Preparing Social Workers for Anti-Oppressive Practice:

Evaluating the Role of Critical Social Work Education

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Abstract

Critical social work (CSW) offers a path forward as social work educators seek to address racism and oppression within our field; yet CSW remains an underexplored topic in social work research. To begin assessment of the prevalence of CSW educational opportunities, student attitudes, and the effect of CSW on student outcomes, researchers administered an online survey to undergraduate and graduate social work students (n = 191) at a large, accredited school of social work. Using quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis, findings suggested that social work students have a strong interest in CSW, but that classroom and field placement opportunities are inconsistent and highly dependent on instructors and practice setting. Linear regression model results demonstrate that plans to use CSW in the future and prior learning of CSW are significant predictors of student knowledge of diversity and oppression derived from the Council on Social Work Education's competency standards even when controlling for relevant confounding variables. Based on these results, we recommend the expansion of CSW implementation within social work curriculum, developing institutional supports for faculty to teach CSW, and a concerted effort to weave CSW within field placements so that CSW is meaningfully integrated within social work education.

Key words: critical social work, social work education, diversity, oppression, anti-oppressive practice

In the wake of the horrific murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and numerous other Black lives, a national movement has taken place that is centering anti-racism, anti-oppression, and theories of liberation at the forefront of social change. Indeed, the protests and demonstrations that took place over the summer of 2020 are estimated to be the largest social justice movement in the history of the United States (Buchanan et al., 2020). This has influenced conversations across multiple disciplines and fields. Notably, it has shifted the discourse in social work and particularly pressed social work educators to incorporate a greater focus on anti-racism and anti-oppressive practices within curriculum and pedagogical approaches (Davis, 2021; McCoy, 2020; Mendez, 2020; UPitt SSW ARDPSC, 2020; UB-Social Work, 2020). While these calls for change have been in existence for decades (Rossiter, 1997), the fervor and solidarity of this international movement presents a critical inflection point in the path of social work education and practice.

Due to its legacy of advocacy and social action, social work has the potential to be one of the professions that leads this social movement that seeks to undo the environment of anti-Black racism and systemic oppression that haunts the United States. But in order to achieve this, internal change must take place to ensure that social work students are prepared to confront structural oppression and systems that promote discrimination (Goode et al., 2020). Critical social work (CSW) enables social workers to utilize a structural lens that addresses systemic barriers and structural oppression from an anti-oppressive approach in order to meet this watershed moment in history. However, the prevalence of CSW within social work educational programs is far from universal and remains understudied. Therefore, this study seeks to expand the literature in this vital topic via an exploratory examination of CSW for undergraduate and graduate students at a large school of social work.

Critical Social Work

Emerging most prominently in the 1970s (Salas et al., 2010), CSW is a theoretical framework that centers structures rather than human pathology as the cause of inequity. Rossiter (1997) summarizes CSW as the "theory and practice which assumes that economic, cultural and social structures privilege some and not others; that those who are not privileged tend to need social work service because of their position in such structures; and that social work is positioned by the state to do the work of regulating such individuals so that the state maintains its ''neutral'' character" (p. 23). This quote addresses two important elements of CSW. First, CSW suggests that individual, interpersonal, and communal problems are often directly linked to institutionalized inequalities within society (Payne, 2018). Second, CSW levies a critique of traditional social work as an enforcer of social inequality by suggesting that some social workers' function is to manage individual behaviors to fit better within oppressive structures rather than change those unjust institutions (Specht & Courtney, 1995). As such, social workers utilizing CSW as a theoretical framework focus on racism, colonialism, sexism, and intersectional oppression when they work with clients and seek to dismantle these systemic barriers rather than regulate the behaviors of their clients. Therefore, political and social advocacy become an integral part of the social worker's duties alongside the interpersonal supports they provide a client.

CSW has been informed by many critical theories and subsequently, this study defined CSW and its usage in social work higher education broadly. Critical race theory, feminist theory, black feminist thought, and structural social work comprise some of the prominent examples of interrelated theories that for the purposes of this study were included within CSW.

Critical Social Work and Social Work Education

Numerous attempts have been made to incorporate CSW into social work education. Education on diversity (Jani et al., 2011), teaching critical race theory (Kolivoski et al., 2014; Ortiz and Jani, 2010), challenging dominant discourses (Daniel and Quiros, 2010), acknowledging privilege (Baltra-Ulloa, 2014),

placing students in field placements focused on structural issues (Ferguson and Smith, 2012), creating community development approaches to justice (Aimers and Walker, 2016), and combating income inequality (Morley, 2016) are all areas of CSW that have been integrated into various social work institutions with varying degrees of success. However, CSW is not implemented uniformly and some significant barriers to its usage remain. For example, Reisch (2013) found that despite a growing focus on social justice in schools, there was less emphasis on CSW overall. Moreover, in a study looking at student perspectives on CSW it was found that students held conflicting and at times contradictory feelings towards CSW education and practice (Barak, 2019). Two examples of these contradictory sentiments include: believing that CSW was an essential intervention while also indicating that it was often not a priority during individual interventions and believing that CSW should change how mainstream social work organizations operated while also believing that CSW would not create those changes in social work organizations.

Several prior studies have investigated the prevalence of CSW educational opportunities and their outcomes on student performance (Barak, 2019; Morley, 2016; Rossiter, 1997). However, this literature has largely called for more research to better explore this underexamined facet of social work education and practice. As such, significant gaps remain in the literature to explore more thoroughly the prevalence, awareness, and desire of CSW opportunities as they are perceived by students.

Critical Social Work and the Diversity and Oppression Scale

In addition to seeing if students are being exposed to CSW, it is important to assess their integration of knowledge and how it shapes their approach to work. One prominent measurement of this within social work is the Diversity and Oppression Scale (DOS) created by Windsor and colleagues (2015). For the purposes of this study, the DOS is more salient than most any other similar measure as it was designed specifically for social work education with direct connections to the Council on Social

Work Education (CSWE) competencies (2015). This measure has been used with several schools of social work to assess student learning and commitment towards the promotion of social justice and serving oppressed and culturally diverse populations (Owens-King et al., 2020; Trull & Myers, 2020; Goode et al., 2020). However, less has been done to directly connect CSW education specifically with outcomes connected to the DOS. As such, this study addresses specific gaps in the social work literature by looking directly at how student perspectives on the prevalence of CSW education and their interest in using CSW in their careers associate with CSWE standards on diversity and social justice knowledge, measured through the DOS.

Significance and Aims of This Study

The country is experiencing a seismic shift in the conversation around racism and oppression. These effects have spread to social work schools and there is an increasing call for greater intentionality into equity, justice, and specifically anti-racism within these programs (Davis, 2021; McCoy, 2020; Mendez, 2020; UPitt SSW ARDPSC, 2020; UB-Social Work, 2020). One of the most compatible theoretical approaches to accomplish these goals within social work education is CSW. Therefore, it is necessary examine the degree to which these educational opportunities exist and if they are producing beneficial shifts in knowledge and attitudes for future social workers. Consequently, this study examined the usage of CSW at a large, accredited social work program located in a northeastern city for BASW and MSW students (n = 191) with the following research objectives:

Aim #1: To identify the prevalence of CSW education opportunities in the form of: 1) courses taken and 2) practical integration within field work tasks for BASW and MSW students. The prevalence of CSW will be measured through descriptive statistics of the sample augmented by qualitative answers regarding the quantity and quality of these educational opportunities. It is hypothesized that the prevalence of

CSW will be low to moderate with BASW and MSW students and it is anticipated that a greater

prevalence of the theory will be found in courses compared to fieldwork.

Aim #2: To explore student attitudes and interest in CSW education in their courses, field placement,

and future professional use. This will be measured using quantitative and qualitative items regarding if

students would want to have greater, lesser, or the same amount of exposure to this theory in their

classes and field work as well as to what extent students plan to use CSW in their future careers. It is

hypothesized interest in CSW will be moderate to high among students.

Aim #3: To evaluate the relationship between exposure to CSW and student interest in CSW with

students' learning of social justice and equity measured through the Diversity and Oppression Scale

(DOS) (Windsor et al., 2015). A multivariate regression analysis will be run to examine relationships

between exposure and interest in CSW on DOS score while controlling for various demographic factors.

Additionally, a mixed effects model for MSW students will examine this relationship while accounting for

the random effect of specialization that is offered at the graduate level. It is hypothesized that exposure

to CSW and strong interest in using CSW will associate with a higher overall DOS score.

Methods

Overview

This study created and disseminated an online survey using Qualtrics to a convenience sample

(n = 191) of undergraduate and master's level social work students at a major North American

university. Based on enrollment data of part-time and full-time undergraduate and graduate students

from 2019, this survey had roughly a 36% response rate and had comparable demographics to the

school's population. The approach utilized in this study was the most appropriate design for the project

because the literature on this subject within the U.S. remains relatively sparse and in need of

observational and descriptive data prior to more advanced processes of causal inference such as a randomized trial. As such, the purpose and subsequent design of this exploratory research survey was threefold. First, the survey focused on exploring the prevalence of CSW in courses and field placement by asking students about their pre-existing knowledge of CSW before providing a definition and examples of CSW education followed by several additional items on student exposure. Second, the survey inquired students about their interest in CSW classes and field placements. Students were asked about their experiences in the classroom and field placement using CSW followed by items on their attitudes and plans for future use of CSW. Augmenting these first two aims were open-ended items that allowed for students to share in greater detail their experiences, perceived supports or barriers to CSW, and their perceived strengths and weaknesses of CSW education. Finally, the survey examined student's knowledge on diversity and oppression using a scale developed following CSWE guidelines (Windsor et al., 2015). The survey was distributed to current students in a school of social work via email and took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Measures

Two predictor variables were operationalized in this study to conduct the multivariate regression model as proxies to represent student exposure to CSW and student attitude and interest in using CSW. Student exposure to CSW was represented by the item "Have you heard of critical social work prior to this survey?" and was dichotomized as yes (1) or no (0). Student attitude and interest was indicated by the item "I plan to use critical social work in my professional career." This item was asked in the survey with a 5-point Likert-scale response but was recoded before analysis to dichotomize completely agree (1) and all disagreeing, neutral, and ambivalent agreement responses (0). In addition to the primary predictor variables, control variables were also included in the model. Demographic information, enrollment in graduate or undergraduate program, MSW specialization, age, and length of

time in the program were collected and utilized in the model. Additionally, if the student had sought out information on CSW independently was included to address concerns that students familiar with the term CSW may have been more likely to seek knowledge on diversity and oppression in general, which could impact their overall DOS score. Finally, students' familiarity with CSW terms and theories (such as cultural humility, systemic racism, structural oppression, Critical Race Theory) were recorded as dichotomous responses to individual items and then summed for a new variable with values ranging from 0 (no familiarity with any terms or theories) to 7 (familiar with all terms and theories). This was included to allow for a distinction between being familiar with general social justice terms affiliated with CSW compared to having informed exposure to CSW and being familiar with the definition of the theory.

Open-ended items pertaining to CSW strengths, weaknesses, supports, barriers, and implementation were integrated within the survey to provide qualitative data that could augment the quantitative data collected. Using a thematic analysis approach to coding, responses were categorized into themes and used to expand the interpretations of the quantitative data.

The dependent variable of this study was students' scores on the Diversity and Oppression Scale (DOS) developed by Windsor and colleagues (2015). The DOS was developed as a method of evaluating student learning based on the Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation (CSWE EPAS) Standards 2.1.4, "the engagement of diversity and difference in practice," and 2.1.5, "the advancement of human rights and social and economic justice" (CSWE EPAS, 2015). The DOS is an established tool within social work education that has been used in multiple studies to assess student learning of culturally diverse and socially oppressed populations alongside social workers' commitment to social justice (Owens-King et al., 2020; Trull & Myers, 2020; Goode et al., 2020). As described by the creators of the scale, "The Diversity and Oppression Scale (DOS) is a standardized instrument measuring self-reported student learning about diversity and oppression … [the] DOS has 4 factors: cultural

diversity self-confidence (α = .90; 11 items), diversity and oppression (α = .69; 8 items), social worker/client congruence (α = .84; 3 items), and social worker responsibilities (α = .61; 3 items)" (Windsor et al., 2015, p. 58). This study added one additional item to the cultural diversity self-confidence factor: "I feel confident about my knowledge and understanding of Latinx history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions." This item mirrored the language of similar items for other racial and ethnic groups that were in the original scale but allowed for a specific item on Latinx culture.

Sample and Participant Recruitment

A convenience sample of BASW and MSW students at a large, accredited school of social work located in a northeastern city were recruited for participation in the survey (n = 191). Students were contacted via email to complete the online survey. Emails to students were distributed through program directors, social work specific school clubs, and generalist research courses. Inclusion criteria consisted of being an active student in the BASW or MSW at the university's social work program and being 18 years or older. There were no active exclusion criteria.

Analytic Plan

Data were collected using the online survey system, Qualtrics, and statistical analysis was completed using RStudio and SPSS 26. To address aims one and two of this study, a mixed methods approach that incorporated quantitative and qualitative data analysis was used. Quantitative data analyses of these aims consisted primarily of descriptive data (e.g., means, percentages) taken from items related to exposure, awareness, and desire for CSW education and demographic information. To augment the quantitative data, qualitative data were examined using a thematic analysis wherein responses were coded into broad themes then refined into narrower categories to further explore student exposure, awareness, and interest in CSW education.

To meet the third aim of this study, multivariate regression models using CSW education exposure and student interest in CSW as the predictor variables and DOS score as the outcome variable were conducted. These models controlled for race, age, gender, length of time in program, undergraduate or graduate degree, if students had learned CSW independently from the program, and their general familiarity with CSW terms or related theories. The two predictor variables used were "Have you heard of critical social work prior to this survey" dichotomized as yes or no, "I plan to use critical social work in my professional career" dichotomized as completely agree and all other responses (all forms of disagreement, neutral, or slightly agree).

Additionally, because this university offers specializations within the master's program (direct practice with individuals, families, and small groups [direct practice] and community, organization, and social action [COSA]), a mixed effects model was used to examine the relationship between the fixed effects of student exposure and interest in CSW with DOS score while accounting for the random effect of specialization (n = 169). Because the undergraduate program is generalist, they were excluded from this analysis. This model again controlled for race, age, gender, length of time in the program, independent learning of CSW, and general social justice knowledge.

Results

While over 200 respondents participated in the survey, after removing incomplete or otherwise unusable surveys, a final sample of 191 participants was utilized during analysis. Table 1 details the descriptive statistics for the race, gender, age, program, specialization, and field placement of participants. The majority of the sample was in the MSW program, direct practice specialization, under the age of 30, and predominantly White and female. When comparing the sample's descriptive statistics to the most recent school-reported demographics from 2019, the sample was quite reflective of the population across all measures. For example, White students account for 70% of the reported 2019

population and 72.8% of the sample. Similarly, female students comprised 85% of the 2019 population

and 87.4% of the sample.

<Insert Table 1 about descriptive statistics of sample here>

Table 2 details the descriptive statistics of students' exposure and interest in CSW education and

field placement. When asked if they had heard of CSW prior to this survey, nearly 70% of respondents

said no. However, after providing a definition and examples of CSW education then asking if students

had taken one or more courses that included some form of CSW, the proportions flipped and 68.6% of

students responded in the affirmative. The prevalence of CSW courses remained overall sparse as 58%

of students said that CSW instruction was included in less than a quarter of their classes. Further, only

about half of students said that their field placement incorporated CSW. While student knowledge and

experiences of CSW were somewhat varied, student interest and intent for future use was far more

unified. The vast majority of students stated they would like to learn more about CSW in classes and use

CSW more in their field placements. When asked if CSW was important for students to learn and

important for social workers to use in practice, students replied in the affirmative at roughly 97% for

both. Additionally, nearly 92% of students indicated that they planned to use CSW in their professional

careers in some way. However, despite such unanimous support for CSW, students were less sure about

how to actually utilize CSW concepts. For example, only 56.3% of students said they felt prepared to

confront structural oppression in society. Finally, descriptive statistics on student DOS scores were also

run. Student DOS scores ranged from 71-122 from a possible 130 with a mean score of 103.6 and a

standard deviation of 9.12.

<Insert Table 2 about student interest and exposure to CSW here>

After examining the finding that student exposure to CSW was mixed but that student interest

in CSW was very strong, a multivariate regression model was created to examine the relationship

between student exposure and interest in CSW with DOS outcomes (Table 3). Student exposure was

represented by if the student had heard of CSW prior to the survey and dichotomized as yes (1) or no

(0). Student interest was represented by if the student planned to use CSW in their future career and

was dichotomized between students who strongly planned on using CSW (1) to those who were

ambivalent, undecided, or planning not to use CSW (0). This model controlled for race, gender, age,

length of time in social work program, degree specialization, and graduate or undergraduate degree. Of

these control variables only two were significant. Direct-practice specialization associated with higher

DOS scores compared to macro social work practice specialization (B = 4.05, p < .01) and length of time

in the program associated with higher DOS scores (B = .57, p < .05). Further, the model controlled for if

students had learned about CSW independently (B = 1.47, p < . 05) as well as students' familiarity with

general concepts associated with CSW, which was not a significant predictor in the model.

As shown in Table 3, there was a significant relationship between both predictor variables of

interest as student knowledge of CSW prior to the survey (B = 3.59, p < .01) and students' plans to use

CSW in their career (B = 4.41, p < .01) associated with higher DOS scores. Notably, a model not

presented in Table 3 included the predictor of if a student affirmed that they had learned concepts of

CSW (after being provided a definition and examples in the survey), which was not significant.

<Insert Table 3 about multivariate regression here>

An Independent-Samples T Test found no difference between undergraduate and graduate

student means in their DOS scores. However, there was significant difference within the MSW program

based on specialization, specifically that direct practice specialization students on average had higher

outcomes on the DOS compared to students in the macro practice specialization. As such, a mixed

effects model was created using only MSW students to examine the fixed effects of exposure and

interest while accounting for the random effect of specialization (Table 4). In this model, students being

familiar with CSW, desire to use CSW in their career, and if they learned about CSW independently all remained significant predictors of DOS score.

<Insert Table 4 about mixed effects model here>

Finally, open-ended survey items were analyzed using a thematic analysis wherein responses were coded into themes, as can be found in Table 5. Many of the identified themes reinforce the findings throughout the survey. Perhaps most salient of these findings was a consistent theme that students were unfamiliar with CSW as a term but familiar with specific concepts of CSW. For example, one student wrote "We have touched on theories related to critical social work, but that term was never used." Another shared, "I have learned about the concepts encompassed by critical social work, but I do not recall the concepts being identified as this type of social work." Other prominent themes that emerged through the thematic analysis were that students had a strong interest in CSW and saw it as a valuable tool that not only broadened their perspective but provided ethical values as a social justice-oriented approach to practice. However, students did identify weaknesses or barriers to CSW as well. Prominent themes here were how prepared professors were to teach CSW content, practical challenges of using CSW in field placement, and being unsure where CSW would fit in within an already full set of required courses.

<Insert Table 5 about qualitative findings here>

Discussion

Aim 1: Student Exposure

To address the first aim of this study, the prevalence of CSW education opportunities in the classroom and in field placement settings for BASW and MSW students were examined at an accredited social work program. This study found mixed results that suggest that CSW is taught sporadically and

often is ill-defined within the classroom. The majority of students (69.6%) stated that they had not heard of CSW initially but when presented with the definition of CSW alongside examples, concepts, and related theories, responses essentially flipped with the majority of students then saying that some form of CSW had been taught in their classes (68.6%). Open-ended responses allowed for greater clarity into why this occurred, as many students suggested that they had learned specific concepts related to CSW but never heard them defined as CSW. Moreover, in both the descriptive data and through thematic coding, it was found that when CSW is taught it is either relegated to an isolated unit within a required course or taught within an elective. That is to say, classroom experiences of CSW were reported to be infrequent or peripheral to central learning and students felt that CSW was not defined when taught. Our findings suggest that field placement tends to have even less CSW incorporated as barely half of students felt they had used CSW in their placement. A consistent theme was identified through coding that some field placements often ignored or actively discouraged CSW dependent on the setting a student was in. In sum, student exposure was mixed, and highly dependent on the course, the instructor, and the field placement, rather than a common experience for students.

These findings are consistent within the broader literature. Previous work has asserted that while social work education has affirmed social justice within its teaching in rhetoric and intent, the actual implementation of these teachings does not always successfully adhere to the stated mission (Reisch, 2013). These findings reaffirm that teaching CSW is indeed a difficult and at times even confusing process (Rossiter, 2001).

Aim 2: Student Attitude and Interest

In contrast to the mixed exposure to CSW was the interest that students had in learning and using CSW. Across all items pertaining to student interest in CSW, support was near unanimous. Over 90% of students agreed that they would like to learn more CSW in their classes and that it is a valuable

tool for students to learn in school. Nearly 80% wanted to use more CSW in their field placement and 97% felt that CSW is important for social workers to use in the field. Buttressing these findings were the responses collected from the open-ended questions. Consistent themes of strong interest in having more learning opportunities and specifically involving CSW within generalist curriculum emerged.

However, even with the strong interest in learning CSW, students did identify contradictions and barriers in their attitudes towards CSW. Despite the vast majority of students stating that they would use CSW in their professional career, only 56.3% stated that they felt prepared to confront structural oppression in society. Several students stated within open-ended items that they felt unsure how to engage in CSW outside of vague notions of advocacy and organizing, which once again reinforced students stating they are interested in learning more concrete tools in how to engage in CSW practice.

Barak (2019) found similar results through interviews with social work students who expressed the contradictory views regarding the importance of CSW while maintaining that it can be difficult to implement. While interest was high, students expressed concerns related to if instructors were well-versed in CSW and how that would shape classroom discussions. Indeed, students' concern regarding instructor preparedness were central to the barriers and limitations discussed in the open-ended items. This again mirrored prior literature which suggests that faculty presence is an essential tool in teaching topics related to social justice (Goode et al., 2020).

Aim 3: Relationship Between CSW Exposure and Student Attitude With the DOS

To address the final aim of this study, the association of student knowledge of CSW and student interest in CSW on the DOS was examined. This study found a significant association, which suggests the possibility of an important relationship between CSW education and student outcomes as defined by the CSWE EPAS (2015) and measured by the DOS. While this association has limited causality or generalizability, the models run did control for race, gender, age, length of time in the program,

specialization, undergraduate or graduate degree, if the student had learned CSW independently, and their overall awareness of related concepts to CSW. Even with all these control variables, if a student was aware of CSW prior to the survey and if a student had a strong interest in using CSW in their professional career associated with higher DOS scores. While this study is one of the first to specifically examine CSW's association with the DOS, it does fall in line with a pattern of prior literature that suggests coursework on anti-racism, social justice, and privilege are beneficial in improving students' knowledge of equity, diversity, and oppression (Owens-King et al., 2020; Trull & Myers, 2020; Goode et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Social Work Education

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations for social work programs and educators become clear. First, this study found that students perceived CSW as valuable not just as a broader perspective that ensures social workers are well-rounded, but also as an ethical imperative to address racism and systemic oppression. Further, this study suggests that students are eager to learn and use this approach as a means of furthering justice and equity in our society and profession. As we consider how to address oppression within our profession and our society, CSW offers a viable path that warrants inclusion within our curriculum and practice. However, this study's findings suggest that access to CSW is inconsistent. As such, it is imperative that CSW be meaningfully integrated within the BASW and MSW curriculums. Business as usual can no longer stand. As the United States begins to reckon with its legacy of racism and oppression (Buchannan et al., 2020), clear calls within the profession are identifying our own roots in anti-Black racism and oppression and demanding internal change within how social work education takes place to address both internal structures within institutions and alter how social work is practiced in the community (Davis, 2021; McCoy, 2020; Mendez, 2020; UPitt SSW

ARDPSC, 2020; UB-Social Work, 2020). While certainly not the only step in this process of reform, CSW

offers a substantive approach that addresses racism and oppression head-on.

To effectively incorporate CSW into the curriculum, social work programs must be willing to

accommodate sufficient time and resources to ensure that CSW content is substantive and thorough

enough to provide value to students. This means that topics related to CSW, anti-racism, and anti-

oppressive practice must be more than a single diversity training, isolated unit within a course, or an

elective class that many students will not take. Instead, CSW should be offered throughout classes and

woven within multiple settings throughout a student's academic career. By doing this, two clear benefits

can emerge. First, this allows for more topics to be viewed from the CSW lens, which can in turn help

students further learn about diversity, oppression, justice, and equity. Second, through offering a

greater depth of CSW education throughout coursework, students can become better familiarized with

how to craft interventions to address structural issues and utilize CSW outside of general platitudes of

advocacy and organizing. That is to say, only through consistent and nuanced learning of CSW in

different settings can students be expected to gain mastery of interventions, skills, and ontological

perspectives that can help shape how they approach work once they are in the field. It is our role as

educators to provide students that opportunity.

Second, this study found that many students felt that their educational experiences of CSW

were largely influenced by prepared or willing their educator was with topics on racism and systemic

oppression. This mirrors findings by Goode and colleagues (2020) who found "rather than listing specific

course activities, students in our sample consistently described how the contributions of faculty

members … in the classroom were significant factors in their ability to receive instruction on social

justice topics" (p. 8).Therefore, the second recommendation is to ensure that faculty are prepared to

teach and discuss CSW within the classroom. In order to successfully implement CSW, it is essential that

faculty be prepared to teach these courses, which requires institutional support, training, and guidance for instructors. This means that educators themselves must adapt to growing interests from students, but it also dictates that programs must provide the guidance, support, and training necessary to prepare current instructors on how to engage in CSW education. Additionally, it will require institutions to engage in intentional hiring practices for emerging educators to ensure that candidates are qualified and prepared to engage in anti-oppressive work. Vitally, this is not a call to place unreasonable burdens on faculty members of color or other minoritized and marginalized identities (Funge, 2011), but instead is a call to social work programs to actively identify methods of supporting all faculty members to be competent in incorporating elements of CSW, social justice, equity, anti-racism, and anti-oppressive practice within their classrooms.

The third recommendation offered is to ensure that additional supports are made to assist students who wish to participate in field placements that utilize CSW. There are unique challenges experienced within the field placement setting that in many ways mirror challenges that students will face when they enter the workforce. There are practical concerns of what policies and procedures a field placement has that may limit what a student can do. Our study found that some students felt that specific settings with more rigid procedures (such as hospitals and jails) were either ignoring or actively resisting the use of CSW approaches. This presents an authentically difficult challenge as field placements have a great deal of discretion in how their internal policy and procedures are enacted and indeed, students who intentionally deviate may be sanctioned. Additionally, students voiced their own questioning about what CSW might look like in a practice setting outside of banal terms such as advocacy. This suggests that students must be better informed about CSW so that they understand how it can be integrated into all practice even in subtle ways.

These barriers are formidable and will require dedicated time and energy over a prolonged period of time to address. To begin, we recommend providing CSW education and tools to students that will allow students to see themselves as connected within systems. As students see themselves as interconnected to social problems rather than isolated, they may identify opportunities for collaboration, organizing, and empowerment that may begin to alleviate the institutional barriers raised by specific field placement settings. For example, as students begin to see how rigid rules and predatory insurance practices within hospital settings impact their lives alongside the people with whom they are working, new paths towards CSW interventions that address multiple dimensions of policy may be engaged with. Through a CSW perspective, students can recognize the shared struggles they have with consumers and build broad coalitions that improve social conditions for all. Part of this process will necessitate praxis and dialogic practice (Freire, 1972) as essential elements to be solidified through practice experience.

Additionally, social work programs would benefit from identifying opportunities to engage in structural work (Ferguson & Smith, 2012) alongside micro practice. These opportunities must be made available to all interested students, even if they are not in macro practice specializations. Ensuring that appropriate placements, liaisons, and supervisors participate in this process can allow for students to develop tools for structural interventions such as collective empowerment, critical consciousness raising, group work and collectivization, and the facilitation of access to resources (Bowen, 2012).

To elaborate on the third recommendation, a brief example of how to use CSW in social work practice will be highlighted using the work done by Bay-Cheng (2011), who provides a thorough review of how to re-politicize empowerment for those working with female adolescents around sexual wellbeing. Bay-Cheng states that current popular forms of empowerment rhetoric center on individual actors so that "when stripped of critical consciousness and social action to correct system injustices,

empowerment is quickly distorted into a self-improvement discourse that instructs individuals to identify themselves, rather than surrounding social conditions, as the problem to be fixed and to compete against others rather than join with them" (2011, p. 714). However, Bay-Cheng asserts that empowerment exists in the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and behavioral/political action and that all three domains must be considered equally valuable and interconnected. In the work done with these female adolescents, Bay-Cheng and colleagues work to keep sexuality within its social and political context so that the youth are viewed not as recipients of needed services but instead as partners engaging in a collective effort (2011, p. 715). Through this framework, efforts are made to challenge traditional forms of sanitation in language and topics that regulate girls' behaviors so that the adolescents in this program could recognize their shared experiences of oppression. This provides a simple put powerful example of how any social work student can operate in their field placement, regardless of setting. Through the recognition that intrapersonal empowerment is dependent on communal relationships and social action, social workers have the capacity to collaborate with their clients towards institutional change in a variety of placements.

While the wide-scale implementation of CSW within social work programs may present challenges, I contend that this process will not be nearly as daunting as it may first appear. Many of the goals presented by CSW are indeed consistent with the stated goals already offered by the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards [EPAS] (2015). Competencies found within CSWE's EPAS (2015) such as "engage diversity and difference in practice", "advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice", "engage in policy practice", and "intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities" are all examples of social work's stated goals that are fully compatible with a CSW education. Indeed, the findings in this study suggest that students engaged with CSW have higher DOS scores indicating that they may in fact be better prepared in these competencies.

Moreover, while logistics and spatial constraints within a curriculum are legitimate concerns, I argue that educators should not feel threatened that their content will be erased. Instead, CSW offers an augmenting educational tool alongside pre-existing content that can operate in tandem to expand, critique, and push our profession's work towards social justice further. Indeed, CSW is not devoid of the interpersonal and practical skills that create the bedrock of micro practice education. Instead, CSW offers an extension of these skills by recognizing the importance of both interpersonal and institutional interventions. In sum, these recommendations are offered not in an utter dismissal of current educational practices but as an expansion towards a new approach that embraces anti-oppressive and anti-racist work as central to the mission of social work pedagogy.

Limitations and Future Research

This research has several limitations. First, the study utilized a convenience sample drawing only from one accredited social work program located in a city in the northeastern United States and therefore has limited generalizability of findings and may not represent the experiences and attitudes of social work students in other geographic regions, or schools of differing sizes. Moreover, although the sample was quite similar to the population of the program, the sample was predominantly White and cisgender women discussing their experiences in a school of social work where the majority of the faculty is also White. The constrained racial/ethnic and gender diversity in the sample limits generalizability. Additionally, there is a concern of selection bias within the sample as students who elected to participate in the survey may have been more likely to have pre-existing knowledge about CSW or greater interest and commitment to social justice issues. As this study used cross-sectional data, causality, and time of exposure to CSW relative to DOS score cannot be measured. Finally, while this study was intentionally focused on the voices of students, faculty perceptions are critically important in determining the facilitators and barriers to CSW education and as such, future research should

incorporate instructors' perspectives. Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution as one of the first surveys to examine the association between CSW education and social work student knowledge of diversity and oppression based on CSWE guidelines.

There is much to be done in future research to explore the role of CSW in social work higher education. To begin, broader studies that examine multiple schools are necessary to better understand student exposure and interest in CSW on a national scale. Regional differences, geographic differences, and a more thorough exploration on the differences of student opinions on CSW by race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability should be conducted. Additionally, the associations of CSW knowledge and attitude on DOS score found in this study warrant further research. Longitudinal and causal research designs should be conducted to better understand the processes of gaining CSW knowledge, changing belief systems, and student attitudes on a host of CSWE competencies and component behaviors.

Conclusion

As we move towards a future where social work actively addresses internal racism within the profession and seeks to dismantle oppression across all facets of our society, CSW offers one of many viable paths to achieve this aim. This study provides a beginning step towards identifying the current state of CSW education and the impact it can have on future social workers. The survey discussed here evaluated the prevalence of CSW education, student attitudes towards CSW, and the association between CSW and student knowledge derived from CSWE competencies. The study outcomes demonstrate that while CSW is not taught consistently nor uniformly defined within courses, there is a strong interest from students to learn more, and evidence to suggest that CSW is positively related with improved outcomes on diversity and oppression knowledge-based competencies deriving from CSWE. These findings support the necessity for further research on CSW and an expansion of CSW

opportunities for students and faculty members as a method of incorporating anti-oppressive pedagogy

within our profession.

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Tables

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 191)

	n	%
Program		
MSW	172	90
BASW	19	10
MSW Specialization		
Direct Practice	141	82
COSA	31	18
Field Placement		
Currently in placement	149	78
Completed placement	16	8.4
Awaiting placement	26	13.6
Sex		
Male	13	6.8
Female	167	87.4
Non-binary, Transgender, or Agender	11	5.8
Race		
White or European American	139	72.8
Black or African American	23	12
Latinx or Hispanic	5	2.6
Asian or Asian American	11	5.8
Biracial, multiracial, or other racial/ethnic group	13	6.8
Age		
≤25	111	58.1
26-39	60	31.4
≥40	20	10.5

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Student Exposure and Interest in Critical Social Work (CSW)

Item	n	%
Class and field placement exposure		
Have you heard of CSW prior to this survey?		
Yes	58	30.4
No	133	69.6
Have you taken one or more course(s) in the School of Social Work that included some instruction about CSW?		
Yes	131	68.6
No	60	31.4
How many of your courses in the School of Social Work included some instruction on CSW?		
≤25%	109	58
26-50%	40	21.3
51-75%	21	11.2
76-100%	18	9.5
Has your field placement incorporated CSW?		
Yes	87	51.2
No	53	31.2
Not sure	30	17.6
Student interest		
Opinion on CSW in the classroom		
Would like to learn more about CSW in classes	172	92.5
Stay the same	12	6.5
Would like to learn less about CSW in classes	2	1.1
Opinion on CSW in field placement		
Would like to use more CSW in placement	128	79.5
Stay the same	33	20.5
Would like to use less CSW in placement	0	0
CSW is a valuable tool for social work students to learn in school		
Agree (slightly or completely)	179	96.8
Neutral	3	1.6
Disagree (slightly or completely)	3	1.6
Future use		
I feel prepared to confront structural oppression in society		
Agree (slightly or completely)	104	56.3
Neutral	33	17.8
Disagree (slightly or completely)	48	25.9
CSW is important for social workers to use in the field		
Agree (slightly or completely)	180	97.3
Disagree (slightly, completely) and neutral	5	2.7
I plan to use CSW in my professional career		
Agree (completely)	126	68.1
Agree (slightly)	44	23.8
Disagree (slightly or completely) and neutral	15	8.1

Table 3

Regressions of Associations Between CSW Exposure, Interest, and DOS Total Score for All Students

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	90.01	4.04		22.30	.000	[82.04 – 97.98]
Has learned about CSW	3.59	1.52	.19	2.37	.01	[.60 – 6.58]
Plans to use CSW in career	4.41	1.47	.23	3.00	.01	[1.51 – 7.32]
Learned about CSW independently	1.47	.69	.16	2.14	.05	[.11 – 2.83]
Familiar with CSW concepts	.79	.44	.14	1.80	.07	[-.08 – 1.66]

Note. This model controls for race, gender, age, length of time in social work program, degree specialization, and graduate or undergraduate degree.

Table 4

Mixed Effects Model for MSW Students

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% CI [LL-UL]	p
Fixed effects				
Intercept	92.33	4.14	[84.83 – 100.17]	.000
Has learned about CSW	3.26	1.47	[0.43 – 6.10]	.05
Plans to use CSW in career	4.29	1.46	[1.32 – 7.02]	.01
Learned about CSW independently	2.86	1.37	[.19 – 5.49]	.05
Familiar with CSW concepts	0.81	.42	[-.05 – 1.64]	.07
Random effects	Variance	SD		
Specialization	5.93	2.44		

Number of observations = 169

Note. This model controls for race, gender, age, and length of time in social work program.

Table 5

Identified Themes and Examples of Open-Ended Responses

Theme	Example of Responses
Student experiences with CSW	**Concepts of CSW are taught but not called CSW** • *"I feel I have learned a lot of CSW concepts without knowing they were a part of CSW."* • *"While topics within CSW are touched on, the term CSW, and all that it encompasses, is not taught to students."*
Student interest in learning and using CSW	**Strong interest in CSW** • *"I think classes mention topics of critical social work, but it should be more of a central theme in all classes, not just a week, day or unit."* • *"There have been a few theories discussed in class but not a lot. I would love to learn more!"* • *"The classes were all excellent, but only one of those was a required class … I think there are missed opportunities to introduce this content in the first-year generalist curriculum."* • *"My field placement is at an agency that works with the justice system and the school to prison pipeline and using critical social work would be really beneficial to carry over into my work there."* **Questions on practical use in intervention** • *"This theory should be taught or at least briefly mentioned in every social work class because it is that important. I also think students should learn more strategies than advocacy to implement structural change. Advocacy is a blanket solution that seems daunting to begin solving such a large problem."*
Value of CSW	**Broad perspective and better prepared** • *"I believe it is essential for students to understand the larger forces that create social and economic inequity and oppression."* • "Becoming a well-rounded social worker with more tools in their toolbox." • *"I think students will become more educated on current social issues and how to address them in practice."* **Ethical, justice-centered, anti-racist** • *"Critical social work education aligns with the ethical code of conduct for social work. Critical social work education aligns with the shifting public understandings of the role social services professionals should play in society. Critical social work education takes an anti-racist approach to social work … Critical social work education adds to the competency of future social workers."* • *"I think it is necessary that students receive critical social work education or else they cannot truly be competent social workers. I think strengths are that students can use these practices to dismantle systems of White supremacy and become aware of systems of oppression, hate, and discrimination."*
Challenges for CSW	**Preparedness of professors** • *"How much CSW is discussed in class depends heavily on how much (or little) the professor wants to incorporate these types of discussions into their class."*

- *"I have concerns of receiving critical social work education from a professor that is not adequately familiar with the details and intricacies of the theory."*

Field placement limitations

- *"Critical social work is an interesting theory but I don't see my field placement having the knowledge/time/ability to use critical social work in real life. Learning how to use it would be extremely helpful. "*
- *"Using critical social work in my field placement is difficult oftentimes because … I'm at the [jail] which is such a massively oppressive agency that is a part of a massively oppressive system, so it definitely creates friction when trying to advocate for people in the jail or deliver a service and the jail creates barriers to this … the jail is just generally set up to make it difficult to work directly with inmates in an empowering way."*
- *"I think that I have only learned about critical social work in a theoretical way at field because of the direct practice nature of my placements. The focus is usually on individuals rather than systems."*

Space in curriculum/courses

- *"There is so much material already, that many students and professors may view critical social work as additional or surplus."*