

Diversity and Social Justice Dynamics: An analysis of the National Standards for Human Services Education

Susan Kincaid, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Human Services Program
Western Washington University
Bellingham, Washington, USA



Abstract

An analysis of the National Standards for Human Services Education in regards to diversity and social justice dynamics.

The Council for Standards in Human Service Education is the accrediting body for the human services discipline and guardians of the National Standards for Human Services Education (www.cshse.org). The Standards, examined without attention to the Specifications articulating the evidence required to meet the Standard, do not include language overtly requiring the study of diversity and social justice dynamics, creating a perceived lack of emphasis on these issues. In this study, definitions of diversity and social justice were established based on the literature and compared to the CSHSE National Standards and the Specifications for each Standard to determine the emphasis, if any, on diversity and social justice dynamics as a condition of accreditation.

Human services is a profession dedicated to helping people in a variety of settings and situations. Those who enter the profession do so with attitudes and values of empathy, patience, open-mindedness, skepticism, rejection of stereotypes, a capacity to deal with ambiguity and take risks, and belief in the capacity to change (Mandell & Schram, 2009, pp. 107-121). Those who formally study human services learn the knowledge, theory, and skills required for direct service delivery, advocacy for individuals and groups, and facilitation of processes for change at all levels of society. That change is generally connected to a professional sense of social justice and a desire for economic, political, and legal equality in the context of access to power and resources. Regardless of the setting, from soup kitchens to after school programs to domestic violence shelters, there is an underlying assumption that some people need assistance to level the playing field. As a profession and field of study, human services “reflects the need for society to help its members live adequate and rewarding lives” (Eriksen, 1977).

All humans have needs, but some humans have access to more resources for meeting those needs than other humans have. In the United States, inadequate access to resources is correlated to demographics of diversity including race, gender, ability, age, and culture. The overrepresentation of these groups in homeless, undereducated, impoverished, imprisoned, and otherwise disadvantaged populations is an issue of social justice. Often, the discussion of social justice and equality is framed in terms of minorities, culture, multiculturalism, or diversity, inadvertently rendering invisible those members of the majority culture who lack the same

resources and face similar barriers.

Social justice is a recurring thread in human services literature and textbooks, as are diversity and multiculturalism. In a world of constant political change and economic movement, one would expect human services degree programs to overtly require courses that explore multiple ideologies in order to prepare professionals who are effective in their work. However, in an analysis of 536 catalog descriptions of courses offered in 39 CSHSE-accredited human services degree programs, Oswald and Totten (2008) discovered that 65% of courses dealt with remediation (personal or community problem-solving), 30% dealt with capacity building (personal or community development, and only 5% dealt with amelioration (overcoming or dismantling structural barriers). Baccalaureate and masters (advanced) degree programs had more courses related to capacity building and amelioration and less time on remediation than their associate degree counterparts. Based on the Ethical Standards of Human Services Professionals, the authors encouraged further emphasis on what they called “working upstream” (problem-solving at the systemic level) and the responsibility of educators to prepare professionals to work at that level. CSHSE accreditation is based on a program self-study that includes curriculum maps, syllabi, required readings, and other evidence of meeting the standards. It is possible that an examination of these supporting documents might present a different picture than the examination of course descriptions.

The Boards of both the Council for Standards in Human Service Education and the National Organization for Human Services are concerned that respect for diversity and commitment to social justice be reflected in codified standards, ethics, and other formal documentation representing these organizations. In 2005, a committee was organized with representatives from both organizations to propose standards for cultural competence. Committee members represented programs of various degree levels from across the country. Unfortunately, the committee disbanded before completing the task.

In this analysis, the terms diversity and social justice are defined followed by a description of the organization of the CSHSE National Standards for Human Service Education. The Standards most pertinent to diversity and social justice dynamics will then be discussed followed by conclusions and implications for further research.

Defining Diversity and Social Justice Dynamics

Diversity is fairly easily defined. It has to do with differences and variety. In the CSHSE standards, the following terms are specifically used: special needs, minorities, students with disabilities, otherwise disadvantaged or underrepresented students, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, learning styles, abilities, socio-economic status, and religion (see CSHSE Standards 5, 12, and 19).

Social justice is a more difficult concept to define. While most people want social justice, and most agree that is tied to equality, the actual working out of that equality is tied to political ideologies. For example, some argue that you cannot have equality with a free market while others argue that you cannot have equality without a free market (Sargent, 2006). Although these ideas are mutually exclusive, they can both be supported by valid logic. Both affect access to resources and power and therefore have implications in the working out of social justice and the need for and delivery of human services.

Social justice is related to the distribution of resources and power within a society, and is based on human rights and equality. Sargent (2006) addresses five categories of equality that are desirable in a representative democracy, (a) political equality including voting, running for office, and influencing law and policy, (b) equality before the law, including interpretation and enforcement, (c) equality of opportunity without regard to gender, religion, ethnicity, country of origin, or sexual orientation, (d) economic equality, and (e) equality of respect or social equality. These concepts include social mobility up and down by all individuals and groups and the removal of structural barriers based on ethnicity, race, class, gender, and religion. Nieto and Bode (2008) define social justice as “a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness respect, dignity, and generosity” (p. 11).

Clearly, social justice is tied to dynamic human systems that allow advantages to some people while disadvantaging others. The remainder of this article will explore how the CSHSE National Standards for Human Services Education address issues of diversity and social justice dynamics.

The CSHSE National Standards for Human Services Education

The CSHSE National Standards are organized into three groups. Standards 1-10 are program standards dealing with issues of policies and procedures. Standards 11-20 are curriculum standards, defining the knowledge, theory, and skills to be included in an accredited human services curriculum, and Standards 21-23 are related to fieldwork as an integrated portion of the curriculum. Each standard is introduced by a brief paragraph giving the context and rationale for the standard. In addition, each standard is followed by specifications (indicators) that provide the details of how the standard must be met.

The following excerpts from the standards provide insight to the layered aspects of multicultural and culturally sensitive education, social justice dynamics, and a spectrum of ideological perspectives and issues that may be threads across the curriculum rather than appearing in specialized courses. The integration of concepts of social justice and diversity to emphasize recurring patterns and systemic influences may be a more effective way to scaffold information on these sometimes difficult concepts than dealing with them in isolated courses.

Irrespective of other studies and past efforts by professional groups to assure cultural competence and commitment to social justice, the question remains. Do the CSHSE National Standards adequately address diversity and social justice dynamics? If the standards address these issues clearly, then programs are required to address them within their curricula.

Program Standards

Standard 5 requires programs to have “written standards and procedures for admitting, retaining, and dismissing students.” Taken in isolation, Standard 5 appears to be a generic policy that any professional degree program would have. However, embedded in the specifications for Standard 5 are specific instructions to “Provide documentation of policies and procedures for enrolling, advising, counseling, and assisting students with special needs (e.g., minorities, students with disabilities, or otherwise disadvantaged or underrepresented students) in order to assure entrance of qualified individuals of diverse background and conditions” (Specification 2).

When read in the context of the specifications, Standard 5 not only requires recruitment of underrepresented populations, it insists that mechanisms are in place to help them succeed. Additionally, Standard 5 assures that the profession itself will reflect diversity as alumni enter

the profession. This standard reinforces the values upon which the human services profession was originated, tying them to the history and context of the time.

Curriculum Standards

Standards 11 through 20 state the requirements for the knowledge, theory, and skills to be covered within an accredited human services curriculum at the technical, associates, and advanced (baccalaureate and master) degree levels. Of these 10 standards, 5 are specifically tied to diversity and social justice (see standards 11, 12, 13, 19, and 20).

Standard 11: The curriculum shall include the historical development of human services.

Human services has its roots in the 1950s when the federal government attempted to bring poor people into the workforce of the Department of Health and Human Services, partly to cut the cost of hiring social workers (Mandell & Schram, 2009). The timing coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, and there was pressure to bring people of color into the helping professions. That in itself ties the history of human services and Standard 11 to the study of social justice and diversity.

Additionally, the Specifications for Standard 11 require students to know how public and private attitudes influence both legislation and the interpretation of policies related to human services. At the baccalaureate and masters degree level, students are also expected to know the differences between systems of governance and economics, have exposure to a spectrum of political ideologies, and learn skills to analyze and interpret historical data for application in advocacy and social change.

The requirement to explore aspects of political ideologies, governance, and economics within the context of human services for application in advocacy and social change cannot be separated from discussions of diversity and social justice dynamics. In a profession where resources ebb and flow based on political power, advocacy requires a sophisticated knowledge of how governmental bills and budgets are initiated, passed, and implemented. Whether advocating for individual clients or groups of clients, the human services professional is involved with a diverse clientele affected by various ideological iterations of social justice through the law and administrative policies and procedures. These issues shift based on the core values of elected officials and their constituents.

Standard 12: The curriculum shall include knowledge and theory of human systems, including individual, interpersonal, group, family, organizational, community, and societal and their interactions.

Standard 12 focuses on human systems, from human development through societal organization and structures. It emphasizes a systemic approach to understanding and solving problems at all levels of society, personal through global. At all degree levels, there is an “emphasis on context and the role of diversity (including, but not limited to ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, learning styles, ability, and socio-economic status) in determining and meeting human needs.” At the associates (incorporated in baccalaureate) level, an “understanding of the capacities, limitations, and resiliency of human systems” is added, requiring a greater depth of understanding. Capacities, limitations, and resiliency are tied to issues of ability, culture, and social class.

At the baccalaureate and masters degree levels, there are two additional specifications,

unmistakably related to diversity and social justice. The curriculum must include knowledge, theory, and skills “to effect social change through advocacy work at all levels of society including community development, community and grassroots organizing, and local and global activism” and “to analyze, interpret, and effect policies and laws at local, state, and national levels that influence services delivery systems.”

Human services are delivered in a broad variety of settings, and the Standards are intentionally written to accommodate that breadth. Standard 12 is bold in its requirement that students learn to facilitate processes for change in small and large societal systems. Focused on meeting human needs, the curriculum must not only prepare students to provide direct services, but also to advocate within legal systems, initiate laws, form grassroots movements, and call attention to global issues that either cause or interfere with the needs of humans. Standard 12 requires knowledge of ideologies for the purpose of analysis and action. Standard 11 required knowledge of ideologies to understand the history of human services and ideological considerations as the field continues to emerge and change.

Standard 13: The curriculum shall address the conditions that promote or limit human functioning.

The scope of human services is addressed in this standard requiring an introduction to the breadth of the field, an understanding of models of prevention, maintenance, intervention, rehabilitation, and healthy functioning for individuals and groups and the broad range of populations served. At the baccalaureate level, the curriculum is also required to include knowledge theory and skills to analyze “economic and social class systems including systemic causes of poverty, political and ideological aspects of human services, international and global influences on services delivery, and skills to influence and effect social policy.”

The Specifications for Standard 13 are similar to those for Standard 12, but the context is different. One is related to the interaction of human systems from small to large, and the other is related to the breadth of the human services field in promoting or limiting human functioning. Taken together, they provide conceptual tools for viewing human needs through multiple lenses. While there are basic needs common to all humans, those needs appear in the context of families, groups, communities, and social constructs and contracts of governance and economics. Meeting human needs often requires intervention in the social constructs and contracts that unfairly distribute resources. The unequal distribution of resources takes us back to the introductory discussion of social justice, the overrepresentation of some groups in poverty, and the roles of governance and economics based on political ideologies. Note that this is the third time ideologies have been specified; first in Standard 11 tied to the historical development of the field, secondly in Standard 12 in the context of facilitating processes for change at all levels of society, and thirdly, in Standard 13 as they relate to human functioning.

Standard 19: The curriculum shall incorporate human services values and attitudes and promote understanding of human services ethics and their application in practice.

The attitudes and values held by the human services profession as determined by research and further validated through national professional organizations, textbooks, and practitioners are clearly stated in the Specifications for Standard 19. They include choosing the least intrusive intervention in the least restrictive environment, confidentiality of information, interdisciplinary problem-solving, commitment to appropriate professional boundaries, and they integrate by reference the Ethical Standards of Human Services Professionals (NOHS, 1996).

Perhaps more than any other, Standard 19 expresses the commitment of the profession to understanding diversity and social justice dynamics. Specification (d) states, “Recognition of the worth and uniqueness of the individual including culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, abilities, sexual orientation, and other expressions of diversity,” immediately followed by “Belief that individuals, service systems, and society can change.” The belief in possibility of change at all levels of society, while impossible to measure or assess, ties back to the knowledge, theory and skills to facilitate change at all levels of society (CSHSE Standard 12). It is fundamental to the work of a human services professional, whether in direct services, administration, community development, or advocacy and activism. It is the possibility of change that allows hope to thrive.

Most importantly, Standard 19 includes a professional commitment to client self-determination. Whether working with individuals, organizing a grassroots movement, advocating in the legal system, or developing capacity within a community, there is a shift of power from the professional to the client. The value of making decisions by those most affected by the decisions is a principle not only of the human services profession, but of sustainability and human rights activists worldwide (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004). The respect of clients as the decision makers affirms their capacity and resilience and recognizes their unique ability to control the outcomes of their own lives.

Standard 20: The program shall provide experiences and support to enable students to develop awareness of their own values, personalities, reaction patterns, interpersonal styles, and limitations.

CSHSE Standard 20 assures that the curriculum will provide space for students to become aware of themselves in both personal and professional contexts, including clarification of personal values. This is in contrast to the professional values adopted by the field that are considered in Standard 19. The wording of Standard 20 requires that students will be supported in their personal growth as they complete tasks identified by the Specifications as (a) conscious use of self, (b) reflection on professional self (e.g., journaling, development of a portfolio, or project demonstrating competency), (c) clarification of values, (d) awareness of diversity, and (f) strategies for self-care.

This Standard provides a bridge between the fieldwork required by Standards 21, 22, and 23 and the curriculum standards. It prepares them for intentional use of the professional self and the opportunity to reflect on the integration of curriculum content with professional practice. The awareness of diversity and their own attitudes prepares them for professional interaction with a diverse client base. Combined with the other curriculum standards, it allows reflection on their own abilities to provide direct services and at the same time advocate within larger systems.

It is at this point that students demonstrate their understanding of diversity and consider their own commitment to social justice, both personally and professionally. Through self-examination, they become aware of any prejudice or bias in their own thinking and values. The clarification of values allows for a deeper understanding of diversity and social justice dynamics in relationship to themselves.

Conclusions

An analysis of the CSHSE National Standards for Human Service Education demonstrates that 5 of 10 curriculum standards address diversity and social justice dynamics through the Specifications that define each standard. Both concepts are integrated throughout the Standards.

Further, the Standards and Specifications that address diversity and social justice dynamics are strengthened by Standard 17, Specification (e) requiring “Critical thinking for analysis, problem solving, synthesis, decision-making, and predicting outcomes.”

Nieto and Bode (2008) tie their definition of social justice to multicultural education that (a) challenges and confronts systemic issues and stereotypes that reinforce institutionalized discrimination, (b) provides necessary resources for all students to learn to their full potential, (c) teaches to the strengths of students rather than deficits, and (d) creates “a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change” (pp. 11-12). All of these conditions are met if the CSHSE National Standards are met, further affirming the role of diversity and social justice by their congruence with multicultural education.

Accredited programs complete a self-study and provide evidence (catalogs, course descriptions, syllabi, brochures, curriculum vitae, etc.) to demonstrate that they have met the standards and specifications. Programs that do not address diversity and social justice dynamics as they occur in the CSHSE National Standards for Human Services Education would not be granted accreditation. On the other hand, it is to be expected that baccalaureate and masters degree (advanced) programs would have greater depth in these areas since several of the Specifications cited did not apply to technical or associates level degree programs.

Regardless of the content of any set of standards, student mastery of the specified knowledge, theory, and skills relies on the integrity of faculty to structure learning experiences and assess outcomes that embody those standards. Standards speak to the minimum requirements of understanding, and it is likely that many programs go beyond the CSHSE National Standards in relationship to diversity and social justice dynamics.

The Standards are research-based and have been affirmed through two separate independent research projects. While language has been modified, updated, and clarified, the intent of the Standards have not been changed without research to support the change (an example would be the Specifications related to the use of electronic technology).

This analysis demonstrates that the Standards do address diversity and social justice dynamics. The importance of these topics in the context of the human services profession cannot be overstated. In the context of a globalization, a flailing U.S. economy, increasing unemployment, and decreasing access to resources, an understanding of these issues at both individual and systemic levels is critical for the human services professionals to be successful in its mission to help humans meet their needs.

References

- Cavanaugh, J. & Mander, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Alternatives to economic globalization: A better world is possible*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Council for Standards in Human Service Education (1980/2005). CSHSE National Standards for Human Services Education. Available at: <http://www.cshse.org/standards.html>.
- Eriksen, K. (1977). *Human services today*. Reston, VA: Reston/Prentice Hall.
- Oswald, W. T., & Totten, V. (2008, October). *Preparing agents of change: Are we walking the talk?* Paper presented at the annual national conference of the National Organization for Human Services, Tucson, AZ.
- Mandell, B. R., & Schram, B. (2009). *An introduction to human services: Policy and practice* (7th Ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- National Organization for Human Services (NOHS). (1996). *Ethical standards of human service professionals*. Available at: <http://www.nationalhumanservices.org/ethical-standards-of-human-service-professionals>.
- Sargent, L.S. (2006). *Contemporary political ideologies: A comparative analysis* (13th Ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson.

Author information: Susan Kincaid, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Human Services Program at Western Washington University. Dr. Kincaid serves as Vice President of Accreditation for the Council for Standards in Human Service Education. She has a background in family and youth counseling, teaches Diversity and Social Justice Dynamics, Organizational, Community, and Global Systems, as well as courses in case management, and interviewing. Her research interests include narrative and social justice.

This article was published in *Human Services Today*, Fall/Winter 2008 , Volume 5, Issue 1 .

<http://hst.coehs.uwosh.edu> This article may be freely distributed for educational purposes provided above copyright information is included.

Human Services Today is a free, online publication of the College of Education and Human Services, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. To subscribe, send an email to hst@uwosh.edu. Include the word *Subscribe* in the subject line. In the body of the email please provide your name, organization, mailing address, email address, telephone number, and job title or position.