

Leveraging a Social Justice Focus on Social Work Education and Licensure

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Abstract: *While MSW students are increasingly interested in attaining social work licenses, social work educators vary in their understanding of state licensure and regulations and how to best prepare graduate students. Opportunities exist along a pathway to licensure to honor social work's professional commitment to social justice by teaching relevant course content that includes direct clinical practice and macro level practice, ideally bridging the knowledge to collectively work to facilitate the passing of state ASWB exams and secure professional licensure. A brief overview of the challenges that exist as social work programs strive to meet CSWE requirements and competency-based course content, in the context of acknowledging the disparities noted in the ASWB licensure exams, and while educating the growing number of students striving to seek professional licensure. Opportunities for MSW programs to identify the role and use of course content, pre-service development, marketing, and recruitment content designed to support students' efforts to pass ASWB licensure exams and obtain credentials are presented. Finally, implications and recommendations for social work programs and faculty to enhance their recruitment, teaching, and licensure preparation endeavors to best assist students and graduates.*

Keywords: *ASWB exams, CSWE competencies, MSW curriculum, social work licensure*

Increasingly, Masters Social Work (MSW) students are interested in obtaining social work licenses. In a 2018 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) survey of over 1,600 MSW graduates, roughly 80% indicated they planned to get their clinical license within five years (Salsberg et al., 2019). The vast majority of social work students indicated their desire to work in a clinical setting and/or in private clinical practice, thereby making licensure essential. Simultaneously, social work educators vary in their understanding of state licensure and regulations and how to best prepare graduate students.

Social work programs/departments of social work must meet the CSWE accreditation of nine core competencies based on actual performance in coursework assignments and practicum (CSWE, 2022a). Programs also want to support and prepare students to pass their state Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) licensure exam, and often find a conundrum where prioritizing course offerings. ASWB licensure exams tend to rely on knowledge and cognitive processes; CSWE accreditation requires coursework to map the integration and accomplishment of nine core competencies based upon performance in coursework assignments and actions in practicum (CSWE, 2022a). Hence, educators base CSWE competencies on the history and roots of the social work profession, and the nine competencies are not necessarily ranked by importance.

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There exists scant evidence to illustrate that social work programs consistently require courses or program content that addresses social work licensing and regulation. While there is a strong interest shown by social work students, the integration of licensure and regulation content into social work education has received sparse attention in the social work curriculum, in textbooks, and in research (Grise-Owens et al., 2016). The result is often a great disconnect between those who license or grant credentials to professional social workers and those who educate BSW/MSW social work students (Grise-Owens et al., 2016). In a 2016 online survey of macro social work practitioners and educators, findings revealed how interest does exist in advanced licensure for macro social work practice; however, much ambivalence exists regarding elevating such licensing to the next level (Plitt-Donaldson et al., 2016).

Background

Early literature related to social work education and licensure has identified barriers to obtaining social work licensure (Boutte'-Queen, 2003), the relevance of CSWE curriculum policy (Black & Whelley, 1999), the dilemma of "grandparenting" in state licensure when non-degreed workers are involved (Cohen & Deri, 1992), and the issue of continuing education requirements once licensed (Dietz, 1998). More recent literature related to social work licensure addresses content about regulatory boards (Boland-Prom et al., 2018), considers the implications of requiring licensing for macro social work practice (Donaldson et al., 2014), provides insights from community practice social workers on professional identification (Lightfoot et al., 2016), and provides future directions related to continuing education requirements to maintain licensure (Kurzman, 2016). CSWE's (2018) *Curricular Guide for Licensing and Regulation* is yet another rich resource that provides detailed information about social work licensing in conjunction with regulation issues across states, credentials licensing types, and educational requirements.

Current licensing regulations are part of a long history of dialogue and debate that has created a rather "dynamic tension for social work professionals" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 296), including if social work requires licensure (Morrow, 2023). Some educators argue that social work programs have ignored how important clinical social work examinations are to the careers of their alumni, to the public, and clients (Thyer, 2011). In 2022, CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) specifically included licensing exam pass rates as an optional post-graduation program outcome in Accreditation Standards, with (5.03) noting that social work programs monitor their program outcomes through graduation rates and at least one additional outcome (i.e., employment rates, licensure pass rate, higher education acceptance rates, time to program completion). The annual collection period and benchmarks for graduation rates and the chosen outcome(s) are determined by the program (CSWE, 2022a). That same year, in response to advocacy efforts from social work practitioners, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) published their inaugural data on AWSB pass rates (Kim & Joo, n.d.; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2022). Subsequently, in response to the ASWB analysis of licensure pass rates that noted disparities in pass rates for Latino, Black and social workers age 50 older (as compared to White test takers), the CSWE's Commission on Accreditation voted to remove licensing exam pass rates from the 2022 EPAS accreditation standards.

This change “reinforces the 2022 EPAS’ emphasis on anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion” (CSWE, 2022b, para. 2).

Social Work Educators’ Role in Conveying Knowledge

Social work educators play a vital role in preparing students and graduates to pass licensure exams, and there remains the inference that from recruitment and admission through graduation day and beyond, what students are taught creates the foundation of knowledge that can affect licensure failure or passing rates. Across regions, states, and social work programs, social work educators are tasked with teaching their students competencies that ensure a student’s ability to practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) are listed on professional job descriptions and serve to guide applicants, employees, and departments to evaluate and assess a person’s readiness for success in a job. A social work professional is expected to possess certain KSAs to perform the duties of their position. Hopefully, knowledge of KSAs will enhance a test taker’s ability to pass licensure exams. Knowledge statements refer to factual or procedural information, a body of information required to directly perform job functions. Skill statements refer to verbal or mental manipulation of data or items that are measured via a test where competency and/or of performance are assessed, typically within an established time limit. Ability statements refer to the power to perform an observable activity at the present time. This means that abilities have been evidenced through activities or behaviors that are like those aptitudes, and aptitudes are only the potential for performing the activity.

KSAs require attention because they are job related and tied to questions one might see on a licensure exam or job performance evaluation. ASWB exams contain content areas, competencies, and KSAs. For instance, in the clinical examination (LCSW), for a content area that includes human development, diversity, and behavior in the environment, the competency would be human behavior in the social environment, and the KSA would be the effects of addiction and substance use on individuals, families, groups, organization, and communities (ASWB, 2018).

Licensure Examinations

Licensure varies across states and territories. For BSW graduates, some require licensure exams for social workers who have graduated from CSWE accredited baccalaureate programs (Cummings, 2019). Licensure for macro and/or administrative practice is available in twenty states, with far fewer states offering licensure specific to macro level practice (e.g., the Licensed Advanced Macro Social Worker license in Missouri) or “ambiguous titles” such as Certified Master Social Work Manager in North Carolina (Cummings, 2019; Morrow, 2022).

Attaining professional social work licensure requires time and money; the LCSW exam is four hours long, and the fee is, on average, \$260.00. Therefore, passing licensure exams on the first try is important because of cost, time, and possible testing fatigue. The five categories of social work licensing exams are: Associate, Bachelors, Masters, Advanced

Generalist, and Clinical. Competencies measured in the ASWB clinical exam include the following: 1) Human Development, Diversity, & Behavior in the Environment (24%); 2) Assessment, Diagnosis, and Treatment Planning (30%); 3) Psychotherapy, Clinical Interventions, and Case Management (27%), and Professional Ethics and Values (19%) (ASWB, 2018). To prepare student or graduate test takers, prep courses and materials are available. These range from the purchase of online practice tests (offered by ASWB or private businesses) to online resources to help those taking or considering taking the National Social Worker-Clinical exam and the purchase of exam guides.

Apgar (2019) examined the great divide between social work's CSWE educational policy and licensure examinations, for example, roughly half, or 54%, of social work faculty members were licensed social workers. Further, the ASWB exams do not impact curriculum or coursework as regulators focus on consumer protection, so competency is based on what social workers do (Apgar, 2019). Consequently, regulators and ASWB exams stress direct practice wherein "only two of the 46 KSA statements in 'Human Development, Diversity, and Behavior in the Environment' focused on larger systems or social justice" (p. 527). In reality, 32% of a licensure exam focuses on "Interventions and techniques used across systems," while all KSA statements relate to micro level practice. No KSA statements have to do with macro social work on larger systems (ASWB, 2018).

Social Justice and Social Work Education, Licensure and Regulation

Social justice, framed as a core foundation of the profession, is rooted in the idea that all people have equal rights, opportunities, benefits, and treatment, and includes necessary advocacy to address and reduce inequalities, oppression, and discrimination (Barker, 2014; Finn, 2021; NASW, 2021). CSWE's (2022a) *EPAS* states that MSW programs' "describe how the program's mission statement is consistent with the profession's purpose and values;" including "social justice....and the quest for social, racial, economic, and environmental justice" (p. 14). In accredited MSW graduate schools and programs, faculty are tasked to deliver course content guided by and structured to adhere to the CSWE *EPAS*, with the core competencies the defining baseline of measurement of student learning in both coursework and practicum. The profession's historical roots of the commitment to social justice, reflected in both the CSWE (2022a) *EPAS* and NASW (2021) *Code of Ethics*, ensure that MSW programs include courses that address the knowledge and skills and experiences necessary to work in communities or mezzo and systems or macro level policy practice.

Increasingly, MSW graduate schools and programs find more students drawn to clinical practice, leading to a growing interest for coursework that focuses on individual or micro level practice; resulting in programs offering limited course content that focuses on policy practice courses. Programs can use CSWE Competency 3: Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusions (ADEI) in Practice and CSWE Competency 2: Advance Human Rights, Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice (CSWE, 2022a), as an opportunity to include course content that can help students connect and build skills that bridge the micro-macro divide. For example, macro level policy courses can include course assignments directly related to the specialization area and/or the student's clinical

practicum population, while clinical courses can expand to include content that looks at the regulatory and/or policy implications of the specialization's practice focus and/or population. Doing so can serve to meet the values and purposes as outlined by CSWE's (2022a) EPAS, and meet the requirements for a clinical course of study necessary to apply for state-level licensure that includes advanced coursework focused on diversity and social justice (Virginia Department of Health Professions [VA DHP], 2024).

Highlights and conclusions by Apgar (2019, 2020) note the disconnect between what CSWE accreditors versus ASWB licensures require as measures for readiness to practice competent and effective social work are cited and considered. The authors posit that a social justice lens considers balancing social work policy-practice and direct clinical practice be used when comparing educational curricula and state licensure requirements and regulations.

How do social work programs recruit, teach, and prepare students to be licensed?

Teaching relevant course content, focused on direct practice, may work to help MSW students pass the necessary ASWB state licensure exam(s). Yet, course content is (appropriately so) unique to each school or department, and licensure exam pass rates vary across states and schools. For instance, there are MSW programs seeking to create a curriculum and practicum-based pathway to clinical licensure; others are focused on supporting a student's goal to pass the ASWB exam, each working within CSWE accreditation requirements. Teaching the core competencies can help students bridge micro/individual and macro/community practice.

MSW generalist year coursework provides students with the generic knowledge, values, and social work skills necessary for ethical professional practice across micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. To better address the coursework requirements for licensure, and the growing interest in clinical practice, an increasing number of MSW programs have incorporated clinical courses that are specifically listed in state licensure requirements (e.g., psychopathology). Very broadly, MSW programs take one or two paths forward after the generalist year core curriculum, such as: 1) a population or practice-area program specialization (e.g., Behavioral Health/Mental Health, School Social Work, Aging/Gerontology, Military and Veterans, Children, Youth, and Families, Social Work with Organizations and Communities), or 2) an advanced generalist approach with tracks defined by electives (e.g., clinical social work, leadership and management, substance use and recovery; CSWE, 2023).

Preparation for State ASWB Licensure Exams

Social work faculty who are licensed tend to spearhead exam preparation initiatives and/or include exam materials in their weekly or semester lectures. Social work faculty formally and informally educate students about the licensure process, the requirements, where to receive more information, as well as the very purpose of licensure and consumer protection. To prepare for the state ASWB exam, during the academic year, programs offer

information sessions for students. Often this preparation is accomplished through close collaboration with professional associations and/or state social work boards.

Programs may offer test prep sessions to help students prepare to take ASWB exams, accessing test questions from previous ASWB exams, thereby allowing students to be exposed to question types, formats, and wording; and receive general tips on test taking. A central part of facilitating the pathway for students planning to apply for licensure is to ensure the completion of a clinical practicum that provides the requisite minimum (600 hours) of advanced clinical practice hours (VA DHP, 2022). However, it is noteworthy that students wishing to pursue macro level practice may complete a non-clinical practicum (e.g., policy analysis or program development) while also taking both macro and clinical electives.

General Lessons Learned

The authors of this paper propose there is a lack of conformity that often exists in social work programs (both institutionally and regionally) regarding social work licensure. This reality is interesting from the perspective of how programs vary in their adherence to CSWE standards. To retain accreditation, social work programs uniformly address the specific competencies and practice areas mandated by CSWE. Yet, students' mastery is assessed through methods created by each program and, if successful, graduate students are issued an irrevocable MSW degree at the end. The educational process is facilitated by faculty and program administration, as well as clearly communicated intentions found among program marketing materials, websites and in program mission statements and goals.

Because social work licensure is a tangible method of holding practitioners accountable and regulating their ability to practice ethical and competent social work, it would stand to reason that the degree and the license would be more closely linked, or at least conceptually so. There is no consistent messaging regarding the connection of social work licensure (clinical and/or macro) to program curriculum.

Rethinking the Micro/Macro Dichotomy

Realistically, many professional social workers realize how viewing education as either "micro or macro" is a false dichotomy. Social workers cannot help an individual without considering the larger environment and, likewise, there is no ability to create change in communities or organizations without understanding and advocating for the individual. Applying the term "social justice" to only macro work serves to further splinter the profession. In a private clinical social work practice, an LCSW may have a client who is experiencing the debilitating effects of a major depressive episode. The client, who identifies as a gay male, discloses repeated comments at their workplace, including homophobic statements and "jokes" that leave them feeling powerless, embarrassed, and isolated. The LCSW who recognizes the importance of interventions that acknowledge and explore internalized oppression, the impact of systemic inequities, and the historical discrimination of LGBTQ persons, is drawing upon the profession's social justice roots

similarly to a social worker who is engaging in macro practice (e.g., community organizing or policy advocacy).

Adopting a broader social justice application in licensure preparation for LSWs or LCSWs may benefit students and programs, demonstrating a commitment to social justice across all levels of practice (micro, mezzo, macro). Social work educators are tasked with challenging the framing that clinical practice (especially private practice) and social justice are mutually exclusive. This commitment will move the needle towards support for licensure being an end-product of social work education.

Implications for Practice

To prepare students for social work licensure, and in efforts to bridge the micro-macro divide, concluding implications note opportunities for programs/departments, schools, and faculty to enhance recruitment, teaching, and the licensure preparation of MSW candidates.

1. Provide social work students with licensure information at the beginning of their educational journey. Both BSW and MSW programs can proactively provide resources, contacts, career options, and/or state regulations about social work licensure. Because the types of licensures vary in each state, schools should be able to provide information about their state (or region in certain cases) that will help students know their options and plan their career trajectories. In one author's work as a BSW educator, she incorporates group activities in which students research licensure criteria in multiple states and conduct job searches for jobs requiring licensure to better understand what those roles entail. She also has the class view the social work licensing board website together and reviews the necessary criteria and application instructions.
2. In teaching social work ethics and the social work core value of competency, educators can promote licensure as one of the most visible ways social workers are held accountable for their work. Licensure is a method of prioritizing public protection. Social workers have a vital role in the health and well-being of individuals, organizations, and communities. Assuring consumers and the public that social work professionals are competent and ethical in fulfilling this role is important to public confidence and our professional identity.
3. In creating or revising course curricula, programs can assess how to support the CSWE competencies by integrating or reflecting the KSAs found in the licensure exam topics and sample questions. Trevino et al. (2024) noted that changes made to the ASWB licensing exam now include KSAs drawn from practice analysis of three content areas: values and ethics, assessment and planning, and interventions and practice. Integration of the three areas will allow the instructor to further illustrate the competencies and provide continued context for social work skills.
4. Social work program course development or redesign could assess and modify course readings, assignments, and classroom or group assignments with social justice as the core foundational framing, seeking to bridge policy and clinical

practice skills through defining the historical roots of macro/community practice and individual/clinical practice.

5. Social work programs ought to continue to initiate research on social work licensure, including furthering qualitative exploration of social work programs across the country and the nature of their curriculum and licensure preparation.
6. Social work programs can make study materials readily available for students. Examples found in other programs include purchasing and loaning materials to students, facilitating access to websites or practice questions, and offering frequent formal or informal study sessions.
7. In marketing and recruitment materials, programs could clarify the differing levels of state licensure available (because they differ between states) and specify the course and practicum requirements that prepare students to apply for clinical, macro, or other licenses. Examples of “Frequently Asked Questions” about licensure are found on numerous MSW program websites.
8. Programs can build and grow available resources (e.g., alumni) and collaborative relationships with professional associations and societies to augment available departmental expertise to provide both information about licensing options and facilitate opportunities for students to access and practice licensure exams.
9. ASWB can engage social work faculty members and practitioners as advocates and paid volunteers to review and modify exam content. Community social work practitioners (clinical and macro) bring expertise and awareness of which competencies and KSAs are truly valuable in everyday practice; while faculty with practice experience (licensed or not) can serve as reviewers and writers for ASWB. KSAs are valuable and CSWE core competencies ought to work to further align knowledge, skills, values and affective and cognitive processes.

Conclusion

We conclude that social work programs ought to be prepared to discuss the role and impact of the pursuit of licensure, course content, and how to best reflect program and community needs. The changes in CSWE competency measurements call for programs to dialogue about the use of licensure requirements to define curriculum, including the infusion of macro-clinical content rooted in promoting social justice and equity. MSW programs would be prudent to prepare for possible dilemmas by considering the following questions: (1) what would be the effect if social work programs are pressured to post licensure scores, (2) how would a decision to post or not to post scores reflect on schools/programs (3) does the use of pass/fail rates measure and reinforce clinical practice at the expense of macro practice?, and (4) how might decisions of the ASWB 2026 Standard Setting Panel (2025) reflect on the use of macro policy practice and social justice as measurements of competence for safe practice? While social work licensure and regulation only partly define social work as a profession, the ultimate purpose of licensure is to protect public consumers of social work services through ethical and competent practice, for which educators play a vital role.

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