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

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

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*Widespread adoption of pedagogical methods promoting evidence-based practice (EBP) could enhance the effectiveness of social work practice education. Schools of social work should ensure that faculty are trained in the methods of EBP; establish a committee responsible for tracking and implementing demonstrably effective instructional innovations related to EBP; provide continuing education courses that promote scientifically supported practices and that include a course devoted specifically to teaching the methods of EBP per se; reward faculty who model superior pedagogical skills in relation to EBP; provide extensive training in computerized bibliographic database searching and other information acquisition methods; incorporate problem-based instructional methods into all practice courses; employ skills-based in vivo assessments and other measures to ensure student-practitioner competency in EBP methods prior to graduation; emphasize specialty practice education to an unprecedented degree; and test for competence in specialty practice areas.*

**Keywords:** *evidence-based practice; social work education; pedagogical methods*

Although the lexicon of social work is now replete with references to "best practices," "evidence-based" methods, and articles 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. Although some enthusiasts might point to the recent spate of books promoting evidence-based practice (EBP) in the social services (e.g., Bilson, 2004; Cournoyer, 2003; Davies, Nutley, & Smith, 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 "EBP revolution," so little of pedagogical pertinence seems to be happening in schools of social work nationally (Howard, Edmond, & Vaughn, 2005; Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 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 a 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 annually, late average age at which such doctoral graduates commence their scientific careers, comparatively unsophisticated and

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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 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 about the methods of EBP (Howard, Bricout, Edmond, Elze, & Jenson, 2003; Howard & Jenson, 2003).

Human capital issues also adversely affect graduate MSW-level education. Between 1990 and 2004, the number of Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)-accredited MSW programs increased nearly 80% (from 94 to 168; *Dashboard Indicators*, 2004); salaries of graduates about this period remained notably depressed (Karger & Stoesz, 2002). Growing recognition that demand for social work MSW education has not kept pace, proportionately speaking, with the growth in numbers and training capacity of social work graduate programs has led some observers to argue that an "open admissions policy" currently exists within social work education nationally, the results of which, it is argued, can be observed in declining entrance GRE scores and licensing exam pass rates. Although the validity of these contentions is presently difficult to evaluate, many social work educators anecdotally report regularly confronting classrooms filled with students of highly divergent talents and levels of motivation, at least some of whom are ill-equipped for graduate training in applied social interventions and others who are frankly antiscientific, anti-intellectual, or both.

Additional evidence indicates that the overall quality of the social work scientific literature is not high (Howard & Lambert, 1996), few controlled trials of social work interventions are conducted (Proctor, 2003), journal editorial boards are often comprised of relatively undistinguished (in research terms) persons (Pardek, 1992a, 1992b), and that social work journals themselves have relatively little influence (Howard et al., in press). 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. (2006) reported that 62% of the social work programs they surveyed "did not require didactic and clinical supervision in any evidence-based psychotherapy" (p. 925). Authors of a related investigation concluded that "while the profession may continue to struggle to define EBP, 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" (Bledsoe et al., in press). Woody, D'Souza, and Dartman (2006) also recently reported less than encouraging findings from a survey of social work deans and directors (or their designees) examining whether and how their programs teach empirically supported interventions. They observed that

only 31 programs, less than half, had endorsed teaching specific ESI [Empirically Supported Interventions] content; still fewer, 26, had designated courses to teach specific ESI content; and of the 31 programs that had endorsed teaching ESI, very small numbers required ESI training materials designed for teaching students the skills and techniques for implementing the interventions. (p. 474)

Woody et al. (2006) cautiously concluded that "the present sample is not overrepresented by programs with faculty who are visibly or highly engaged with the EBP movement" (pp. 474-475).

Although the findings above clearly reflect the current need for greater emphasis on EBP practice education within social work, the profession has experienced some positive growth in these and related 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 should avoid hyperbolic claims as to what EBP education 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 might be to heighten students' awareness of scientifically unsupported practices 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) so that their use might thereby be discouraged.

## IMPLEMENTING A PEDAGOGY PROMOTING EBP IN SCHOOLS OF 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 and efficiently 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 using 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 Web site ([www.lib.umich.edu/socwork/rescue/ebsw.edu](http://www.lib.umich.edu/socwork/rescue/ebsw.edu)) titled "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 Web site 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, and Evidence-Based Mental Health Online, 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 Web sites and workshops are potentially useful in promoting EBP, social work has been slow to recognize the fundamental importance of

information to all that effective practitioners do. Although these Web-based resources are available to enhance student learning and teaching of EBPs, many social work faculty need continuing education to learn how to use these resources. At present, it is probable that the overwhelming majority of social work graduates (and many faculty members) 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 provided 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, once each semester the first author (M.H.) brings in at least 20 chemical dependency journals to the substance abuse class he teaches and describes the name of each journal, when it was established and under what auspices, and the types and the average level of methodological rigor of the articles published in the journal. Surprisingly, students have consistently appeared to find this information interesting and useful. Social work educators with substantial content expertise can also introduce students to recent handbooks, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews describing scientifically supported interventions 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 computerized bibliographic databases available and be able to search several of the most pertinent of them effectively. Schools should also expose students to other important information sources in specific substantive practice areas. At some schools, this training is 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 school faculty members (especially those teaching EBP methods) will possess or develop expertise in searching several of the more widely used databases (e.g., PsychInfo or PubMed).

*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 original 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 be advisable, 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, as a profession, we are not currently adequately preparing students for EBP, then 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 of 2 years' duration, 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, during 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, scores of controlled evaluations have been produced and significant numbers 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 able to evaluate the practice-relevant scientific literature and 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 during the course of a 2-year program. Social work will need to implement focused educational programs

that consistently produce competent practitioners in necessarily circumscribed areas. To some extent, this development parallels the establishment of specialty and subspecialty practice in medicine and law (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2006, p. 12), although that level of specialization might be premature in social work. Additional efforts are also needed on the part of CSWE to ensure that social work graduates are competent to practice following graduation. The current Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 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 able to evaluate the scientific literature and deliver an evidence-based intervention in one or more specific practice areas on graduation.

Another pedagogical development needed in social work is the adoption of a clearly articulated educational philosophy describing the nature, purpose, and utility of scientific training for MSW 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, 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 by many students. It is notable that debate is ongoing as to on 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 2 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 practice experiences), we believe that this approach should be replaced with training in the specific methods of EBP. 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, critically appraise, and apply available practice-relevant scientific findings and evaluate the outcomes of this process on an ongoing basis. Given the time constraints associated with a 2-year educational program, students should be required to learn only those aspects of research required for EBP.

Pedagogical efforts rooted in what has been termed case or problem-based learning are particularly useful in helping students appreciate the clinical utility of pertinent scientific evidence (Gambrell, 2005). Problem-based learning is active, task oriented, and often group based. In contrast to lectures and other traditional didactic approaches, problem-based learning 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 that 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 articles 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 rapidly growing numbers of measures available for evaluating education in EBP (Shaneyfelt et al., 2006), the use of simulated clients to help students deliver appropriate care and reduce professional errors (Mangan, 2006), and the growing application of practice skills tests to ensure, for example, that professionals like physicians and lawyers have the ability to perform medical examinations, 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 BSW/MSW 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 choose 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 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 practice outcomes. Because it focuses on practice situations similar to those they will encounter during the course of their careers, problem-based learning can help students acquire 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 and honesty 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 faculty members interested in EBP 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 effectively 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 for 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 competence of their students on graduation. The manner in which such testing would be accomplished (e.g., by instructors of individual courses or by practice area or with a comprehensive assessment at the conclusion of MSW course and fieldwork) has yet to be determined and could, potentially, differ across schools.

Several additional concerns are relevant to the widespread adoption of EBP and related educational approaches within social work. These include the thorny issues of what constitutes "evidence," how field education might best be used to foster EBP (Edmond, Megivern, Williams, Rochman, & Howard, 2006), whether empathy and other critical aspects of clinical social work can be taught (Monroe, 2006), whether EBP 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 practices that differ in the nature and degree of their current scientific support. Students should be taught to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different research designs and the types of questions such designs are 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 password access to Web sites with links to searchable computerized bibliographic databases and other useful materials for EBP should be provided gratis to field instructors by local schools of social work.

*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 (Council on Social Work Education, 2003, Table 402, pp. 121-122). If 2005-2006 social work graduation figures approximate those for 2002-2003, then social work graduates constituted approximately 10% of the 83,041 professional degrees awarded in 2005 (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2006, p. 4). Despite their substantial numbers, many social workers believe that the profession is undervalued by the general public and other professional groups. Widespread adoption of EBP training in schools of social work 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.

One key issue that has emerged in the EBP movement is the lack of clarity about what is involved in changing to EBPs. It is important for social work educators involved in teaching EBPs to distinguish between evidence-based interventions that can be delivered by individual practitioners and those EBPs that require systemic changes at all organizational levels to support the implementation of the practice with fidelity. Many of the EBPs that social service organizations have adopted involve purchasing training and supervision for a period of time (sometimes up to 2 years) to certify that practitioners, supervisors, and administrators are implementing the EBP with the maximum likelihood of the intervention producing the positive outcomes noted in the controlled trials. Furthermore, helping students to learn how to translate EBPs into "real world" agency-based practices requires a different set of skills than traditionally taught in many social work research and evaluation courses. Developing skills in monitoring fidelity, tracking adaptations, and measuring relevant outcomes is central in assessing the effectiveness of the EBPs at the clinical, supervisory, and organizational levels.

There are indications that interest in EBP in social work is growing. Among the many papers submitted at the 2007 Annual Conference of the Society for Social Work and Research were those titled, "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"; "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"; "Adapting Evidence-Based Depression Care for Low-Income, Ethnic Minority Patients and Public Sector Organizational Systems of Care—Applying Key Elements of Translational Research"; and "Transporting an Evidence-Based Parenting Program to Multicultural Prevention Settings."

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

We believe that social work education for EBP is neither "the wave of the past" (Stricker, 2003) nor "old wine in new bottles" (Taylor & White, 2002), as some have argued; rather, EBP is a new approach to social work practice education that could significantly increase the effectiveness of professional social workers 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) into their course offerings; institute significantly more extensive and sophisticated information science training; favor specialist as opposed to generalist training; adopt a clearly articulated pedagogical 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-based learning methods across the practice curriculum; test for practice competence in specialty practice areas and the methods of EBP prior to graduation; develop 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. If the 12 pedagogical recommendations delineated above are widely followed, the prospects for EBP in social work will be significantly enhanced.

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