Increasing Political Practice and Policy Practice in Social Work Students

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Abstract: *Political practice and policy practice are critical components of the social work profession, yet social workers and social work students do not fully engage in them. Bachelor and Master of Social Work programs (BSW and MSW) cover these topics, often through lecture-based instruction; however, a growing body of literature suggests experiential learning is better for building efficacy and interest in them. This article reviews the literature on political practice and policy practice in social work (including teaching approaches), discusses the implications for social work of a decreased emphasis on macro social work, and then explores the results of a new study attempting to address this issue. A one-group, pretest-posttest study was conducted with BSW students (n=66) to evaluate the possible effectiveness of a new training. Key findings yielded an increase in the likelihood of the students engaging in political and policy activities in the future (with the most significant effect size related to the likelihood of sending a letter to the editor). Based on the literature review and study results, recommendations, with an emphasis on experiential learning activities, are offered for social work educators looking to increase the likelihood of political practice and policy practice engagement in their students during and after going through social work programs.*

Keywords: *Macro social work; political practice; policy practice; social work education; legislative advocacy; political participation*

Public policies can have life-or-death consequences for social work clients. At the micro level, whether or not a state chooses to expand Medicaid can determine whether a client can access needed health care. At the mezzo level, the funding a county allocates to its schools can dictate teacher hiring practices, which can lead to negative ripple effects. For example, a teacher shortage can yield class crowding, learning disruptions, and unmet needs for students with disabilities (Lieberman, 2022). Or at the macro level, a country's immigration policies can determine whether young people can be deported to a country their parents fled.

These policies–and the elected officials who craft them–are highly relevant to the social work profession and those we serve. Nevertheless, social workers and social work students are not as interested in political practice and policy practice as they are in other social work subjects (Hill et al., 2017; Pawar, 2019). The disinterest is problematic since the public safety net, a set of policies on which social workers and their clients depend, is quickly degrading in the United States (Abramovitz, 2020). The degradation makes educating and activating social work students in political practice and policy practice all the more urgent. The present article reviews the literature surrounding political practice and policy practice in social work, mainly related to social work education, then shares the results of a study conducted to evaluate a political practice and policy practice training program.

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Literature Review

Social workers and social work students are uniquely qualified to engage in political and policy realms due to the intimate nature of their relationships with clients and the profession's mission of attending to the vulnerable, oppressed, and impoverished (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). The profession believes in this calling so strongly that engaging in political practice is included in the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021). Additionally, policy practice is one of the few core competencies set by the profession's educational accrediting body (Council of Social Work Education [CSWE], 2022).

Formal definitions will be given for political practice and policy practice since they can at times overlap or seem overly similar; however, in plain language this writer thinks of political practice as action taken to affect elections or elected officials and policy practice as action taken to affect policies directly. The formal definition being used here for *political practice* is the practice of *political social work*, or "social work practice that explicitly attends to power dynamics in policy-making […] expanding political participation, influencing policy agendas, working on campaigns or in electoral offices, and holding elected office" (Lane & Pritzker, 2018, p. 4). The definition being used here for *policy practice* is "using social work skills to propose and change policies in order to achieve the goal of social and economic justice" (Cummins et al., 2023, p. 5). Lastly, policy activity by social work students is considered here to be under the umbrella of the Gal and Weiss-Gal (2023) term *academic policy involvement*.

Political Practice and Policy Practice of Social Workers and Social Work Students

Findings on the political practice of social workers have variability, particularly when looking over decades, but tend to show that social workers engage in higher levels of political activity than the general public (Felderhoff et al., 2015; Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Parker & Sherraden, 1992; Wolk, 1981). The most common political practice activity among social workers is voting (Ostrander et al., 2021). To a lesser extent, other political practice activities by social workers include voter engagement (Abramovitz et al., 2019), campaigning (McClendon et al., 2020), and running for elected office (Lane et al., 2018). Social work students tend also to show higher levels of political activity engagement than the general public, and similar to social workers, their most common political practice activity is voting (Bernklau Halvor, 2012; Wright, 2019) as well as news-watching and voter engagement (Ostrander et al., 2018).

Less is known about the policy practice activity of social workers, due to research explicitly on policy practice being rare (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2023). Research tends to show low engagement in policy practice among social workers (Weiss-Gal, 2017) as well as social work students (Schwartz-Tayri, 2021). One meta-analysis of the social work literature found only 51 studies on policy practice since the 1980s and noted that the studies reported low or very low levels of social worker policy practice engagement (Weiss-Gal, 2016). This trend of moderate to low engagement in policy practice, while showing some variations, has been observed in studies of countries such as Australia, Canada, China,

Finland, Germany, Israel, Portugal, Sweden, and the United States (Cai et al., 2022; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2017; Gottwald & Sowa, 2019; Mendes et al., 2015; Ostrander et al., 2021; Shewell et al., 2021; Tham & Thorén, 2020; Weiss-Gal et al., 2020).

Regarding which policy practice activity types are engaged in, contacting policymakers is one of the most common among social workers (Mendes et al., 2015; Ritter, 2007) and students alike (Bernklau Halvor, 2012; Wright, 2019). When looking at more nuanced activity though, with a more significant time commitment, levels of engagement tend to be extremely low. For instance, in reference to testifying before a public hearing, two studies of social workers found only 3-5% of their samples had done so (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Ritter, 2007) with similar results among social work students (Bernklau Halvor, 2012).

Declining Emphasis of Macro Social Work

Low levels of political practice and policy practice engagement could be partly due to a declining emphasis on macro social work in the overall profession. This could be particularly true of the sometimes-complex legislative advocacy activities needed to impact the creation of laws. For decades academics and practitioners have had concerns about the social work profession focusing far more on individual issues (*micro practice*) than on systemic ones (*macro practice*) (Apgar & Nienow, 2023; Reeser & Epstein, 1987; Reisch, 2016; Reisch & Andrews, 2002; Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014; Specht & Courtney, 1995). Micro practice is more popular than macro practice among social workers and social work students (Pritzker & Lane, 2014; Segal-Engelchil & Kaufman, 2008). Furthermore, social workers do not see macro activities as critical to their work (Hill et al., 2010) and students do not see them as relevant to their goals (Amerman Goerdt et al., 2019; Anderson & Harris, 2005). Even social work educators emphasize micro work more than macro (Hill et al., 2017; Pawar, 2019).

One of the ways this depoliticization shows up in the field is the pervasive stigma in social workers being perceived as "being too political" at work (i.e., engaging with clients in simple, permissible, civic discussions, such as encouraging them to vote; Hylton et al., 2018). Rome et al. (2010) found that over half of the sample of professional social workers never engage in these kinds of discussions with clients. Macro work is missing from many social workers' employers and many social work students' field placements. One study found that only 2% of the social workers in their sample spent time each week engaging in macro tasks (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). Another study, with a sample of almost 40,000 Master of Social Work students, found that only 6% of them were in macro placements (McBeath, 2016). The implications of this decline in promoting macro social work are severe and far-reaching.

Thankfully, the picture is not all bleak. In recent years, this trend has been acknowledged as problematic by a number of social workers and they have been taking exciting, organized steps to help turn the tide. Three projects which demonstrate this point well are: Campaign School for Social Workers, the Special Commission on Macro Practice, and the National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign (NSWVMC). First, the University of Connecticut's Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work

(NAHIPSW) regularly holds trainings for social workers interested in running for office or working on campaigns (McClendon et al., 2020). This training has been found to increase participants' likelihood to engage in political practice (Lane et al., 2018). Anecdotally, this writer finds these trainings to be incredibly efficacious, as she attended one in 2017 and was running for state office in a matter of months. Next, the Special Commission on Macro Practice is a highly dynamic group seeking to promote macro social work and rebalance the profession's current "Micro-Macro divide" (Bailey et al., 2022). Lastly, the National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign (NSWVMC) works to educate social workers on how they can empower clients with non-partisan voter engagement (Hylton et al., 2022). This is just a glimpse of the phenomenal work being done to increase macro practice, but may offer optimism that there is indeed hope.

Implications for the Social Work Profession

At this time in the United States, there is an insufficient number of people-centered policies in place and a dearth of voices calling for them. This is reflected by startling statistics on vital social issues. For example, the United States is experiencing the highest wealth gap since before the Great Depression (Keshner, 2019). With income inequality greater than almost any other industrialized nation (Siripurapu, 2022), 43% of Americans have recently postponed health care they need (Brenan, 2023), 10% of Americans are food insecure (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023), and half of American families have inadequate child care (Igielnik, 2022).

Increased political practice and policy practice engagement of social workers and social work students could have untold, positive benefits for the profession and those we serve. As Representative Ayanna Pressley said, "The people closest to the pain should be closest to the power, and […] a diversity of voices in the political process is essential to crafting more effective public policy" (Committee to Elect Ayanna Pressley, n.d., para. 1). Greater engagement in political practice and policy practice is needed by social workers and social work students to ensure that public policies address the profession's mission of enhancing human well-being and meeting the basic human needs of all people (NASW, 2021). Social workers prefer micro practice over macro, but the two are inextricably linked (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014) as many academics argue that all social work is inherently political (Lane & Pritzker, 2018; Reisch, 2016). Through this lens (and as echoed by NASW and CSWE), the ability to effectively engage in political practice and policy practice is vital for all social workers and social work students.

Theoretical Framework

Experiential learning theory (ELT) denotes a process of activity involving learning while doing (Kolb, 1984). Researchers in social work have found that experiential learning is effective in teaching political practice and policy practice (Apgar & Parada, 2018; Beimers, 2016; Lim et al., 2018; Street et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020; Weaver, 2005; Witt et al., 2020). Social work students who took policy courses with experiential learning methods were found to engage in greater levels of advocacy after graduation than those taught with traditional methods (Mink & Twill, 2012; Rocha, 2000; Weiss-Gal & Savaya,

2012). Significantly, this pedagogy has also been found to facilitate greater feelings of self-efficacy in social work students (Bernklau Halvor, 2016; Nowakowski-Sims & Kumar, 2020; Weaver, 2005).

Traits of Effective Political and Policy Trainings

Social work students perceive political practice (Meehan, 2021) and policy practice instruction as dry and abstract (Heidemann et al., 2011; Henman, 2012). Trainings must be efficacious to ensure that social workers are competent and confident to engage in political practice and policy practice. Historically, social work programs have taught political practice and policy practice courses with a heavy emphasis on theory and lecture (Apgar & Parada, 2018; Ritter, 2013) and as previously stated, this has not resulted in the level of political and policy engagement needed. What makes for effective political practice and policy practice training? Critical, evidence-based components are discussed below.

Individualized

Students can have trouble seeing the impacts of policies on their clients (Sherraden et al., 2015). Offering students the flexibility to learn about policy practice through the lens of an issue they care about is valuable and efficacious (Henman, 2012; Pawar & Nixon, 2020).

Realistic

As important as knowledge is, understanding how the system works is useless if participants cannot act. The resource of time is a major determining factor in whether or not a social worker will participate in political activities (Verba et al., 1995). Social work students have little free time (Diebold et al., 2018), thus effective training must be practical and instruct participants in activities that will be accessible in their day-to-day lives.

Tone/Humor

Policy practice can often seem dense, so using a light-hearted and humorous tone can be helpful. Humor helps to learn complex subjects (Berk, 2002) and aids learners to be less tense and reactive (Lujan & DiCarlo, 2016). One researcher found replicable findings that humor helped increase students' final exam grades by 10% (Ziv, 1988). There is sometimes a fear that using humor in the classroom can threaten credibility, but students perceive educators with high humor as more competent than those with low humor (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999).

Passionate

Passion is a critical component of political activity, as passion for an issue helps develop feelings of political efficacy (Beaumont, 2011). Thus, effective training must tie in with the learners' passions. Grounding a learning activity in a so-called "generative theme," or something an individual has strong feelings about, helps to break through apathy

and generate energy and hope (Hope & Timmel, 1996, as cited in Bernklau Halvor, 2012). Secondary passion can also be beneficial. Students find instructors' passion for policy to be influential and helpful in expanding their appreciation for political advocacy (Bernklau Halvor, 2016).

Supportive

Even if a training contains all the factors listed above, students will not participate politically if they do not feel confident in their abilities (Schwartz-Tayri et al., 2020). To help increase feelings of confidence and self-efficacy, effective trainings should help students feel supported. Bernklau Halvor (2016) found that students benefit from having instructors who believe their students can successfully impact the political system in a positive way.

About the Present Study and Its Aims

Social workers and social work students are under-engaged in political practice and policy practice. Considering the evidence-based qualities of effective trainings described above, a training was designed and implemented to increase political and policy engagement among social work students. The present study sought to evaluate this training. Research question: "What is the effect of a short, experiential training using evidence-based qualities towards increasing students' intent to engage in greater levels of political practice and policy practice?"

About the Training

This training is, by design, introductory and brief. Its total duration is about one and a half hours. The training starts with a quick review of some basic political and legislative processes in the United States, but spends the bulk of time on specific political and legislative advocacy skills, such as (1) connecting one's overall life interests with specific public policy areas, (2) finding organizations to collaborate with on legislative advocacy in areas of students' interests, (3) finding one's policymakers, (4) calling policymakers, (5) writing to policymakers, and (6) finding new political candidates who align with one's values.

Each skill is briefly introduced and modeled, and then participants are invited to practice the skill. For example, the facilitator discusses the importance of elected policymakers hearing from their constituents. The facilitator then calls a legislator's office on speakerphone, shares the reason for calling, and describes the action being sought (e.g., "I want the representative to vote yes on…") before ending the call. Participants are then invited to call one of the elected officials whose contact information they looked up earlier in the training.

The training strongly emphasizes evidence-based qualities (e.g., using students' interests, instructor humor, providing support, etc.) to optimize student engagement. While designed and pilot tested as an in-person training, it should be noted that this study was

facilitated virtually due to the timing being early in the COVID-19 pandemic. All six trainings were facilitated by the same macro social work instructor and with the same content.

Methods

IRB Approval

This study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to be conducted confidentially. Students were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, that there was no compensation, and that there was little risk.

Study Design

This was a one-group, pretest-posttest design. While trainings were facilitated with six different groups of BSW students, between August and October 2020, analyses were done with an aggregate of all participants' data so this is not being considered a multi-group design. Pre-tests assessed students' levels of attitudes and behaviors using Qualtrics software. Post-tests were given immediately after trainings, then assessed for potential changes. Post-tests also were facilitated with the Qualtrics software.

Recruitment and Sampling

Social work department faculty were contacted to determine interest in having a training facilitation done during one of their classes. This process yielded six groups of students to participate in trainings virtually (classes were being conducted online at this time, as this was in fall of 2020, early in the COVID-19 pandemic). The sample was comprised of 66 BSW students at a public regional university in the southern United States. One student (1.5%) identified as nonbinary, four students (6.1%) identified as men, and the remaining 61 (92.4%) identified as women. Regarding race, one student (1.5%) identified as Asian, 13 students (19.7%) identified as Black or African American, and the remaining 52 students (78.8%) identified as White or Caucasian. One student (1.5%) was older than 45 years old, seven students (10.6%) were in the 25-34 age range, and the remaining 58 (87.9%) were in the 18-24 age range.

Measures

The pre-test survey first solicited demographic information. Likert scales then measured students' political and policy activity level. The post-test used the same format but omitted demographics and added one optional, open-ended question asking if there was anything participants would like to share about the training or related topics. The main instrument adapted for the pre- and post-test was the Individual Orientation Toward Engagement in Social Action Scale (IOTESA). The IOTESA, which leans more towards measuring political practice than policy practice, and exhibits strong reliability and

validity. Cronbach's alpha (α) for the scale was .96 and the coefficient of determination (R-squared) was .364 (Corning & Myers, 2002). While the scale has 35 questions, only 10 were used in the survey (possible implications on validity are discussed in the "Limitations" section).

The 10 questions asked how likely participants were to engage in activities like campaigning for a candidate, voting, and emailing a public official. These questions were posed with options: "extremely unlikely," "unlikely," "likely," and "extremely likely." For analysis, these were recoded from 0 (*extremely unlikely*) to 3 (*extremely likely*). In light of the pre-test and post-test being taken so closely together, measures were taken to help strengthen the validity of the study and its questionnaire. Those measures included basing the survey on an established instrument (Corning & Myers, 2002), pilot testing the survey prior to giving it to students, and using a standard measurement procedure with each of the six cohorts.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. A total of 90 pretests and 75 posttests were recorded. Pre-test and post-test data were paired, and unpaired test data were discarded. In total, 66 complete sets of data were viable. Analyses were conducted to determine the difference in participants' likelihood to engage in activities between before and after they received the training. Because the data are ordinal (questions had options such as *likely* and *unlikely*), a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted instead of a paired samples *t*-test. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$. Effect sizes for each item were calculated as $r = Z / N^{\frac{1}{2}}$, with Z being the Wilcoxon signed-rank statistic and N being the number of paired samples (Rosenthal, 1994). The values 0.1, 0.3, and 0.5 were considered the cut-off for small, medium, and large effects.

Results

For nine of the ten questions, participants were more likely to engage in political and policy activity after receiving the intervention. Question 6 ("How likely are you to send a letter or e-mail expressing a political opinion to the editor of a periodical or television show?") had the most significant effect size ($r = .75$, $p < .001$). Questions 2 ("How likely are you to organize a political event [e.g., talk, support group, march]?"), 4 ("How likely are you to campaign door-to-door for a political candidate?"), and 8 ("How likely are you to send a letter or e-mail about a political issue to a public official?") also had large effect sizes (rs > .50, ps < .001). Questions 1, 3, 7, 9, and 10 had moderate effect sizes (rs > .30, ps < .01). Question 5 ("How likely are you to vote in a non-presidential federal, state, or local election?") did not have a statistically significant effect size ($r = .17$, $p < .165$); however, participants reported a high likelihood for this question on the pretest, indicating a potential ceiling effect and leaving little opportunity for growth as a result of the training. See Table 1 below for full results.

One optional, open-ended question was asked at the end of the participant post-test inviting students to share any thoughts they had on the training or related topics. Nine of

the 66 participants answered this question substantively (five additional answers were recorded saying some version of "N/A"). Seven of the nine responses were positive and were either directly about the training (e.g., "This was a great overview training of basic knowledge social workers should be aware of and more proactive things we can do to get involved") or shared something the student learned in the training (e.g., "I did not know that it was so easy to advocate on behalf of a law by simply calling or emailing an official.") Two responses were neutral and about students' thoughts more broadly (e.g., "I think politics are most of the time a game of who is popular but legislation is very important. The general public just needs more education.")

Table 1. *Change in Likelihood to Engage in Political and Policy Practices*

Question	MB	MA	W	r	p
Q1: How likely are you to purchase a poster, t-shirt, etc. that endorses a political point of view?	1.11	1.38	241.5	.44	<.001
Q2: How likely are you to organize a political event (e.g., talk, support group, march)?	0.92	1.31	313	.57	<.001
Q3: How likely are you to go out of your way to collect information on a social or political issue?	1.68	1.94	322	.37	.002
Q4: How likely are you to campaign door-to-door for a political candidate?	0.70	1.08	253	.58	<.001
Q5: How likely are you to vote in a non-presidential federal, state, or local election?	2.11	2.20	114	.17	.165
Q6: How likely are you to send a letter or e-mail expressing a political opinion to the editor of a periodical or television show?	0.89	1.65	741	.75	<.001
Q7: How likely are you to distribute information representing a particular social or political group's cause?	1.52	1.77	230	.39	.002
Q8: How likely are you to send a letter or e-mail about a political issue to a public official?	1.27	1.71	520	.51	<.001
Q9: How likely are you to attend a talk on a particular group's social or political concerns?	1.65	1.91	315	.33	.005
Q10: How likely are you to keep track of the views of members of Congress regarding an issue important to you?	1.71	2.05	334	.44	.002

Note. Total participants (*n*) was 66. *MB* represents the mean before and *MA* represents the mean after. *W* stands for the Wilcoxon signed-rank statistic and *r* denotes the correlation coefficient. The probability value is represented by *p*. Questions were posed with answer options: extremely unlikely, unlikely, likely, and extremely likely. For analysis, these responses were recoded from 0 (*extremely unlikely)* to 3 (*extremely likely*). Effect sizes for each item were calculated as $r = Z / N^{\frac{1}{2}}$, with *Z* being the Wilcoxon signed-rank statistic and *n* being the number of paired samples (Rosenthal, 1994). Cut-off values of 0.1, 0.3, and 0.5 were used for interpreting small, medium, and large effects. The significance level was set at $p < .05$.

Discussion

Students participated in a brief, experiential training to increase their likelihood of engaging in political practice and policy practice in the future. Before and after the training, students completed questionnaires about levels of related activity engagement. Students expressed a greater likelihood of engaging in political practice and policy practice after the training than before for nine of the ten items, indicating that this training effectively increased students' desire and intent to engage in political practice and policy practice. The findings are consistent with previous research showing that experiential learning is very effective. Notably, the one question that showed no significant improvement following the training (i.e., likelihood to vote in a non-presidential election) is the question that appeared to be near the ceiling on the pretest. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that most social workers (Ostrander et al., 2021) and students (Bernklau Halvor, 2012) already vote in high numbers.

Student Insights

One optional, open-ended question was asked at the end of the participant post-test inviting students to share any thoughts they had on the training or related topics. Nine of the 66 participants answered this question and three key themes emerged. First: students found that having complex systems explained simply, and being given concrete advice on meaningful engagement, was extremely helpful (e.g., "I am interested in taking more action in politics because I was given practical ways that I can help make change.") Second, students expressed surprise and/or relief having seen legislative advocacy skills modeled (e.g., "I did not know that it was so easy to advocate on behalf of a law by simply calling or e-mailing an official.") Third was feelings of confidence and/or empowerment (e.g., "I now have a new outlook on what I can do to help better the community we live in.")

Recommendations

Social workers and social work students increasingly perceive politics and policy as something disconnected from or not applicable to them (Amerman Goerdt et al., 2019; Meehan, 2021). We must find ways to break through and help them make these crucial connections. Based on the literature presented here, and supported by the findings from the present study, social work programs are encouraged to evaluate their political practice and policy practice curriculum and teaching methods, and ensure that they are utilizing experiential components. Doing this can help reframe political practice and policy practice much more actively and strategically than classes taught without experiential learning (Schwartz-Tayri et al., 2020). Utilizing experiential activities can also promote future political practice and policy practice engagement (Nowakowski-Sims & Kumar, 2020; Street et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020).

Experiential learning activities for political practice and policy practice need not be grand. Simple tasks can be beneficial such as signing up to receive action alerts (Tower & Hartness, 2010). A variety of writing activities can be effective too, such as policy briefs (Sundet & Kelly, 2002), social media posts (DeRigne et al., 2014; Rocha, 2000), blogs (DeRigne et al., 2014), and authoring letters to the editor or to legislators (DeRigne et al., 2014; Rocha, 2000). This is particularly true as related to areas of students' interests

(Henman, 2012). These activities can be easily interspersed throughout the curriculum and spread over a semester as appropriate (Zubrzycki & McArthur, 2004). Experiential activities can also be more expansive and involved, like conducting student debates (Keller et al., 2001); visiting a legislative office (Manalo, 2008); spending a whole day learning and advocating in a state capitol (Beimers, 2016; Nowakowski-Sims & Kumar, 2020); or spending additional time explicitly preparing for these events at the capitol (Kilbane et al., 2013). These activities can be particularly engaging when using cases in students' own communities and states (Wolfer & Gray, 2007).

To end this section, some additional recommendations are being shared from the academic literature regarding helping to promote macro work in social work educational programs. Reisch (2016) noted that much of this work can be done outside of BSW and MSW curricula. Partnerships outside of academia can reinforce this change in culture by working with various stakeholders in the community (Weiss-Gal, 2017). Reisch (2016) suggested building an appreciation of macro social work, particularly the profession's role in policy change, into the culture of programs through informal activities like orientations and lunchtime talks. We can also make sure to bring political practice and policy practice up when discussing topics related to human rights (McBeath, 2016). One last valuable resource is educators themselves. Instructors' excitement and enthusiasm can be a helpful tool for engaging students' interests in policy practice and political social work (Pritzker & Lane, 2014).

Study Limitations

This study was done virtually with undergraduate students in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which understandably was found to increase stress among this population (Wilson et al., 2021). This heightened stress may have impacted students' answers on pre- and post-tests. It is also possible that social desirability impacted how students answered questions, biasing students' responses towards those that appear more socially acceptable. Another limitation is that the study used convenience sampling, which yielded a relatively homogenous group (most students identified as white women in the 18-24 age range). Future studies should endeavor to do random sampling where possible and for greater generalizability.

The pre-test and post-test relevant to this article was adapted from the Individual Orientation toward Engagement in Social Action Scale. While this scale has substantial levels of reliability and validity, the pre- and post-tests only used 10 of the scale's 35 items; the reliability and validity of partial use of this scale have not been researched. Additionally, given that the pre- and post-tests were given in such close proximity, the validity of the measure of changes in students may be limited. Lastly, while the results of the present study alluded to a strong potential for behavior change, one study showed that similar interventions may not have a long-lasting impact (Segal-Engelchin et al., 2017). In addition to getting students more engaged, how to keep them engaged over time needs further study.

Further Research

The training described in this article was designed to have social work students meaningfully and personally engage in political and policy skill-building and to increase their interest in these activities. It may be worth doing additional research on this training to see if the results are replicable and to determine why some elements showed more change from pre- to post-test than others. Future qualitative research could also be useful to better understand fears or misconceptions which may contribute to the lack of full engagement in political practice and policy practice of social workers and social work students. Understanding these attitudes and experiences in greater depth may help researchers determine best practices to move social work students from anxieties and misunderstandings, closer to confident action.

Conclusion

The intervention described in this paper increased students' intent to engage in political practice and policy practice. The research adds to a growing body of scientific literature, reinforcing that experiential learning is helpful for training social work students on the topics of political practice and policy practice. This research is timely, given that the social work landscape is experiencing a weakening focus on social action and an increased focus on clinical professionalization (Ostrander et al., 2017). As a profession set apart by our commitment to the vulnerable and oppressed, I argue that we must relentlessly pursue new and novel ways to get through to, educate, and empower our students to do this vital work. Students demonstrate tremendous passion every day for the populations and issues they care about most. We need to help students translate that passion into meaningful political and policy action by continually finding the best ways to give them the knowledge and confidence to do so.

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