

Evidence-Based Practice and the Reform of Social Work

Education: A Response to Gambrill and Howard and Allen-Meares

Jeffrey M. Jenson, Ph.D.

Bridge Professor of Children, Youth, and Families

Graduate School of Social Work

University of Denver

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### Abstract

In this report, I respond to papers by Gambrill and by Howard and Allen-Meares that call for significant pedagogical reforms in social work education based on principles of evidence-based practice (EBP). My remarks focus on the promise of EBP as an agent of broad-based reform in social work education and on the implementation of EBP principles in the social work curriculum. Additional recommendations regarding the application of EBP principles to educational reform and teaching are identified.

Interest in evidence-based practice (EBP) has grown exponentially in the medical and social sciences in the past decade. The growth of EBP is most apparent in medicine where it is recognized as a systemic process used to diagnose and treat medical problems (Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000). In recent years, EBP has also garnered the attention of multidisciplinary international teams interested in evaluating and disseminating empirical evidence about the efficacy of treatments for mental health disorders (Campbell Collaboration, [www.campbellcollaboration.org](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org); Cochrane Collaboration, [www.cochrane.org](http://www.cochrane.org)).

The promotion of EBP principles in social work can be attributed largely to individual scholars and small groups of researchers (e.g., Gambrill, 1999, 2003; Howard & Jenson, 1999; Proctor & Rosen, 2003). Efforts to date have been aimed at exposing social workers to definitions of EBP and to describing the process of applying EBP principles to practice and policy (e.g., Bilson, 2004; Gambrill, 2003, 2006a). Only a small number of studies have examined teaching strategies consistent with EBP or have discussed the potential of EBP as an agent of educational reform (Howard, Himle, Jenson, & Vaughn, in press; Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003; Woody, D'Souza, & Dartman, 2006).

The 2006 University of Texas at Austin symposium on Improving the Teaching of Evidence-Based Practice marks one of the first national efforts to examine EBP in the context of teaching and curriculum reform. In this paper, I respond to symposium reports authored by Gambrill (2006b) and Howard and Allen-Meares (2006). My remarks focus on two areas raised by the authors: 1) the promise of EBP as an agent of broad-based reform in social work education; and 2) the implementation of EBP principles in the social work curriculum. Additional recommendations regarding the application of EBP principles to educational reform and teaching are delineated.

#### EBP as an Agent of Educational Reform

Curriculum reform in social work education is a complicated endeavor characterized largely by incremental change. Curriculum discussions promoting modest changes in structure and content are a routine part of academic deliberations in most schools of social work. However, significant reforms that alter the nature of graduate education are seldom suggested or debated in professional symposia or conferences.

Gambrill and Howard and Allen-Meares present a number of well-articulated pedagogical reforms aimed at applying principles of EBP to social work education. Collectively, the authors' suggestions for reform provide a comprehensive examination of current weaknesses in social work graduate training and offer a template for significant curriculum reform. A discussion of these weaknesses and reforms follows.

#### *Transparency as a Guide to Educational Reform*

Transparency as a guiding principle in EBP practice and educational reform is emphasized by Gambrill and mentioned by Howard and Allen-Meares. Gambrill views transparency as the most important underlying principle of EBP. Further, she argues that transparency is critical to an entire conceptual model of practice identified as *evidence-informed practice*. Citing numerous examples of non-transparency in social work practice and education, she calls for a review of curriculum aka Flexner's analysis of the medical profession in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Flexner, 1910).

Importantly, Gambrill suggests that transparency also entails a broad professional responsibility. In this regard, she calls for efforts aimed at holding social work accountable for its present educational shortcomings. Howard and Allen-Meares reinforce this assertion by recommending that all graduate students be trained to inform clients about the available empirical evidence and practice options related to their presenting or diagnosed problem(s). In support of this idea, the authors recommend that MSW students be tested for practice competence at the end of their two years of study.

Values of transparency, accountability, and competency should resonate with faculty and students. For example, most faculty members would agree with a recommendation that graduate education include advanced training in ways to access empirical evidence about the etiology and treatment of common client problems and disorders. Further, most students would acknowledge the importance of transparency in relaying knowledge and delivering interventions to clients. Curriculum reform, however, will require more than a simple acknowledgement of the importance of transparency, accountability, and competency. As Gambrill and Howard and Allen-Meares imply, these fundamental principles should underlie any debates about broad education reform.

*The Scientist-Practitioner Model in MSW Research Training*

Howard and Allen-Meares argue that the time-honored practice of teaching research skills to MSW students is outdated and ineffective. Noting that very few students progress to doctoral training, they call for a reorganization of the MSW research sequence. In this reorganization, students would be taught principles of EBP through exposure to cases that require them to access information and make informed practice decisions. In short, students would be trained to be practitioners, not researchers.

The proposal by Howard and Allen-Meares deserves significant attention. The shortcomings of the scientist-practitioner model have been noted and discussed by several authors (e.g., Jenson, 2005; Kirk & Reid, 2002). My experience teaching MSW-level research courses – one that is likely very similar to other faculty members – reinforces Howard and Allen-Meares' assertion that we are indeed teaching research skills to students who may never conduct evaluation activities. While the tradition of teaching the scientist-practitioner model may be hard for some to abandon, a paradigm shift reinforcing EBP principles in research training is warranted.

*Specialty vs. Generalist Training*

Generalist training for practice has been a cornerstone of social work education for many years. Is generalist practice education outdated? Is generalist training incompatible with EBP principles? Howard and Allen-Meares raise, and then answer, these questions by suggesting that students would be best served by receiving advanced training in specialty areas as opposed to earning a generalist education. Importantly, they argue that student-practitioners must be informed of rapidly-changing advances in knowledge related to practice and suggest that EBP principles and teaching strategies offer a more effective approach to acquiring such knowledge.

In reality, graduate social work education appears to have become somewhat of a hybrid of generalist and specialized training. For example, many schools teach generalist principles in the foundation year and then offer tracks or emphases in the concentration year that expose students to a small number of courses in a substantive area (e.g., substance abuse, mental health, or child welfare, etc.). Perhaps students are receiving inadequate generalist and specialty training on both counts. It is time to move away from

generalist models and hybrid forms of training that provide only a small dose of specialized and generalist education to students.

Summary. Howard and Allen-Meares' call for the abandonment of the scientist-practitioner and generalist training models and the adoption of EBP reforms offer tremendous promise for social work education. These and other education reform efforts should be guided by principles of transparency, accountability, and competency. Issues associated with the implementation of EBP principles in social work education are discussed next.

#### Implementing EBP Principles in the Social Work Curriculum

##### *Clarity in the Definition and Process of EBP*

Gambrill reminds us that EBP is more than simply encouraging practitioners to review empirical evidence and select efficacious interventions for clients. This critical point is often lost in the rather simplistic portrayals of EBP found frequently in the social work literature. EBP is a process that requires practitioners to identify, evaluate, and apply evidence pertaining to a client problem to subsequent practice decisions. Gambrill states that when followed correctly EBP obligates practitioners to inform clients of the empirical evidence pertaining to the nature and treatment of their problem(s). She also notes that EBP requires practitioners to involve clients in decision-making about intervention options. The latter point is consistent with earlier notions of transparency raised by the author.

Gambrill's insistence that a broad view of EBP is necessary for its successful adoption in social work is well-stated. A narrow interpretation of EBP – as only a form of empirical clinical practice for example - is likely to lead to a quick rejection by many in the field. Further, a view of EBP as another attempt by the *empirical practice crowd* to integrate research and practice poses risk to the adoption of a comprehensive view of EBP in practice and to its subsequent utility as an agent of educational change. I fear that some have already rejected - or at a minimum have voiced considerable skepticism about - EBP on the basis of incomplete definitions or lack of understanding of the complete process of EBP. As Howard and Allen-Meares (2006) note, "Social work education for EBP is neither 'the wave of the past' nor 'old wine in new bottles,' as some have argued; rather, it is a new approach to social work education that could dramatically alter professional practice over the coming decades" (p. 17). We must move quickly to send an accurate message of what EBP is, *and what it isn't*, to the larger social work community. Curriculum reforms and teaching strategies must be based on the comprehensive process of EBP as developed by Sackett and colleagues (2000) and summarized by Gambrill.

##### *Problem-based Learning*

Gambrill and Howard and Allen-Meares acknowledge the potential of problem-based learning (PBL) as a guiding principle in curriculum reforms based on EBP principles. Gambrill (2006b) defines PBL as an approach that, "involves a different form of professional education in which students are placed in small groups of five or seven, together with a tutor trained in group process as well as skills involved in evidence-informed practice such as posing well-structured questions and searching effectively and efficiently for related literature," (p. 20). PBL is a departure from traditional lecture formats in which students hear and absorb information. A PBL approach in social work would require that students receive the tools and skills necessary to conduct case

assessments, identify and evaluate scientific evidence, and choose and evaluate interventions and outcomes. Emphasis is on the method and tools available for decision-making; thus, learning is case-based and interactive.

Currently, PBL is being used in the medical profession with some success (Straus, Richardson, Glasziou, & Haynes, 2005). The adoption of PBL will require a significant philosophical and practical shift in social work education, a proposition that may be met with resistance by some faculty members. However, evidence from medicine and from theory supporting PBL suggests that the positive educational outcomes achieved with PBL is a direction worth taking. Questions remain about whether all graduate courses would use PBL, or whether only practice classes would lend themselves to such a framework. Finally, a shift to PBL would also require schools to strengthen their information and evidence-based infrastructures.

#### *Training in Information Acquisition*

Howard and Allen-Meares note correctly that a curriculum incorporating EBP principles will require access to information sources including empirical reports published in journals and books, systematic reviews, treatment manuals, and practice guidelines. In an EBP curriculum, students will need to be skilled in accessing and interpreting systematic reviews, reading treatment manuals, and understanding practice guidelines. Faculty in many schools of social work will require initial training or booster sessions in many of these same skill sets.

Summary. The key curriculum reforms described by Gambrill and by Howard and Allen-Meares highlight the importance of honoring the process of EBP in all training efforts. An EBP curriculum will require significant shifts away from traditional instructional methods. Extensive training and retraining of faculty will also be necessary.

#### Discussion and Recommendations

The time has come to reexamine the continuum and nature of social work education. Gambrill's call for a complete review of the social work curriculum is timely, as is Howard and Allen-Meares' assertion that several of our educational paradigms and models have outlived their purpose. The authors of both papers offer many recommendations for specific curriculum reform in social work education. In fact, Howard and Allen-Meares identify 12 pedagogical principles that if followed in their entirety would serve as a comprehensive reform of social work education. Gambrill offers important reforms based on tenants of transparency and PBL; she also identifies helpful strategies to promote and use EBP in traditional social work curriculum that were not discussed here.

A shift to EBP as a guiding framework for social work education is timely. Recent advances in the availability and dissemination of empirical evidence about the etiology, prevention, and treatment of individual and social problems requires a new form of educational training that is more dynamic and fluid in nature. I agree with Gambrill's assertion that student-practitioners and faculty members no longer have the luxury of learning through traditional lecture and discussion formats. To be effective, social workers must keep pace with up-to-the-minute empirical evidence and information. They also must be held accountable for the practice decisions they make to an increasingly informed clientele.

Several additional ideas to support the recommendations offered by Gambrill and by Howard and Allen-Meares might be considered. First, the entire continuum of

bachelor to doctoral social work education should be examined in the context of EBP. EBP has distinct implications for each level of training and a coherent continuum based on EBP principles should be developed. Second, the effect of advanced standing policies on curriculum reform should be considered. Advanced standing – the time-honored practice of providing foundation graduate credit for courses taken as an undergraduate – shortens the duration of MSW training for many students. This practice prohibits significant curriculum change because it restricts the ability to add advanced and specialty content to MSW-level education. EBP principles should be used to create a two-year curriculum that avoids duplication of course content in the undergraduate and MSW foundation years.

Incentives or mechanism to promote change based on EBP principles will have to be created. The reforms highlighted in this paper will require a significant shift in thinking for faculty who are unfamiliar with, or resistant to, EBP or PBL. As Gambrill notes, many schools have only a small number of faculty who are familiar and supportive of EBP. Dissemination outlets, social work journals, and national conferences sponsored by the Society for Social Work and Research, Council on Social Work Education, and the National Association of Social Workers should do their part to elevate the awareness and acceptance of EBP.

We must move quickly to test and implement many of the recommendations discussed in this paper. A number of questions will need to be answered as principles of EBP and PBL are adopted in the curriculum. For instance, will students learn more effective assessment and intervention skills in an EBP curriculum? Is PBL a more effective teaching strategy than traditional approaches? Is specialty or generalist training more effective in the development of an effective practitioner? Clearly, a number of comparative studies are needed to answer these and related questions surrounding curriculum reforms in social work. The Council on Social Work Education should consider convening a task force of educators interested in advancing EBP in social work education to explore the myriad of issues raised by Gambrill and by Howard and Allen-Mears.

Gambrill concludes with the observation that clients may be the most effective voice for future changes in social work education. She may be right. Medical patients are better informed and more likely to access information and evidence about alternative treatments than at any point in history. Perhaps soon the same will be said about social work clients. As Gambrill suggests, the real impetus for change in social work education may yet come from clients.

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