



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 50

Issue 1 *Anti-Trans Policies and Social Work
Education*

Article 2

2023

An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Recommended Citation

Pacey, Megan S. and Christensen, Candace (2023) "An Introduction to the Special Issue," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 50: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol50/iss1/2>

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An Introduction to the Special Issue

Special Issue Editors:

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Transgender individuals, particularly children and youth, have been targeted in recent years as part of a sociopolitical backlash consisting of legislative attacks that aim to restrict the rights and freedoms of transgender and gender expansive (TGE) youth and their families. In 2021, reports from national advocacy organizations reported that year as having the most anti-trans bills in a single year since 2015 (Krishnakumar, 2021). The legislative attacks have continued with more than 300 proposed bills targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals in 2022, the vast majority targeting transgender children and youth in more than 30 US states (HRC, 2022). At the time of finalizing this special issue in March, 2023, more than 40 states have proposed over 350 anti-transgender bills (Track Trans Legislation, 2023). These bills primarily target youth and young adults and threaten to restrict their rights and freedoms in public facilities, schools, sports, and healthcare. For example, more than half of the currently proposed bills aim to restrict access to gender-affirming healthcare for TGE youth and even young adults in some states (Track Trans Legislation, 2023).

This policy-level discrimination harms TGE youth and adults through negative rhetoric about TGE people and by restricting access to supportive and life-saving resources (Kuper et al., 2020; Pacey et al., 2020; Pacey et al., 2021; Perez-Brumer et al., 2015). These policies and associated rhetoric directly conflict with social

work ethics and values and require intervention from social work practitioners, advocates, and educators. However, despite justice and equity as central parts of social work ethics and the mandate for social work education to address diversity, equity, and inclusion, social work education has generally been silent on these issues with few exceptions.

In response to the wave of anti-transgender legislation in early 2022, the University of Kansas Center for LGBTQ+ Research and Advocacy partnered with social work scholars and advocates across the US to organize a national town hall focused on “Anti-trans Policies & Social Work Education.” Social work educators and practitioners from across the US organized the town hall to engage in critical discussions surrounding social work education’s role in perpetuating anti-trans bias and the silence in the face of these anti-trans attacks in the political arena. Organizers brought together six panelists, Rae Caballero, Ginger Chun, Raye Dooley, Sarah Mikhail, Dr. Sarah Mountz, and Dr. Darren Whitfield. Each panelist shared their expertise from lived experiences, social work practice, or research with the TGE community. The panelists answered questions focused on the responsibilities of social work education programs to be active agents of change in the face of transphobic policy and practice. They also identified clear action steps for social work education institutions and social workers to address the harm and act to end it. The town hall ended with a Q & A that engaged the audience members and panelists in generating a plan of action. The town hall, recorded and available at the link in the references, engaged in critical conversations surrounding the anti-trans political climate. Attended or watched by over 400 people, the town hall was a critical calling in of social work education to do better.

This open-access special issue is one of several steps taken following the town hall to expand the reach of the important messages conveyed. In May 2022, we issued a call for papers to address topics aligned with the vision of the town hall—to be a space where we demand social work governing bodies and social work education institutions acknowledge the harm done to TGE people and communities. This special issue also asks for a commitment to center TGE people, communities, and related issues. We opened the call to students, staff, faculty, and advocates for papers that were conceptual, research-oriented, theoretical, or calls to action. The papers

included in this special issue met that call, and we are excited to share them with you and for you to use them to push social work to live our stated values and advocate for TGE inclusion and rights.

The articles in this special issue are grouped into two broad categories: 1) TGE student and faculty experiences in social work education, and 2) strategies for teaching, organizing, and innovating social work education to promote more trans-inclusive social work education programs. The special issue concludes with a critical call to action for social work education. All of the articles specifically relate to the intersection of social work education within the context of the violence and harm that come from anti-trans policies, legislation, and rhetoric. Simultaneously, they take us beyond the policy context, recognizing that social work and social work education have the potential, and the mandate, to intervene within all the systems in which TGE people are oppressed, discriminated against, and harmed, and to train students to do the same.

TGE Student & Faculty Experiences in Social Work Education

The first four manuscripts in this special issue explore and elucidate the experiences of TGE students and faculty in social work education programs. Situated in social work ethics and values and the core competencies of social work education, these authors highlight the contradictions between our profession's stated values and goals and the lived experiences of TGE communities. The first two articles provide a narrative experience of students at two different schools of social work. First, in their article "*Transphobia in class, anti-trans legislation at the state: A commentary on navigating harm and hope in a social work education program,*" Greenwood and Pacey combine narrative exposition and a critical literature review illustrating a BSW student's experiences navigating transphobia and cissexism at the state level and within social work education. They integrate the harm inflicted when TGE students are misgendered and experience cissexism with the hope that comes from building community and the possibilities of change. Their call to action provides concrete recommendations based on their shared experience and research that can serve to make schools of social work, practi-

cum sites, and the social work accrediting body more affirming and inclusive of TGE communities. Next, Akapnitis, Jenkins, and Mendoza utilize collaborative and critical autoethnography to extrapolate the burden on TGE doctoral students in social work and their mentors to cope with, and address harms perpetuated against TGE communities. Their article, *"Between the noise and silence: An autoethnography challenging schools of social work to evolve for trans students,"* highlights the intersectional experiences of TGE doctoral students, including feelings of isolation and abandonment, and their burden in finding community and resources during challenging times. They conclude with important recommendations for social work education programs on supporting TGE doctoral students.

The next two articles in this section systematically explore the experiences of TGE students and faculty within social work education. Shelton, Dodd, Borgan, San Emeterio, and Wilhelm explore TGE students' experiences within social work's signature pedagogy, practicum education. In their article *"A descriptive account of the practicum experiences of trans and nonbinary social work students,"* the authors describe findings from a digital survey of TGE social work students and their experiences within practicum, including practicum staff and faculty, agency staff, and other critical components of the practicum experience. Situating their findings in the harms of cisgenderism and cisnormativity, Shelton et al. call on social work education to radically shift toward centering and celebrating transgender and nonbinary students in social work. Next, in their article *"An institution can have good intentions and still be atrocious': Transgender and gender expansive experiences in social work education,"* Kinney, Cosgrove, Swafford, and Brandon-Friedman explore the experiences and meanings of affirmation and disaffirmation experienced by TGE students and faculty in social work education programs. Their findings elucidate key areas of social work education—classrooms, practicum sites, texts, peers and colleagues—that contribute toward this affirmation or disaffirmation. They call on social work educators to acknowledge and challenge the current sociopolitical climate against trans people and to re-envision how to better educate and serve TGE communities.

Strategies for Teaching, Organizing, and Innovating Social Work Education

The next four manuscripts in the special issue illuminate strategies and methods for supporting TGE communities in social work education and practice activities. These methods range from sharing multi-dimensional case studies and bolstering ally behaviors. Other papers propose using mutual aid as a culturally relevant practice in the face of anti-trans policies and adopting transformative justice principles to affirm TGE people and counteract marginalization. These strategies and methods are grounded in frameworks, practices, and empirical data that affirm the self-determination and inherent dignity and worth of TGE communities.

First, in their article *“Teaching beyond trans-competency: Exploring trans-affirming pedagogy through applied case studies,”* Mountz, Harrell, and Zaman use their personal and professional experiences to generate multi-dimensional and intersectional case studies that center the experiences of transgender individuals and their community context. The authors describe how they employ these case studies to teach social work students trans-affirming, intersectional approaches to social work practice. Next, through an analysis of ally behavior that supports TGE people, Atteberry-Ash, Walls, and Holloway illustrate which demographics, social work program attributes, and psychosocial characteristics correspond to higher levels of ally behavior among social work students. Their article, *“Committed to the cause? Examining social work education’s role in supporting ally behavior for transgender and nonbinary people and communities,”* highlight findings that demonstrate the essential role that sexual and gender minority representation play in bolstering ally behaviors within social work education contexts.

The third article in this section, *“The future of mutual aid from the perspective of queer and trans organizers,”* by Holloway, Hostetter, Morris, and Kirby, implements a desire-based framework and foresight lens to reveal the perspectives of queer and trans mutual aid practitioners on the future of mutual aid. The authors use the study findings to argue for incorporating mutual aid practice into social work education as a culturally relevant approach to resisting an-

ti-transgender policies. In the final article in this section, Bickford, Kemmerer, Martinez, Matijczak, and Wagaman provide a framework and empirical argument for using transformative justice principles to center TGE experiences in social work education. Their article, *"Applications of transformative justice principles for centering transgender and gender expansive experiences in social work education and practice,"* portrays how the history of social work practice and education has pathologized and marginalized the TGE community. As an antidote, the authors apply transformative justice principles and practices to the social work profession, emphasizing the principles of accountability, survivor-led, transformation, and community building and resilience. These four papers provide affirming, evidence-based strategies for supporting TGE communities in social work education and practice spaces.

Closing Commentary

As a conclusion to the special issue, Whitfield, Westgate, Gartner, Jacobs, and Atteberry-Ash provide a critical closing commentary on the state of the social work profession, social work education, and the numerous social work governing bodies on their explicit role in addressing anti-trans policies, legislation, bias, and harm. Their article *"Anti-transgender policies and practices in social work education, accreditation, and licensing: A call for change"* radically challenges social work to confront the harms enacted through bias and silence in the face of oppression toward TGE communities. They call on these social work organizations to come together to address these harms, advocate for TGE inclusive policies, and promote systemic changes in the social work profession.

Conclusion

From state-sanctioned violence to classroom microaggressions, there is an urgent need to transform the harm these systems have perpetuated against TGE people. The nine papers in this special issue provide a wealth of information on how to affirm and support TGE students and community members, challenge anti-trans policy and rhetoric, and advocate for equity and justice for TGE com-

munities. Specific implications for improving social work education spaces involve assessing the implicit and explicit aspects of social work education programs. Both the curriculum and culture of social work programs must proactively and publicly affirm TGE students and community members. Social work educators (faculty and practicum instructors) need a clear understanding of how cisgenderism appears in social work education spaces and how to replace cisgenderism with trans and gender-expansive affirming language, behaviors, and learning materials. Social work institutions (schools and accrediting bodies) must take the lead by infusing TGE-affirming knowledge, practices, and policies into organizational cultures. These institutions should also build support networks for TGE students, staff, and faculty, so they do not have to carry this extra labor into their educational or professional journey.

Specific to social work education, faculty and practicum instructors need to move beyond cultural competence and emphasize structural competence. This frame emphasizes a nuanced understanding of the multi-level challenges TGE community members face. In-depth case studies, mutual aid, and transformative justice principles offer pedagogical pathways to centering the experiences and strengths of TGE people. Further, bolstering sexual and gender minority representation in social work institutions leads to higher levels of allyship in the organization. This special issue provides straightforward, actionable steps that social work accrediting bodies, educational institutions, and faculty can take to create equitable, affirming, and inclusive structures, systems, and practices for the TGE community.

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