



Creating Social Work Civic Citizens: A Professional and Educational Responsibility?

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Abstract

All levels of education have been tasked with creating empowered, civic-minded citizens. It is often assumed that students come into college having received a robust civics education in high school, leaving a potential gap between education and abilities of graduates to become ethical and effective social workers and civic citizens. When broached in higher education, disagreement often lies in what civic competency means, how it is addressed in the classroom, and - for higher education - if it is appropriate to support a particular “agenda” or ideology in creating pedagogical goals. For social work, the disconnect between historical professional goals, the current political and professional climate, and academic barriers and freedoms can be further impacted by disparate views on whether it is appropriate for social work to support education aimed at increasing civic competency and engagement. This conceptual paper will review the historical roots of the profession, explore current issues related to civic competency and political education, and discuss the future of civics education in social work.

Social Work History: A Focus on Values

The profession of social work has developed around several different historical movements and political eras, from the birth of social work with Jane Addams’ Hull House to more recent emphasis on clinical work/private practice [1]. While the profession has always espoused its commitment to social change, the values behind various social change movements are often tailored toward the political and moral underpinnings of society. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, social work was not considered a profession by all [2], rather it was more of a loose association of charities. Many people supported values holding that personal failures, rather than systematic injustices, lead to unsuitable living conditions and poverty [3, 4]. With this value came an underlying belief that social problems should be addressed by leveraging a market system, based on a determination of social order interests and supply/demand considerations, that valued market control over resources [5, 6].

During the Great Depression, work towards supporting and creating new public policy began. Arguably, the political action of social work was short-lived, as by the end of the 1930s social work began to

operate within the values and goals of the market value approach [3, 5, 7]. Social reform and social action did not become widely held professional values until the 1960s-1970s, therefore the profession did not return to a political direction until this time [8]. In fact, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) did not publish its first code of ethics until 1960. The code’s legacy is focused on the interdependence of micro, mezzo, and macro practices on creating social justice change and the importance of social action and responsibilities to include political activity [8]. Currently, the social work profession appears to be undergoing a resurgence of earlier market values and commercialism which does not necessarily value social action and responsibility as necessary for social justice reform [9]. There is concern that social workers are distancing themselves from political engagement in favor of working within an increasingly controlling system where accountability and success are determined by politicians and businesses rather than by social workers and the people they serve [9].

Political Engagement as a Social Work Value

While one of the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) curriculum standards is a requirement to educate social work students on social policy, it has been debated whether social policy encompasses political engagement. This distinction is interesting in light of the fact many argue social work is inherently a political endeavor, as social workers seek to mediate between individual and community needs and the market economy driving the use of resources via policy implementation [3]. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) released a statement declaring that “the mission of social work is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” noting that “core professional values” cannot be fulfilled “without advocating to reform, dismantle, or even abolish the racist and oppressive systems we may work within and beside” [10]. These directives from two of the profession’s largest governing bodies seem to indicate that political education and political engagement are necessary components of social work practice.

Because of the focus on professionalism, a drive towards consumerism, and profit-motive considerations since the 1920s, the context under which social workers operate favors working within the status quo and treating clients as consumeristic goods [11, 12]. Working within the status quo arguably precludes social/political action because many of the activities that social workers currently perform may not effectively support socio-political intervention and could be viewed as threatening to the established norms and practices [12]. It is often assumed that incoming bachelor's students will have a robust civics education stemming from their high school studies. In fact, not every state requires civics education, not all civics education requirements in states that do teach civics are the same, and most students cannot pass a basic civics exam upon completion of high school [13, 14]. Shapiro and Brown [13] note that no state currently provides "sufficient and comprehensive" (p. 2) civics education due to curricula that are "heavy on knowledge" (p.5) but deficient in skills building. For example, only 9 states, plus the District of Columbia, require one year of government/civics education, with most states only offering a half year of education [13]. These gaps in education have resulted in low civics engagement among Americans in general and low scores on AP US Government exams among the very high school students who will be entering our social work programs [13]. These educational deficiencies leave a gap between student knowledge and the responsibilities of the profession, as outlined in the code of ethics.

As the social work profession increasingly embraces globalization through international practice, students seeking to work internationally must acquire an understanding of the US context and practical and accessible foundational knowledge. This foundation will facilitate their implementation of social work practice within the political systems of various countries, ensuring culturally responsive and appropriate interventions. Discussions surrounding global and international citizenship and civics education are occurring, with some noting that many countries are concerned about the civic education of their citizens and the deficiencies in civics education in many non-US contexts [15, 16]. Because contexts outside the US are wide and varied and not the context most US-based students will be focused on and/or exposed to, this paper focuses and provides a critique on a US context only. While a discussion of non-US context civics education would be worthwhile, as outsiders to non-US contexts, critiques of these contexts are best left to insiders.

The deficits identified above highlight an integral barrier: students may lack the fundamental knowledge to grasp the core principles underpinning their work. Consequently, how can the profession expect effective interventions in situations requiring civic knowledge to fulfill its objectives? Is education's emphasis primarily on teaching the historical and current social policy landscape and its intersection in daily micro-level social work practice? If so, what does this mean for the very code of ethics our profession rests on? If we expect the profession to continue to have a global reach, what responsibility does higher education have in ensuring that students possess a basic knowledge base to navigate diverse political contexts beyond the US?

Social work values, such as human dignity and worth, social justice, service, and integrity, are vitally important to the profession and, therefore, weaved into all parts of education. If social work is not inherently political, it is hard to imagine how education can attend to these values without discussing political climate and how policy priorities and interventions can be swayed by political action [17]. Social work may be largely unable to achieve these values if political action and engagement are not supported as legitimate social work activities. Neoliberalism in social work education has manifested as depoliticization, despite our code of ethics citing the pursuit of social change as an integral social work value [18]. Without an emphasis on

social justice initiatives, it has been argued that social work is largely an unnecessary profession, and in fact, the specific drive to intervene on the macro level is what makes social work unique compared to other social welfare professionals [19]. Further, social work values preclude us from seeing the profession as one of consumeristic drive to satisfy individual needs and instead task us with the moral agency to engage in the development of political community [19]. Because the profession is inherently political, it is better served by addressing political issues upfront, rather than pretending issues do not exist.

Civic Competency and Political Engagement: Current Climate

It has been argued that political development should be a main objective of any educational program and encompass education on civic literacy, fostering democracy and individual responsibility, and responsibility for social change [20]. Civic literacy refers to education aimed at providing basic civic knowledge, along with the tools to use this knowledge in civic activities and political action [20]. Further, political engagement education can help individuals develop critical consciousness - the "critical analysis of society and one's status within it" [21]. Education focused on raising students with critical consciousness and a drive for political engagement helps students gain skills in critical reflection so that they can easily analyze social inequalities, such as the economic disparity between poor and rich individuals, and take action to address these inequalities [21]. Interestingly, while civic literacy education has been thoroughly discussed in literature focused on K-12th education and in university-wide educational programming, it is overlooked in social work educational programming discussions. The lack of emphasis on civic literacy and political engagement is concerning as social work policy practice is a professional competency, involving the capacity to implement public policy and promote social change at all levels of social work practice [1, 22].

Lack of attention to political engagement education could be due to several issues within social work programs. There seems to be conflict regarding what kind of knowledge is necessary for a social work professional to have and how this knowledge should be conveyed so that students have the necessary practice skills [19]. Proponents of civic education cite several basic topics that should be covered: factual history and current events, important laws and regulations, and how to become constructive societal participants [15]. What is unclear for social work education is how these objectives are folded into curriculum and what civic engagement looks like for social workers. Educating in today's political climate can be problematic considering that as a social good, many universities are governmental entities constrained by rules and regulations, and the professors who teach in universities are expected to conform to mandates or face sanctions. Public and governmental beliefs about the purpose of education can bind what topics are deemed appropriate for discussion or lead to the choice of less risky conversations for fear of losing employment. One needs only to look at the state of Florida for an example of how political climate can directly impact what can and cannot be taught at all levels of education [23]. This leaves social work educators needing to teach students about social justice, civic competency, and political action without clear direction on how to best do this.

Politically-Focused Social Work Education: Pros and Cons

A main goal of social work education should be to train social workers at all levels of practice to see their power as central to addressing social problems, reflect on its role in social work, and learn to use power ethically in their practice [24, 25, 26]. While some argue that the university is not the appropriate place to foster these skills, others point out that college students have many opinions about political topics. Problems arise because students are uncomfortable

with being confronted about opinions and not well-versed in dealing with fears of conflict or maintaining an open climate for fruitful discussion [27, 28, 29]. Further, higher education's mission in general is one of fostering political engagement that links personal and social responsibility to active democracy [28]. Social work should nurture these classroom activities as the profession touts inherently politicized values such as social justice and the promotion of social welfare [10, 30, 31]. Additionally, the culture under which the social work profession operates is becoming increasingly aware of disparities due to race, gender, sexuality, disability, and age [32]. Social work is already political in that the profession directly deals with the allocation of scarce resources, the promotion of social welfare, cultural and social issues, and mediation between individual and systematic needs [29, 30]. For social work to remain relevant and true to its underlying mission, educating students in political and civic engagement skills is necessary to ensure students can engage in social change efforts [30].

Advocates of civic and political engagement education cite the need for social work to "practice what it preaches" by socializing social workers into the various roles, norms, and values of the profession [33-37]. In fact, CSWE standards tout political social work as a legitimate practice area [31]. Social work programs are critical in providing curriculums that embody social work norms and values, as well as opportunities to practice concepts learned [38]. For students to practice what the profession preaches, educational programs must incorporate programmatic material related to these concepts [39]. Arguments have been made that there is limited interest in political placements by students, social work supervision in these arenas is difficult, and questions of whether these types of placements are sufficient to satisfy the practicum requirement exist. Most of these concerns can be resolved by ensuring program and faculty commitment to training social workers in civic/political engagement [30, 40]. It may not be true that social work students are uninterested but are simply unaware of this professional possibility [30, 40]. Finally, because social work has a commitment to political and social activism, any internship in this area would necessarily be adequate to fulfill field requirements [40].

Institutions of higher education have been accused of promoting only liberal ideals and activism goals, specifically targeting education aimed at civic competency and political action as existing to further a liberal agenda [41, 42]. The claim is that the "new" civics education does not provide the necessary basics in civics and instead is only used as a platform to convert students to specific university-held ideals of how government, businesses, and the market should be [41, 42]. For social work civics education, disagreements seem to center on whether social good/social justice should be included in civics education and the argument that universities are not currently open to diverging opinions and values, meaning that students are not getting a well-rounded education [42].

In response to concerns about low civics literacy, Beaumont et al. [43] conducted the Political Engagement Project, a pre- and post-test study to examine various civics interventions provided at 21 college programs. While an older study, it provides context still relevant today. Their study found that including civics education in programs/educational opportunities promoted political engagement and increased political literacy and skills, without pushing students toward a specific political ideology [43,44]. Students in Beaumont et al.'s [44] study described activities, assignments, and projects that they engaged in that helped them apply civics knowledge and skills and reflect on their political selves. While social work is inherently political and relies on the adherence to a set of professional values, civics education in social work programs need not endorse or focus on one political ideology over another, rather it can focus on instilling a political knowledge, awareness, drive, and confidence to engage in a multitude of political contexts.

Dissenters argue that social justice is a contentious, unresolved

topic that is often not discussed as such, leading students to believe wrong information and support dangerous and harmful ideals [42]. Some have gone as far as to state that schools of social work unfairly indoctrinate their students with opinions instead of facts, therefore teaching civics is "lo[sing] sight of the difference between instruction and indoctrination" [42, 45, 46]. Further, critics argue it is oppressive that students are expected to comply with certain professional standards of behavior (e.g., NASW Code of Ethics) because it does not allow students to have divergent, but relevant and supportable, views. Therefore, education centered on civics and political engagement in social work diverges from social work's values of meeting the client (the student, in this case) where they are and encouraging and respecting diversity.

Another argument is that moving the profession back towards political engagement and social change will inevitably harm the micro-level clients whom social workers are tasked to help. This is because there is only so much time allotted for an educational degree and shifting even one class away from direct practice and toward political and civic education can hinder direct practice educational goals, leading graduating social workers to work in practice areas for which they are not properly trained. Bardill further argues that in previous graduating classes of Masters of Social Work (MSW) students whose educational program focused on civics education, students were grossly unprepared for practice and employers were hesitant to hire them. Because social work values center on person-level commitments, social workers have a larger commitment to direct care than political engagement and social change. Focusing education on macro-level issues, such as social change, creates social workers who are detached from the very people they are tasked with helping and will harm the profession as other professions step in to fill the direct practice gap.

Politically-Focused Social Work Education: The Future

Political empowerment of students stresses social action and social change, values held as dear to the foundation of social work [47, 48]. While arguments can be made against increasing civic literacy education in social work, these arguments do not hold weight when the values and norms of the profession are based on inherently politicized societal issues and needs. Additionally, a main tenant of higher education rests on academic freedom undergirded by education's purpose of intellectual development and the raising of critical awareness of society and one's place in it [49]. In fact, Coelho & Menezes [50] use the term university social responsibility (USR) to highlight the role that higher education, in general, should play in creating civically educated and responsible students by aligning civics education with the argued role of the university, to cater towards the common good. Social work education, specifically, is meant to prepare future social workers to incorporate diversity and cultural humility into practice skills even though they will often be working within systems adverse to social justice practices and change. For social workers to have the ability to reflect on and effectively address power and privilege in their practice, they must have an understanding of the political frameworks that encourage and perpetuate these concepts [51].

Programs can think about embedding curriculum with learning opportunities tailored towards specific skills, such as micro practice skills, with the added benefit of fostering civic development. For instance, university students in Europe participated in a project aimed at creating a certificate program in auditing. As part of the program, students had to work in multicultural groups to conduct a supervised audit on a partner university. The purpose of the audit was two-fold, to provide an experiential learning opportunity for which students can develop their skills, as well as expose students to a service learning opportunity where they helped a partner institution assess and report on its performance through critical feedback, to promote improvement [50]. Students in this program reported that participation in the audit activity positively impacted how they

interacted with the world and an increased understanding of the interconnectedness of the social world and their obligation to make a difference [50]. Social work programs could consider adding projects into specific courses, such as volunteer case management or counseling services, to meet civics learning objectives and focus.

The lack of emphasis in social work programs on political action and civic duty may be less one of disagreement with the need for such education and more one of hesitation on how to address a topic that embraces a “pedagogy of discomfort” [29], requiring educators to be aware of their own discomfort, as well as students’ discomfort with coming to terms with their assumptions and beliefs. Research shows that student engagement with disagreement, outside of family and friends, can help prepare them for deliberate political conversation [52]. Therefore, social work programs must imbue curriculum with education regarding deliberation and the opportunity to engage with deliberative opinion [52] while providing opportunities for students to use/develop skills and engage in learning that emphasizes civic and social responsibility. In a recent study, Kachel [53] investigated the status of civics education within social work programs in Germany. Similar to the situation in the US, it was observed that German students entered social work programs with a wide spectrum of civics knowledge, influenced by variations in civics education across different German states. Consequently, much of this knowledge is acquired within the home environment. However, only a small number of programs provide curriculum dedicated to civics education [53]. Students in the German social work programs reported discomfort in engaging in political/civics discourse, potentially stemming from a lack of shared civics language and disparities in prior civics knowledge among classmates [53]. Kachel [53] advocates for social work programs to provide comprehensive support to both students and faculty, fostering diverse opportunities for learning civics education and applying civics knowledge across various educational activities.

Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek [54] describe the need for education, at any level, to focus on creating an environment where individuals can develop as people. Social work educational objectives and civics educational objectives also require the development of self and professional. The authors created the “6 Cs” framework that includes skills for effective collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creativity, and confidence [54]. Many of the skills necessary for successful civic engagement and citizenry are the same skills we hope our students learn in Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs. The objectives of civics education, imparting civic knowledge and skills (e.g., processes of government, political ideologies, constitutional rights), civic values and dispositions (e.g., civic discourse and engagement with differing perspectives), and civic behaviors (e.g., agency and confidence in engaging in civic practices, such as voting) [14]. While the “6 Cs” framework is not specific to civic engagement education or social work education, it provides a platform to intertwine the goals and educational objectives of both. Considering programs are often already incorporating skill development in these areas into their curriculum, finding ways to leverage what is already being taught to impart additional civics knowledge aimed at developing social work professionalism and responsible civic participation would not be challenging.

It is acknowledged that it may be almost impossible for most BSW/MSW programs to include a required stand-alone course in civics and civic engagement due to the number of required courses already included in programs. Embedding content and activities into already existing courses, such as policy, macro practice, human behavior in the social environment (HBSE), and introduction to social work courses may be most advantageous. Not only does embedding content into existing courses negate the need to create space for a standalone course, but it also allows educators to align civics material with existing social work content to provide ease of connection between social work and civic responsibilities. For instance, any class that

discusses the NASW Code of Ethics could embed content on social work responsibilities to critically evaluate and enhance their capacity for informed political action and connect these activities to social work ethics and priorities. A policy course could provide an opportunity to talk about the branches of government, what they do, and how they connect to social work’s commitment to specific issues and ideals. An introduction to social work course could provide initial exposure to the connection between being a good civic citizen and the ethical requirements of social work professionals helping students start to develop a political self.

For instance, Bringle & Clayton [55] argue that service learning inevitably is civics learning, and therefore service learning should be leveraged to enhance civics learning and engagement in higher education through a service learning course that involves experiential activities with critical reflection and assessment. The authors provide several frameworks from which educators can base their service learning opportunities, including UNESCO’s Framework for Global Citizenship [55]. Mtawa & Nkhoma [56] detail service learning initiatives at a South African university within humanities and health sciences departments. Students conducted surveys and engaged in various projects in a rural community, and the authors found that participation in these service learning activities enhanced students’ capability and comfort with local citizenship [56]. While integrating service learning courses into curricula may be challenging, incorporating service learning activities - like community activities and volunteer projects - can enrich civics learning. This enrichment is best achieved when they are delivered with a clear framework, a focus on social justice and diversity, collaborative learning, exposure to new environments, and robust reflection and assessment [55,56].

It is understood that many programs already have some material/activities aligned towards civics education, such as participation in local Lobby Days and policy analysis papers, but one or two instances of content discussion throughout an entire BSW or MSW program does little to instill and reinforce the connection between civic identity and civic action required for students to become active and effective civic citizens. Youniss [57] provides several broad ways civics education can be best conveyed: classroom discussions, focus on student government activities, and purpose and service learning that includes service activities. The main goal of embedded material should be helping students cultivate a civic identity that is leveraged towards commitment and action whose focus is the improvement of society, aligning with social work’s ethical values [58], which often requires multiple exposures to material and several opportunities to put learned material into practice [57]. Many recommended activities are already utilized throughout the BSW/MSW curriculum, leaving an easy opening to modify existing material and activities to include civics material and focus.

Classroom engagement with political topics necessitates that professors view education not as a student repository but as a liberating endeavor that focuses on respectful dialogue that stresses the recognition of social injustices and civic restraints in society [59]. Social work is unique in its historical roots in social and political activism and continued support of activist endeavors. Beaumont et al. [44] state it well: “Political participation is critical for the legitimacy of democracy” (p.249), but it is also critical for the legitimacy and effectiveness of social justice and advocacy movements. Social work programs must remember that civics and politics have both a social and collaborative element, where political engagement requires the development of political identity, efficacy, and engagement skills that develop through education and experiential activities that focus on individual and collective experience [44]. Students cannot be expected to be competent in their ability to address social problems without education on the various mechanisms by which this can occur, as well as the skills needed to intervene and promote the common good and a more just society. Further, because change can occur at any level of practice, if social work continues to balk at civic and political education, we are becoming part of the problem, not the solution.

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