Critical Conversations in the Classroom: Preparing the Empowering Social Worker

Historical and emerging demographic shifts throughout Europe translate to an increasingly diverse landscape. And, like many European nations, the U.S.A. is a country of diverse ethnic and racial groups. Mapping onto this diversity, economic and social inequalities serve to marginalize particular social groups. The effects of the marginalization of subpopulations within countries are astoundingly similar. Historically underserved groups (i.e., those socially, economically, and politically disempowered) are typically denied equal access to social goods, and as a result, suffer a multitude of injustices, including being disproportionally poor, undereducated, unemployed, and imprisoned.

According to the Global Agenda and the Melbourne definition, the social work profession has an obligation to ameliorate inequality and promote social justice. These goals are echoed throughout the global social work community at the regional and national levels, with social work organizations in countries as diverse as Singapore and Botswana committed to advocacy for people's dignity and well-being and promoting a just society. Challenging social inequality seems to be a dominant feature of social work as practiced around much of the world, and social workers in Europe and in the U.S.A. are similarly bound to professional codes of ethics that requires promotion of the rights and dignity of all. So, preparing the next generation of social workers to address the needs of marginalized populations seems paramount.

To effectively educate and train social workers in a manner that supports the profession's mission toward ameliorating inequity, educators must attend to the issues of systemic inequality and its impacts, as well as promote students' recognition of their own experiences of privilege and disprivilege. But this aspect of social work education can be particularly challenging for instructors and students (Pease, 2006). Exposing inequalities can be uncomfortable and classroom discussion can be emotionally charged and challenging, especially for those in the privileged group (Boyd, 2008). To do this effectively, educators must value the viewpoints and experiences of students, position them to make comparisons between their and other's experiences of inequality and help them to place these experiences in a broader social context (see, for example, Pease, 2006). One model for this educational practice is Curry-Stevens' (2007), *Pedagogy for the privileged,* which offers educators a classroom practice to confront ignorance of (and resistance to knowing about) one's privilege and is transformational in its purpose. This practice can facilitate students' personal growth and aid their understanding of their role in undoing systemic injustices.

In this interactive workshop, the presenters will first outline the ten steps within Curry-Stevens' model *Pedagogy for the privileged* and then demonstrate strategies for the safe uncovering and discussion of issues related to privilege, disprivilege, inequality and oppression. Participants will explore their positions of privilege and disprivilege and their understanding of the impacts of social location. Participants will then be asked to share the challenges of these critical conversations in the classroom, and finally, the group will address ways in which these challenges can be overcome so as to promote students' self-awareness of their own biases which could be barriers to effective work with marginalized communities. Workshop participants will thus gain a methodology and tools to successfully facilitate difficult discussions regarding positionality of privilege and oppression in order to promote the development of an ethical justice-oriented framework for social work practice.

This workshop aims to create an international and inter-cultural dialogue on educational practices that promote and serve the profession's mission towards equipping social workers for anti-oppressive practice that empowers clients belonging to marginalized communities.