



Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

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Another challenge to the profession! In her commissioned article, Elisabeth Reichert contends that "[w]ithout fully understanding what social justice means, social workers can only give lip service to this pillar of social work practice. The difficulty, though, lies not in the teaching of social justice, but in the core meaning of this term. Social justice has no clear definition, and consequently, often serves merely as a pleasant sounding catchword." Not unlike the amorphous term "change agent" and the ambiguous "isms" that are deeply ingrained within the linguistic framework of the profession, the term social justice, though widely used and espoused, escapes definition. While many would argue that social justice is the foundation upon which social work practice has been built, the core definition remains elusive. It is within this context that Reichert challenges the wider practice community to be more precise in defining this concept, forcing her readers to draw clear divisions between theory and practice. If this concept cannot be clarified in theoretical terms, then we must reconsider our righteous claims that social justice lies at the heart of our practice.

Ultimately, Reichert's article serves as a vehicle for engaging practitioners and educators in structured dialogues around their respective practice orientations as it relates to social justice and protecting human rights. The fundamental question in this debate will be one of approach. Do we approach the issue from the macro-level, and focus on how systems can be altered to be more sensitive to the rights of people, or do we use a micro-level approach, and focus on ways in which individual empowerment can be increased? Or do we use both approaches? This call for a movement towards clarity will assist the practice community immensely — a working definition will serve as an instrument to measure one's own practice, and will be instrumental in assisting practitioners to achieve unequivocal human rights for their community.

The underlying thrust of Reichert's article cre-

ates reasonable opportunities and challenges for continuing education. Once a formal consensus is reached around the core nature of social justice in social work practice, continuing education workshops could be offered to those who do not have a firm grounding in social justice theories.

The following articles are equally incisive and hold their own challenges. As is increasingly more apparent, practitioners require both broad-based and specialized knowledge and skills to successfully navigate the contours of the evolving managed care and privatized service delivery landscape. Through a survey administered to a variety of practicing field supervisors, which employed 23 skill and knowledge items identified by Vandivort-Warren (1996), Michael N. Kane, Elwood R. Hamlin, and Diane Green found that over half of the respondents indicated that critically important items were to be taught prior to actual field practice at the university level. Studies such as these are vital, for they inform curriculum development in an attempt to increase the congruence between instruction and the reality of respective field settings, allowing continuing education to target more specific skill and knowledge areas.

In his article, "Re-thinking South Korea's Special Graduate Education as a Continuing Education Resource," Junseob Shin contends that there is a serious need for cost-efficient provisions to increase both opportunities for, and access to, continuing education. Based upon a survey that analyzed the definitive characteristics of two graduate-level programs, Shin proposes that the various special graduate programs, which traditionally provided non-traditional students with a minimum social work education and level-one licensure, reorganize their regionally fragmented focus and facilitate continuing education opportunities for practicing social workers in the field.

Since continuing education occupies such a critical role in informing and defining the practice knowledge and skills of the wider human services

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community, it is imperative that researchers employ valid evaluation designs to correctly assess and improve the relative impact and effectiveness of continuing education for practitioners in the field. Though plagued by weak internal validity and rival variables, the pretest-posttest evaluation design remains the most popular and efficient means for measuring cognitive knowledge gain, for it accommodates both small budgets and time constraints. Isolating the "testing" variable, Thomas R. Barton, Tracy J. Dietz, and Linda L. Holloway revisit a continuing concern over the validity of pretest-posttest designs in their article "Using a Pretest-Posttest Design to Evaluate Continuing Education Programs." The authors intend to demonstrate that testing does not have a significant impact upon group posttest scores, suggesting that the simple pretest-posttest is an effective evaluation design for

measuring knowledge gain.

The final article featured in this issue, "Inside-Outside: Boundary-Spanning Challenges in Building Rural Health Coalitions," will serve as an invaluable resource for both practitioners and continuing education facilitators, who must address the immediacy of coalition-building challenges. Judith M. Dunlop and G. Brent Angell propose a series of practice guidelines and institutional and interpersonal factors, illustrated by specific case scenarios from a Canadian rural health coalition, which should be considered in conceptualizing coalition-building strategies. As the wider human services continuum moves towards coalition building to improve service delivery, community practitioners are forced to mediate multiple external organizational relationships, while attempting to increase the synergy between various organizational missions.