

Practice Experience and the New Social Work Professor: Implications for Advanced Generalist Programs

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Abstract

The need for social work practice experience to become more effective social work instructors has been the subject of much controversy for several years. The goal of this study is to advance the conversation about whether new faculty, who are highly experienced social work practitioners, have a necessary prior skill set to more effectively teach advanced practice courses than new inexperienced professors. Data was used from 488 student assessment of teaching surveys for eight new faculty teaching at an advanced generalist social work program at a mid-west university. Findings suggest that practice experience increases the quality of practice-oriented teaching. Implications for advanced generalist social work programs pertaining to the recruitment and sustainment of clinician-scientists are discussed.

Keywords: Social work practice education, practice experience, student satisfaction, new faculty

Introduction

The debate about the need for practice experience among social work educators has gone on for decades. Point/counterpoint articles have been written, both highlighting and refuting the importance of practice experience and the need for a social work licensure that requires practice experience (Kemp, 1998; Marson, 2006; Seidl, 2000; Thyer, 2000; Videka-Sherman, 1998). Until the 1960s, most social work educators were chosen from experienced practitioners and supervisors. The strong belief was that educators who possessed practice competence would be the most able to convey this to students in the classroom (Shachter, 1969). As social work education has evolved, the need for educators to move from teaching based on anecdotal work experience to theory building and empirical validation of practice began to transform the market for social work educators (Mackie, 2013; Midgley, 1999;).

As the profession continues to mature, greater expectations are placed on social work faculty for high-level scholarship, thus swaying the social work education market towards those professionals who were doctorally prepared in advanced research methods and statistics. This was due, in part, because research in the field of social work has a “checkered history” and the academy has challenged the profession to be more vigilant about the quality of their research in order for the profession to gain adequate recognition and respect from colleagues in other disciplines (Midgley, 1999, p. 105). With this increased emphasis in scholarship, professors require additional training in social work research methods to meet tenure expectations around scholarship.

The unintended consequence of the pendulum swinging away from practice competence toward research competence was a dramatic increase in social work educators teaching practice courses with fewer years of practice experience than ever before (Johnson & Munch, 2010). A growing concern about the quality of instruction based on a reduction in practice experience ensued, compelling the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) to formally address the issue. The end result was a policy that mandated social work instructors of required advanced practice courses to have at least 2 years of post MSW experience in professional social work (CSWE, 1994).

Johnson & Munch (2010) postulate that practice experience expectations of social work educators have changed to become less rigorous. Supporting this conclusion, Mackie (2013) demonstrates that despite the CSWE mandate of 2 years of post-MSW practice experience to teach advanced practice courses, only 65% of social work programs continue to advertise an expectation of 2 years of post-MSW practice experience to be considered for employment. Interestingly, Barsky, Green, & Ayayo (2013) studied recent hiring priorities for BSW and MSW programs in the US. They were intrigued by their finding that many programs are now expressing a desire for candidates with practical and practice-oriented experience with 34% of the programs studied identifying advanced clinical practice as an area of expertise needed and 22% perceiving that recent applicant pools are lacking advanced clinical social work practice.

This debate takes on a new twist as we consider the need for experienced scientist-practitioners to teach advanced generalist students. More than 25 years ago, CSWE adopted a revised curriculum policy statement (CSWE, 1988) that allowed for an advanced generalist track as one possible focus areas in graduate social work education, eventually becoming one of the fastest growing areas of concentration for MSW programs (Lavitt, 2009). Early on, Gibbs, Locke, & Lohmann (1990) entreated advanced generalist programs to provide an MSW curriculum with highly relevant advanced learning opportunities of sufficient depth such that students would be able to apply advanced curriculum content with multiple intervention levels. This continues to be true today as the advanced generalist practitioner focuses on the intersection between individuals and the broader environment, having to assume multiple roles and intervene across multiple practice levels in a multi-theory and multi-method manner (e.g., Morales, Shaefer, & Scott, 2010; Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois, 2012).

If advanced generalist students need in-depth learning opportunities in select advanced curriculum focus areas, then instructors must have the skill sets required to provide that in-depth learning. This is consistent with advanced generalist philosophy where it is believed that specialization doesn't occur in the classroom, but over many years of practice in the field (Schatz, Jenkins, & Downey, 2000). Therefore, experienced practitioners may have an advantage in this area, though it appears no study confirming this has been completed.

The goal of this study is to advance the conversation about whether new faculty who are highly experienced social work practitioners teach advanced practice courses in an advanced generalist program more effectively than new inexperienced professors. To better understand the impact significant practice experience has on social work education, this study examines student assessment of the teaching effectiveness of new faculty, half of whom have significant practice experience and half of whom do not. No studies known to the researcher has examined student evaluations of teaching for new faculty in this way and given the paucity of such data; this study can provide a significant starting point from which to further examine this issue.

Method

University Student Assessment of Teaching (USAT) survey data from students taking graduate concentration (advanced standing) courses was gathered from data routinely provided to the Social Work department leadership. The USAT is a locally developed measure that has reportedly been in use for approximately 20 years. However, institutional summaries using the USAT in its current form are only publicly available since 2003 (UND, 2014). While focus groups were originally used to develop the USAT prior to its inception, no published or unpublished studies of the measure's reliability or validity are presently available.

Graduate students in these courses generally reflect the ethnic diversity found in the local area with the vast majority being white females that intend to practice social work at the MSW level rather than continue on for doctoral training. USATs collected from these students are

designed to garner information about their perceptions of the overall effectiveness of the course and to aid in the evaluation of teaching effectiveness throughout the university. They include 22 items with statements such as "the course was well organized" or "I participated when appropriate." Students are asked to provide a rating on a five point likert-type scale where "1" indicated they strongly disagree and "5" indicated they strongly agree.

A convenience sampling method was utilized, as secondary data was analyzed and only available from a single department. USAT scores were analyzed from eight newly hired faculty in their first academic jobs who were hired in the social work department within the last seven years. Four of these professors followed the more traditional academic route and were hired within 1-2 years of completion of their terminal practice degree programs. They were placed in the "academic" group. Three from this group were hired in tenure-seeking roles and one was in a non-tenure seeking position. This group consisted of 3 women and one man, 3 were white and one was Asian, with an average age of 33. The other four had significant (ranging from 12-25+ years) post-MSW practice experience before entering academia. Two from the "practitioner" group were non-tenure seeking MSW faculty and two were PhDs in a tenure-seeking track. This group consisted of 3 men and one woman, all were white, with an average age of 52. Between these eight professors, evaluations for 41 graduate level courses (488 total student evaluations) were examined. Only advanced generalist practice courses taught within the first two years of being hired were used in the analysis in order to eliminate research bias due to potential positive effects of fine-tuning courses and teaching skills over time (e.g., Boice, 2000). Mean score averages were compared for significant differences between the two groups.

Because differences were tested between only two categorical, independent groups, the independent samples *t*-test was selected. *T*-tests were also used due to the fact that USAT scores (dependent variable) were a continuous interval scale variable. However, conducting multiple *t*-tests increases the probability of type I error so the .01 significance level was adopted rather than the customary .05 level (e.g., Duncan, 1975). Effect sizes (*r*) were calculated to measure the strength of relationship between the variables. The effect size statistic calculated for these independent-samples *t*-tests was Cohen's *d*. Mean differences and the ranges of values for a 95% confidence interval (CI) were also calculated.

To assure anonymity of participants to the campus IRB Board, a student research assistant from outside of the department, with no knowledge of the study participants, helped ensure that USAT scores for individual professors remained confidential. USAT score data was aggregated and placed onto a spreadsheet with no identifiers. The research assistant was instructed on which group to code each professor's USAT data (group 1 and 2) but was not made aware of the reason for that coding. After receiving the data from the research assistant, the author maintained control of the only copy of the spreadsheet and conducted all data analyses.

Results

The 15 questions on the USAT pertaining specifically to the instructor and/or the instructor's the impact of the course. Thirteen of these were statistically significant and are listed in Table 1 below. They are broken into two categories: Modeling professional practice behavior and effective curriculum delivery with three additional summary questions regarding effort, instructor effectiveness and the overall value of the course. These are placed under the "inspiring effort and overall satisfaction" category. Results from Table 1 indicate that all three of these summary questions were significant. Finally, a total score (grand mean) was calculated. The total scores (grand means) for the USAT surveys examined in this study were also significantly higher for the practitioner group.

There were consistently higher mean scores obtained by the practitioner group, yet the magnitude of the differences in the means between the groups were modest, ranging from .124 (effectively used technology) to .526 (found ways to keep students interested). All but two of the effect sizes calculated indicated a medium effect ($>.30$), and four (communicated ideas and information clearly, connected course to real world situations, found ways to keep students interested, and treated students with respect) were found to have a large effect ($>.50$). The total score for the USATs found a medium effect at .401.

Discussion

This research examined one aspect of academic life (teaching) when one transitions from the practice culture to the academic culture and suggests that new faculty with significant practice experience might be better prepared to begin teaching in advanced generalist settings. The study findings suggest that practice experience may increase the quality of practice-oriented teaching based on student evaluations and serves as an initial starting point for a larger conversation about the relative importance of attracting experienced social workers into academia and into advanced generalist programs in particular.

One implication for this finding may be that social workers with more years of practice experience may be more likely to have opportunities to have taken on multiple roles (e.g. counseling, case management, supervising, administration) and practice across multiple levels (macro, mezzo, micro) in ever-changing environments. Advanced generalist programs aim to teach students to thrive in dynamic environments, and the boundaries of our already broad profession are becoming increasingly fluid (Lewandowski, GlenMaye, & Bolin, 2004). Therefore, instructors with significant practice experience may be equipped with more relevant, cutting edge information and examples that are more directly useful social workers providing service to their clients and organizations (Kemp, 1998; Liles, 2007; Marson, 2006).

A possible explanation of the study findings may be that new faculty members with large amounts of prior practice experience are in a different place in their careers than their less experienced counterparts. For example, Laursen & Rocque (2009) identify three career stages for

academics and the challenges they face. In the early career, the focus is on teaching, advising, research, negotiation, and time management skills. Experienced social work practitioners may have already developed negotiation and time management skills and are often proficient in the mid-career skills of leadership and administration, collaboration, and outreach. These skills may be highly desirable, particularly for smaller social work programs as they may allow them to fill leadership roles earlier than what is commonly expected.

Diversity in all of its forms is important for any social work faculty to better prepare our students to work in culturally diverse settings (e.g. Mama, 2001). It could be argued that clinician-scientists provide a service that neither predominantly research-oriented faculty nor clinician only adjunct/non-tenure seeking faculty can provide. They provide a valuable perspective that serves to compliment and strengthen the faculty as a whole. Rather than becoming the “dinosaurs in the social work academy” as Johnson & Munch (2010) discuss, perhaps they can help bridge the gap between the practice and research worlds. But, like Liles (2007) points out, the pressures and stresses of being a tenure track professor serve as an obstacle to staying connected to the direct practice world and can serve as a barrier to recruiting and retaining direct practice faculty. If we are to truly support and affirm the concept that research should inform practice and practice should inform research as the CSWE research standard 2.1.6 states (CSWE, 2008) we must consider ways to break down these barriers and meet these challenges for the good of our students, universities and the profession as a whole. Formally promoting social work practice outside the university helps ensure that faculty knowledge and skills are more relevant and capable of preparing advanced generalist practitioners to successfully maneuver through the practice and ethical challenges they are likely to face (Marson, 2006; Liles, 2007)

Limitations and recommendations for future research

While the current research validates assertions found in the literature that students appreciate instructors with more practice experience (e.g., Kemp, 1998; Schacter, 1969), more extensive research is required in this area to better understand the relationship between practice experience and teaching success. This study relies on student perceptions and satisfaction, but offers no direct measures such as more favorable practice outcomes in the field. Outcomes based research would provide valuable insight into this relationship.

The current study also does not account for several possible intervening variables that could be accounted for with a better-constructed study. For instance, there was no control for the type of class being taught. There may have been higher USAT scores for direct practice courses with individuals and/or families as a very high number of students express interest in providing direct practice services at these levels. Additionally, the type of practice experience the various instructors possess was not controlled for and the findings were limited to just the first two years

in academia. It is unknown if any potential advantage in teaching effectiveness begins to level off as less experienced faculty gain further experience while in academia.

Other student related variables could have also influenced the outcome of this study. For instance, this study could not control for the diversity experience of students, as majority of the students were white and female. Nor was this study able to control for the instructor grading strategy that may have impacted student evaluations. Other limitations include having a low sample size (8 instructors) from a single social work program. Such a small sample size makes it difficult to control for potential bias in this study. For instance, student satisfaction scores may have been impacted by a student preference for male faculty, as 75% of the practitioner group was male, or a bias against non-white instructors, as only the academic group had representation from a different race. Studies with greater numbers of participants could help address some of these limitations as would studies that incorporated the “type” of practice experience the instructor (e.g., micro, mezzo, macro, child welfare, case management, clinical, etc.). This study is a start, but clearly future studies are needed to pursue this discussion further. Future studies that incorporate mixed methodology, addressing the shortcomings of this study are needed, as more reflection and conversation is needed regarding the role of social work clinician-scientists (Johnson & Munch, 2010).

Finally, future research could focus on the potential differences between highly experienced adjunct faculty and tenured/tenure seeking faculty. While adjunct instructors are key to a healthy faculty mix, authors have previously cautioned that drawbacks may exist when programs rely too heavily on instructors who are not part of the core base of faculty who design and deliver significant aspects of the practice curriculum. They suggest that full-time faculty members may be more fully vested in key curriculum areas and may be more versed in the intersections between courses across the entire curriculum and more inclined to integrate theory. (e.g., Kemp, 1998; Johnson & Munch, 2010). Unfortunately, no research exists to confirm these assertions or validate their possible impact on student learning.

Should future research demonstrate that practice experience leads to higher quality instruction and better student outcomes, then advanced generalist programs and the social work field in general ought to consider making a special effort to seek out applicants with significant practice experience as a part of a diverse team of faculty.

After hiring them, universities would appear to benefit from providing this distinct group with the unique supports they need to succeed and encourage greater opportunities for all faculty members to expand their practice skills in order to stay current and relevant in their instruction. There would also be implications for CSWE, as their stated mission is to strengthen the profession of social work. If more practice experience means better educational outcomes, CSWE accreditation standards could encourage the hiring and support of more new faculty with greater levels of experience through a system of quotas or preferences, similar to the mandate in standard M3.3.3 that requires the majority of full-time MSW faculty be doctorally prepared (CSWE, 2008).

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Table 1: USAT scores by Practitioner/Academic group

Modeling Professional Practice Behavior Questions:	Practitioner Mean (SD)	Academic Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> (two tailed) (<i>df</i>)	Mean Difference (95% CI)	<i>r</i>
Instructor approachability	4.61 (.159)	4.41 (.215)	11.76** (486)	.201 (.167-.234)	.466
Communicated ideas and information clearly	4.55 (.305)	4.08 (.477)	13.02** (486)	.464 (.397-.538)	.507
Connecting course to real world situations	4.64 (.176)	4.30 (.334)	14.42** (486)	.343 (.296-.389)	.536
Found ways to keep students interested	4.55 (.225)	4.02 (.498)	15.32** (486)	.526 (.458-.593)	.556
Available during office hours or by appointment	4.49 (.360)	4.46 (.257)	1.26 (486)	.036 (.020-.093)	.096
Treated students with respect	4.76 (.137)	4.37 (.417)	14.06** (486)	.386 (.332-.440)	.532
Effective Curriculum Delivery Questions:	Practitioner Mean (SD)	Academic Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> (two tailed) (<i>df</i>)	Mean Difference (95% CI)	<i>r</i>
Made good use of book/materials	4.37 (.284)	3.95 (.623)	9.05** (486)	.223 (.174-.271)	.399
Effectively used technology	4.61 (.201)	4.39 (.334)	3.59** (486)	.124 (.056-.192)	.369
Explained grading criteria clearly	4.43 (.339)	4.31 (.423)	4.99** (486)	.149 (.090-.207)	.167
Connected activities/assignments to course goals/objectives	4.57 (.241)	4.34 (.348)	8.57** (486)	.231 (.178-.283)	.358
Provided clear, useful and timely feedback	4.35 (.409)	4.26 (.425)	2.39 (496)	.090 (.016-.164)	.216
Course was well organized	4.38 (.349)	3.98 (.643)	8.53** (486)	.393 (.301-.484)	.352
Inspiring Effort and Overall Satisfaction Questions:	Practitioner Mean (SD)	Academic Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> (two tailed) (<i>df</i>)	Mean Difference (95% CI)	<i>r</i>
Student put forth full effort for this course	4.62 (.171)	4.49 (.221)	6.99** (486)	.124 (.089-.159)	.291
Instructor was effective in promoting student learning	4.62 (.181)	4.35 (.407)	9.86** (486)	.275 (.220-.330)	.394

Course was worthwhile addition to the university experience	4.59 (.190)	4.29 (.453)	9.77** (486)	.301 (.240-.361)	.397
Total Score (Grand Mean):	Practitioner Mean (SD)	Academic Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> (two tailed) (<i>df</i>)	<i>Mean Difference (95% CI)</i>	<i>r</i>
Total scores for the USAT	4.53 (0.19)	4.25 (0.41)	11.45** (486)	.284 (.237-.357)	.401

Note. * $p \leq .01$; ** $p \leq .001$.