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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

INTEGRATING PRINCIPLES OF SPIRITUALITY INTO THE SOCIAL WORK CLASSROOM

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Integrating Principles of Spirituality into the Social Work Classroom

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Abstract

Incorporating content on spirituality into social work curriculum assists students in understanding the contexts of their own spiritual beliefs and how to integrate their personal values with social work professional values. Including spiritual content in social work education equips students with tools to protect their professional practice by identifying where their personal and professional values overlap. Learning to use spirituality as a tool can also help students identify when clients' spiritual beliefs are the cause of false guilt and negativity or when spiritual beliefs are strengths that motivate clients in the healing process. Likewise, classroom discussions that incorporate how to use spiritual assessments and how to work with clergy and chaplains provides a holistic treatment model for students. This paper discusses ideas to assist with incorporating content on spirituality into the social work classroom.

“The inclusion of spirituality and religion within social work is supported by the profession, including mandates from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)” (Barker, 2007, p. 147). The 2001 & 2008 CSWE *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS), specifically mentioned the ability to “practice without discrimination and with respect, knowledge, and skills related to clients’ ... religion” as an essential element of the professional foundation (EPAS 3.0.3, CSWE, 2001) as well as an aspect of diversity in which one should practice without discrimination (EPAS 2.1.4 & 3.1.3, CSWE, 2008). Furthermore, the NASW standards for culturally competent practice Standards 1, 2, and 3 discuss the need to understand one’s own values, beliefs and family traditions and values as an aspect of diversity (NASW, 2001).

Social work scholars distinguish spirituality from religion (Canda & Furman, 1999). Spirituality has been described as the basic essence of the individual (Carroll, 1997 & 1998), as well as how an individual finds meaning and purpose through relationships with “self, others, and a higher power” (Canda & Furman, 1999; Barker, 2007, p. 148). Spirituality encompasses an experience of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in relationship with self, others, and God, or a perceived transcendent reality, that is innate in all human beings (Canda & Furman, 1999; Hodge, 2006).

While spirituality is generally seen as referring to human experiences that transcend the self, religion is generally described in terms of formal institutions for spiritual beliefs and practices. Accordingly, religion has been defined as a “communal setting” through which beliefs are organized and spirituality is practiced (Hodge & McGraw, 2005; Barker, 2007, p. 148). As Dudley and Helfgott (1990) have noted, “religion is encompassed within spirituality, but spirituality is viewed as broader than religion” (p. 288). Likewise, Cowley and Derezotes (1994)

have observed that spirituality is not connected to any particular theology and is not equivalent with religion. Therefore, as Dudley and Helfgott (1990) have observed, spirituality can be expressed outside any particular religious context.

Literature Review

Inclusion of Spirituality into the Social Work Curriculum

In a study of professional social workers, psychologists, and counselors conducted in 1991, Sheridan, Bullis, Adcok, Berlin and Miller found that 82% of the respondents had rarely or never been presented with content on religion and spirituality in their clinical graduate education (Sheridan & Hemert 1999).

Studies of faculty members indicate that a majority would support inclusion of a specialized course on spirituality in the social work curriculum, primarily as an elective (Sheridan, Wilmer & Atcheson, 1994; Dudley & Helfgott, 1990). A similar survey of MSW students revealed that a higher percentage of students than faculty believe a specialized course in religion and spirituality should be required of all students (Sheridan & Hemert, 1999). A substantial majority of the surveyed students reported an interest in taking a course focused on religion, spirituality, and social work practice (Sheridan & Hemert, 1999). In another survey of MSW students, almost all of the students believed that information on religion and spirituality should be presented in their curriculum (Cascio, 1999). Likewise, results of a survey of BSW students revealed that they overwhelmingly agreed that social work education should include content on religious and spiritual diversity and content on how to deal effectively with religious and spiritual issues in practice (Graff, 2007).

Nevertheless, only 17 of 114 surveyed CSWE-accredited MSW programs offered courses on spirituality and social work in 1995 (Russel, 1998), and that number had increased to only 50

programs by 2001 (Miller, 2001). By 2005, 75 programs were reported to offer programs on spirituality or religion (Canda, 2005), which means that a substantial number of the more than 190 CSWE-accredited MSW programs still do not offer courses on spirituality or religion.

Canda (2002) notes that social work has moved through a series of phases, beginning with a strong Christian and Jewish sectarian spiritual emphasis and including a phase when topics of spirituality and religion were completely overlooked. Currently, the profession is increasingly adopting a global perspective, “that respects cultural and spiritual diversity around the world, avoids ethnocentric or chauvinistic tendencies, and maximizes the potential for synergy between the various national developments” (Canda, 2002, p. 2). Nevertheless, the integration of spirituality within social work practice on a global front will require the profession to be cautious about taking on an ethnocentric view of spirituality; avoid a competitive stance when encountering differences among nations, cultures, religions, and linguistics; recognize that there are differences that should not be ignored while honoring commonality and diversity; and avoid the trap of humanocentrism, that is, failing to recognize a worldwide view of spirituality that involves consideration for all living things and the planet as a whole (Canda, 2002).

Including spirituality into social work education may be related to the fact that baby boomers have demonstrated their interest in spiritual care as an important dimension of well-being (Canda & Furman, 1999). According to the National Academy on Aging Society (1999), there will be a 50% increase in the number of people in the U.S. who have chronic conditions by 2040. As this aging population faces the end of life, spiritual concerns regarding the meaning of life and death will become inevitable (Ai, 2002). Likewise, the federal government has begun to lend support for “scientific inquiry into the role of spirituality and religion in health and well-being” (Ai, p. 108).

According to Hodge (2005), at least three factors contribute to the recent interest in spirituality among social work educators:

- 1) Empirical research showing spirituality as a client strength (Ellison & Levin, 1998; Koenig et al., 2001; Maton & Wells, 1995; Pargament, 1997);
- 2) Societal interest in spirituality (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999); and
- 3) “The advent of postmodernism fostered by the recognition of the limitations of the modern, secular worldview” (Bowpitt, 2000; Hodge, 2005, p. 38).

Integrating spirituality into the social work curriculum is preparing students for professional competence in caring for the spiritual well being of clients (Ai, 2002). Ai (2002) suggests that foundation courses such as human behavior and the social environment (HBSE) are a good place to start the integration of spiritual components into existing curriculum along with developmental theories of human behavior. Thus social work education can include a view of the person that considers the spiritual dimension as well as the cultural dimension of the person-in-environment. Ai also suggests there are considerations for integrating spirituality into education in practice methods that use non-development theoretical approaches to prepare students for practice with targeted problems and populations. Finally, Ai recommends using research to enhance social work theory and practice development through education as well as rethinking curriculum content in relation to social services and policies.

Inclusion of Spirituality in Education to Assist Social Work Students

A separate course on spirituality and religion will compete with an already crowded curriculum in many programs. A required course on spirituality and religion also may require the omission of another course in many programs. Accordingly, those programs that want to

include course content on religion and spirituality but that cannot add another required or elective course will have to integrate content on spirituality and religion into other courses.

The authors propose that discussions on spirituality should be incorporated into practice classes, and other curriculum as it is appropriate. It should be included at both the BSW and MSW level. The NASW Code of Ethics should provide the template within which to integrate students' personal and spiritual values with those of the social work profession. "Given the significant role education plays in instilling the professions' ethics and values (Cnaan, 1999), it is perhaps particularly important that the profession's educational curricula are based upon ethical standards" (Hodge, 2005, p. 38). According to Hodge (2005), the universality of spirituality is interconnected to values and ethics, and assumes a dynamic sense of mutuality, awareness, and creativity.

Discussions and assignments that deal with spirituality provide students with an understanding of how to include spiritual matters into practice. This paper proposes two ideas to incorporate spirituality into classroom discussions. The first is to consider how spirituality impacts the social worker by using the NASW Code of Ethics as a framework for students to examine their own attitudes and beliefs regarding spiritual matters. Secondly, students can be taught to consider how to help clients include spirituality into the treatment process through interdisciplinary practice and coordination with clergy and chaplains. Similarly, classroom discussions can focus on the strengths that clients receive through their spiritual beliefs and how spirituality can be a coping mechanism. The authors recommend including these discussions in all practice classes at both the BSW and MSW level rather than in a separate class.

Developing a Professional Identity

Kaplan and Dziegielewski (1999) found that social work students may have strong personal spiritual and religious values, but it was difficult for these to be integrated into practice. Spiritual values are usually engrained in individuals from early childhood, and students' personal values may sometimes conflict with the values of the social work profession. As one becomes socialized into the profession of social work, it is imperative to integrate one's spiritual beliefs with professional values. Spiritual beliefs are often tied to values that are defined as the beliefs, preferences, or assumptions about what is desirable or good for man (Pincus & Minahan, 1973). Values help determine our actions; therefore, social work education must include identifying potential areas of conflict between personal beliefs and professional values. At the present time, there is little research that focuses on social work students' beliefs about religion/spirituality and social work (Graff, 2007).

Use of the NASW Code of Ethics to Integrate Spiritual and Professional Values

The NASW Code of Ethics states that practitioners "should be aware of any conflicts between personal and professional values and deal with them responsibly" (NASW, 2008). The Code of Ethics serves as a useful guideline for examining how professional and spiritual values intersect. "Neither NASW nor CSWE provide social workers with guidance for ethical decision making on the use of spirituality in practice" (Eun-Kyoung & Barrett, 2007, p. 4). The Code socializes practitioners new to the field to social work's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards (NASW, 2008). However, "little has been written about the philosophical (or theological) underpinnings of the nature of persons required to support core social work values and ethics" (Sherwood, 2007, p. 122). This understanding may come through classroom discussions and exercises that create self-awareness. Classroom discussions should be developed to help students evaluate the core values of the social work profession and discuss how each

value compares and contrasts with their personal values. “Self-awareness enables a more immediate connection with the knowledge base of spirituality, which includes knowledge, history, traditions, spiritual practices, and the wide range of individual experiences which people consider to be “spiritual” (Rothman, 2009, p. 165).

Service

The NASW Code of Ethics state that social workers will elevate service to others above self-interest, provide some services “pro bono” or without the acceptance of fees, and use their knowledge, values, and skills to provide community services and address social problems. Social work students can be encouraged to use the Code of Ethics to assess the types of services supported within their faith group, if they have one. Some faith communities participate in mission trips or special outings to assist the oppressed, poverty stricken, and needy. Some promote projects that include building homes, neighborhood clean-up, or caring for widows within their congregation. Students can evaluate how they serve individuals, families, groups, and communities through their affiliation with a faith community. Thus a classroom activity that focuses on the professional value of service without compensation can be useful in helping students determine how they already embrace the social work value of service. Furthermore, students benefit from being asked to be involved in some kind of volunteer activity. These activities can then facilitate discussions about how one can put others before self. This type of discussion is critical to self-examination and in understanding how compassion fatigue and burn-out can impair practitioners who may have overextended themselves in service and may become incapable of providing adequate care to self or others.

These discussions should also include the need for competent practice through self-care to prevent burn-out. Students who feel called to the profession of social work may struggle with

the idea that it is all right to care for oneself in the midst of extreme client needs. This topic will be explored in more depth later in the paper.

Social Justice

Social justice includes advocacy on behalf of vulnerable populations, negotiating needed resources, and brokering for access to services. Students can be instructed to complete a community assessment of the area surrounding their home or place of worship. They can then develop a plan that would address high priority needs and discuss with their clergy or community leaders ways in which to address these needs in the community. Students could benefit from learning how to assess vulnerable populations.

“The search for meaning and purpose involves self-awareness, awareness of social responsibility, and concern for social inequality” (Eun-Kyoung & Barrett, 2007, p. 3). However, NASW has described populations as vulnerable who come into conflict with the beliefs of a particular faith group. This is a broad statement that can be confusing for students and one that must be considered within the proper context. A conflict between a particular group and the teachings of a particular faith is often a discourse in moral standards. Thus, students can learn to determine when the conflict is nothing more than a difference in world views or when a conflict results in injustice or oppression. Students must be able to determine how they might respect the dignity and worth of the individual while at the same time holding individuals accountable for their actions in an empowering way.

Dignity and Worth of the Person

Most conventional faith communities recognize the inherent dignity and worthy of persons in relation to God. In other words, most mainstream faith groups view people as worthy of dignity and respect by virtue of the fact that all individuals are children of God. Students

benefit from evaluating their spiritual beliefs regarding the dignity and worth of the individual and how they can assimilate their personal views into this social work value. If there is a conflict between their spiritual beliefs and respect for the dignity and worth of another person, it can be enlightening for students to discuss this conflict within the context of the social work classroom and participate in thoughtful, intelligent discourse with their peers as well as their instructor. If the internal conflict continues, students can be encouraged to carry on discussions with family members or a member of the clergy. Students drawn to the social work profession will benefit from the insight gained when deeply ingrained and perhaps unchallenged beliefs are called into question and examined in the light of objective, intellectual inquiry.

Importance of Human Relationships

The social worker is a partner in the process of strengthening human relationships in order to “promote, restore, and enhance” (NASW, 2008) the well-being of clients. However, social workers are sometimes involved in cases when human relationships have been harmful to each other. Therefore, students can benefit from evaluating how the value of human relationships may come into conflict with the requirements of agencies they work for in practice. The use of case examples in class can help clarify these conflicts. Some of these examples may include:

- Child welfare cases where children are in harmful family situations. Students may struggle with the idea of children being reunited with abusive or neglectful parents or the termination of parental rights.
- An elderly client who wants to return home to a family that has been abusing him or her and who denies the abuse to avoid being admitted to a nursing home.

- Areas of personal and professional conflict for students might also include cases where divorce seems imminent between a couple in marital therapy. The student may value marriage and reconciliation and actively support reconciliation while the couple is determined to end the relationship.

Students can be challenged by these and other case examples to explore potential conflicts that may arise between their spiritual or religious values and the importance of human relationships.

Integrity

As the value of integrity is discussed in class, it provides opportunity for students to see the importance of supporting the mission and values of the social work profession and maintaining ethical standards of practice. For example, how might a student respond in an agency setting where social work is not the primary profession (schools or hospitals) and where professional values may conflict with those supervising the social worker. How might a social worker deal with the lack of integrity of a colleague or supervisor who may not follow the standards of the social work profession? Class discussion and activities bring these issues to the forefront and challenge students to consider how they might handle these situations in real world settings.

Students can begin to understand the importance of personal conduct at all levels as they develop an understanding of how the Code of Ethics is written. It begins with standards of conduct and comportment regarding one's individual ethical behavior, then describes behavior toward colleagues, and moves to the context of an agency. The Code then broadens to describe conduct as a practicing professional, as a member of the professional social work community, and finally, at the macro level as a member of society. The Code of Ethics states that a social worker should not be involved in dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation (NASW, 2008).

Social work educators should proactively encourage classroom discussions in which students begin to envision any potential areas of conflict between personal and professional values as well as incompetence, deceit, dishonesty, or misrepresentation. Moreover, as part of these discussions, students should conceptualize a method of problem solving for use with any ethical dilemmas they encounter.

Incorporating the Concept of Self-Care in Social Work Education

All social workers run the risk of feeling the weight of client circumstances and may become overburdened for their clients. However, those who have a sense of calling may be particularly vulnerable. At times, the demands of one's professional role coupled with unrealistic expectations of professional performance pose challenges for social workers to sustain health, maintain insight, or recognize their own need for social, emotional, and spiritual support. In order for social workers to help others, they must first be mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy themselves. Thus, students must learn to be aware of the pitfalls of the profession and recognize their need for self-care.

Self-Care

Radey and Figley (2007) define self-care as "a potential mechanism to increase clinicians' positive affect and physical, intellectual, and social resources" (p. 210). Thus, self-care can be described as actions a social worker takes to activate personal resources to promote and sustain mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well being. Social work educators have a responsibility to incorporate the concept of self-care into the social work curriculum in order to prepare future social workers to implement self-care. Students should be encouraged to know that the practice of self-care is not self-seeking in that the focus is to keep oneself healthy in

mind, body, and spirit in order to be able to effectively and proactively contribute to the health, well-being, and spiritual growth of clients.

Compassion Fatigue

In concert with a lack of self-care is the occurrence of compassion fatigue. Figley (1996) cited poor self-care as one of the major factors contributing to compassion fatigue among helping professionals, along with unresolved trauma, lack of satisfaction in the work, and the inability or unwillingness to control work stressors. To be compassionate is to be consciously aware of another's distress and desire to alleviate their suffering. However, compassion and empathy are not without a price and often are more costly than the social worker had imagined. Compassion fatigue has been defined as "a state of tension and preoccupation with the traumatized patient... it is the function of bearing witness to the suffering of others" (Figley, 2002, p. 1435). Compassion fatigue has also been described as the "phenomena of secondary traumatic stress... and refer[s] to the negative impact of clinical work with traumatized clients" (Bride, Radey, & Figley, 2007, p. 156).

Social workers may be repeatedly exposed to traumatic and emotionally demanding situations experienced by their clients over extended periods of time and, thus, are vulnerable to experiencing compassion fatigue. Furthermore, social workers at all levels of practice can become overwhelmed by the day to day struggles of at-risk populations. Thus, social work education must reinforce prevention and self-awareness so that students become cognizant of the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue, identify specific triggers, and develop a plan of action. Equipping students to care for self and be aware of the pitfalls of compassion fatigue serves as a preventive measure verses a treatment mindset that waits until compassion fatigue occurs before taking action.

Ethical Responsibility of Self-Care

Inherent in the core values of the social work profession is the social worker's responsibility to be healthy in mind, body, and spirit. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (1999):

4.05 (a) Social workers should not allow their own personal problems, psychosocial distress, legal problems, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties to interfere with their professional judgment and performance or to jeopardize the best interests of people for whom they have a professional responsibility (p. 163).

In service to clients, social workers develop helping relationships with their clients. Compassion fatigue can result in the social worker developing a negative view of the client that challenges the value of service to the client and upholding what is in the client's best interest. Students are often enthusiastic and ready to "save the world" while completing their education. Once they begin field placements or begin their professional careers, they may be surprised at how quickly they succumb to potential negativity within an agency, complacency from their colleagues, or pessimism that may result from the demands of the job. These negative factors may lead to feelings of failure and isolation that undermines the budding professional's determination and resolve to make a difference. Thus, social work education that presents the concept of self-care as an ethical responsibility can serve to motivate students to utilize self-care strategies and seek consultation to increase compassion satisfaction.

Integrating Spirituality into Social Work Education to Improve Social Work Practice

Interdisciplinary Collaboration with Chaplains and Members of the Clergy

Emphasis in the social work classroom should focus on the necessity of a holistic treatment approach that includes members of the clergy and chaplains. When clients are struggling with serious losses, health issues, and death, they sometimes want help dealing with their own spiritual issues regarding the meaning and purpose of life. Social workers could help clients address spirituality questions by linking the client to the faith community. Helping students view the faith community as a resource can strengthen the overall treatment plan and help facilitate future collaborations between social workers, chaplains, and members of the clergy. A study with members of 28 denominations (Openshaw & Harr, 2009), both rural and urban, revealed that clergy make an attempt to address the needs of the members of their faith group before making outside referrals, but when serious mental health issues are present, such as addiction, suicide threats, abuse, or the need for extended treatment, the clergy will refer to mental health professionals. The members of the clergy who were interviewed by Openshaw and Harr indicated that they would welcome the opportunity to work conjointly with social workers on behalf of a member of their faith group. They would like to get to know the professionals in their community so their referrals could be based on personal knowledge about the practitioner and the type of services offered. They would agree to be a support to a social worker who is working with members of their faith group.

Likewise, chaplains often work with interdisciplinary teams that include social workers, psychologists, nurses, doctors, and psychiatrists. A study conducted in 2004 with members of the Association of Professional Chaplains in which 399 chaplains participated, indicates that there is frustration felt by chaplains in trying to help integrate spiritual needs into treatment and helping other professionals to understand the importance of addressing spiritual concerns (Harr,

Openshaw, & Moore, 2006). Many of the team members were unclear about how to integrate spirituality into client treatment, which sometimes results in inappropriate use of chaplains

Chaplains reported seeing the spiritual aspects of a person as part of a holistic approach to treatment. Holistic treatment looks at all parts of the person spirituality, feelings, thoughts and relationship (Hawkins, Siang-Yang, & Turk, 1983). A mutual desire to assist others and the development of common goals creates a bond between social workers and chaplains. When this is present in a human service setting, there is true holistic collaboration, partnership, and team work. Trust must be developed over time as professionals from these different professions work together. Social workers and chaplains can compliment each other on teams if they respect each others' discipline.

Clergy and chaplains want social workers to know that they are available to help when a member of their faith group is receiving professional services and would like to work in a positive interdisciplinary relationship (Openshaw & Harr, 2009). This type of positive interaction between helping professionals would offer a natural support system for clergy, chaplains, and social workers who are dealing with clients who are members of a particular faith group. Social work students should be taught how to establish interdisciplinary relationships and the importance of having collaborative relationships with clergy and chaplains in order to increase the total care given to clients.

Motivation Derived from Spirituality

Incorporating the concepts of spirituality and religiosity into practice with clients is a holistic approach in the helping process and in the culturally competent practice of social work (Hodge, 2005). Knowledge and an understanding of the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of clients serve to provide social workers useful tools with which to engage the client

and promote client-practitioner collaboration. Furthermore, knowledge and understanding of spiritual principles can equip social workers to refute distortions that result from the misuse and abuse of religion and spirituality that cause negativity and internal conflict in the lives of clients. Thus students can learn to utilize the positive tenets of spirituality in practice to motivate clients in their personal growth and healing.

Spiritual principles can be conceptualized broadly or narrowly and may encompass a wide range of beliefs. Spiritual principles are tenets that outline values and behaviors that aid individuals in living full and meaningful lives. Encouragement is a principle that can serve as a framework for the social worker in motivating clients to search for an understanding of self and others throughout the healing process.

Hope is another facet of spirituality that in and of itself is vital to health and healing. Students can learn the importance of cultivating a sense of hope, focusing on client strengths, to engender the client's belief in the possibility that their circumstances can improve. Cultivating hope is likely to occur in the context of a trusting relationship between the client and the social worker, thus, trust is another motivating facet of the helping process. Hope can be present even when circumstances seem hopeless and must be encouraged so that confident expectation may continue. Students can develop the skill of reframing life events in such a way as to inspire hope and positivity for the future.

Summary and Suggestions for Educators

As the population ages, social workers will be asked to "provide interventions and services to humanity at a much deeper level than ever before. Social work education must accept this charge to move the profession toward meeting the demand" (Ai, 2002, p. 109). An understanding of spirituality will help equip social work students to consider the client from the

theoretical standpoint of person-in-environment that is consistent with the competent, contextual practice of social work. A holistic approach to assessment and intervention includes consideration of clients' faith and spiritual beliefs, and assures that the social worker is culturally competent to deliver services. Williams and Smolak (2007) argue that most social work education programs do not include training in faith and spirituality and suggest that incorporating knowledge of spirituality promotes multicultural competence, effective communication with people of faith, and the holistic practice of social work. Furthermore, social work students who know themselves and are aware of their own beliefs, values, and biases must also be aware of their views on faith and spirituality (Sheridan, et al., as cited in Williams & Smolak, 2007). Students who are well grounded and secure in their own beliefs and values will be less likely to feel compelled to impose their views on their clients. Thus, providing opportunity for students to learn, explore, discuss, and even debate issues of faith, religion, and spirituality within the context of the learning environment serves to better equip students to know self and to know their clients.

The challenge in incorporating spiritual principles into social work education may be most apparent when students do not readily recognize their own spirituality. An understanding of spirituality and religiosity serves to equip social work students to consider the client's personal and social interactions and approach the client from the theoretical standpoint of person-in-environment that is consistent with the competent, contextual practice of social work.

Most social work education programs do not include training in spirituality. (Williams & Smolak, 2007). Incorporating knowledge of faith and spirituality promotes multicultural competence, effective communication with people of faith, and the holistic practice of social work. Furthermore, social work students who know themselves and are aware of their own

beliefs, values, and biases will also be aware of their views on faith and spirituality (Sheridan, et al., as cited in Williams & Smolak, 2007). Students who are well grounded and secure in their own beliefs and values will be less likely to impose their views onto their clients. Thus, providing opportunity for students to learn, explore, discuss, and even debate issues of faith, religion, and spirituality within the context of the learning environment serves to equip students to know self and better serve their clients.

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