Distributive Justice and Equity in Grading:
A New Instructor's Reflections

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Abstract

The author reflects upon early teaching experiences to identify a conflict between minimal distributive justice, or the distribution of goods that ensures all individuals have an acceptable level of that good (Deutsch, 1985), and grading of students' assignments. Instead of addressing the unequal distribution of college preparedness among her students, the author's grading reflected and potentially reinforced educational, racial, and economic inequalities. In agreement with Anastas (2010), an ethic of social justice is recommended for use in social work education. Social work educators can provide greater access to resources (e.g., the instructor's time) for students experiencing disadvantages that affect their academic performance.

Keywords: social work education, distributive justice, social justice, grading, underprepared college students

Introduction

Before my first semester of teaching, a Facebook friend who was beginning college posted that she was excited to have scheduled a class with a professor who reportedly dismissed his classes early and brought students homemade cookies. I realized then that this was not what I wanted my students to say about my classes. I began my teaching with an aim to be an engaging lecturer, an encouraging advisor, and a demanding grader. I was unaware that the last of these aspirations, my desire to maintain consistently high standards in grading, would conflict with my guiding value as a social worker: social justice.

Social justice is related to distributive justice, which is the fair distribution of goods (Deutsch, 1985). Goods can be distributed based on a variety of criteria, such as merit, effort, or need, and it can be argued that each distribution is fair and therefore, just. Minimal distributive justice is a way of distributing goods so as to ensure an adequate minimum to all. It was evident that not all of my students had acquired an adequate minimum level of educational preparedness for college coursework. This paper is a reflection on my experience of grading underprepared college students, which was in conflict with the social work profession's value of social justice.

Relevant Theory and Research

As Brookfield (1998) describes, one's teaching is informed by reflection upon one's own learning history, the learning experience desired for those in one's class, the knowledge of colleagues, and one's theoretical perspective. Each of these elements shaped the way I approached grading. For instance, in my own learning experiences, I had little respect for teachers that I deemed "easy" graders. If high grades were not a challenge to receive from a teacher, I assumed that this reflected the teacher's inability to distinguish between the excellent and the average. Consequently, as a teacher I set out to award the highest grades to only the highest-level work.

Second, the classroom experience I desired for my students affected my grading (Brookfield, 1998). Since I wanted to encourage students' effort and development of skill, I treated high grades as an incentive for students to submit quality assignments. As Anastas (2010) notes, "Teachers who 'go easy' on students, individually or collectively, are not helping students learn…" (p. 245). Further, I expected my current students to talk about the course and my teaching with future students, and I did not want those reports to attract students looking for an "easy A." Rather, I wanted students with high expectations for their courses and themselves to fill my classroom.

As the semester progressed, I found myself relying heavily upon my more experienced colleagues and supervisors to discuss grading (Brookfield, 1998). I frequently asked my supervisor, are my expectations reasonable? Should I be concerned that the lowest exam grade was *that* low? The consistent response was that neither my expectations nor my students' performance were extraordinary. Rather, my experiences as a new instructor were normalized as common to the department and higher education, generally.

The final "lens" that Brookfield (1998) identifies for reflection upon one's teaching, "the lens of theoretical, philosophical, and research literature," was where I discovered an unanticipated value conflict (p. 197). By the end of the semester, it was clear to me that the final grades of my students reflected social and economic inequalities that had affected their performance in the course. The ethical principle, "Social workers challenge social injustice" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008) suggests that social work education should not perpetuate injustices previously experienced by students. Disadvantaged students were less prepared or underprepared to succeed in the course, and this inequality was reflected in students' final grades. The distribution of grades in my course conflicted with my general professional value of social justice and with minimal distributive justice, a specific aspect of social justice.

While such a conflict is not discussed in the social work literature, the literature on underprepared college students is pertinent to the dilemma of grading and distributive justice. Taking a broad view, Astin (2000) observed that remedial education of underprepared students is in conflict with the value institutions place on the excellence of admitted students for the purpose of resource acquisition.

> [Higher education institutions] have become so preoccupied with our individual 'excellence' – competing with other for the 'best' students and faculty we can get – that we tend to lose sight of the fact that we are really part of a larger community of institutions that is collectively supposed to serve a very basic and critical public purpose: to education the citizenry of the state. (Astin, 2000, p. 137)

Perhaps colleges and universities are more interested in attracting top students than producing academically and vocationally successful students—that is, students with adequate academic skills to fulfill professional aspirations and participate in civic life. This would explain an institution's dismissive posture towards underprepared students.

Generally, this body of research explores individual, instructional, and institutional factors that are correlated with the academic success of underprepared college students. At the individual level, Barbatis (2010) found that family support, participation in co-curricular activities, and student-faculty interaction were related to the persistence of underprepared students. In the classroom, various instructional topics and methods have been evaluated for their role in the success of underprepared students, including video supplemental instruction (Hurley, Patterson, & Wilcox, 2006); specific study techniques (Cukras, 2006); and extended length recitations, peer-led team learning groups, and peer-mentored study groups (Shields, Hogrebe, Spees, Handlin, Noelkin, & Riley, et al., 2012).

At the institutional level, Deil-Amen (2011) found that when some students are identified as needing to take remedial courses and designated as "remedial students," this masks the needs of other underprepared students who meet benchmarks that prevent them from placement in remedial courses but still struggle academically. "[Nonremedial students] constitute a potentially marginalized and certainly at-risk population who are overlooked due to our focus on categorizing and contrasting along the remedial/nonremedial and the two-year/four-year divides" (p. 64). Sherwin (2011) found that several systemic changes at a tribal, open access college improved the experience of underprepared students, such as providing training to faculty specific to serving underprepared students, improving the accuracy of academic advising, and offering technology assistance. Hughes, Gibbons, & Mynatt (2013) recommend use of narrative career counseling to assist underprepared students to address challenges in their academic progress and role conflicts, while Mortensen (2006) suggests psychosocial mentoring by faculty, especially following academic failure or disappointment, and offering encouragement to struggling students to obtain social support.

Though the literature on underprepared students and remedial education covers interventions for individual students, classes, and institutions, it does not directly speak to grading or distributive justice. These reflections can contribute to the conversation on this subject within social work education. Given the importance of both academic success and social justice to the profession, the topic of distributive justice and grading needs to be addressed.

Minimal Distributive Justice

Distributive justice, generally, is concerned with the distribution of goods, be they material or intangible (Rawls, 1971; Deutsch, 1985; Fleischacker, 2004). In society, distributive justice can relate to distribution of food, health care, education, pollution, wealth, opportunity, or any other goods that affect well-being. A number of values can be used to justify the fair distribution of goods (Deutsch, 1985). For instance, a society could distribute health care based on ability to pay, or according to reciprocal arrangements with providers, or depending on level of need. One value orientation that can direct the distribution of goods is "so that none fall below a certain minimum," which is minimal distributive justice (Deutsch, 1985, p. 3). In terms of health care policy, emergency health care is supposed to be distributed according to minimal distributive justice in America. All who access hospitals for emergency health care are to be treated without regard to ability to pay, thereby providing a minimum level of wellness.

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Put another way, minimal distributive justice is the distribution of goods with the goal of addressing deficiencies in that good. This concept is especially relevant to the profession of social work.

> Social work can be conceived as a profession engaged in alleviating deprivation in all its varieties, from economic to psychological; social workers identify people who fall below the social minimum in any justice-related good and intervene in order to help them rise above that minimally accepted level. (Wakefield, 1988, p. 194)

The value of minimal distributive justice can be clearly observed in a variety of social work practice contexts. In the past, I have employed this value when providing extra measures of security to supervised visitation sessions for clients who had experienced domestic violence, as well as when offering sliding fee scales for mental health services to low income clients. These practices ensured that my clients received the minimum level of a social good (helpful services) despite barriers to distribution of it (e.g., inability to pay).

As a social work educator, however, I struggled to reconcile the differences in educational preparedness among students—the absence of minimal distributive justice—with the practice of holding all students to the same standards when grading (Brody, 2012). By providing all students with comparable access to the educational resources at my disposal (e.g., lectures, feedback on assignments, office hours), I was operating as though my students' prior access to educational resources had been distributed to ensure a minimum level of academic readiness. My students' final grades, however, reflected social and economic barriers to the distribution of education, not an adequate minimum level of it.

Inequalities Reinforced by Grading

Three types of inequality were evident in the grades of my students: educational, racial, and economic. Educational inequality was apparent in that some students did not know how to summarize an author's ideas, how to paraphrase while avoiding plagiarism, how to cite sources, or how to construct a reference list. I believe some students had never been adequately taught these skills, so my evaluation of their writing was in effect an evaluation of their high school or college English education more than an evaluation of the students' intellectual or writing abilities. The presence of students in my course who were unprepared for college-level writing is far from an isolated incident. Of students who took the 2010 ACT (originally an acronym for American College Testing [ACT, 2014]), a standardized college entrance test, 33.7% received scores that indicated they were not ready for college-level English courses (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). My grading reinforced the unjust distribution of educational opportunity found among my students.

Next, racial inequality was evident in students' final grades. There were 14 students in my class, including five African-American students and one biracial individual. Collectively, the African-American students finished the course with a D average, as compared to a B average for non-African-American students and a C average for the class as a whole. At first, I was concerned that this was due to some subconscious bias on my part. However, after reviewing my grading for consistency, it was clear this was not the case. Instead, I believe the racial inequality

seen in my students' grades is another manifestation of the educational inequality found in society, which was not unique to this class. Not only were one-third of students who took the ACT in 2010 underprepared for college-level English, as discussed previously, but this was found disproportionately among racial minority students (NCES, 2011). My assumption is that the African-American students in my class had not received the minimum acceptable level of educational opportunity, and students' grades reflected and reinforced this discrepancy.

My grading also highlighted the economic inequalities among my students.   The average grade for students who stated that they were employed was 68.5%, as compared to the non-working students' average of 78%. This is consistent with the research of Hawkins, Smith, Hawkins, and Grant (2005), who found "the average number of hours worked and perceived work interference with studies were statistically significant negative predictors of self-reported overall grade point average" (p. 23). It is likely that the students who had to work had less time and energy for assignments than the unemployed students. My grading reinforced the economic disparities between students who needed the income from employment while in school and those who did not.

Like most universities, my university provides institutional resources to address these inequalities. The university's writing center is available to assist students with all the problems seen in my students' papers, and minority students have university staff available to them specifically to support their academic achievement. My efforts to connect students with these resources were somewhat fruitful. Students who acted upon referrals received higher grades than those who did not, but those who did not go to the writing center, for example, cited work responsibilities as prohibiting them from going. In these instances, economic inequality prevented remediation of educational inequality. Whether due to economic needs, cultural practices, stigma, or other reasons, my students' reluctance or refusal to access resources outside the classroom reshaped my understanding of my responsibilities as an instructor.

Minimal Distributive Justice and Social Work Education

Anastas (2010) recommends an ethic of social justice in social work education. As proposed by Stefkovich (2006), this ethic "calls for equal access to tangible and intangible goods but offers greater access to those who are socially disadvantaged" (Anastas, 2010, p. 240). The academic resources that I make available to students (e.g., constructive feedback, individual tutoring appointments) can be distributed based on need. This is helpful when approaching the social inequalities among students discussed above and is also in line with our ethical requirement to challenge social injustice by promoting equal access and opportunity (NASW, 2008). While I make resources for academic success available to all students, the value or ethic of social justice both permits and requires me to allocate resources under my control—namely, my time—more liberally to students who are at a disadvantage.

As suggested by Anastas (2010), I can continue to utilize the value of minimal distributive justice in my work with students in my practice as a social work educator. As with clients, I can engage students by viewing them as individuals with unique needs and remembering details of their narratives. I can assess their needs and pay attention to barriers to academic success. Once identified, I can intervene to promote students' abilities to overcome

barriers. Interventions may include referrals to campus services, but when barriers also prevent access to these, interventions may include writers' workshops and study sessions. I can evaluate the success of interventions by determining if students' barriers to academic and professional success have been reinforced or mitigated by the education provided in my courses. In sum, my values as a social worker can continue to guide me as a social work educator, albeit before assignments are submitted, not while grading them.

Grades as Social Goods

Decades ago, Kirschenbaum, Napier, and Simon (1971) provided an argument for considering students' grades themselves as social goods, in the sense that the standards of distributive justice apply to the distribution of grades.

> When we grade, we are using potentially very dangerous numbers... especially when the grades these days can determine who gets sent to Vietnam and who stays behind, or when our grading systematically screens out black kids from getting some of the benefits in this world of ours. (p. 162)

While military conscription is no longer an immediate concern, students' grades can determine future opportunities or lack of them. This is especially true in professional education, which has the added responsibility of gatekeeping (Anastas, 2010). For clients to benefit from effective and ethical interventions, their social workers must have the knowledge and skills to provide those services. Therefore, students' grades in social work courses are important determinants of who becomes a social worker and who does not.

It is all the more unfortunate, then, when a student's lack of educational preparedness or other inequality is reflected in her or his final course grade. While remedial education may be in conflict with a college's desire for prestige, it is still surprising that effectively addressing academic deficits and other barriers, and producing capable professionals despite them, is not a greater source of pride (and therefore, recipient of resources) for institutions with the mission of education (Astin, 2000). Especially in a social work program, if academic skills (e.g., writing) are inhibiting a student's progress towards a professional goal, the professional value of minimal distributive justice might compel a social work educator to provide interventions that promote the student's success.

Personal Implications

In some ways, my value conflict between minimal distributive justice and grading is not resolved. The tension remains between varying levels of preparedness among students and the perception that grades must be completely objective to be fair.   In an important way, however, I now understand that to remain true to my personal and professional values, I must design interventions that meet the diverse needs of my students. I may have to meet with students more often, outside of class, or even allow them to submit ungraded drafts to help them to improve their writing. Further research is needed to understand how social work educators can promote equal access and opportunity for disadvantaged social work students. Perhaps more importantly,

further reflection is needed within the profession to clarify the role of social justice in social work education.

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