

**DEVELOPING CROSS-CULTURALLY COMPETENT SOCIAL WORKERS
THROUGH INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION:**

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE 2008 EPAS

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Abstract

Students must be prepared for living in a global community. This is especially the case for helping professionals. This paper presents a curriculum model for increasing cultural competency in a baccalaureate program for social workers through international education in Belize

The ability to develop new paradigms for clinical practice rests partially on the cross-cultural knowledge, skills, and values of the emerging generation of social workers. While it has often been said that social workers must continue to strive toward greater cultural competence, the need for social work educators to design curricula with ethno-conscious practice as a major thrust has never been greater. This is not to suggest that universities have made no improvements in this area, only that the models employed thus far have resulted in minimal returns. There is a need for systemic change in the way we approach cultural competence as there are staggering ill effects (even the possibility of an inaccurate assessment) that could occur if workers are not culturally conscious. The purpose of this manuscript is to present a model for increasing cultural competency in a BSW program through international education. Added to this is the realization that the new generation of social

workers will be called upon to create new models of practice that bridge different worlds (economically, culturally, politically, and geographically) - a challenge that requires the ability to think creatively, to adapt readily, and to practice cross-culturally. But, how do social work educators prepare a workforce of professionals capable of responding to such compelling demands? Can we prepare students to face challenges that we ourselves have only limited capacity to envision?

More than ever before in the history of our profession, we must educate students to become capable of realigning their customary patterns of thought, to more fully grasp the complexities of social problems in the context of cultural realities quite different from their own. We also need to prepare our students to work in tandem with other professionals, forming interdisciplinary partnerships that would provide for the creation of more holistic responses to emerging social problems. It was this backdrop of thinking

that formed the context for the authors' envisioning a new curricular model for use in a baccalaureate or masters level social work program. The conceptual framework undergirding this program is in line with the competency-based approach to social work education underscored by the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), particularly Educational Policy 2.1.4 relative to engaging diversity and difference in practice and Educational Policy 2.1.5 that addresses the social worker's competence in advancing human rights and social and economic justice. International Social Work Education. Boehm (1984) outlined two popular approaches to teaching international social work that remain in use to this day. The first, the comparative approach, respects the value of what he called "the law of parsimony in curriculum development" by avoiding the need to add courses to the existing curriculum (p. 19). In essence, it presupposes that international social work is best taught by going from the more known to the less known, teaching U.S. child welfare policies, for example, and using the welfare policies of another nation as a means of offering a comparative dimension. This approach offers flexibility in that faculty need not address the same topics cross-nationally, although it does place a unique burden on each faculty member to find examples that may be used for comparative purposes. Given the present lim-

itations of many social work faculty in the area of international social work, this expectation can often be rather demanding. In addition, the student fails to have a consistent reference point through which to integrate the international perspectives gained from various faculty, as each may use a different country and culture as a comparative model. While one might argue that this diversity could be quite positive, breadth of exposure without depth of integrative experiences is of questionable value to overall learning.

Boehm identified a second approach to the teaching of international social work practice – that of schools offering a course specifically designed for this purpose. Johnson (1996) estimated that approximately 20% of all BSW programs have a course on international social welfare. This approach seems to perpetuate the domestic/global dichotomy in social work education referred to by Asamoah, Healy, and Mayadas (1997). The current paucity of offerings in international social work, coupled with the fact that most are offered only as electives, is an indication of our lack of vigilance in fully addressing the foundational expectations of the Council on Social Work Education in this area. Yet, as noted by Greif (2004), *"learning more about social issues in other countries through reading and engaging in cross-national learning are important steps in helping to wage a battle against potential shortcomings in our own continuing growth as a profession"*

(p. 516). All entry-level, generalist practitioners must now be able to demonstrate competencies outlined by the Council on Social Work Education's Commission on Accreditation in their most recent Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). One such competency is the ability to "engage diversity and difference in practice" (CSWE, Educational Policy 2.1.4, 2008 EPAS). Practice behaviors associated with this "core competency" include being able to "*recognize the extent to which a culture's structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power.*" Another practice behavior to be demonstrated by all baccalaureate level graduates of CSWE accredited programs is to "*gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups*" (CSWE, Educational Policy 2.1.4, 2008 EPAS). One might well ask, in light of these new standards, if it is possible through comparative analysis of systems and programs alone for students to develop the facility to analyze and synthesize information about a culture substantively different from their own, then be able to apply the results of that synthesis to the design and evaluation of effective and culturally sensitive interventions. One approach, suggested twenty years ago by Nwachuku (1989) was that we must 'start where the culture is' by coming to understand their world view, the normative form

and patterns of familial and social relationships, and indigenous forms of help within that culture. To do so would, it would seem, necessitate that students also be competent in two remaining practice behaviors associated with this educational standard, namely to be able to "*view themselves as learners and engage those with whom they work as informants*" while also being able to "*recognize and communicate their understanding of the importance of difference in shaping life experiences*" (CSWE, Educational Policy 2.1.4, 2008 EPAS). The program outlined in this document is a more comprehensive approach to the challenges of international social work education than would be necessary to meet the minimum standards outlined by CSWE, and moves beyond the two approaches outlined above. The program outlined is actually only one possible model, developed with Belize as the site for the international social work experience. The program is designed to ensure that students bring to their international field placement experience the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for effective entry-level practice in the context of the United States or a developing nation. The achievement of this goal would be measured by their success in meeting the demands of one field placement in the United States and a second in Belize (Central America) or a comparable developing country. Unlike curricular designs that address the needs of special populations as separate

courses, this curriculum weaves into every required course the perspective of practice from a national as well as an international perspective. Therefore, students would grapple with policy considerations both within the context of the United States as well as in Belize, tackle the complexities of social work practice in a variety of sociopolitical contexts, apply the biopsychosocial framework of examining human behavior in the social environment both in America and Belize, examine frameworks for research on their practice that may be most appropriate to these differing populations, and demonstrate their ability to integrate knowledge across the various components of the curriculum and apply that knowledge in their social work practice.

It is believed that this approach, which offers an integrated curriculum not unlike the interconnectedness of nations in a global economy, best prepares students in the design and delivery of interventions grounded in a holistic understanding of a distinct population. We know that understanding the language, customs and practices of a people is insufficient, in and of itself, to fully appreciate the complex forces that have shaped a country and its people. We also know that a country is composed of multiple peoples, each group having diverse customs, language, etc. We know the impact of globalization and, as underscored by Dominelli (2007) and others, the need to see its impact as "a

key challenge for social work educators and practitioners...that has to be addressed in the profession's teaching and training programs" (p. 30). For example, [social work educators] "have to deal with the internationalization of social problems and the issue of worker mobility across borders" (Dominelli, 2007, p. 43). Preparing entry level practitioners with such competencies is a challenge social work educators can no longer avoid.

The Choice of Belize

Belize was selected as a model site for the second field placement experience as it is an English-speaking, developing nation suffering from a dearth of available formally organized services to its diverse (culturally as well as socioeconomically) and multi-problemated population. In spite of having few organized support centers, Belize is a nation with multiple informal networks of support. Slightly larger than Massachusetts, it has two main roads, a declining rate of infant mortality (23.1 deaths per 1,000 live births), a growing birth rate (estimated at 27.84 births/1,000 population) and a high rate of illiteracy (over 23%) (CIA, *World Factbook*, 2009). It is a developing country with a high rate of unemployment (8.5%) among its multicultural population of 322,100 people (Statistical Institute of Belize, 2008). The major cultural groups of Belize include the Mestizos (48.7%), Creoles (24.9%), Mayans (10.6%), Garifuna (6.1%), and other ethnicities

(9.7%) (CIA, *World Factbook*, 2009). In spite of its cultural diversity, English is the official language and its legal system and form of government (constitutional parliamentary democracy) are relatively familiar to those who know the English system. In addition, Belize has become the destination for an estimated 30,000 refugees from political unrest elsewhere in Central America ("Refugee Resettlement in Belize," 1995).

Major concerns noted in the CIA *World Factbook* (2009) "continue to be the sizable trade deficit and unsustainable foreign debt equivalent to nearly 90% of GDP." A key short-term objective, also noted in *The World Factbook* (2009), continues to be "the reduction of poverty with the help of international donors." With over one-third of its population living in poverty (CIA *World Factbook*, 2009), it is a nation with compelling clinical practice challenges, yet the context provides for participation by students who may not have command of a second language.

Because social work has its roots in what Sachdev (1997, p. 7) has aptly called a "tradition of promoting social justice and . . . (a) concern for culturally diverse client groups," the authors decided that the international experience must offer exposure to a developing nation in which social action is needed to affect changes that would lead to increased social justice. Furthermore, as noted by Devore and Schlesinger (1996) among others, it

is essential that students have opportunities to develop a strong sense of self-awareness if they are to be prepared to engage in effective, client-centered, cross-cultural practice. In support of that need, the authors have worked to ensure that opportunities for self-assessment and exploration of attitudes and prejudices be incorporated throughout the preparation course work as participants in the program would be working with indigenous groups on micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels of practice. Such an experiential learning model would provide what Green (1995) has described as the necessary direct, interactive experience with persons from a world that differs substantively from one's own. It was this type of immersion experience that Sachdev (1997) referred to as essential if students are to absorb cultural content and be able to apply that understanding in the selection, execution, and evaluation of interventions at all levels of practice.

Social work programs may well develop such a curriculum in collaboration with other professional programs (e.g., education or nursing). Such a concept is founded in the belief that social work students need to have direct practice experience working with students from other professional disciplines if they are to design interventions that address the multidimensional needs of clients, both in the United States and globally. This model of collaborative field experience demands that several seminars be held

in advance of and also following the interdepartmental field experience, as efforts need to be coordinated to ensure that the needs of the local communities are addressed in the planning of educational, medical and social services. Having a program director with direct practice experience in the developing country (in this case, Belize) is an invaluable component and could add to the success of the program, as often such an individual has maintained professional relationships that facilitate the establishment of the program. As noted by Sachdev (1997), there are distinct advantages to faculty having a working knowledge of the country and its people. In addition, one of the key strengths of the program rests in developing and maintaining mutual respect, to ensure that the needs of the people being served are met while providing opportunities for students to learn about the needs of the community directly from members of that community.

THE PROGRAM DESIGN

The goals of the program include:

- 1) Offering students an opportunity to broaden their base of understanding relative to cross-cultural practice.
- 2) Providing experiential learning in working with individuals, groups, and institutions in a developing country.
- 3) Enhancing students' problem solving and critical thinking skills by examining alternative models of practice.
- 4) Strengthening self-awareness among students.

These goals are designed to be achieved through the cooperative efforts of an international team of social workers, educators, and key informants from the community who work together to create a learning environment rich with experiences aimed at developing students' cross-cultural competency while serving the needs of the local community.

Partnering with members of the community in designing, implementing and evaluating the program serves to ensure a quality experience for the students while also modeling for them the appropriate ways for professional social workers to engage with a community of people. Rather than people from the more developed nation bringing into the developing land a fixed notion of the needs and how best to address them, service learning opportunities are arranged in concert with local agency staff, thereby ensuring a "client" focused approach that is also culturally sensitive. In dialogue with the community, faculty and students work in tandem with existing community-based agencies in preparing students to work effectively with the diverse populations of Belize. The core values of the social work profession (service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence) are at the heart of the program. The program is designed as a fully integrated model for infusing international social work throughout the curriculum, culminating in a four-

week block placement internship with evening processing sessions in the host country just prior to the last semester of a student's final year in a social work program. This intensive experiential learning opportunity should be in addition to a year-long internship in a U.S. based human service agency. Therefore, the program is designed to enhance and supplement, rather than to replace existing internship experiences of students. In essence, this approach attempts to break the boundaries of thought that have, according to Asamoah, Healy, and Mayadas (1997), prevented our being able to internationalize the curriculum.

Each course in the curriculum (e.g., Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Social Welfare Policy, Methods of Practice, and Research) should integrate concepts appropriate for preparing students for the field experience, while challenging them to think beyond the confines of their immediate world and the models of practice endemic to the United States. As such, students should be expected to examine, for example, the biophysical hazards facing poor children not only in the United States but in the host country. Also, they would compare social support systems of the U.S. to those of the developing country and examine how they differ not only in underlying values but in their implementation and impact on society. Issues of social justice should be addressed in the context of various

sociopolitical realities, and methods available to support human inquiry should be scrutinized in research class to discern the relationship between selection of methods and ethnic-sensitive social work practice. The usefulness of various instruments for the evaluation of programs and the assessment of client needs should be analyzed to determine their appropriateness for use with persons from another culture. Also, students should be challenged to think critically about the possible ramifications to indigenous people when culturally insensitive and inappropriate methods of practice and its evaluation are employed. United Nations materials could serve as a source of information for better understanding of issues related to human rights and social justice. The International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work's Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles (IFSW & IASSW, 2004) can be used as a backdrop against which to discuss guidelines for professional practice, particularly in relationship to human rights, human dignity and social justice.

The implementation of this program requires also that faculty from collateral disciplines bring into focus within their foundational service courses an international perspective, offering students in social work the opportunity to apply content not only to the United States but also the host country. For example, faculty from the Politics De-

partment may be able to structure such foundational courses as State and Local Government or Survey of American Government to include a comparative examination of U.S. government structures with those of Belize. This would help ready students for courses in the policy sequence, where students analyze policy issues with consideration given to the prevailing historical, cultural, and economic influences of the era in which they were developed. Because the context of a developing country can differ so vastly from that of the United States, students would have an opportunity to move outside their familiar reference points while analyzing policy formation in a very different arena. Therefore, the sociopolitical structure of the host country should be taught through a variety of course work, ranging from Politics to Sociology to Economic Geography, with faculty from the respective disciplines providing expertise in the methods of analysis suitable for a thorough examination of another national context. This approach is in keeping with what Midgley (1997) has identified as a general trend among universities to require students to gain a more international perspective through their general education curriculum.

A Suggested Plan of Action

The first phase of the program should be designed to prepare a group of social work students beginning two years prior to their international field

experience. The second phase would continue that process for additional students and introduce into the process students from other professional programs, while completing preparations for an international dialogue via a blog. This Internet-based exchange would occur during the block field placement in the host country, with student interns communicating from their location to other social work majors back at the University on such topics as cross-cultural practice challenges, empowerment around policy initiatives thought to be helpful to indigenous clients, and emerging critical needs of the poor in the developing country. Students completing assignments related to the host country, and those interested in participating in the field placement the following year, would be expected to gain from this state-of-the-art means of communicating between nations. It is also anticipated that interns in the host country would be experiencing many of the adjustment issues faced by immigrants coming to the U.S., with conflicting values, beliefs and attitudes complicating their adjustment process. It would be important for faculty to seize the opportunity to process this experience with the interns through reflective journaling, modeled after Fook's (1996) reflective questions, as well as evening seminars. An interdepartmental placement opportunity could provide students the chance to work in tandem with their colleagues from other disciplines toward the

achievement of common goals of empowerment. Such an interdisciplinary approach is a model seldom experienced in the traditional classroom, but has long served as a well defined method of conducting social work practice in a variety of environments.

Before deciding on joint ventures, it would be imperative to research the unique contributions that may be made through partnership efforts aimed at empowering residents of the selected international site. For example, while social work students provide direct services to children and families, education students might provide direct support through the Language to Literacy Project of Belize. That project is designed to strengthen the language arts instruction of children through literature-based teaching methodologies that introduce culturally relevant books, such as

When the Monkeys Came Back, which addresses the preservation of the rainforest. Nursing students may be simultaneously addressing nutritional and other health education needs of children in the same school. Student and parent groups may be formed around such issues as HIV/AIDS awareness, nutrition, and adjustment to illness.

These groups could be co-facilitated by student interns and faculty from the professional programs involved in the partnership, with faculty role modeling the professional use of self in the multi-disciplinary environment.

Evaluation of the Program

Several approaches could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Students could complete attitudinal scales at various points in the curriculum, with developmental comparisons made between those who participate in the program and those who do not. In addition, students could keep a journal during their field placement experiences (both in the U.S. and in the host country) and participate in exit interviews just prior to graduation to help assess the relative usefulness of the program. A follow-up survey could be sent to all participants two years after completion, to solicit feedback on their assessment of the program from a more mature, professional perspective.

Faculty who teach the foundational and core courses in the Social Work curriculum could also be asked to assess the performance of students both in classes and in the field placement. Of prime importance is the assessment by those served in the host country. This blend of subjective and objective assessments follows the model proposed by Sachdev (1997). The assessment process is designed to be addressed as an integrative whole, modeling the larger design of the program itself.

Conclusion

If students are to be adequately prepared to meet the challenges of a global environment, if they are to move beyond the confines of traditional

thought to explore new approaches to social problems, and if they are to gain a rich understanding of the importance of developing and maintaining a culturally-appropriate practice base, then such a hands-on, experiential learning model must be offered to them. Whether students ultimately practice their social work skills in an international environment or on a domestic front, the knowledge, skills and values imparted throughout the program should prove to be beneficial and directly transferrable as they address issues of poverty, human rights, social justice, empowerment, and sustainable development. As noted by Tesoriero, an educational program set within the infrastructure of a long-term partnership ... "is one way of contributing to an international perspective in social work and of social work graduates promoting human rights and social justice as global citizens and ethically sound social workers" (2006, p. 139).

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