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# The Impact of Social Work Education on Social Justice Practice Behaviors

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The Impact of Social Work Education on Social Justice Practice Behaviors

by

Nicole Dahl, MSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

Committee Members

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social work research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the University Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

## Abstract

Research has suggested there is a gap between how social workers understand social justice and how they incorporate it into practice. Therefore, this review examined studies that targeted change in social work students' social justice practice behaviors. Ten studies examined the effect of social work education from entry to graduation by collecting pre and post-test program data. The remaining studies examined the effect of a particular course. Finally, 55 social justice competencies from learning outcome reports were reviewed to gain greater understanding of MSW social justice practice behaviors. Findings suggest the majority of accredited schools of social work report students demonstrate mastery of social justice competency. Characteristics of effective social justice learning interventions included the learning environment, use of small group discussions, and instructor-led reflections that promoted sharing of beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of social justice content. Suggestions for further research on how social justice competency is operationalized and assessed in social work education are discussed.

*Keywords:* clinical social work, social work education, social justice, evaluation, learning outcomes

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# The Impact of Social Work Education on Social Justice Practice Behaviors

## Introduction

*“In a world of war and injustice, how does a person manage to stay socially engaged, committed to the struggle, and remain healthy without burning out or becoming resigned or cynical? Revolutionary change does not come as one cataclysmic moment but as an endless succession of surprises, moving zigzag toward a more decent society. We don’t have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can quietly become a power that can transform the world.” (Zinn, 2007)*

Despite advances in health, education, and technology, indicators such as poverty, violence, environmental degradation, and access to quality healthcare and education suggest the current state of social justice is in decline (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2011; United Nations, 2006). In 2014, “nearly 36 million men, women, and children were living in modern slavery worldwide” (Global Slavery Index, 2014). Modern day slavery is defined as “human trafficking, forced labor, debt bondage, forced marriage, commercial sexual exploitation and the sale and exploitation of children” (Global Slavery Index, 2014). At the national level, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world and the second highest percent of children living in poverty of all developed nations (Population Reference Bureau, 2012; United Nations Children’s Fund, 2012). These injustices occur in our very own communities. Minnesota is home to some of the highest racial disparities in the nation – which left unaddressed; threaten the future of our economy, and the health and well-being of our future generations.

The traumatic nature of injustice is well documented. A growing body of research has begun to illuminate how the cumulative effects of unresolved transgenerational trauma results in the deterioration of communities and significantly elevates individual risk for physical and mental illness. Societies that experience historical trauma face lower academic achievement, decreased social mobility, shortened life-span and issues such as substance abuse and suicidality

(Atkinson, Nelson & Atkinson, 2010; Cohen, Farley, & Mason, 2003). These statistics indicate that social justice may be one of the most dire public health issues of our time.

Injustice is not a new phenomenon; however, it has been suggested that Americans' beliefs and optimism for justice have changed dramatically. Since the 1990's public opinion polls indicate a growing number of Americans – regardless of class, gender, race, or age – are not confident that future generations will “be better off” (Wall Street Journal & NBC News Poll, 2014). Prior to the 1990s, confidence that a better future was an attainable goal remained high, despite historical periods of hardship and such as the Great Depression. Scholars have noted this decrease in confidence parallels drops in political and civic engagement, and an ever growing individually focused society (Sander & Putnam, 2010; Steele, 2012).

Historically, interest and motivation to engage in social change has ebbed and flowed; yet, the common elements of social movements that have created more just societies indicate the importance of collective communities, solidarity, conscious raising, political involvement and belief that justice is possible. Social justice practice behaviors are varied, and commonly include activities such as advocacy, protests, community organizing, lobbying, street theater, street art, and research for policy change. However, some scholars suggest the most critical element in any social change effort is the coming together of community and the healing relationships that develop between people in the pursuit of liberation and justice (Atkinson, et al., 2010; Chomsky, 2012).

The social work profession is particularly suited to offer a social justice framework, given its emphasis on social relationships, quality of life for members of society, and knowledge of trauma interventions. In fact, social work originated in response to widespread poverty and inequality and played a role in establishing influential policy reform such as the Federal



Emergency Relief Act of 1933, the Social Security Act of 1935, child labor laws, workers compensation, and support for low-income families (Abramovitz, 1998). As social work gained status as a profession, advances in training and education became paramount, and specialty areas of practice developed in response to the social, cultural and political factors of the time. The 1920s was known as the psychological paradigm, due to the “psychoanalytic and mental hygiene movements” (Abramovitz, 1998, p. 519). It was also a quiet period for political involvement due to widespread fear. During this time, many social workers embraced the psychological orientation; as a result, the practice area of clinical social work was born. During this time, a large number of social workers moved from public agencies into private practice. Dissent within the profession arose due to varied opinions amongst professionals regarding involvement in social reform. Although social workers continued to work for change, clinical social workers’ commitment to social justice was questioned due to the use of diagnosis, assessment and therapeutic interventions (Specht & Courtney, 1994).

To address these concerns, the two guiding professional organizations of social work, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council on Social Work Education (CWSE) worked to implement standards and integration of social justice within social work training (Abramovitz, 1998). In addition, accredited schools of social work require assessment of students’ ability to demonstrate competency in social justice practice behaviors (CSWE, 2015). In acknowledgment of the ambiguity in operationalizing social justice, some social work programs have made additional efforts to supplement NASW’s and CWSE’s description of social justice through the creation of principles or guidelines for practice. Despite these honorable efforts, some suggest the translation of social justice from theory to practice remains intellectualized and abstract (Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

While most contemporary social work scholars have acknowledged the need for interventions across the micro-macro continuum (e.g., Shdaimah & McCoyd, 2012), the extant literature on the topic suggests there is a gap between how social workers understand social justice and how they incorporate it into practice (e.g., Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). In a world in which social justice is in decline and historical trauma threatens the fabric of our communities, this manuscript aimed to contribute to the professional literature on how clinical social workers understand and incorporate social justice into practice. Given the scarcity of studies outside of the field of education, this review focused on the impact of social work education on social justice practice behaviors. More specifically, this review was guided by the following question: how does competency in social justice learning outcomes translate to real world social justice practice behaviors?

## **Literature Review**

Throughout history, social workers have struggled with divergent schools of thought regarding how best to accomplish the dual mission of individual service and large-scale social reform (Abramovitz, 1998; McLaughlin, 2011). Over the past 75 years, the rising numbers of clinical social workers in private practice and the profession's deepening involvement in therapeutic interventions and evidence-based practice has caused concern that the profession had become complacent, trading its social activist roots for prestige, higher wages, and individualized care (Margolin, 1997; O'Brien, 2010; Specht & Courtney, 1994). Although it is widely acknowledged that social justice practice behaviors are necessary at all levels of practice, the contemporary literature suggests the problem is not the growing sector of clinical social work; but, perhaps an incongruence between how social workers understand social justice, and how that understanding translates into practice (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). Therefore, the following chapters will provide a review of the contemporary literature on clinical social work and social justice.

### **Concepts and Definitions**

In order to understand the impact of social work education on social justice learning outcomes, it is necessary to define the terms and framework used to guide this review. The following section will provide a brief overview of relevant concepts and operational definitions for the following terms: social work profession, social work education, educational policies and standards, competency-based social work education, social justice competency, social justice practice behaviors, and assessment of social justice competency.

**The profession of social work.** The profession of social work aims to improve the well-being of individuals and societies (NASW, 2008). According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE),

*“The purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being. Guided by a person-in-environment framework, a global perspective, respect for human diversity, and knowledge based on scientific inquiry, the purpose of social work is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons, locally and globally”* (CSWE, 2015, p. 5).

Social work is set apart from other helping professions by its application of theoretical models that emphasize person-in-environment; strengths-based practice and social justice values (NASW, 2008). Social workers provide a wide range of services in various settings such as schools, hospitals, nursing homes, government agencies, community clinics, and correctional facilities – across all areas of practice (Whitaker, Weismiller & Clark, 2006).

**Micro, mezzo and macro practice areas.** Social work is commonly categorized into three areas of practice that identify the system level in which the worker intervenes to effect change. Some scholars have proposed these categories are irrelevant for contemporary social workers, as they do not support a unified profession – or the need for social workers to have intervention skills across all system levels. Nevertheless, micro social work refers to direct practice with individuals, families and groups. It is the most common area of practice for licensed social workers in the United States (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). Change efforts are focused on enhancing the individual’s functioning and wellbeing. Mezzo social work commonly involves work with businesses, neighborhoods, and organizations. Mezzo social work interventions are targeted at effecting organizational or community change. Macro social work focuses on creating change at the structural level. Common practice strategies include lobbying or advocating for policy change (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Although social justice is

necessary at all levels of practice, it is most widely associated with macro practice and structural level change. This conceptualization will be explored further in the review of the literature on the conceptualization of social justice in social work practice.

**Clinical social work.** Clinical social work is a specific area of practice in social work in which practitioners provide a variety of mental healthcare services aimed at enhancing well-being and access to resources (CSWE, 2008). Clinical social workers provide the majority of the nation's mental health, substance abuse and behavioral health services (NASW, 2015). The distinguishing characteristic of clinical social work is its use of diagnosis, therapeutic techniques, evidence-based practice, and advanced educational training (CSWE, 2008). In keeping with the profession's mission, the goals of clinical social work are to enhance well-being and to advance social justice. Social justice in clinical social work practice is most commonly conceptualized as promoting human dignity and working to ensure access to resources for the poorest, most vulnerable and oppressed members of society (NASW, 2008). Much like macro practice social workers, clinical social workers work in a variety of settings such as schools, hospitals, nursing homes, government agencies, community clinics, and correctional facilities. Clinical social workers may also provide psychotherapy in private practice settings.

**Council on social work education programs.** The CSWE is the accrediting body for schools of social work in the US and is, therefore, responsible for setting and maintaining educational policies and standards (EPAS) for accreditation (CSWE, 2008). The goal of accreditation is to ensure the quality of education to prepare social workers for competent practice. Two organizational milestones are relevant to this study. In 1994, all accredited training programs were mandated to integrate social justice content into the curriculum. These efforts were implemented in response to the call for greater professional integration - in other

words, to more effectively prepare social workers to navigate the micro-macro continuum (Shdaimah & McCoyd, 2012). In 2008, CSWE required schools of social work to move to a competency-based learning outcome model. These efforts were implemented to enhance the social justice focus of professional training and to promote educational quality and integrity (CSWE, 2008).

**Educational policies and standards.** The Educational Policies and Standards (EPAS) were developed by CSWE in response to the call for greater professional integration (Shdaimah & McCoyd, 2012). The 2015 EPAS identifies nine competencies – or areas of knowledge, skills, and behaviors – that are required for effective social work practice. These competencies must be implemented in the curriculum of accredited master’s and bachelor’s level programs. Each program is allowed freedom in implementing the EPAS. In other words, training programs can choose how to integrate social justice content into coursework, assignments, and field education. To maintain accreditation, training programs must complete regular reviews to provide evidence of adherence and implementation of the EPAS standards and accomplishment of program goals. This process seeks to ensure the quality and integrity of social work education (CSWE, 2015).

**Competency-based social work education.** Competency-based education models are commonly utilized for training healthcare professionals (CSWE, 2008). “A competency-based approach refers to identifying and assessing what students demonstrate in practice” (CSWE, 2015, p. 6). All accredited training programs must assess students’ demonstration of competence in each of the nine competencies identified in the EPAS. According to accreditation rules, training programs are required to post the results of their learning outcomes assessment. Since this study is interested in the impact of social work education on social justice practice behaviors,

a more in-depth discussion of how social justice competency is defined and assessed in social work education is warranted.

**Social justice competency.** According to CSWE’s 2015 EPAS, “Competency 3,” social justice is conceptualized as follows:

*“Social workers understand that every person regardless of position in society has fundamental human rights such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers understand the global interconnections of oppression and human rights violations, and are knowledgeable about theories of human need and social justice and strategies to promote social and economic justice and human rights. Social workers understand strategies designed to eliminate oppressive structural barriers to ensure that social goods, rights, and responsibilities are distributed equitably and that civil, political, environmental, economic, social, and cultural human rights are protected.”*

**Social justice competency behaviors.** The two practice behaviors identified by CSWE for assessing social justice competency in the 2015 EPAS are:

- 1) Apply understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels; and,*
- 2) Engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice.*

Some scholars have critiqued how competencies are defined in higher education. Similar critiques have been aimed at the operational definitions of practice behaviors in the EPAS (Gambrill, 2014). For example, how is “engage in practice that advances social, economic, and environmental justice” operationalized? What are the indicators - or objective evidence, and who are the stakeholders involved in assessing competency? These issues will be discussed further in the following sections.

**Assessment of social justice competency.** The goal of assessing social justice competency is to help training programs understand the strengths and areas for growth in implementing social justice content into learning opportunities. According to accreditation

standards, social justice competency must be assessed by at least two measures. Standard instruments, assessment protocols, and types of data collected are not mandated. The sole requirement is at least one measure must assess demonstration of social justice practice behavior in a real or mock setting. Therefore, each social work program is allowed to determine how it will assess social justice competency; however, the assessment plan must be approved by the CSWE. Assessment plans must outline, “A description of the assessment procedures that detail when, where, and how each competency is assessed for each program option” (CSWE, 2015). Similarly, each school determines a measurement benchmark for social justice competency. Benchmarks can be thought of as goals – or the percent of students desired to demonstrate competency. Achievement of the benchmark indicates “mastery” of social justice competency (CSWE, 2015).

**Social justice competency instruments.** The most common instruments used to assess, or measure, social justice competency are self-efficacy instruments, course work grades and field performance evaluations. Self-efficacy instruments measure an individual’s beliefs or confidence in ability to effectively accomplish tasks or goals (Calderon, 2013). Methods of assessment in field evaluation were not explicitly explored or defined within the literature of this review; therefore, no definition can be provided. The strengths and challenges of assessing competency-based education in social work will be examined in the discussion section of this paper. The following section will examine the literature on social work education and social justice.

### **Social Work and Social Justice**

The following section will investigate the studies that have empirically examined social workers’ understanding and engagement in social justice activities.



**Practice preference and social justice.** According to a 2006 NASW Workforce Study, the overwhelming majority of social workers are employed in individual practice. Findings from this study indicate that 61 percent of social workers spend over 20 hours a week in direct practice while only 1 percent spent 20 or more hours a week in policy development or community organizing work. In addition, only 30 to 35 percent of social workers reported devoting time to engagement in policy or community issues in their job.

However, research on the differences between clinical and macro practice social workers, demonstrate that their beliefs, views and attitudes regarding social problems and the quest for justice are more common than not (Bradley, Maschi, O'Brien, Morgen, & Ward, 2012; McLaughlin, 2011; Weiss, 2003). For example, two studies identified the majority of individuals who enter social work, do so due to values and desires to right injustices as opposed to motivations such as pay or prestige (Borenzweig, 1981; Seiz & Schwab, 1992). Similarly, a study that compared shifting attitudes in social work between 1960 and 1980, found that social workers in the 1980s were more likely to attribute poverty to structural causes, but chose work in direct care. Meanwhile, social workers in the 1960s were more likely to attribute poverty to individualistic causes; however, they were significantly more involved in advocacy and political organization (Reeser & Epstein, 1999). This suggests that a social worker's area of practice is not necessarily indicative of social justice commitment. It also suggests that the socio-political culture of the period has historically impacted social workers' level of activism.

**Common themes in defining social justice in social work.** Most social workers acknowledge the importance of having a combination of skills to enhance individual ability to function within in a society where systemic injustice is present, while also having the skills to intervene at the policy level to affect more socially just policies (Shdaimah & McCoyd, 2012).

However, the literature on how clinical social workers understand and engage in social justice is limited. The following themes were representative of the literature on social workers beliefs, attitudes, and conceptualization of social justice.

***Uncertainty, lack of confidence, ambiguity.*** A common theme in the literature was ambiguity and lack of confidence. In a number of studies, clinical social workers were tentative and or hesitant in discussing their thoughts about social justice. Social workers in these studies also expressed a lack of confidence in discussing social justice content (McLaughlin, 2009; Morgaine, 2014). For example, Longres and Scanlon found that social workers “struggle to articulate a clear definition of social justice” and how it is expressed in direct practice without “ambivalence or ambiguity” (2001). Similarly, the literature suggested social workers struggle with consensus in defining social justice. For example, some social workers associate social justice with only structural level change, while others propose social justice is needed along a continuum. The literature suggests that a clearer definition of social justice is necessary in order for social workers to more effectively conceptualize what social justice looks like in their work (Bonnycastle, 2011).

***Utopian concept.*** In a number of studies, social workers identified social justice as a utopian concept. For example, a study of social work students in China found that students did not believe social justice was achievable (Liang & Lam, 2015). In another study, social justice was identified as a “fantasy” (Morgaine, 2014). A number of studies also suggested some social workers experience apathy regarding the possibility of a socially just society (Han & Chow, 2010; Hancock, Waites & Kledaras, 2012). This raises the question: can social workers meet the profession’s goals without belief that social justice is possible? However, social workers, who perceived social justice as definable goals along a continuum, were less likely to experience

professional ineffectiveness when it comes to the profession's social justice mission (Bonnycastle, 2011). This is increasingly important given the organizational barriers social workers face, combined with increasing social disparities.

***Value, principle or goal.*** Social justice is commonly conceptualized as a value or principle. It was least often referred to as a goal (McLaughlin, 2006; Morgaine, 2014). In some studies, social workers described advancing social justice through principles or values such as “dignity and worth of the person.” Human dignity was also discussed as “transformative respect” in regards to advancing social justice. For example, Morgaine found that social workers believe “social justice occurs through transformative respect or acts of compassion, conveyed through enacting the social work values (1) respect for the individual; (2) self-determination; and, (3) commitment to equality.”

***Access to resources.*** Social justice was also defined from the perspective of helping people access resources such as food, clothing and shelter. Resources were not just material but, also extended to opportunities and human rights. For example, a survey of 191 social workers found social justice in direct practice was most commonly reported using the following terms: access to resources, equality, human dignity and empowerment (O'Brien, 2010).

***Advocacy.*** In a number of studies that addressed how social workers incorporated social justice within their practice, advocacy was identified as the most commonly used strategy (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Mitchell & Lynch, 2003; Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006). Advocacy was defined as taking action to defend the rights and interests of the client to prevent injustice. It was also defined as helping clients gain the skills to advocate for themselves and to have access to the resources necessary to promote independence (McLaughlin, 2009).

While social workers endorsed advocacy as the dominant social justice strategy, some studies indicated the amount of time dedicated to advocacy is minimal. For example, in a study that assessed the number of clinical social workers who engaged in advocacy within their job, 90 percent of the sample reported advocacy involvement; however, the time spent in advocacy activities was typically less than five hours a week (McLaughlin, 2009). In a similar study, when asked to rank order the most commonly performed occupational tasks, direct practice social workers ranked advocacy last (Nelson, 1999). Since social workers associate advocacy with social justice, it is clear that greater understanding is necessary of how social workers understand advocacy for social justice.

***Policy.*** If beliefs predict behavior, one would expect greater interest in macro practice amongst social workers; however, the literature on this topic fails to find a significant connection between social workers' beliefs about the causes of poverty and interest in social reform practices (Haynes, 1998). A study conducted at a University in Israel assessed the relationship between social work students' attitudes toward poverty, beliefs about the profession's goals, and interest in policy practice, and found no connection between students' preferred response to poverty and interest in policy matters. In other words, while most students strongly endorsed structural causes and responses to poverty, this had little impact on their level of interest to engage in policy (Weiss, 2003).

A common theme in the literature was the association between social justice, policy reform, and feelings of discomfort. Some studies noted social workers reported discomfort with the political nature of social justice (Longres & Scanlon, 2001). Social workers also indicated feelings of frustration associated with injustices upheld at the very institutions they work for (Morgaine, 2014). Time was also identified as a barrier. In one study, social workers reported

the time and effort required for large scale change can often lead to feelings of frustration and defeat (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001).

Fear was also a common theme associated with policy reform. In a study by McLaughlin, social workers endorsed beliefs that advocating for certain social justice issues could cost them their position with an agency (2009). Finally, it was not uncommon for social workers to endorse feeling “overwhelmed” or “burned-out” in regards to the structural nature of social justice (Fisher, Weedman, Alex, & Stout, 2001). These studies suggest that social workers face a number of barriers in upholding the dual mission to service and reform. In light of the complexities clinical social workers face in advancing social justice, this study aimed to address the gap in the literature on how training impacts social justice practice behaviors.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Social justice is subject to varying perspectives based on personal, educational and professional experience; therefore, it is important to understand the conceptual framework - or lens - social justice researchers use to guide the research process. The conceptual framework for this study is critical theory – also known as emancipatory theory. Critical theory attributes individual problems to political, economic and social injustice (or structural causes), not individual failures. Unlike traditional theory which seeks to understand and explain phenomenon according to proposed scientific laws, or facts, critical social theory aims to challenge the status quo to inspire social action and to right unjust conditions. Critical social theory rejects traditional theory’s notion of objective knowledge or scientific fact; rather, it proposes human ways of knowing are embedded in subjectivity due to personal, historical, social, institutional and political values, interests and influences. (Take for example the history of the DSM and homosexuality as a disorder). In taking this stance, critical social theory seeks to evaluate widely held socially dominant ways of knowing to transform structures of oppression, power and inequality. This framework suggests that institutions have investments in maintaining the status quo and can have a powerful influence over science, media, and cultural ways of knowing – therefore critical critique and social action are necessary elements in human liberation and social justice (Forte, 2007).

Communication and language are central to critical theory. Critical theory views society as composed of two groups, those with privilege and those without. Privileged members use language to dominate public knowledge and use power to silence dissent (via media etc.). It is believed that those who are the poorest, most vulnerable and oppressed are “ignored and misunderstood. Clients often adopt the perspectives (words, explanations, opinions, judgments,

and assumptions) of the privileged and come to engage in self-talk characterized by self-blame, acceptance of the present state, and passive resignation to their exclusion from the conversations that matter” (Forte, 2007, p. 506).

According to critical theory, the role of the social worker is that of social critic. “The social work critic engages in acts of evaluation about the systematic distortions that render public deliberations undemocratic. The critic poses alternatives and correctives to his or her audience with the desire of transforming undesirable speech situations into inclusive, fair, cooperative public debate. The social work critic hopes to increase audience members’ self- and public awareness, sense of citizenship, and devotion to communal aid” (Forte, 2007, p. 507).

## **Methods**

This review of the literature examined the impact of social work education on social justice practice behaviors by analyzing quantitative ( $n = 12$ ), qualitative ( $n = 4$ ), and mixed-methods ( $n = 2$ ) studies. An examination of the extant literature on social work and social justice identified a lack of consensus in the effectiveness of social workers in promoting social justice. Therefore, this review was undertaken to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this topic. Relevant studies were screened for quality based on explicit search strategies and inclusion criteria with the goal of minimizing bias and fostering a transparent study design. In this review, “interventions” were conceptualized as learning processes that contribute to change in knowledge, skill, and behavior (CSWE, 2015). This review was operationalized from an intervention framework, in order to understand the impact of education and the changes in social justice practice behaviors. Also, a thematic analysis of qualitative studies was conducted to understand how social work students and educators understand social justice and how conceptualization of the topic translates to practice behaviors.

### **Search Strategy**

A three-part search strategy was utilized in this review and conducted on February 7, 2016 through March 21, 2016. The initial search was conducted using the search terms ‘social work education’ AND ‘social justice’ AND ‘competency’ AND ‘evaluation’ in two databases: Academic Premier and Social Work Abstracts. Only online full-text articles in peer-reviewed journals were considered. The preliminary search identified over 5000 articles that contained the search terms in the title, abstract, and index terms used to describe the article. However, the majority of these articles were not studies. The secondary search terms included: ‘social work’ AND, ‘social justice’ AND ‘social action’ AND/OR ‘civic engagement’ AND ‘learning



outcomes.’ Titles and abstracts of articles that appeared to meet criteria were reviewed. Finally, reference lists of these articles were scanned for additional relevant studies. Of the 50 studies identified in the search process, 21 were reviewed for inclusion in the final review.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

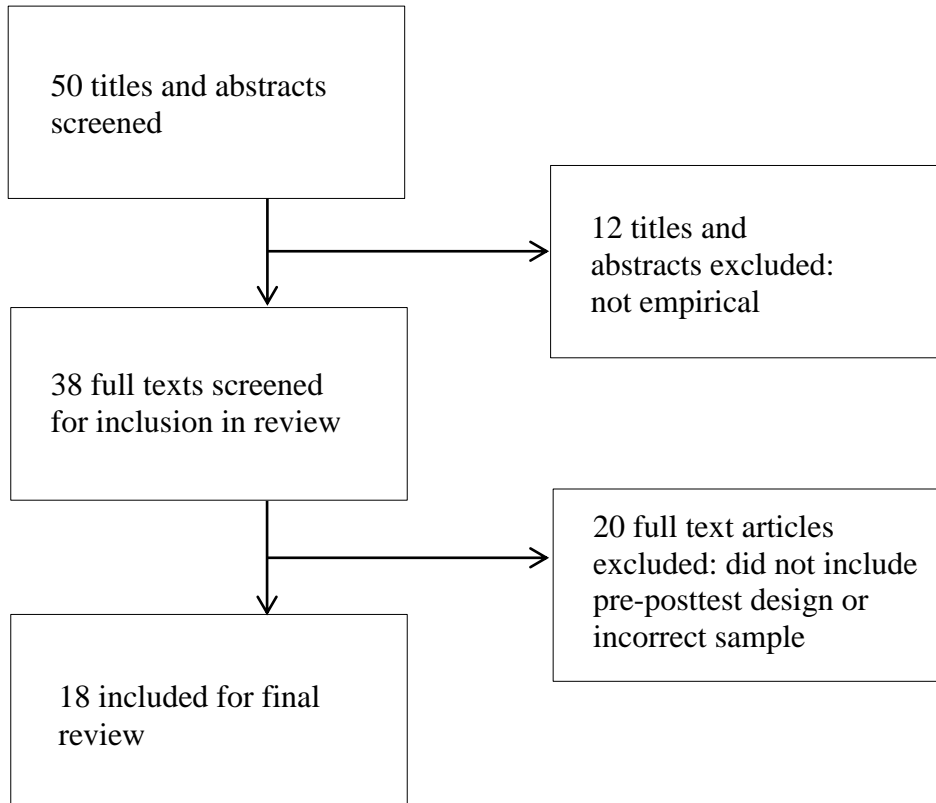
To understand the effectiveness of learning as an intervention, initially, only studies with pre and posttest designs were considered for this review. However, due to the paucity of pre-posttest designs on social work education and social justice practice behaviors, secondary inclusion criteria were extended to cross-sectional, and mixed-methods research designs. Quantitative studies were included if they: examined the impact of social work training on social justice beliefs, attitudes, and or behaviors. Due to the wide range of terms, and overlapping nature of social justice concepts, studies that examined views on poverty and oppression were included. Studies that examined diversity and policy preferences were excluded if they did not explicitly reference social justice as these practice competencies are linked to CWSE Competency 2: “Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice” and Competency 5: “Engage in Policy Practice.” Inclusion criteria for qualitative studies required: 1) examination of perceptions, beliefs or attitudes of social work students and educators on the topic of social justice or the use of social justice terminology; 2) examination of how social work students and/or educators define or conceptualize social justice; and, 3) examination of studies that reported on the social justice content in course syllabi.

### **Study Selection**

Relevant titles and abstracts were entered into a review spreadsheet and screened for appropriateness based on the Preferred Reporting of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMS) guidelines. Studies that did not meet inclusion criteria were excluded and noted with

reason for exclusion. The researcher reviewed the full-text of the remaining studies. See figure 1. for a flowchart of the study selection process.

*Figure 1.* Study Selection Flow Chart



### **Data Extraction and Analysis**

Once studies were identified for inclusion in the study, data was extracted into an analysis spreadsheet to summarize emergent themes and pertinent study characteristics such as: author, research design, location, population, sample, duration of study, intervention components, method of assessment, target social justice practice behavior, and outcomes. Studies were assessed for quality of evidence based a modified version of the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) rating scale. The quality rating criteria for this review are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

*Criteria for Assessment of Quantitative Study Quality*

<b>Quality Assessment Table</b>			
<b>Scoring factors</b>	<b>1 (Low)</b>	<b>2 (Moderate)</b>	<b>3 (High)</b>
Study design	Case Study or qualitative data only	Pre/Post Testing	Longitudinal with Pre/Post Testing
Outcome measure	Subjective Measure: reflections, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, program evaluation	N/A	Objective Measure: standardized test, assignment, gains in skill development
Evaluators involved in assessment	Student (self-reports)	student+educator and / or field supervisor	student+educator+field supervisor +service user
Note: Factors for consideration of upgrading were: Use of comparison group (+1). Factors for consideration of downgrading: Reported limitations: risk of bias, incomplete reporting of outcomes or lack of precision (-1). Rating Key: High ≥ 9, Moderate = 6 -8, Poor = 3-5			

Table 1 identifies the method for grading evidence quality. Studies were scored on a nine-point scale in four areas that commonly impact study quality and risk for bias such as study design, direct versus indirect method of outcome measure, and the number of evaluators involved in assessing social justice competency. Factors for upgrading or downgrading a study were also taken into consideration. For example, if a study used a comparison group, one point was added to the total of the score grade. If a study reported critical errors or incomplete reporting of outcomes 1 point was detracted from the total score grade. The quality ratings of studies included in this review are reported in the following section. Qualitative studies for inclusion in this review were not graded; however, they were assessed for inclusion based on specific criteria identified in the search strategy.

## **Results**

Based on the search strategy, 12 quantitative, four qualitative, and two mixed-methods studies met eligibility for inclusion in this review. All studies were published in English in a peer-reviewed journal between 1996 and 2015. See Table 3 for a full summary of study characteristics. The following section will analyze and synthesize the data collected in this review.

### **Assessment of Studies**

Studies were assigned to a quantitative or qualitative category to be assessed and assigned a quality rating score based on the criteria for assessment of study quality criteria in Table 1. The resulting appraisal of study quality is shown in Table 2 on the following page.

Table 2

*Appraisal of Study Quality*

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Study Design</b>	<b>Outcome Measures</b>	<b>Evaluator</b>	<b>Quality</b>
Bell et al. (2015)	Qualitative, Pre/Post (1)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 3/12
Dudziak et al. (2012)	Qualitative, Case Study (1)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 3/12
Fisher et al. (2001)	Cross-Sectional (1)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 3/12
Funge (2011)	Qualitative	N/A	N/A	N/A
Gasker et al. (2003)	Pre/Post (2)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 4/12
Han et al. (2010)	Pre/Post (2)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 4/12
Hancock et al. (2012)	Cross Sectional (1)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 3/12
Hawkins et al. (2001)	Qualitative (1)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 3/12
Hong et al. (2009)	Qualitative	N/A	N/A	N/A
Limb et al. (2006)	Pre/Post (2)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 4/12
Longress et al. (2001)	Qualitative	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mizrahi et al. (2013)	Pre/Post Test (2)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 4/12
Twill et al. (2013)	Cross-sectional (1)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 3/12
Van Hoorhis et al. (2006)	Pre/Post Test (2)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 4/12
Van Soest et al. (1996)	Q-E, Pre/Post Test (3)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 5/12
Vincent (2012)	Qualitative	N/A	N/A	N/A
Weaver et al. (2011)	Pre/Post Test (2)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 4/12
Weiss et al. (2003)	Pre/Post Test (2)	Indirect (1)	Student (1)	Low 4/12

*Note:* Q-E = quasi-experimental. The numbers in parenthesis denote scores which were totaled and average for a sum total rating.

According to the quality criteria for this review, all studies scored a low-quality grade. A “low quality” evidence score denotes that the effect of the intervention (impact of social work education) on social justice behaviors remains unclear. A “moderate quality” evidence score denotes that evidence supports the effect of the intervention; however, further research is required to generalize the results. Finally, a “high-quality” score indicates significant evidence that the outcome was affected by the intervention. In other words, the evidence supports that social work education results in social justice practice behaviors.

It should be noted that these types of results in assessing studies on the impact of education are not unique to social work. According to higher education research, assessing competency-based education models is problematic in that there are many complicating factors involved in designing studies and instruments that measure how knowledge translates to behavior (Calderon, 2013). Studies on social justice competency are further complicated due to the lack of valid and reliable measures and lack of operationalized indicators of social justice practice behaviors across the micro/macro continuum (Gambrill, 2014). This will be discussed further in the results of this review.

### **Analysis of Studies**

**Description of study population.** Fourteen studies were conducted in the United States; two studies were conducted in Australia, one in Canada and one in Israel. Although most US studies cited CSWE's EPAS social justice competency, only three identified they were conducted within a CSWE accredited school of social work. The majority of participants in the quantitative portion of this review were MSW students. Six studies examined MSW students; two examined BSW; three examined both MSW and BSW, and three specified "social work student." The qualitative studies in this review included social work educators and analyses of social justice content in social work curriculum.

**Intervention.** As stated earlier, the intervention examined in the quantitative portion of this review is social work education. Social work education was selected as the "intervention" of focus for this review due to social work education's social justice goals. Also, there was limited research on this topic outside the realm of education. The primary modes of "intervention" varied regarding duration, setting, and design. The majority of studies in this review examined the impact of social work education as a whole. More specifically, ten studies examined the

effect of social work education from entry to graduation by collecting pre and posttest program data (e.g., Han, 2009). Only one study in this review retroactively examined the effect of a political concentration program (Fisher et al., 2001). While these studies provided the highest quality of data, they were also limited in that they only addressed certain themes, or outcomes, commonly associated with social justice (e.g., poverty attitudes) versus a systematic understanding of how students' social justice learning outcomes changed from entry to graduation.

The remaining studies in this review examined the effect of a particular course or curriculum design (e.g., Bell, Moorhead, & Boetto, 2015). For example, one study examined the effect of a study abroad course (Bell et al., 2015), one examined the effect of an 'Organizing for Action with Diverse Groups' course (Dudziak & Profitt, 2011), one examined the effect of an introduction to poverty and social welfare course (Gasker & Vafeas, 2003), one examined the effect of a "societal oppression and cultural diversity" course and two studies examined the impact of research courses on students' social justice competency (Longres & Scanlon, 2001; Vincent, 2012). Although field education is a defining pedagogy of social work education, no studies that included evaluation from field training met inclusion criteria for this review.

**Outcome measures and competency.** In large part, the studies in this review failed to identify specific practice behaviors, or indicators, for what it might look like to competently engage in practice that advances social, economic and environmental justice. With regards to environmental justice, no evaluative studies were found. Rather, competency was most often correlated with endorsement of beliefs, values, and attitudes that align with the mission of social work – or indirect methods of assessment. Indirect methods assess subjective measures such as attitudes, beliefs or perceptions of knowledge or skill attained as opposed to direct methods

which purportedly measures gains in knowledge, skill, or practice behavior (Calderon, 2013).

Reports of self-efficacy and program evaluation were also common measures. Though ideal, no studies in this review included service users in the evaluation of student practice behaviors. See Table 3 for a full summary of instruments utilized in this review.



Table 3  
*Summary of Study Characteristics*

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Dudziak & Profitt, 2012	US, 180 BSW students	Qualitative case Study, posttest only	Data from 4 yrs.	Organizing for Action with Diverse Groups Course	Qualitative data: students reflections at posttest	Social justice social action	Reinforced importance of required social action educational opportunities, group work, challenging factors that impede political involvement, & community engagement
Fisher, Weedman, Alex & Stout, 2001	US, 131 MSW students	Quantitative & Qualitative 3 cross-sectional surveys	Length of program entry to grad.	Political social work program concentration	Survey – satisfaction with 7 aspects of program	Policy used interchangeably with social justice	57% participated in collaborative activities, 48% in lobbying, 24% in campaigning, 28% as “persuaders” and 28% in activism. Participation in a professional organization endorsed as social change effort.
Funge, 2011	US, 13 educators at 3 accredited schools	Qualitative semi-structured interviews, content analysis	N/A	Research curriculum	Semi-structured interviews	Research curriculum and social justice	N=9 not possible to ensure students are oriented to social justice. N=4 felt it was the responsibility of the educator to cultivate social justice orientation. Institutional barriers: workload, lack of opportunities to discuss social justice teaching strategies. Lack of operational definition of social justice
Gasker & Vafeas, 2003	US, 95 BSW students	Pre-posttest	1 semester, data from 4 semesters	Intro to Poverty and Social Welfare Course	Attitudes about poverty	Economic justice and social change (poverty)	Social work majors began with largely structural views on poverty and increased by end of course. Students did not lose optimism about social change—a concern indicated by other researchers—instead optimism increased
Han & Chow, 2010	US, 1424 MSW students	Pre-posttest Longitudinal Study, Secondary Analysis,	Length of program entry to grad.	MSW education as a whole	Student rating of involvement in 11 social action activities	Social Action	Significant change from entry to grad in views of social work mission. Contribution to society was highest score for primary pursuit of MSW degree. Negative scores implied some students experience hopelessness associated with social justice. 2/3rds reported no participation in any social action.

Table 3 (continued)  
*Summary of Study Characteristics*

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Hancock et al., 2012	US 44 MSW 105 BSW. 3 CSWE schools	Cross sectional	Length of program entry to grad.	Social Work Education	Orientation to oppression & oppressed populations survey	Willingness to act as an advocate for oppressed groups	26% of MSWs recognized structural nature of oppression but felt unable/willing to affect it. Nearly 1/4 of all students believed, treating everyone the same in individual encounters was effective to combat oppression.
Hawkins et al., 2001	Australia, 30 social workers	Qualitative longitudinal study (5yrs) - thematic and content analysis	Length of program entry to grad.	Social Work Education	Grounded Theory	Thematic content analysis of social justice language	Social justice term rarely used. Use of language demonstrates awareness of social environmental factors; however, predominant use of language implies inconsistencies & ambivalence toward social action.
Hong & Hodge, 2009	US 114 MSW	Qualitative content analysis	Curriculum design	31 syllabi, 26 different programs	Textual analysis of MSW syllabi	Thematic analysis social justice	Lack of social justice terminology clearly outlined in course syllabi.
Limb & Organista, 2006	US, 6987 MSW students at entry and 3451 at grad	Secondary analysis of data from CalSWEC	Length of program entry to grad.	Social Work Education	Survey assessed 6 professional areas & social action activities	participation in social action activities	Suggests training may negatively impact desire to work with poor and disadvantaged populations. Something happens during graduate school that makes working in areas long associated with social work's traditional mission (e.g. child welfare) less appealing.
Longres & Scanlon, 2001	US, 12 educators & course syllabi	Qualitative interviews & text analysis	Research curriculum	Research courses	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis social justice	Social justice was defined broadly, no specific topics, theories, or methods more relevant to justice than others. Social justice was not systematically discussed in classes, syllabi, and textbooks.
Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013	US, 327 MSW at entry, 160 at grad.	Pre-posttest, survey descriptive study	Length of program entry to grad.	Self-Report attitudes, behaviors and motivations	Semi-structured interviews	Social activism	Significant change in self-reported commitment to social justice activities from entry to graduation.

Table 3 (continued)  
*Summary of Study Characteristics*

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
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Twill & Lowe, 2014	BSW	Survey cross-sectional	Length of program entry to grad.	BSW education	Hatcher's civic minded scale	Civic minded scale	Faculty & field educators more civic-minded than new grads and other practitioners. New graduates who had participated in implicit curriculum were more civic-minded. No significant differences between students in based on number of community courses
Van Soest, 1996	US, 222 MSWs from 2 different universities	quasi-experimental Pre-posttest	1 semester	Societal Oppression and Cultural Diversity course	Belief in just world scale	commitment to social justice advocacy	Statistically significant increase in self-reported advocacy behaviors. Belief in a just world increased after taking an oppression course that demonstrated contradictions to just world belief. Barrier to teaching oppression discussed
Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006	52 MSW students	Survey, Pre-posttest	Length of program entry to grad.	Graduate education	4 instruments perceptions re: empowerment,	Empowerment and social justice advocacy	Over course of graduate education, significant positive change occurred in both aspects of empowerment, and social worker empowerment - positive association with client empowerment.
Vincent, 2012	US, 45 educators, nation sample	quantitative & qualitative exploratory cross-sectional survey	research curriculum	Research courses	The social justice research curriculum survey	How do research faculty conceptualize social justice?	Majority of faculty cited no theories in presenting their conceptualization of social justice. Some expressed reservations about the relevance and distortive nature of social justice as it pertains to social work research.
Weaver & Yun, 2011	Canada, 166 BSW students	Pre-posttest	Length of program - entry to grad.	BSW education	Attitudes toward poverty and poor people scale (perceptions)	Poverty views	Suggests social work education played a role in the participants exhibiting a more structural attitude toward poverty and impoverished persons.

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**Beliefs and Attitudes.** Beliefs and attitudes are common measures utilized in social work education. Some research suggests that beliefs and attitudes predict behavior. However, the studies in this review indicate that beliefs and attitudes are not reliable predictors of engagement in social justice practice behaviors. For example, Hancock and colleagues found that over 25% of MSW students at an accredited school of social work, recognized the structural nature of oppression; yet, felt unwilling or unable to affect it (2012). Similarly, Han and Chow found that although MSW students endorsed beliefs and attitudes congruent with social justice goals, two-thirds of the respondents reported no participation in any social action activity (2010). In their study, Limb and Organista compared entry and graduation pre and post-test scores, and found a negative correlation between social work education and students' desire and commitment to work with some of the poorest and most vulnerable populations. These studies could suggest that social work education fails to instill social justice competency. However, it could also be argued that the measures used in these studies are incompatible with the correlations being drawn.

Other studies support the role of education in fostering social justice behaviors. In a study that examined civic-mindedness among a sample of social work educators, social workers in the community and new BSW graduates – faculty and social workers who supervised students in field placements, were more civic-minded than new grads. Practicing social workers were the least civic-minded of the sample (Twill & Lowe, 2014). While the factors that contribute to these findings require further research, there is an interesting connection between one's connection to education and greater commitment to civic engagement. Unlike the previous studies, these researchers suggest that education plays a significant role in social justice behaviors.

**Self-efficacy.** Although there is a significant amount of literature that states self-efficacy is a reliable predictor of actual competency, the one study in this review on self-efficacy did not find it to be a valid indicator of actual competency or mastery of practice behaviors. For example, Vitale found that, “social work students’ self-ratings of skills and self-efficacy were not significantly correlated with field instructors’ evaluations of the students’ performance” (Fortune, Lee, & Cavazos, 2005) also see (Vitale, 2011) and (Douglass, Thomson, & Zhao 2012).

**Efficacy of intervention.** The effectiveness of interventions varied greatly in this review. Studies with a qualitative component captured a greater understanding of social justice outcomes, with fewer negative correlations, and significantly more efficacious outcomes. For example, a study that examined the effect of a short-term study abroad course in India with reflective faculty-led workshops found a significant change in students' ability to define social justice. Pretest data of students’ definitions of social justice were vague and commonly associated with fairness, equality, and access to resources. Post-test data indicated students had gained a more nuanced and holistic understanding of social justice. Students’ definition of social justice in the post-test data reflected themes of civic engagement, community empowerment, environmental justice, and solidarity. Ambiguity was replaced with confidence and enthusiasm for social action and community engagement.

In their study, Dudziak and Profitt reported similar results from four years of qualitative data from an Organizing for Action Course with Diverse Groups (2012). This case study emphasized the history of social movements, group work, challenging common impediments to political involvement, and skill development in social action and community engagement. Although only post-test data was collected, students reported a transformative learning

experience. Similar to the study abroad course, student reflections indicated the course had transformed not only their commitment, but ability to define social justice on a meaningful personal level.

Transformative learning experiences were also emphasized in a study that examined the impact of an “introduction to poverty and social welfare course” (Gasker & Vafeas, 2003). The goal was to reinforce the nature of the structural causes of poverty (orient students to professional values) while combatting hopelessness or fatalistic attitudes toward poverty as indicated in the studies discussed earlier. Learning interventions included exploring the history of poverty, oppressive institutions, and their effects, and social work methods to “prevent, alleviate, and resolve poverty” (Gasker & Vafeas, 2003). Person-in-environment framework, group work, and democratic class atmosphere in which students were encouraged to share alternative perspectives – were all cited as crucial learning interventions. When compared to students who took a typical policy course, the students in this study did not develop fatalistic attitudes about social change. However, not all learning interventions resulted in such transformations.

In a study that examined the impact of an “oppression and diversity” course on 222 MSW students, “belief that the world is just” increased after taking the course – despite emphasis on content designed to illustrate injustices (Van Soest, 1996). Belief in a just world is commonly correlated with lower levels of social action; therefore, it would appear this intervention had opposite impact intended. These findings may suggest that the environment or method in which students are engaged has a greater impact than content alone and that further research is needed.

**Social work educators.** All studies in this review that examined the role of the educator found that that social work educators in large agree that social justice is an important component

of education; yet, there is considerable variance in understanding of the concept, preferred teaching methods and belief in their ability to impact students' social justice orientation (Longres & Scanlon, 2001; Vincent, 2012). In a study that explored how 13 social work educators at a CSWE accredited school understood social justice and perceived their responsibility to impact students' social justice perspective, the findings reflected contrasting opinions. Four educators stated it was their responsibility as social work educators to cultivate a social justice orientation in their students. Meanwhile, nine educators indicated beliefs that "this was neither an achievable nor a desirable, objective of social work education" (Funge, 2011). A study that examined the views of twelve social work research instructors reflected a similar debate. While most faculty expressed commitment to social justice some members indicated difficulty associating social justice with their work. For example, one interviewee in the study stated, "I don't connect [justice] to my work...I think of social justice as politics, and my work isn't that...I do research" (Longres & Scanlon, 2001; p. 453). Another interviewee had an opposite perspective, identifying that social justice in social work research is imperative – citing historical examples in which research violated human rights.

**Educational barriers.** In the literature, politics was a recurrent theme that often divided educators – or was a source of discomfort in the classroom. As indicated in the interviewee's quote above, there is a range of understanding, comfort and desire to engage in social justice content in the classroom.

Another theme that emerged in the research was barriers educators face in teaching social justice. Workloads, lack of opportunity to collaborate about social justice teaching strategies, and students responses to social justice content were all reported as institutional barriers to implementing social justice curriculum. The most recurrent barrier that emerged in nearly all of

the literature – is the vague definition of social justice – and the impact this has on social work programs’ ability to effectively address social justice educational policy. For example, in a study conducted by Funge, more than half the interviewees questioned, “how closely CSWE-accredited social work education programs adhere to the social justice standard” – due to the difficulty operationalizing social justice (2011, p. 84). One interviewee in this study stated, “I can’t even tell you what a socially just society would look like, but I can tell you what a functioning client could look like” (Funge, 2011, p. 84). This highlights the need for language and conversation that promote greater clarity surrounding social justice content.

### **Analysis of MSW Learning Outcome Assessments**

To gain a better understanding of how social justice competency translates into real world practice behaviors, 55 of the 261 accredited master’s level social work degree programs were reviewed. Outcome reports in this study were selected based on an alphabetical listing on the CSWE website. Seventy-three CSWE schools of social work’s websites were searched for posted learning outcome reports; however, reports for 18 of the programs were not easily located. Of the 55 learning outcome reports reviewed only six programs indicated students did not meet benchmarks for social justice competency. This suggests the overwhelming majority of MSW students at accredited schools of social work; demonstrate mastery in social justice practice behaviors.

**Clinical versus macro concentration competencies.** Programs with clinical and macro practice concentrations reported clinical social works students were equally competent when compared to their peers in macro practice concentrations. In fact, two schools of social work with clinical and macro practice concentrations reported students in the clinical concentration achieved competency benchmarks while students in the macro concentration did not.



**Social justice measures.** Twenty-seven learning outcome reports did not report the measures used to assess social justice competency. Six reports identified only one measure, therefore, it is unclear if these programs adhered to the assessment standards or simply did not list the second measure on the report. One report utilized a retroactive online questionnaire to assess self-reported endorsement of social justice practice behaviors. One report measured scores from three policy course assignments. The remaining reports endorsed a combination of assessments such as grades, field evaluations, and self-efficacy measures.

**Social justice benchmarks.** Benchmarks of social justice reported in the 55 learning outcome reports varied widely. For the 27 reports that did not report measures, it was not possible to interpret the relevance of the benchmark – or how the program conceptualized the assessment of social justice. Programs utilized both mean scores and percentages. Benchmark percentages ranged from 75% to 90%. In other words some programs aimed for 75 percent of students to demonstrate social justice competency, while others aimed for 90 percent.

## Discussion

This review examined the impact of social work education on social justice practice behaviors by analyzing 55 learning outcome reports and 18 learning intervention studies. In this review, “interventions” were conceptualized as social work training or learning opportunities. This review supports the impact of education on social justice behaviors; yet, the direct cause and effect relationship of learning interventions on social justice behaviors was unclear. Analysis of the data in this study revealed that learning environment, use of small group discussions, and instructor-led reflections that promoted sharing of alternate beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of social justice content promoted increased interest and confidence associated with social action.

This review found the most significant challenge in understanding clinical social work education’s impact on students’ social justice behaviors is the difficulty operationalizing social justice practice behaviors, lack of consensus in the use of social justice terminology in reporting outcomes, and lack of specific instruments to effectively measure social justice practice behaviors. This challenge was particularly evident in the analysis of learning outcomes. Since programs used various terminology to define similar concepts, instruments or measures, it was difficult to compare effectiveness across programs. Program’s ability to define benchmarks was also a challenge in comparing programs, and raised a number of questions. For example, if all social workers are required to advance social justice, is it effective for some programs to set a goal of 70% of students achieving social justice competency, while others set goals for 90%? What are the factors that contribute to variations in benchmarks for social justice? Is setting a benchmark of “satisfactory” doing a disservice to the promotion of social justice? What is the

risk associated with employing self-reports as a measure of social justice? These are all questions that require further thought.

According to this review, the four main measures used to measure social justice practice behaviors were: self-efficacy instruments, self-report surveys, assignment grades and field evaluation. It is unclear if programs developed their instruments or utilized measures that have been tested for validity and reliability. According to the literature, few instruments have been designed to assess social justice competency. Rather the most common instruments are self-reports aimed at assessing beliefs and attitudes about poverty, diversity, oppression. The research on the use of self-efficacy instruments varies – some research proposes it is a reliable predictor of practice behaviors in social work– yet, a significant number of studies have found that self-efficacy does not predict actual practice behaviors. Therefore, it is important for training programs to consider the risks and benefits, especially when measuring social justice practice behaviors, given the challenges indicated above.

Field evaluation is a common method of assessing social justice competency; however, the data analyzed in this review failed to identify explicit identifiers for how social justice competency is assessed by field supervisors. Typical methods involve the creation of a learning agreement; however, no research was identified that explored the effectiveness of social justice learning plan goals. Methods of social justice competency assessment in field evaluation have not been explicitly explored or defined in the research or learning outcome reports.

### **Strengths and Limitations.**

**Strengths.** Despite the exploratory nature of this review, two strengths are present. First, given the significant amount of critical literature regarding clinical social work's commitment to social justice, this review attempted to systematically explore the empirical

literature on the impact of social work training in preparing social workers for competent social justice practice. The goal was to provide a more empirically-based comprehensive understanding of the strengths and challenges in order to offer implications for education, practice and future research. Second, prior analysis of social justice competencies from learning outcome reports could not be found in the literature; therefore, this research may be the first of its kind. This is significant, because the research offers insights into the strengths and challenges of assessing social justice practice competencies. Also, analysis of social justice competencies highlights the commitment of social work training to social justice; however, it also illuminates the challenges inherent in assessing education and social justice.

**Limitations.** Four limitations are present in this review. First, despite CSWE's competency standards, there is a lack of valid and reliable instruments for measuring social justice practice behaviors in training. As a result, the selection of studies for this review was limited and had a high bias factor. Second, no studies in this review addressed all four dimensions of social justice competency: human rights, social justice, economic justice and environmental justice; rather, the majority of studies focused on assessing only one component of social justice such as diversity, political involvement, views on oppression or poverty attitudes. A third limitation of this research is the difficulty in operationalizing social justice. In other words, the varied terminology associated with social justice may have impacted the search strategy. Given the overlap between studies on social justice, and diversity, multicultural competence, civic engagement and political engagement, it is possible pertinent studies may have been excluded from the search. Finally, due to the design and sampling methods of studies in this review, the results cannot be generalized. Similarly, only 55 of the 261 possible learning outcomes assessments were reviewed.

## **Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this review offer three implications for future research. Social work training programs could benefit from more rigorous research in the development of valid and reliable instruments for assessing social justice practice behaviors. Similarly, more detailed reporting standards for learning outcome assessments could benefit future researchers interested in studying aspects of social work training that contribute to competency. More specifically, learning outcome reports that offered greater transparency and detail were easier to interpret and included more meaningful data - which researchers could use to build upon findings or measures that are particularly useful for social justice education outcomes. This is significant given the paucity of studies in this area.

Also, future research should explore including citizens or service users in evaluating students' social justice competency. Social workers in large are demographically homogeneous and representative of a privileged group; therefore, it is important to consider if we are upholding oppressive structures by utilizing self-reports as a measure of social justice competency.

Finally, further research should examine the “professional hopelessness” or feelings of apathy that are not uncommon when engaging in social justice work. This is relevant because if social workers do not believe social justice is possible, this could impact the profession's ability to effectively advance social justice.

## **Implications for Social Work Practice**

This research offers two implications for social work education and social work practice. To enhance social justice practice behaviors, training should emphasize explicit conversations on social justice and offer opportunities for social justice action that includes political, civic, and creative engagement opportunities. The research suggests that extending opportunities beyond

the political arena may help garner involvement by individuals who endorse discomfort with political action and the conflictual nature it is often associated with (Vojak, 2009). Similarly, social change that solely focuses on policy reform may be limiting. For example, policy reform has a history of stemming from movements that originate in community, cultural and artistic movements. This allows individuals greater opportunity to gain social justice practice experience by breaking down barriers for participation.

Also, it is important for professionals to have common language and terminology, much like the DSM. Therefore, social justice education should strive to use common language in order to promote greater confidence. Finally education and training should prepare social workers with the skills to confront organizational barriers that may prevent them from upholding their professional duty to both service and reform when they enter the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

This review of the literature on clinical social work and social justice has identified a number of key issues. First and foremost, there is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of social justice and beliefs about how it should be incorporated into education and practice. As a result, there is scant research on social workers systematic understanding of social justice and their ability to advance it in practice. The research on social work education faces similar difficulties; as evidenced in the paucity of evaluative studies on the effectiveness of training programs in promoting social justice. Rather, the few studies that exist address a component of social justice, such as beliefs about diversity, multicultural competence, or poverty attitudes.

All social workers are called upon to advance social justice. Without a clear definition and understanding of what we are trying to achieve, it is difficult to identify a scientific and objective understanding of how effective our efforts are. Nevertheless, this review attempted to

capture a comprehensive understanding of how social justice is conceptualized in the profession, and the implication this has for educators, students and professionals. This review was also conducted from the perspective that social justice is necessary at all levels of practice, and furthering the divide amongst the profession is antithetical to the mission. With that said, the researcher sought to constructively analyze professional “ways of knowing” associated with assessing social justice competency and proposing future research to explore more inclusive and participatory ways of assessing social justice competency.

The ways people are attracted to engage in social action are as varied as the definitions of social justice in the literature. As a profession that embraces diversity, social workers must find ways to support one another in engaging in large and small, political and creative forms of social justice. This is necessary if we wish to maintain the hope necessary to fulfill our professional commitment.

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