New Voices

Political Leadership in Social Work Education: A Reflection

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There is no doubt that there are major schisms occurring around the globe that are deeply troubling to social worker educators – schisms that speak to values that are counter to those that undergird the profession and our educational programs: nationalism, racism, and anti-intellectualism, for example. These forces have led to disruptive and disturbing actions. Brexit in the United Kingdom and the election of Trump in the United States come to mind immediately, but other examples abound. If progress really is characterized by "two steps forward and one step back," we seem to be in reverse mode. For those of us in the business of preparing the next generation of social workers, these events and the values they represent are particularly challenging.

As social work educators we are both social workers and educators and, in both cases, these times demand that we be leaders. There are a number of ways to respond to such challenges – depending on which of these two "hats" we are wearing, but we need to wear them both.

1. Social work educators as social workers.

The line between acting as a social worker and acting as an educator is necessarily a blurry one. As social workers, we model for students what it means to practise social work and therefore it is important that we get it right. They are watching. Events that threaten our foundational values and principles are deeply disturbing, and yet giving in to purely emotional reactions is a luxury that we – and our world – cannot afford. We must rely on our body of theory and research to guide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in order to develop strategic and deliberate actions.

First, we need to remember that social work across the globe is a profession born out of the need to respond to social and economic disruptions. We have a rich history illustrating the key roles that social workers have played to create large-scale social change that can provide guidance for actions in this contemporary environment. The settlement house movement, the civil rights and women's movements, and deinstitutionalization of dependent children and persons with mental illness, to name a few, are good examples of these (American Academy of Social Work and Social Services, 2015).

Secondly, we must break down the siloes between social work education, research and the many different fields and methods of practice to maximize our impact. There are a number of ways in which we can increase our impact, but in this brief article I will note one in particular that is becoming increasingly significant within our discipline. Profession-wide advocacy can be advanced through utilizing an organizing framework known as the *collective impact model* (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Nee & Jolin, 2012). Collective impact efforts facilitate and organize the contributions of different organizations towards a common goal, each according to their respective strengths, expertise and resources. Successful collective impact initiatives share a vision for the desired change, agree on key measurements to assess progress to the goal(s), coordinate activities that support and reinforce each other, and commit to regular and continuous communication. Finally, as with all collaborative efforts, having an organization serve as the "backbone" of the initiative increases the likelihood of success (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Initiating collaborative projects, along with the structures that are important to their success, takes time and the ongoing investment of committed partners. Given the sense of urgency to respond to political change and the challenges identified, it may be that we need to act and create the structures for change simultaneously. Whilst having a structure with all of these ingredients in place would be ideal, we can also create "good enough" structures to help us move forward. We want to make sure that we do not allow "perfection to be the enemy of the good" and prevent ourselves from moving forward until we have the perfect structure established before we act. Collective impact initiatives, while having a clear method, also lend themselves to this kind of iterative process.

In the US, examples of collective impact include raising the profile of social work through a White House Briefing (2013; http://www.cswe.org/Advocacy-Policy/2013-CSWE-White-House-Briefing-Presentations led by the Council on Social Work Education); developing and endorsing legislation to advance the profession, known as the Social Work Reinvestment Act (re-introduced in 2013; http://www.socialworkreinvestment.org; led by the National Association of Social Workers); and articulating a set of societal "Grand Challenges" that the social work profession can impact over the next decade (2015; http://aaswsw.org/grand-

challenges-initiative/; led by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare). While each of these initiatives were led by a different social work organization, with related, although unique missions, none would have any hope of success without the collaboration of other social work organizations across the education, research and practice sectors. In the US, these efforts have placed social work more definitely at the table in national conversations and planning efforts. In addition, the efforts have created momentum, visibility, and strategic partnerships outside the discipline of social work that have benefitted the profession, such as increased support for social work workforce development (HRSA Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training Grants) and an increased presence of social work in national agencies and think tanks (for example, a social work researcher was appointed to sit on the strategic planning committee of the US National Institute of Health Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research). There are undoubtedly excellent examples of such collective impact in other parts of the world and we need to create more opportunities to learn from each other.

Finally, we need to form and nurture new partnerships. We need to align with organizations, foundations, corporations and other entities that may aspire to similar goals even if the reasons for valuing those goals differ. Some of this may make us feel very uncomfortable. As a profession, we often lead with our values and require agreement on the values before we agree to collaboration. I am suggesting that this is not only short-sighted, but will almost surely insulate our efforts and inhibit our progress. In the cases of Brexit in the UK and the election of Trump in the US, these events revealed a level of perceived disenfranchisement and fear among populations that have been thought to have enjoyed historical privilege and protection. If our change efforts do not engage those from "the other side" we will have, at best, learned nothing and, at worst, we could fore-doom our efforts.

2. Social work educators as educators.

Much of what has been articulated above is also salient to our role as educators. However, there are additional ways in which we need to leverage that role to both capitalize on the "learning moment" that the circumstances present, and to better prepare our students for effective practice.

The need to have social work students know our history of participation and leadership in social change efforts is extraordinarily critical in these times. Knowing this history is empowering and provides direction for future action. In the US, the CSWE Center for Diversity and Social & Economic Justice is preparing materials to support faculty in helping students make sense of the current political landscape. Central to this is the need to highlight the ways in which previous leaders of social change maintained a vision for a just society to mobilize change efforts (for example, Frederick Douglass, Jane Addams and Martin Luther King, among others).

Secondly, these times underscore the need for social work students to be better prepared to act within the political and policy context(s) of their practice. In parts of the world, especially in the more developed countries, there has been a decided "tilt" towards clinical practice. We need to return to our roots and bridge the micro–macro practice divide in social work practice and education. It is the ability to apply core social work skills

to different systems that is, after all, the hallmark of the profession. It could be argued that waves of neoliberal influence have nevertheless blunted our resolve, requiring a revisiting of core disciplinary beliefs. Successful interventions at the micro *and* macro levels require facilitating agreement on goals, enlisting allies to support the change, and reframing dynamics so that all parties speak the same language. The kind of events that have occurred across the globe have engendered a great deal of passion in many social work students who are moved to demonstrate, create position statements, and other forms of protest. While protest is an important and valuable means of civic engagement, we need to also help them to embrace their passion within a framework of critical thinking and strategic action at the policy level. It is critical that we emphasize that, while action may be fueled by passion, it is implemented through smart strategy and application of skills.

Finally, we need to be open to learning from our students. If ever there was a time to transition from the "sage on the stage" to "guide by the side" approach to teaching and learning, it is in these times of fast and disruptive change. A leader in the literature on good teaching, Parker Palmer (2007), encouraged educators to nurture their "capacity for connectedness" and to make relationships central in the teaching–learning endeavor. As a social work educator, I always instructed my students that if you wanted to have an *effect* on people, you needed to stay close enough to be *affected by* them. The same is true for teaching and learning.

By attending to these central functions in our positions as professionals and educators, we will undoubtedly encounter opportunities to serve our institutions and communities in leadership roles. We must be willing to step up and embrace these roles, to provide the kind of thought leadership that will engage others, bridge divides, and expand possibilities. We need to reach across disciplinary, professional and geographical boundaries to find allies, supporters and mentors for the work. We need to listen deeply to those whose opinions differ so that we can find ways to align our priorities to others. This will require that we learn to speak the language of politics and policy more fluently than we have, and pay attention to when and how the narratives shift. We must harness the impressive energy of students and early career practitioners in this work, who bring great passion, insights, and new tools (the ever-growing social media platforms). And in so doing, we need to help them understand the difference between protest and strategy.

References

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