disability content within the curriculum and the number of faculty and students with disabilities. Further, one needs to move outside academia to become more involved in advocacy movements, such as working with agencies employing an activist disability approach (Mackelprang, 1993). To develop partnerships with community disability groups, it is essential that schools of social work encourage students, faculty, and the public to re-examine attitudes and beliefs about people with disabilities based upon the medical model of disability (Pardeck, 2001). Pardeck (2001) calls for an unsettling of attitudinal bias by requiring mandatory diversity training for all staff and faculty, and helping faculty to understand and implement the accommodations necessary to properly support persons with disabilities. Advancement in social work and disability will happen when administrators of U.S. schools of social work address the need for specific courses, projects, and practicum on disability, increase support and accessibility for students and faculty, and fully realize the importance of preparing social workers to

work effectively with persons with disabilities based on the social model.

Methodology

Our research focused on accredited U.S. schools of social work, and we obtained contact information for each of the schools of social work from the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE, 2012), the national accrediting social work organization, through their public website. We distributed an online survey to all the deans and directors of these accredited schools of social work. The process began with an email letter of introduction containing a brief description of the study and the survey questions. The letter of introduction also provided a link to the online survey, which was hosted by a commercial platform—Fluid Surveys—University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

Potential risks to participants were minimized by keeping responses confidential. We assigned a number to each responding dean or director and their school of social work. Information provided by deans and directors about their school of social work was entered into an SPSS system and a master list was maintained that linked the names of the schools to the code number assigned. Data about each school will be kept indefinitely for future research, analyses, and comparison. The questions asked about disability course content were not considered sensitive, and they dealt only with factual data regarding the various programs. No personal information was requested from any respondent, nor were the opinions of the respondent requested regarding the nature or quality of the specific social work program.

In brief, the survey was intended to gather a comprehensive overview as to the manner in which disability course content, field placements, research, and support for disabled faculty and students were being addressed in the schools of social work and the universities. To be specific, one set of questions focused on programs, curriculum content, and student field placement experiences. A second set of questions asked about scholarly activities and faculty members whose research and publications included a focus on

people with disabilities. A final set of questions addressed equity policies regarding admission, educational support services available to students with disabilities, and the number of individuals with disabilities currently registered in BSW and MSW programs.

A total of 145 schools from across the United States completed the online survey. Responses to each of the open-ended questions were organized into separate data cluster sets and analysed thematically. We identified global themes within each of the question sets, and formed sub-themes to capture the range of the answers provided by the respondents. A “thematic map” (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was created across the question set results and assessed by each of the co-investigators. We established the final results by consensus using an iterative process among the project researchers moving between the cumulative thematic map and the details within the individual survey responses to ensure authenticity to the original data.

Findings

Email surveys were sent out to 564 schools of social work, but 22 emails bounced back leaving a total of 544 schools being contacted. Of this number, there were 145 responses, representing a 26.6% response rate. Ninety-eight percent of the schools reported being accredited by the Council of Social Work Education.

Programs and Courses

Of the 145 respondent schools, 88 or 61% reported having no specific courses pertaining to social work and people with disabilities within their programs, but it does appear that many schools of social work do have disability content in many of their courses. Eighty-nine percent of respondents reported that they integrate disability in courses related to direct practice, social policy, or diversity. Of the disability-specific courses offered, the majority were undergraduate courses, with 89% of these courses offered at the bachelor of Social work (BSW) level. Forty-eight % of the schools offering courses in disability at the master of social work (MSW) level. It is interesting to note that one third of the respondents indicated

that their school of social work collaborated with other university departments that offered courses related to people with disabilities, thus allowing their students the opportunity to take electives outside of the school of social work. The findings indicate that a very small portion of the schools of social work offer combined degrees in law and social work, and of these programs there were a minimal number of courses with disability-related content. For example, 13 percent of the programs have MSW/JD (social work and law) programs, and two percent of these programs offer specific courses in disability policies and law.

Findings suggest that the majority of courses offered at the BSW level fell into the following eight categories:

- Social welfare policy
- Human behavior in the social environment (HBSE)
- Diversity, cultural competence, and vulnerable populations
- Disability related to the aging population
- Service delivery
- Mental health and disability
- General social work practice
- Disability specialty courses

Twelve percent of the respondents reported that courses pertaining to social welfare policy included disability content. Seventeen percent of the courses regarding human behavior in the social environment (HBSE) included disability content. Seventeen percent of the courses with a focus on gerontology, medical, and family caregiving issues included disability-related content. Seventeen percent of courses in service delivery included content which dealt with working with people with disabilities. Such content was included in courses such as Department of Human Services and Department of Rehabilitation courses, Children and Family Services courses, social services with persons with disabilities, service delivery issues and skills, and exploration and service learning with an introduction to progressive services for people with disabilities.

For this research, disability included physical, cognitive, sensory, and mental health disabilities, and some of the respondents noted that their par-

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ticular school of social work offered courses in the area of mental health impairment. Seven percent of the schools, for example, offered courses in mental health, specifically focusing on best practices and mental health and disabilities, and social work and mental health. Twenty-two percent of the programs offered “special topics” courses including social work and parents with disabilities, social work with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, understanding developmental disabilities, social work with families affected by disability, social work and people with developmental disabilities, and medical social work in a health setting. Courses offered at the MSW fall into roughly the same categories as the BSW programs:

- Policy
- Human behavior in the social environment (HBSE)
- Service delivery
- Disability as diversity, cultural competence, and working with vulnerable populations
- Disability related to aging
- Mental health and disability
- General social work practice and disability
- Specialty courses that cover a wide range of topics about disability

While some respondents reported that they do not offer specific courses on disability, they indicated that disability is included in the overall MSW course content. For example, 19 percent reported offering courses pertaining to social welfare policy that incorporated disability content. Fourteen percent reported offering courses pertaining to mental health and disability, disability as diversity, social work with vulnerable populations, and general courses pertaining to social work practice that included working with persons with disabilities. Ten percent of the respondents stated that they offer disability content through their human behavior and the social environment (HBSE) courses. The following specialty courses included disability course content:

- Social work and persons with developmental disabilities
- The nature of health and illness
- Clinical social work with physical illness

- Social action and disability
- Understanding developmental disabilities
- Disability, culture, and universal access in society
- Interdisciplinary project in universal access
- Social work and behavioral health
- Social work with families affected by disability
- Study of theory, research, and best practices

Collaboration with Other Departments

It is interesting to note that a number of the respondents indicated that their schools of social work collaborated with other departments in addressing the needs of people with disabilities:

- Thirty percent of respondents collaborate with schools of education.
- Twenty-seven percent collaborate with programs related to rehabilitation services including occupational therapy, physical therapy, rehabilitation sciences and counseling, and therapeutic recreation.
- Twenty-seven percent reported that they collaborate with departments of applied health sciences, public health, healthcare, ALS, health management and policy, nutrition, and health technology.
- Twenty-three percent collaborate with disability studies programs, disability services, and American Sign Language (ASL) programs, interpreting, and deaf studies programs.
- Seven percent collaborate with communication sciences and departments of communication disorders.

Field Practicum Experiences

It is interesting to note that while the study found a large discrepancy between the number of schools of social work that offered courses directed at disability-related content and to people with disabilities, the number of students involved in placements where the client population was specifically with people with disabilities was significantly high. In fact, ninety percent of the respondents indicated that they were aware of students who were doing field placements in agencies that deal specifically with persons with disabilities.

Committees

There were 128 responses to the question asking respondents whether or not their school of social work had a persons with disabilities caucus or persons with disabilities committees, of which 21% reported that they did, while 73% indicated they did not.

Numbers of Students and Faculty

There were 104 respondents to the question regarding the number of students with disabilities registered in BSW programs. The findings indicate that the number of students with disabilities is very low. Seventeen of the 104 respondents did not know of any students with disabilities in their BSW program, while seven respondents indicated that there were no students with disabilities in their BSW program. (Three respondents thought the question was not applicable). Eighty-four individuals responded to questions about MSW enrollments. Of this number, 29 of the respondents indicated the question was not applicable as their schools only had a BSW program. Twelve respondents reported there were no students with disabilities in their MSW program, while 11 indicated they did not know how many disabled students were enrolled in their program. Twenty-five of the respondents reported one to 10 students with disabilities in their MSW program.

Efforts at Creating an Inclusive Environment and Scholarly Activities

There were 41 responses to the question about committee development, efforts at creating an inclusive environment, and scholarly work related to disability. Four respondents indicated that there was no effort or interest in the area of developing a more inclusive environment for people with disabilities, and there was diversity-specific research being done by faculty members. Five of the respondents indicated that the concerns about disability were included in committees on diversity. One respondent indicated their Diversity, Recruitment, and Retention Committee “addresses a variety of issues” with “a balance of students and faculty, BSW and MSW student reps, BSW and MSW faculty.” Another respondent indicated that their Office of Multicultural Diversity and Learning Resources offered services, support, and advocacy. Twelve of the respondents indicated that

the school of social work deferred matters concerning disability policies and services, such as accommodation, to a university-wide office. As one respondent indicated, “Our college has a strong academic support program for students with learning challenges/disabilities and the social work program is supportive of any students with these challenges.” And, another respondent stated, “[A] Learning Center for students with disabilities exists, university committees regarding policies and practices exists, [and] assignments and placements are tailored to the needs of students with disabilities.”

Six respondents recalled efforts at creating an accessible school environment through student-driven activities. One school sponsored student-driven colloquial session focused on creating an inclusive environment, while two other respondents indicated that a social work school committee “works to assist students with special needs.” In another case, a respondent reported that the director of the school sat on “a campus wide accessibility committee to review accessibility of our online curriculum and provide training to our faculty.” Another respondent commented on how they organized inclusive social parties for students and people with disabilities from the community. One respondent discussed how the Student Social Work Association works on some disability issues. Looking to the future, another respondent described how students who are concerned about how the faculty can be “more cognizant about students with disabilities” are forming a committee of concern and meeting with the school administration.

With respect to future courses and programs, four of the respondents spoke about how their school had developed or is in the process of developing courses and programs in the area of disability.

Ten respondents identified faculty and graduate students involved in scholarly projects, nationally and internationally, and who had expertise as disability scholars. One respondent indicated that they had as many as three faculty members working in the area of developmental disabilities involving child welfare, education, and mental health agencies. Other scholarly work

mentioned by respondents included parental attitudes regarding disability, international policy on disability, and disability studies and practice.

Reflections on Disability Development

As a final question, survey participants were asked if there was anything else happening at their school of social work that was pertinent to disability. Five respondents indicated they had nothing further to say about their school of social work and disability. However, 18 of the 33 respondents spoke positively about the history and ongoing program development in their school with respect to disability, often speaking positively about university broad centers of support for students with disabilities that assisted with instructional accommodation issues and worked to improve accessibility through initiatives involving Universal Instructional Design. One respondent spoke of how their social work program had been offering programs and services for persons with disabilities since the 1970s, and others commented on what they are doing presently and how it has been considered nationally significant. In some cases, respondents mentioned how their focus on disability had brought them national attention. Some respondents indicated how they were working to encourage students to apply for educational supports and academic accommodation. As one respondent stated, "The Social Work Program has been working with the College's advising staff to create a support group for students with disabilities (and interested persons) and to host a series of professional conferences on the topic of including people with disabilities in community volunteer and service opportunities."

Limitations

An important challenge for the researchers was getting contact information for the various U.S. schools of social work. The contact data obtained from the CSWE website created some difficulties, and in a few cases resulted in unintentional emails being sent to the same person who chose not to participate in the study. All of the questionnaires were sent to the master list, and in some cases, respondents from BSW programs answered questions directed at MSW schools of social work faculty and these had to be

discarded. Although the email survey allowed the researcher to reach many possible respondents over a large geographical area, it is the survey method with the lowest response rate (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). On average, e-mail surveys have a 23% lower response rate than that of posted hard copy surveys, but in this study the response rate was approximately 27 percent with a 145/564 response ratio. Unfortunately, many of the comments were quite sparse, as is often expected in many surveys. However, the responses to the open-ended questions produced considerable information about efforts to create an inclusive environment and scholarly activities about disability in the various U.S. schools of social work. A follow up person-to-person qualitative interview no doubt would have contributed to the data, but it was impossible to add this element to the survey given the cost associated with time and hiring research assistants.

Discussion

The findings of this research provide us with some very important insight as to the manner in which social work education is addressing the needs of people with disabilities in the United States. The research indicates that while some schools are just beginning to offer disability-related courses, other schools of social work report disability-related course offerings dating back 35 years. Courses pertaining to people with disabilities do receive a relatively high degree of attention in U.S. schools of social work. For example, at the BSW level, the survey results show that 89% of the schools responded that they offered course material dealing with people with disabilities. However, at the MSW level, the actual number of disability-related graduate courses was much lower, with only approximately 52% schools of social work reporting MSW courses relating to people with disabilities. It is evident that many schools of social work in the U.S. are committed to offering courses related to people with disabilities, but it is difficult to ascertain the focus of the course content, whether or not they take a positive or negative view of disability, and whether or not they focus primarily on the medical model conceptualizations of disability.

The survey results appear to show a few interesting trends. To begin with, at both the BSW and MSW levels, the tendency is to cover disability-related content and issues as part of a wide spectrum of courses. For example, the survey results indicate that disability is covered in such diverse courses as social policy, human behavior, and direct practice as well as in courses pertaining to gerontology, family care-giving, and cultural competency and diversity. In fact, 46 % of respondents linked disability content to broader BSW courses. The argument, of course, can be made that it is quite positive to have disability issues covered in a wide range of courses, but the problem is that it is difficult to actually get a handle on the depth and scope of the material covered. In other words, it is challenging to determine whether or not students spend a class or two or more addressing disability in the broader course content. In short, the quality and quantity of disability-related material remains unclear, and hence it makes it difficult to ascertain the level of exposure, teaching, and research that students actually get when it comes to social work and people with disabilities. In short, is disability being treated like the flavor of the month?

U.S. schools of social work also offer disability content in disability-specific courses, as 89% percent of the respondents indicated disability-specific courses in their programs. This is a significantly high ratio of reporting schools showing evidence of disability-specific courses at the undergraduate level. While the survey did not explore actual course content, reported topics and themes nonetheless do emphasize clinical elements of practice. Common themes are found in such core words as “understanding people with disabilities,” “helping people with disabilities,” “services provision and people with disabilities,” “rehabilitation services,” and “skills and services for working with people with disabilities.” Disability activists and academics interested in a more critical and radical disability analysis might contend that such courses have as much potential for hindering people with disabilities as they do in helping people with disabilities.

While results suggests that most BSW course content focuses on a “medical model” of disability,

the survey results for MSW programs show that many U.S. schools of social work offer disability-related courses emphasizing human rights and social justice. The above findings do, in some ways, represent an interesting dichotomy in that courses at the BSW level appear to be rooted in what can be identified as generalized service delivery courses, and courses at the MSW level appear to be rooted in specific courses pertaining to critical disability theory, social justice, and advocacy.

Notwithstanding the diversity in disability-related course offerings at various U.S. schools of social work, it is important to note that the vast majority of schools (91%) reported students doing placements that involved working with clients with disabilities. The data pertaining to placements offer a few important speculations. To begin, the placement can be viewed as an important educational tool and experience wherein students can and do learn about the needs of people with disabilities. And if the placement is all the student is getting, then at least they are getting some exposure to people with disabilities, which in and of itself adds to the overall educational experience of the student. Moreover, the high demand for placements with persons with disabilities does show that students may have an interest in working with this population at some later point. The high number of placements further underscores the need for having more social work and persons with disabilities courses wherein theory and practice can become more closely connected.

The findings of this study do reflect much of the literature pertaining to people with disabilities and social work in the U.S. and abroad in at least two areas: (a) disability is an emerging area of interest in U.S. schools of social work and (b) there remains an ongoing persistence of a generalist and somewhat “medical model” in courses at the BSW level but a more specific critical disability theory and human rights focus at the MSW level. The survey results show some interesting ways in which schools of social work are attempting to include more disability focused research and content. For example, some schools of social work cross list the same disability-related course

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for both MSW and BSW students, wherein the graduate students are expected to do more work for the same course.

In addition to cross listing courses, respondents indicated that faculty interested in disability-related research often collaborated with academics in other disciplines. This is quite evident in schools of social work where these schools existed alongside schools of education, medicine, rehabilitation programs, and health studies programs. In fact, the study found that almost 25% of faculty members in schools of social work collaborated with rehabilitation professionals. Interestingly, though, only 10% of the schools reported collaborative work with academics who were interested in disability rights and social justice issues for people with disabilities. In many ways, these findings highlight earlier observations, which noted that many BSW programs in the U.S. emphasize a clinical or medical focus in their disability course content. Similarly, the results point to a contradiction that suggests that while social work as a profession most often adheres to a social or political model of disability, most American social work programs are aligned with medical model course content, which analyzes disability through a “deficit-treatment lens” (Gordon, 1994; Depoy & Gilson, 2002; Lum, 2010).

Moving beyond an investigation into course offerings and field placements, an acceptance of students with disabilities and the hiring of people with disabilities as faculty members were also of concern to the researchers. Interestingly, 17 % of the respondents indicated that they did not know the actual number of students with disabilities enrolled in their BSW programs, with 11% of respondents not knowing how many disabled students were in their graduate program. This lack of notice of the number of students with disabilities enrolled in social work programs should be contextualized. In the U.S., for example, people with disabilities do not have to disclose having a disability (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). So, it is highly possible that many people with disabilities enrolled in schools of social work have not disclosed having a disability.

Do U.S. Schools of Social Work Accurately Reflect Progressive Discourse and Legislation?

The findings of this research show that there is a broad range in the actual delivery of disability-related course content, disability-focused practicum, disability research, accessibility, and acceptance and recruitment of students and faculty with disabilities throughout the various U.S. schools of social work. And this broad scope, “patchwork guilt” response to disability inclusion causes us to wonder if most American schools of social work are actually developing a critical, progressive understanding of disability, or if the focus is by and large aimed at medical model solutions, which are reflected in course content. In addition, we question whether schools of social work and universities are proactive in the development of policies that lead to greater accessibility and inclusion or if they are simply meeting the minimum required standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

We recognize the paradox in raising these questions as we note the connection of people with disabilities to the very politically active disability rights movement of the 1970s known as the Independent Living Movement (DeJong, 1979). It is also important to note the development of legislation that brought about significant changes for people with disabilities, especially students with disabilities. The authors note here the importance of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 which have brought about legislative and policy changes that have created greater educational opportunities for Americans with disabilities (Jurkowski & Welch, 2000; Neudel, 2007).

The Rehabilitation Act (1973), section 504, addressed disability rights by prohibiting higher education institutions from receiving federal funds if they discriminate against persons with disabilities. Despite the belief that this piece of legislation is progressive, it is also very narrow in scope. Schools were in compliance with the law as long as they did not significantly hinder participation in academic programs (Adams & Brown, 2006; Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 1996). Thus, there were no legal requirements for schools to provide more positive, proactive accommodations. In 1990, the U.S. Congress recognized that under

current legislation, persons with disabilities were still extremely disadvantaged and had little substantive legal recourse pertaining to discrimination (Adams & Brown, 2006; Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 1996). Within the year, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) required all institutions of higher learning to accommodate persons with disabilities. The ADA resulted in more financial support for programs to address access to curricula and the employment of disability “specialist” advisors to improve accessibility to campus (Adams & Brown, 2006).

The ADA goes further than earlier legislation in its prohibitions regarding the discrimination toward individuals with disabilities attending academic and professional programs (Palley, 2008). This legislation applies to all facets of the program including the classroom, field placements, and other program activities (Pardeck, 2001) so that no one is denied access to higher education due to accommodation or supportive needs. Access can only be denied if it creates “undue hardship,” meaning that admitting or hiring a person with disabilities would create an undue administrative or financial hardship for the program (Palley, 2008; Pardeck, 2001). Moreover, this legislation maintains that such accommodations cannot significantly change the program (Pardeck, 2001), leaving the difficult task of ascertaining what constitutes “undue hardship” or a “fundamental change” to the school administrators.

“Undue hardship” is determined on a case-by-case basis and includes considerations such as class size and financial resources available to the program, as well as possible changes to course requirements along with the level of disruption caused to the student body (ADA and Post-Secondary Education, Title II, 1991, as cited in Pardeck, 2001). “Reasonable academic accommodation” is considered to be any modifications to the program that will ensure equal opportunity or access for a student with a disability (Pardeck, 2001; Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005), such as, the provision of interpreters or special assistive technology (Pardeck, 2001).

Mandated services include books on tape, note takers, testing accommodations, and access to

learning opportunities and materials (Council on Disabilities and Persons with Disabilities [CDPD], 2010). Non-mandated or “enhanced services” include tutoring, counseling, help with learning strategies, career counseling, and access to persons with learning disability expertise (CDPD, 2010). Notably, what is a reasonable accommodation is not defined universally but rather is determined on a case-by-case basis by the program (Mackelprang, 1993).

Institutions must by law strive for integration whenever possible (Pardeck, 2001). Despite progress, there is a need in the U.S. to focus attention upon greater understanding of the needs of persons with disabilities in higher education. There needs to be a strategy to ensure all faculty members receive diversity training focused on the unique needs of persons with disabilities, including the need for related accommodations (Pardeck, 2001) and Universal Instruction Design (UID; Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005; Burgstahler, 2008). Interestingly, while the legislation calling for greater inclusion of people with disabilities in the university setting exists, this study does indicate that there remains a very broad range across schools of social work in the United States. As reported, some schools of social work have very few students and faculty with disabilities, and decisions about accommodation and accessibility appear to occur on a piece meal basis. In contrast, other schools of social work appear to offer a number of supports and services for students with disabilities. Moreover, many schools of social work do not offer disability-focused courses at either the BSW or MSW levels, despite the fact that people with disabilities make up one of the largest minority populations in the U.S., and it is quite likely that social work graduates will at some point work with clients with disabilities.

Conclusion

The research set out to discover in some small way the state of social work education as it relates to people with disabilities in the United States. While there are some shortcomings with the research findings, as there is with most online surveys, the research nonetheless does make many important discoveries. To begin, we note that the

topic of disability represents a very mixed package. The findings suggest that many schools of social work offer disability-specific courses while others do not, yet they offer disability content through other courses. The findings also show a diversity in course content, with the vast majority of BSW courses focusing on skills and the “how to” (how to work with and rehabilitate people with disabilities). The MSW courses tend to focus on disability policy, disability rights, and social justice for people with disabilities. In addition to these findings, our research shows that a large percentage of social work students end up doing placements where the client population is overwhelmingly made up of people with disabilities. While the ADA has improved disability access and inclusion for people with disabilities such as students, administrators, and faculty in schools of social work, it is clear that much more needs to be done.

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