To the Editor:

I read with interest “Teaching About Vulnerable Populations: Nursing Students’ Experience in a Homeless Center” (Stanley, 2013), which was published in the October 2013 issue of the Journal of Nursing Education. Stanley (2013) recorded student responses to an experiential service-learning project with the homeless, and responses ranged from developing a greater respect for homeless clients to gaining a greater awareness of the insurmountable barriers faced by homeless clients. Unique to Stanley’s account was the integration of critical social theory into service-learning pedagogy. Course and project learning objectives included “respect and caring for all individuals” and an “awareness of social justice” (p. 587). However, I challenge nurse educators to question whether an awareness of social justice is sufficient for holistic caring responses to vulnerable populations.

Stanley (2013) acknowledged that students felt a sense of advocacy, although they had neither sufficient knowledge nor expertise to act on the broader social structures impacting homelessness. Hanks (2013) called for clear educational approaches to teaching social justice and better evaluative measures of student outcomes. Stallwood and Groh (2011) documented the various positive outcomes of service-learning, including an increased sense of professional and civic responsibility. Detailed and systematic evaluative measures of student outcomes are absent from Stanley’s report (2013), just as they are in many other service-learning studies. Stallwood and Groh found a decided lack of consensus on student outcome variables in service-learning research; however, their call for a more rigorous evidence base in service-learning education has gone unheeded.

Although I appreciate the value of service-learning in expanding student understanding of the complex factors contributing to homelessness, this awareness and sensitivity are only small steps toward the achievement of better health outcomes for vulnerable populations. Service-learning pedagogies informed by critical social theory hold promise for influencing student leadership and action on issues of social justice. It is time for researchers to strengthen the evidence base and develop standardized methods and outcomes for the evaluation of educational strategies for the care of vulnerable populations.

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References

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