

Physical Impairment and Teaching Policy

An Issues Orientation

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This paper outlines the incorporation of an "issues" orientation into courses on disability policy. This approach is based on the notion that disability policy is fraught with a number of seminal issues. One of the main purposes of this teaching approach is to bring those issues into the classroom both methodologically and content-wise. The paper discusses: (1) the need for nursing students to develop critical and analytical abilities; (2) the way that this approach, anchored on an inquiry method, fosters the development of those abilities; (3) examples from disability courses of how this approach can be brought to fruition.

POLICY by its very nature involves decisions and choices. Neil Gilbert and Harry Specht define policy around the key dimension of choice,¹ a choice of one plan of action over that of another. David Gil argues that the study of alternative social policies is one of the most seminal ingredients of policy analysis. Alternatives and choices involve differing perspectives and points of view, which are at least as complex in their dimensions as the multi-faceted values represented by the people who hold or espouse them.

Social policies in the area of disability are particularly noted in the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties for the range of issues, alternatives and choices that are so much a part of continuing discussion and debate in this area. The issue of a "barrier-free society" is only one among many of these issues. Some proponents argue that only when a society is completely barrier-free can it claim any degree of humanitarianism in respect to the disabled citizens living in that society. Those with other points of view argue that a barrier-free society is either socially or economically unfeasible or impossible. The purpose of this paper is to outline the incorporation of an "issues" orientation into the disability classroom. The assumption upon which the paper and this approach is based rests on the notion that disability policy is fraught with a number of seminal issues, and that one of the main purposes of this teaching approach is to bring those issues into the disability policy classroom both methodologically (meaning teaching methodology employed) and content-wise.

The Main Focus

In this paper we will focus on three points: (1)

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the need for nursing students to develop critical and analytical abilities; (2) the way that this approach, anchored on an inquiry method, fosters the development of those abilities; (3) examples from disability courses that we have taught of how we have attempted to bring these into fruition.

First, it is critically important at this juncture in the history of the Nursing profession that nursing students develop their critical and analytical abilities to the fullest. "Liberating education consists," states Paulo Freire, "in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information."² Despite Dewey and his notion of learner involvement in the learning process, and the thinking of a host of other educational philosophers going back to Socrates himself, much of Nursing education is not particularly noted for its orientation to developing critical and analytical abilities in students. Legal education has had a long history of a specific focus and orientation in respect to the development of analytical and critical acumen.

Much of an attorney's professional life (most particularly courtroom attorneys) centres on an analysis of issues, on convincing people of the merits or demerits of these particular issues, of specific courses of action to take, and the like. Legal education has set a traditionally strong course in respect to the encouragement of analytical and critical capabilities, from which Nursing education might have much to learn. The movement in Nursing toward more content in management, planning and policy only underscores these points the more.

Admirable Attempts

Certainly, Nursing education has moved beyond the "bleeding heart" image or period of its history. But it has not yet come close to an overall orientation to fostering the development of a critical and analytical acumen in students in respect to major social issues or problems. Often new "experiential" exercises are employed in the classroom in the effort to get the student "involved" in his or her learning and to make that learning more meaningful and relevant. These are admirable attempts to get away from the traditional didactic, classroom lecture approach to learning. But in so doing we need to, if it can be put this way, "beef up the experiential." Nursing graduates need to be able to critically analyze and present an argument for or against a point of view before boards, legislatures, supervisors, and fellow hospital, clinic, or agency workers. Their ability to do so will do much to determine whether their views are adopted or accepted, their pers-

pectives considered or ignored. We may be living in a "back to basics" era in contemporary education, and we may be more painfully aware than in previous years of the inability of many students to engage in scholarly criticism at a sufficiently high level.

Second, this approach, anchored on an inquiry method of teaching, fosters the development of analytical and critical abilities. Classes that spend a major portion of their time presenting, classifying, and supporting opinions, hypotheses and various points of view on issues are characterized as 'inquiry classes.' Individual thinking and discovery are key elements in the inquiry approach to learning. Students are encouraged to take a definitive stance on an area of disability policy, and must defend that position or stance. In so doing students actively participate in the learning process, discovering on their own the links between values, assumptions and facts. Paulo Freire states the following:

Thematic investigation, which occurs in the realm of the human, cannot be reduced to a mechanical act. As a process of search, of knowledge, and thus of creation, it requires the investigators to discover the interpenetration of problems, in the linking of meaningful themes. The investigation will be most educational when it is most critical, and most critical when it avoids the narrow outlines of partial or 'focalized' views of reality, and sticks to the comprehension of total reality.⁴

Major Objective

A major objective here is to integrate both content and methodology. The "content" of disability policy now is characterized by numerous issues and competing points of view on these issues. The methodology employed here attempts to bring competing issue-filled points of view on disability policies into the disability policy classroom through the employment of an issue-oriented methodology.

Students in disability policy courses, and in other human services or policy courses as well, need to have the experience of staking out a position on disability policy and arguing the case on behalf of that position. In many areas of disability practice, professionals are called upon to voice points of view on particular policy changes and are called upon to support those points of view, before agency boards, staff meetings, supervisors, or fellow colleagues. An example might be a nurse or other human services professional persuasively arguing at a staff meeting for increased handicapped facilities within the agency itself. A well-argued case stands a considerably better chance of assent from the staff and administration of the agency.

Third, we have employed this approach successfully in courses that we have taught on disability policy, and have found it to be a scholarly, yet fresh and interesting approach to the subject

matter. We have found the students to be considerably more interested in an "issue" or "problem" focus as opposed to more traditional approaches. Students are encouraged to take one or more sides of an issue, with other students taking other sides to the same issue. Sometimes a student will take both "pro" and "con" positions on the same issue, which can be a most beneficial learning experience. A student does not have to hold the point of view that is argued or defended, and may state this to the class. This is not a debate, but is an issue presentation exercise. "Uncritical transmission of what is is not neutral, nor is it objective; it supports the status quo," states Thomas M. Brigham.⁵ Critical analysis must come first before change efforts can be truly effective. Good and incisive thought must precede good and effective action.⁶ The attempt here is to "get back to the basics" in respect to the development of sound positions and arguments on important issues in disability policy. As such, it can reap considerable educational rewards in the long-term growth of students in developing a truly critical acumen about major issues in disability policy and other areas of policy as well.

Footnotes

1. Gilbert, H. and Specht, H.: **Dimensions of Social Welfare Policy**; Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974, P. 4.
2. Freire, P.: **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**; New York, The Seabury Press, 1970, P. 67.
3. Massialas, B. G., Sprague, N. F., and Hurst, J. B.: **Social Issues Through Inquiry: Coping in an Age of Crisis**. Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.
4. Freire P. *op cit.*, p. 99.
5. Brigham, T. M.: Liberation in social work education: Applications from Paulo Freire. **Journal of Education for Social Work** 13 (3); 8, Fall, 1977.
6. Geach, B.: 'We have a language barrier to overcome'. In **Current Perspectives in Psychiatric Nursing: Issues and Trends**, ed. Kneisl, C. R., and Wilson, H. S. St. Louis, Missouri, The C. V. Mosby Co., 1976, pp. 14-25.

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