

Teaching Evidence-Based Practice:
Strategic and Pedagogical Recommendations for Schools of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Widespread adoption of pedagogical methods promoting evidence-based practice (EBP) could enhance the effectiveness of social work practice. Schools of social work should: 1) ensure that all faculty and field instructors are trained in the methods and pedagogy of EBP; 2) establish a faculty committee responsible for tracking and implementing demonstrably effective instructional innovations related to EBP; 3) provide continuing education courses that promote scientifically-supported practices and that include a course devoted specifically to the methods of EBP *per se*; 4) reward faculty who conduct rigorous evaluations of methods by which social work education might be made more effective vis-à-vis promotion of EBP or who model superior pedagogical skills in relation to EBP instruction; 5) provide far more extensive training in computerized bibliographic data base searching and other information acquisition methods than have hitherto been offered; 6) incorporate problem-based instructional methods into all practice courses; 7) employ skills-based *in vivo* assessments and paper-and-pencil measures to ensure student-practitioner competency in the methods of EBP prior to graduation; 8) emphasize specialty as opposed to generalist practice education to an unprecedented degree and test for practice competence in specialty practice areas using skills-based assessments; and 9) ensure that the only research-related curricular offerings required of students are those furthering students' competencies as evidence-based practitioners, given that few MSW students seek doctoral training. Although EBP is no panacea, efforts targeted to the areas elucidated might foster EBP in social work.

Although the lexicon of social work is now replete with references to “best practices,” “evidence-based” methods, and papers purporting to pronounce “what works,” (Howard, Himle, Jenson, & Vaughn, in press), it is not readily apparent that pedagogical practices in social work have changed significantly in recent years. While some enthusiasts might point to the recent spate of books promoting EBP in the social services (e.g., Bilson, 2004; Cournoyer, 2003; Davies et al., 2000; Smith, 2004), organizations that have sprouted up for the express purpose of fostering scientifically-based social services practice (e.g., The Social Care Institute for Excellence, Campbell Collaboration), or the establishment of periodicals such as the *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work or Education for Evidence-Based Practice*, there is scant indication that these developments have significantly influenced social work education.

Why is it that in the midst of what has been called the “evidence-based practice revolution,” so little of pedagogical pertinence seems to be happening in schools of social work nationally? (Howard, Edmond, & Vaughn, 2005; Howard et al, 2003) Is the revolution a revolution in name only or do other factors account for the absence of a significant paradigmatic shift in social work pedagogical approaches consistent with the mandates of the movement to EBP? To arrive at a set of concrete recommendations for the promotion of EBP education in social work, it is useful (though discouraging) to reflect on the current contextual conditions characterizing social work education.

Contemporary Social Work Graduate Education

Careful consideration of extant conditions affecting social work education clearly suggests that EBP education is no panacea for all that ails the profession. Human capital issues include the small number of doctoral social work graduates produced each year,

the late average age at which such doctoral graduates commence their scientific careers, the comparatively unsophisticated and poorly integrated research training many graduates receive, and other factors contributing to the low publication rates and limited scientific productivity of most social work faculty (Howard & Jenson, 2003; Howard & Lambert, 1996). An aging professoriate further compounds these issues, given that several reports have identified significant inverse relationships between number of years since graduation and scholarly productivity (Howard & Jenson, 1999a; 1999b; Howard & Lambert, 1996). These findings are disturbing because social work doctoral graduates are precisely the professionals who should be producing research findings of greatest utility to social work practitioners and are the professors who would be charged with educating new generations of social workers in the methods of EBP (Howard & Jenson, 2003; Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003).

Human capital issues also adversely affect MSW-level education. At least one recent large national survey of MSW students concluded that, "...the [substantial] growth of programs, low GRE scores among graduate social work students, modest entry-level wages for social work graduates...and declining pass rates on the MSW licensing examination...are consistent with a trend toward open enrollment" (unpublished article under review and can't be cited). With national MSW admissions acceptance rates at high levels, most social work educators regularly confront classrooms filled with students of highly divergent talents and levels of motivation, many of whom are ill-equipped for graduate training in applied social interventions and some of whom are frankly anti-intellectual and/or antiscientific.

Additional evidence indicates that the overall quality of the social work scientific literature is not high, few longitudinal investigations or controlled evaluations of social work interventions are conducted, journal editorial boards are often comprised of relatively undistinguished (in research terms) persons, and that social work journals themselves have little influence (cf., Howard et al., in press; Howard & Lambert, 1996). Although these criticisms have been voiced for so long by so many that they are now regarded as hackneyed truisms, they remain valid and have serious implications for the potential success of EBP in social work.

With regard to the current status of EBP education in schools of social work nationally, there are few recent studies. Weissman et al. (2006a) reported that 62% of social work programs, "did not require didactic and clinical supervision in any evidence-based psychotherapy" and observed in a related unpublished investigation that, "while the profession may continue to struggle to define evidence-based practice, it is hard to justify the lack of training in psychotherapies that are supported by clear research evidence and a seeming preference for those lacking the support of research evidence" (Weissman et al., 2006b, p. 13). Woody, D'Souza, and Dartman (2006) have also recently reported less than fully encouraging findings from a survey of social work deans and directors examining whether and how their programs teach empirically-supported interventions.

Although the findings above are clearly relevant to an assessment of the current need for and prospects of EBP practice training within social work, the profession has experienced some positive growth in the abovementioned areas over the past decade. That said, human capital issues continue to bedevil social work and will likely seriously impede adoption of EBP pedagogical approaches across the profession.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 1: Proponents of EBP in social work would do well to avoid hyperbolic claims as to what EBP training will do for the profession and its clients. There are many serious impediments to widespread implementation of EBP pedagogical efforts in social work and it is likely that systemic issues will undermine these efforts for the foreseeable future. A feasible and justifiably modest early aim of EBP education in schools of social work nationally might be to discourage use of scientifically-unsupported interventions that are costly and/or associated with seriously adverse consequences (particularly in those cases where one or more low-cost, benign, and effective interventions are available).

Implementing a Pedagogy of Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work: Recommendations

Social workers as information scientists. Effective social workers who routinely deliver EBP interventions are, necessarily, skilled information scientists. Schools of social work should ensure that student practitioners develop relatively sophisticated information acquisition and appraisal skills in their desired areas of practice expertise. Although it is vital that students achieve relatively advanced information science training, few schools of social work adequately introduce students to the hundreds of available bibliographic databases and the methods by which they can most productively be searched. When such information is presented, it is usually provided at the most rudimentary level over the course of only a few hours.

Students should be required to take at least one semester-long course exposing them to a broad array of bibliographic and other information sources useful for EBP and the most effective means of accessing and utilizing them. Students should be required to demonstrate these skills prior to graduation.

At the University of Michigan School of Social Work, we have developed a website (www.lib.umich.edu/socwork/rescue/ebsw.edu) entitled Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work, associated library workshops in EBP literature identification methods, and a series of information science literacy competencies to assist our students in acquiring literature identification and bibliographic searching skills. In addition to introducing the basic methods of EBP (e.g., formulating a searchable question), the web site and workshops introduce essential search language and concepts (e.g., Boolean operators/search delimiters), and include descriptions and links to a number of computerized bibliographic databases. The website also provides links to *Web Resources in the Public Domain for Evidence-Based Social Work* including the National Library of Medicine register of clinical trials, Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations, National Health Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, Centre for Evidence-Based Social Services, Evidence-Based Mental Health On-line, and *Resources for Social Work Professionals* (specially designed for UM graduates), among many other sites. Workshops in EBP literature searching methods are also offered at many other libraries on campus, with particularly intensive training offered at the Taubman Medical Library. Although websites and workshops are potentially useful in promoting EBP training, social work has been slow to recognize the fundamental importance of information to all that effective practitioners do. At present, it is probable that the overwhelming majority of social work graduates evidence low levels of information literacy and limited hands-on skills in information acquisition and analysis methods at graduation.

In addition to advanced training in information science methods offered by professional librarians, it is essential that social work educators take the time to describe available high-quality information sources to students in their areas of practice expertise. For example, each semester I bring in at least 20 substance abuse journals to the substance abuse class I teach and describe the name of the journal, when it was established and under what auspices, the types of articles it publishes, and the average level of methodological rigor of articles published in the journal. Surprisingly (to me), students have found this information interesting and useful. Similarly, educators with substantial content expertise can introduce students to recent handbooks and other texts describing EBP interventions, as well as recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews in key areas of concern and where and how they can be located.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 2: Schools of Social Work should provide students with relatively extensive levels of training in information science methods. At a minimum, students should be aware of the broad array of available bibliographic databases and able to search them effectively. Schools should also expose students to other important information sources in specific substantive practice areas. At some schools, this training will be provided by a social work librarian, at other schools a reference librarian with relevant expertise may be recruited from the general university library system. Ideally, one or more faculty members (especially those teaching the methods of EBP) will also evidence or develop expertise in searching several of the more widely used databases.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 3: Social work educators in specific practice areas should expose graduate social work students to a broad sampling of systematic reviews, meta-analyses, practice guidelines, scientific journals publishing review articles and research studies, and textbooks/handbooks describing scientifically-supported practice interventions. To the fullest extent possible, all course syllabi and readings should draw upon the best available primary and secondary scientific evidence in a given practice area. It may make sense, in some schools, for a faculty member or committee to review course syllabi for inclusion of such content.

Social workers as evidence-based practitioners. A host of related issues attend any discussion purporting to advance the prospects of EBP in social work. If we accept that we are not currently adequately preparing students for EBP, than what instructional philosophy may be said to undergird our current teaching and field training efforts and to what extent is this pedagogy inconsistent with the tenets and procedural requirements of EBP? If we discover that our current efforts are partially or wholly lacking insofar as they result in skilled evidence-based practitioners, than what pedagogy might be promoted to redress these deficiencies and what regulatory, institutional, and instructional maneuvers might be enacted in service of this pedagogy?

To a noteworthy degree, social work education has historically embraced the aim of training students for generalist/advanced generalist practice. Perhaps this tradition was borne of pragmatism given that MSW programs are only two years long, many social workers work with a diverse array of client populations and issues over the course of their practice careers, and relatively little empirical evidence was available to guide practice efforts in specific fields of practice. The situation has changed markedly, however, over the past 20 to 30 years with regard to the quantity, quality, sophistication, and ready availability of practice-relevant scientific evidence. In many areas, such as

prevention and treatment of substance abuse and antisocial behavior, scores of controlled evaluations are being produced annually and dozens of empirically well-established treatment and prevention interventions have been identified (Vaughn & Howard, 2004).

For this and other reasons, the generalist model is pedagogically ill-suited to modern practice demands including the dictates of EBP. If MSW education is to be successful in producing well-informed students capable of delivering evidence-based interventions, it will need to become much more specialty focused. At a minimum, all MSW students should be current with the practice-relevant scientific literature and able to deliver at least one evidence-based intervention in a specific practice area upon graduation. Even if social work education is configured such that it fosters more competent practice in specialty areas, it will be difficult to achieve this modest aim over the course of a two-year program. Social work will need to implement focused educational programs that consistently produce competent practitioners in necessarily relatively circumscribed areas. To some extent, this development parallels the establishment of specialty and subspecialty practice in medicine, although that level of specialization might be premature in social work. Additional efforts are also needed on the part of Council of Social Work Education to ensure that social work graduates are competent to practice following graduation. The current Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2004) pertain almost exclusively to foundational course requirements and provide little direction to schools vis-à-vis the appropriate constitution and conduct of their concentration-level course and field experience offerings.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 4: The generalist model of social work education is pedagogically ill-suited to modern practice demands and should largely be abandoned. Schools of social work should foster competence in specialized areas of practice and ensure that graduates are familiar with the scientific literature and able to deliver an evidence-based intervention in one or more specific practice areas upon graduation.

Another needed pedagogical development in social work is the adoption of a clearly articulated educational philosophy describing the purpose, nature, and utility of scientific training for MSW-level students. To some extent, the current situation in social work is reminiscent of efforts over the past half-century in applied psychology to produce highly trained scientist-practitioners at the doctoral level. Social work students are taught statistical techniques, often encouraged to conduct their own research, and otherwise introduced to issues falling under the broad rubric “research methods,” but it is often unclear to what end (if any) this material will eventually be put. Few MSW students seek doctoral training and it is questionable whether much of the current research training delivered is ever put to good use on the part of many students. It is notable that debate is ongoing as to the success of efforts to promote the scientist-practitioner model in applied psychology; the scientist-practitioner model is almost surely not working in social work, where the program span of two years as currently configured is not adequate to achieve competence as a scientist or practitioner.

To the extent that the scientist-practitioner model is currently embodied in the curricula of schools of social work nationally (e.g., in courses devoted at least in part to preparing students to conduct their own research or in research practica experiences), we believe that this approach should be replaced with training in the specific methods of EBP. That is, MSW programs exist to train practitioners not scientists or even scientist-practitioners and it is likely that the best practitioners are able to identify, access, and

critically appraise available practice-relevant scientific findings, apply the fruits of these efforts and evaluate client outcomes on a real-time basis. Given the time constraints associated with a two-year educational program, students should be required to learn only those aspects of research training required for EBP.

Pedagogical efforts rooted in case- or problem-based instruction are particularly useful in helping students to appreciate the clinical utility of pertinent scientific evidence and in helping them learn the most efficacious ways to access that information (Gambrill, 2005). Problem-based learning also provides students with substantial experience in coping with exigent clinical issues arising in situations of scientific uncertainty—a common scenario in real world practice settings. Schools of social work should ensure that students understand the ethical obligation all practitioners have to consistently and transparently communicate to clients the evidentiary basis for their practice recommendations.

A number of other developments would enhance the teaching of EBP in social work. First, the profession should foster the establishment of a cadre of EBP experts nationally (and ideally at least one faculty member per school) to track current research and pedagogical advances in EBP. As anyone who has followed the growing number of papers specific to EBP can attest, research in this area is exploding and the profession would benefit from the expertise and direction a group of social work professionals could provide in this area. Second, schools of social work have been remiss in ensuring that student-practitioners practice competently prior to graduation. Among the many recent developments in this area are the growing numbers of paper-and-pencil instruments available for assessing practice competence (Davis et al., 2006), the use of simulated clients within schools of medicine to help medical students deliver appropriate health care and reduce medical errors (Mangan, 2006), and the growing use of skills tests to ensure, for example, that professionals like lawyers have the ability to take depositions and perform other basic professional functions prior to graduation and licensing (U.S. News and World Report, 2006).

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 5: Schools of social work should adopt a clearly articulated educational philosophy that underscores the primary aim of social work education (i.e., to prepare effective practitioners) and the specific types of research-related experiences and training that are consistent with and promotive of that aim. Faculty of schools of social work should ask themselves whether they have commingled preparation for doctoral education and practice training in a manner that is less than optimal for the 98% of MSW students who chose not to seek a doctoral degree. Similarly, faculty of schools of social work should examine the extent to which they have implicitly adopted a scientist-practitioner model of social work training that may be inappropriate to the aims and given the constraints of social work education.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 6: Schools of social work should adopt the methods of problem-based learning. Problem-based learning offers significant advantages over more conventional didactic approaches, such as lectures, because it exposes students to the uncertainties and complexities of practice and provides students with the experiences and tools to ask answerable questions, identify and evaluate pertinent scientific findings, apply them in practice, and evaluate intervention outcomes. Because it involves practice situations similar to those they will encounter over the course of their practice careers,

the methods of problem-based learning can help students learn EBP skills in a manner that will generalize to real world settings.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 7: Schools of social work should teach students the ethical importance of transparency in social work practice. That is, student-practitioners should be prepared to provide a description of the scientific rationale and weight of the evidence in support of any practice recommendation they make to clients.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 8: Each school of social work should appoint a committee of interested faculty members and charge them with tracking scientific developments and educational innovations pertinent to EBP and assisting with their implementation. Faculty members who conduct rigorous research examining the comparative efficacy of social work educational approaches vis-à-vis production of evidence-based practitioners or who model EBP in the classroom or field should be rewarded with tenure, promotion, or other incentives. The availability of one or more such experts at each school of social work and the establishment of a cadre of EBP experts nationally within social work would constitute a significant resource to the profession as it moves toward more widespread training for EBP.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 9: Schools of social work should test students to ensure that they have the ability to practice effectively upon graduation consistent with the tenets and methods of EBP. To this end, schools should consider employing criterion-referenced examinations with surrogate clients and other skills-based in vivo assessment protocols and paper-and-pencil measures of established reliability and validity so that they can warrant the practice competence of their students upon graduation.

Several additional concerns are relevant to widespread adoption of EBP and related educational approaches within social work. These include the thorny issue of what constitutes “evidence,” how field education might best be utilized to foster evidence-based practices, whether empathy and other critical aspects of clinical social work can be taught, whether evidence-based instructional efforts are modality- or procedure-specific or can be employed to teach more global aspects of effective practice (e.g., establishing rapport, building therapeutic relationships, etc.), and the extent to which we can reasonably expect our current contingent of social work professors, who themselves may generally require education in the methods and pedagogy of EBP, to teach these methods.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 10: EBP should be taught from an epistemologically sound perspective emphasizing the tentative nature of all scientific knowledge. That is, training should emphasize that there are no “evidence-based” treatments per se, only interventions that differ in the nature and degree of their scientific support. Students should be taught to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different research designs and the types of questions such designs best suited to answer.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 11: Field education should foster EBP and enhance students’ abilities to deliver treatments that are comparatively well supported by the available research evidence. Instruction in EBP methods and access to web sites with links to computerized bibliographic data bases and other useful materials for EBP should be provided gratis to field instructors.

EBP Pedagogical Principle # 12: Schools of social work should institute EBP training programs for full time and adjunct professors who require instruction in the

methods and pedagogy of EBP. Continuing education programs should be configured such that they promote application of the most effective interventions in specific practice areas and include a course devoted specifically to training in the methods and pedagogy of EBP.

Discussion

In the most recent year for which published figures are available, 8,140 master's degrees and 175 doctoral degrees were awarded in social work (Statistics on Social Work Education, 2003). If 2005-2006 social work graduation figures approximate those for 2002-2003, then social work graduates constituted 10 % of the 83,041 professional degrees awarded in 2005 (Chronicle of Higher Education, August 25, 2006, p. 4).

Despite their substantial numbers, many social workers believe the profession is undervalued by the general public and other professional groups. Wide-spread adoption of EBP training has been promoted as one promising means by which the competence of social work graduates could be improved and appreciation for the profession thereby enhanced.

There are certainly indications that interest in EBP in social work is growing. Among the many fine papers submitted to the 2007 Annual Conference of the Society for Social Work and Research were those entitled, "Use of Evidence-Based Practices by Community Substance Abuse Coalitions: Reports from the Front Line," "Cybernetics: Balancing Evidence-Based Practice with Practice-Based Evidence," "Evidence-Based Practice across Disciplines: Barriers Found and Lessons Learned," "National Survey of School Social Workers' Knowledge and Use of Evidence-Supported Programs to Address Interpersonal Violence," "Examination of a Sample of Published Outcome Studies from 2000-2005: Implications for Evidence-Based Practice," "Geriatric Evaluation and Self-Management Services: Expanding Evidence-Based Practice," "Social Work in Primary Care: An Evidence-Based Intervention Study for Older Adults," "Is Spiritually Modified Cognitive Therapy an Empirically Effective Intervention? Evaluating the Research through the Lens of APA Evidence-Based Protocols," "Social Work Faculty Views of Evidence-Based Practice: A National Survey," "A Systematic Review of Evidence-Based Research on Juvenile Sexual Offender Treatment," "Analyzing Longitudinal Qualitative Data: A Study of Practitioner Attitudes about Adoption of Evidence-Based Practice," "Implementing Evidence-Based Practice in Social Service Agencies through a University-Agency Partnership," and "Adapting Evidence-Based Depression Care for Low-Income, Ethnic Minority Patients and Public Sector Organizational Systems of Care—Applying Key Elements of Translational Research."

Still, the question remains, do these investigations and others of their ilk, not to mention the cascade of books, articles, and other information sources purporting to address "best practices," represent the incipient stages of an EBP movement in social work or merely a change in verbiage or passing fad.

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. Proponents of EBP should not oversell the short-term benefits of a movement to EBP education or minimize the difficulties associated with this transition. Schools of social work should

incorporate the full gamut of available information sources for EBP training (e.g., systematic reviews, clinical practice guidelines, meta-analyses, practice algorithms, manualized interventions, etc.), into their course offerings; institute significantly more extensive and sophisticated information science training; favor specialist as opposed to generalist training; adopt a clearly articulated pedagogic philosophy that has as its end the preparation of competent practitioners who can draw to the fullest extent possible on the pertinent scientific literature; adopt problem- or case-based learning techniques across the practice curriculum; develop of a cadre of school-level and profession-wide experts in the literature, issues, methods, and pedagogy of EBP; and promote field and continuing education experiences that model and reinforce EBP. To the extent that these and other recommendations are adopted, the prospects for EBP in social work will be enhanced.

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