

Teaching International Social Work Education at CSWE Accredited Programs in Midwestern United States

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Abstract

The importance of international social work education these days is difficult to overstate as social work education has been established in nearly every part of the world. American higher education, however, is challenged to expand and keep pace with developmental trends in the global arena. Being that social work educators train students by imparting knowledge and professional practice, their responsibilities have increased, especially with the introduction of the 2008 Educational Policy on Accreditation Standards (EPAS) by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Drawing on semi-structured interviews from 14 professors at accredited CSWE programs, this article examines international social work education at CSWE accredited programs in the Midwest.

Keywords: International social work, international social work education, CSWE accredited programs, international field placements

Introduction

The importance of international social work is difficult to overstate these days. With the advent of high-speed internet and recent technological innovations, the world has been transformed into a “global village.” It is of primordial importance for social workers to be well informed about problems in their local communities and the international stage at large (Dominelli, 2003; Midgley, 2001). World problems do not only occur within one community or country. These problems can be encountered irrespective of the distance. As globalization continues to change the dynamics of the world economic system, political and social structures in many countries have advanced in terms of “communication technologies” and have made communication faster and easier (Engstrom & Jones, 2007, p. 136).

International Social Work Education

According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in their Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of 2008, the purpose of the social work profession is:

To promote human and community well-being. Guided by a person and environment construct, a global perspective, respect for human diversity, and knowledge based on scientific inquiry, social work’s purpose is actualized though its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of quality of life for all. (CSWE, 2008, p. 1)

From the above, it is quite clear that social work educators should serve the profession’s future by the provision of competent professionals who can work around the globe (Dominelli 2004; Healy, 2008; Lee, 2008, Midgley, 2001). According to Jones (2009), “Social work education aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for effective practice” (p. 14). Dominelli (2004) states international social work is “at the crossroads and needs to consider its future in terms of directions it wishes to proceed” (p. 91).

In the United States, “Social work has tended to be thought about and theorized primarily within the context of modernity and the nation state” (Dominelli, 2004, p. 91). So in many cases, many accredited institutions “perpetrate the myth that international social work merely involves the crossing of borders” (p. 91) and therefore remain short of designing new courses in international social work. In the case of the United Kingdom, Lyons (2006) writes that many programs have developed courses at their bachelor and graduate levels to offer “specialist international education” (p. 371). Dominelli (2004) suggests that “social work educators and practitioners need to retheorise social work in ways that situate practice in a locality within the global context within which it is embedded and begin to unpack the connections that exists between different levels of activity” (p. 92). He also notes that social work education needs to be formulated by designing the curriculum that could prepare students to face the many global social problems. The pressure for change that stems “from forces within the broader sociopolitical context” (Jones, 2009, p. 14) cannot be ignored. Asamoah, Healy, and Mayadas (1991) exclaim that the curricular should be designed with a global focus and that the distinction between international and domestic social work is no longer relevant and “internationalizing the curriculum is desirable and that it will increase the American social workers’ competence in domestic practice and enhance social work education’s participation in an international field” (p. 3). Many social problems now have global impacts (Asamoah, Healy & Mayadas, 1991).

However, Dominelli (2004) paints a pessimistic picture that “there are a few texts that have attempted the retheorisation of international social work in new directions” (p. 93) and she cites Healy and Lyons as prominent examples. This somehow buttresses the view of Professor Maria Julia (Personal communication, February 16, 2011) that there are few professors who have worked assiduously to infuse international social work topics in their programs’ curricula and that once they left their vacuums, they were not easily filled. There has been a lack of continuity and difficulty in designing or maintaining courses once the pioneers left the program.

Educators are to play pivotal roles in examining the “knowledge, attitudes and skills that will be required of American social work in an increasingly diverse environment” (Healy et al, 1997, p. 2). Owing to the changes in global demographics and problems, “social workers now more than ever need an international perspective” (Engstrom & Jones, 2007, p. 137). Limiting the scope of students by preparing them for specific problems mandated by their own societies restricts their abilities considerably (Dominelli, 2003; Healy, 1999, 2001, 2008). Therefore, teaching international social work and exposing students to different learning experiences is of great importance.

Experimental Learning Theory

Oktay, Jacobson and Fisher (2013) note “social work education is strongly rooted in a model of experiential learning” (p. 219). Experiential learning has been credited to the educational philosopher John Dewey who emphasized the importance of human rights as key to relationship within societies (Goldstein, 2000). According to Kolb (1984) experiential learning theory “offers the foundation for an approach to education and learning as a lifelong process” (p. 3). Experiential learning paves way for the revitalization of the university curriculum “to cope with many of the changes facing higher education today” (p. 4). Lee (1990) exclaimed that a theory can only be appropriate when an educator effectively uses it. Thus, the gap between what theory can do to explain the practitioner’s reality and what he or she needs to know may be called the “experiential learning gap” (p.2). The practitioner is concerned with the situations, which involves many variables that no general theory can accommodate and therefore learning from experience becomes vital (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Kolb’s model of learning is important as it “ensures critical and reflective goal-directed action and evaluation of the consequences of the action” (Walker, Crawford & Parker, 2008, p. 44). Lee (1990) noted that unless assistance is sought from someone else, preferably a peer partner, there is little improvement to take place as learning is a lifelong process.

Goldstein (2000) feels that “experiential learning is a humanistic and democratic model of education that prepares learners to respect, respond to, and find meaning in the impelling life experiences of their clients” (p. 7). Furthermore, “experiential learning is directly related to immediate goals and needs” (Bogo & Vayda, 1987, p. 2), therefore the learner becomes motivated to work on the problem and find solutions (Bogo & Vayda, 1987). In this study, the participants spoke extensively about the benefits of student learning outside the classroom.

Method

This is a multi-site study of social work programs as a way to explore the way CSWE accredited programs prepare students for international social work.

Case studies are very important as researchers use multiple ways in collecting data (Creswell, 1998). The primary research question guiding this study was “How do CSWE accredited programs provide educational experiences to prepare students for skills and knowledge in international social work?”

Participants

From the CSWE website, I was able to identify all the accredited MSW institutions in the Mid-Western United States with international social work courses or study abroad programs and therein sent out solicitation letters for their participation. Geographically, the Mid-Western United States includes the following states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

Participants for this study were 14 deans or heads of social work programs with international social work courses or individuals who are responsible for the international social work curriculum at the department, school, or college of social work. These individuals were able to provide the necessary information that the study sought to uncover. Ten participants were men and four of them were women.

As part of the requirement for doing a study of this nature, permission was sought and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approved the study as exempt. Subsequently, solicitation letters were sent out to potential participants and once they accepted to participate in the research study, other letters requesting permission to be on their campuses were sent out as well. All interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participants. They were given informed consent forms and participants were guaranteed anonymity with no mention of their institutions. An interview guide was used and being that the interviews were unstructured, participants had the opportunity to provide detailed responses.

In this study, I began analyzing the data after the first interviews and this continued throughout the data collection process. According to Wiersma (2000), “data collection and data analysis usually run together” (p. 202). The analysis in this study included writing field notes, memorandums, transcribing the interviews, reviewing the transcripts, documents and Internet sources. After I had analyzed the first set of data, themes were then identified (Creswell, 1998)..

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 302), “Credibility indicates that the findings are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants’, researchers’, and readers’ experiences with a phenomenon.” All of the participants are erudite individuals working in universities, therefore, were able to discuss at length their views about the phenomenon. Hence, the researchers delineated interpretations from the quality data that they provided. Participants offered detailed descriptions of the topic being studied and this moves to a greater extent to make the study one of quality.

Transcripts of each interview were sent to the research participants via electronic mail, as I sought verification or confirmation of accuracy of the data from them so that their answers were not misconstrued. An explanation of the processes was made to the participants in the letters sent to them as it could have been very expensive for the researcher to travel once again to the participants’ locations. The participants were given the opportunity to listen to the audio tapes if they wanted, but none of the participants requested the tapes. Additional member checking was conducted via telephone once the transcripts were received. After I arrived at the themes and findings, I sent them to the participants so as to ascertain if they agreed or disagreed with my findings.

In doing the analysis of this research, segments were prepared and submitted and meetings were scheduled for the researcher to explain how some codes were concluded; this is known as peer debriefing.

Results

A main theme that emerged in this study was teaching students through international field placement and study abroad. Participants repeatedly explained the importance of international field placements and study abroad programs, and their many benefits to students. However, the other themes (external factors), namely funding and collaboration among faculty teaching international social work, continue to be the major stumbling blocks in designing international social work concentrations. The lack of money, or the insufficient funding, has placed international social work concentrations at the lower rungs of the priority ladder. They are more expensive to create and maintain. Also, collaboration of school leaders, the programs, and the institutions at large are discussed. From this theme, one can deduce that leaders of social work programs should engage in regular contact with their colleagues so as to share their experiences in leading their programs and thereby work on areas that could impact or improve student learning.

International field placements and study abroad programs

International field placements and study abroad programs are now seen as major components of doing international social work and enhancing experiential learning. In the interviews, participants explained different durations of their study abroad trips that ranged from one to three weeks, and longer stays for international field placements. In some cases, the composition of the student body does not encourage the administration to plan study abroad trips or have international field placements, as many students have no interest going abroad. They are only interested in securing masters' degrees and licensures so that they can work in their locales.

We have also talked about study abroad programs in connection with our students' interests. I think the reason why we do not have one for now is the nature of our student body to be very honest with you. We have many non-traditional students who are craze bound to this metropolitan area. We don't have many of out-of-state students and most of our students are part-time. We have almost an equal number of part-time students and this presents a different kind of student population in terms of areas of interest and the ability to do certain kinds of international activities like study abroad programs (Professor Victor).

It was revealed that programs should prepare students very well for the international field placements so that students know what they expect on their trips overseas. One participant, Professor Benson, explained that taking students overseas is labor intensive, so they usually get another faculty member to accompany the students. "It is labor intensive because I want a male and a female, but all of our students are female. I want two people so that the faculty can be safe and the students can be safe."

Professor Brima stated that they do their best to explain to students that they can still practice international social work within their locales. He also explained that there are many opportunities for them in the international arena. As such, faculty provides the necessary advising to students as they plan their careers.

Funding

Funding became a major theme by delineating the problems accredited institutions in the Midwest encounter as they try to develop courses in international social work or facilitate study abroad programs. Participants discussed problems associated with limited funding for professors and students to participate in study abroad programs or attain international field placements. The excerpt below presents the current problem:

Well the biggest challenge is funding. International programming if it entails traveling overseas is very expensive so I am concerned about that. I would say that maybe 5% are interested in an international practicum. That hardly justifies a sustained budget. (Professor Paul)

In some instances, the students have to pay for all of their expenditures for study abroad trips and international field placements, and this is usually large sums of money. Professor Paul further stated that the lack of communication among deans sometimes leads to the duplication of services, and with effective communication, schools in geographical proximity could design international collaborations, or even study abroad trips, that could benefit all of them with lesser costs. Furthermore, he stated that the lack of collaboration even makes it difficult for the social work programs to get funding, as they all usually issue requests to the same external funders, such as Fulbright. He explained:

Yes we were successful in working with The USAID, Fulbright, like I just said. Before now we are exploring private foundations and businesses and industries also. But it will be stronger if all the deans could get together and tell their faculties to collaborate with other schools of social work programs. It will be much easier to get money instead of competing from the little pot. (Professor Paul)

Another important issue that came to the forefront in the interviews was the lack of collaboration between schools of social work and local international, non-governmental organizations. Professor Johnson exclaimed, "We have international non-profits organizations in the area but we do not partner with them much. Our dean has been involved in the African community but officially I don't think we have any field placements with them."

Conversely, one program has extensive collaborations with other institutions in other parts of the world.

We have three different programs- Beijing, Italy, Mexico- different programs that we organize and also our students can organize field work experiences on their own so for instance we have a program or course in Beijing, couple of programs in Rome, and two courses in Mexico (Professor Betty).

Professor Betty further explained that courses are designed by their faculty members in other parts of the world and the faculties teach the courses. Professor Samking also expressed the importance of collaboration and the benefits as a whole by saying, "So, naturally, it's a rewarding experience."

Another professor, Dr. Benjamin, noted that they have been able to assist some universities in Africa to establish social work departments that prepare students at the master's and doctoral levels. He notes:

While we certainly welcome international students into our program, we don't do international marketing or seek students internationally. However, because we help established the MSW and the PhD programs at the University of, we have had several students who attend our programs here as well. We currently have some students from Africa who also became aware of our program through our involvement in Africa with faculty there.

Curriculum Development and Design

Professors play pivotal roles in teaching students at the university level, but throughout the individual interviews, they expressed the lack of a mandatory curriculum design from the Council on Social Work Education on international social work. One professor expressed his view about his university's international social work curriculum:

The only distinction here is that our professors go abroad and they teach the students the courses except in two situations. One is in we have a new collaboration and the professors at the University of..... will be teaching our students a comparative course on family Assessment in the US and Europe. A family child course from the USA perspective and the other one is a field placement course in Mexico where they will actually be going there for about six weeks. (Professor Majoe)

Here, the time frame for students to be in another country is one week and for this program, they see this as taking part in international social work. One can describe this as a sight-seeing trip or a visitation to an orphanage in Jamaica, for instance, as the students will learn very little in a week. This program, however, has very detailed pre-departure preparations that include language requirements, taking some elective classes, and other training before they depart. The students are trained on cultural awareness issues and this gives them insight into what to expect once they travel.

Another professor gave a grim picture of the situation and ruled out any future possibility of a concentration in international social work. "I don't see a concentration here. I really don't. I think it will be integrated into what we do as a school connected with our urban mission. I think we are already looking into urban issues internationally." (Professor Frank)

Discussion

Indeed, prior literature supports my findings in this study, the importance of international field placements and study abroad programs, and experiential learning in social work. The importance of study abroad programs and international field placements has been written about extensively (Kamya, 2009; Lager & Mathiesen, 2012; Panos, Pettys, Cox & Jones-Hart, 2004; Petty, Panos, Cox, & Oosthuysen, 2005; Lough, 2009; Mulvaney, 2011; Rotabi, Gammonley, Gamble & Weil, 2007; Vincent, 2009). Panos et al. (2004), in their study, define international field placement to be "any placement, within another country other than the United States that met the practicum requirements for their degree, including receiving college credit. Therefore, field trips, study abroad, conferences, and brief exchanges were not counted as a practicum experience" (p. 469). According to Razack (2010), "International exchanges are gaining attention in schools of social work" (p, 251). The importance of field education is documented by the International Association of Schools of Social Work/International Federation of Social Workers *Global Standards*.

“Field education should be sufficient in duration and complexity of tasks and learning opportunities to ensure that students are prepared for professional practice” (IASS/IFSW, 2005, p. 5). Lager and Mathiesen (2012) believe international “field placements provide opportunities for substantive student learning and are powerful tools that can prepare students for international practice” (p. 337). Students may accrue many benefits from international placements, as they will gain “greater awareness of global poverty, formulate realistic intervention strategies, recognize their role as participants, and strengthen their commitment to social justice” (Lough, 2009, p. 468). Lough (2009), however, cautions that if institutions do not provide the necessary support, then students are bound to remain with their ethnocentric views about things and this will not be beneficial to them. Thus, institutions should have the capacity to provide students with the opportunities for international field placements. It is expected that through international field placements, social work programs can prepare students with core skills and provide the necessary support students need such as supervision (Lough, 2009) and a faculty liaison.

Contemporarily, field education poses some problems for many CSWE accredited institutions. There have been considerable changes in the composition of the student body. Many students are full-time workers and rely greatly on their jobs to pay their tuition and augment the financial aid they receive from their respective schools. This means that austerity arrangements or personalized placement hours will help out (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). Before 1982, schools were given the leeway to determine “the structure of fieldwork and the number of required hours for students to achieve program goals and objectives” (Raskin, Wayne & Bogo, 2008, p. 175). According to Raskin et al. (2008), radical restructuring has been deemed best, but CSWE still has not changed the 900 hours required by students to complete their field education. Dominelli and Bernard (2003) state, “Students who go abroad have the opportunity to grow and develop if their interactions with others are conducted in accordance with the principles of valuing others” (p.8).

A study conducted by Pettys et al. (2005) of 21 U.S. schools found that “the number of students placed internationally by any one university in any one year was very small” (p. 279). The study found that programs close to national borders were able to place more students in the neighboring countries of Mexico and Canada. A study by Mulvaney (2011) found that “Masters of Social Work programs that are accredited for longer periods of time are more likely to place students internationally” (p. 2). The study also found that programs with established collaborations with schools of social work overseas were “more likely to place students internationally” (Mulvaney, 2011, p. 2). According to Pettys et al. (2005), students are required to apply for international placements and should demonstrate the financial ability and a good grade-point average. Orientations or preparations for international field placements vary greatly from one institution to another. Pettys et al. (2005) found that some schools conducted orientation seminars ranging from a day to two weeks. Preparation is key to successful international field placement (Lager & Mathiesen, 2012). Lough (2005) calls it a “comprehensive design” (p. 473), and this includes creating a good frame of mind for the students as to what they should expect, so as to avoid cultural shock, especially as some international placements involve traveling to third-world countries where social amenities and a host of other facilities are lacking or nonexistent. In many cases, students will have to cover airfares, secure visas, necessary vaccinations, obtain travel health insurance, buy medications and medical supplies, and be primarily responsible for local travel and transportation.

According to Lough (2005), without the proper preparation of students, this “could perpetuate and reinforce incorrect ideas and stereotypes thereby increasing ethnocentrism” (p. 474). In terms of student preparation, Zunz and Oil (2009) note that programs need to prepare students in languages of their placement locations, as supervision was described as a “challenge because such language barriers” and could inhibit the free flow of information about clients and the improper expression of reflection. They, therefore, suggest that “language barriers included carefully selecting and coaching field supervisors to deal with communication issues” (p. 134). Transportation barriers have been described by Zunz and Oil (2009) as a major inhibiting factor that students encounter during international placements and in order to ameliorate the problem, schools have offered placements for students that are close in proximity to agencies or along routes of public buses. Another problem they discuss is that of cross-cultural issues. According to Zunz and Oil (2009, p. 135), schools usually have clear and detailed conversation about the differences in culture, and thereby offer the necessary preparations to their students. Another challenge U.S. social work programs face is that of health issues. “The need for multiple vaccinations and anti-malaria treatments often concerns parents and students” (Lowe, Dozier, Hunt-Hurst & Smith, 2008, p. 744).

Moving away from the domestic arena is the difficulty in finding international field placements “for students to demonstrate the program’s competencies” (EPAS, 2008, p. 9). In the case of international field placements, it could be very expensive for students if they involve traveling to other countries and staying there for longer periods of time. Accommodation is usually another problem, as many students stay with families in order to reduce costs, and in some cases, the living arrangements may not be optimal. The 2008 EPAS has as a criterion that programs should provide orientation to students, train field instructors, and maintain a dialog with the field-setting supervisor, and also a faculty liaison. This is somehow a problem for many countries, as many social workers may not hold the qualifications a field-setting supervisor should hold (a Master’s Degree in Social Work) and this makes many “field directors appear to be slightly more lenient with an accreditation requirement for international placement” (Mulvaney, 2011, p. 4). In many cases, field directors have come to rely greatly on what they hear about locations of placements, “such as its political stability and standard of living, and what can be confirmed, such as telecommunication services” (Mulvaney, 2011, p. 4). In many cases, field directors do not have opportunities to visit field settings internationally. However, Lager and Mathiesen (2012) caution that in as much as “political, social, and economic challenges must be considered as relationship factors that affect the feasibility of exchanges, they should not be the sole determinants of future efforts” (p. 339).

Conclusion and Implications for Social Work Education

In keeping with the CSWE accreditation standards, participants explained how they provide both the explicit and implicit curriculum to students. Nearly all of the participants discussed the importance of international social work and explained the steps taken to teach students, and provide them with the requisite experiences needed to become international social workers or do international social practice within their localities. Nearly all of the accredited institutions in this study have study abroad programs, and this is used to a certain extent to expose students to other cultures in other countries. Some of the institutions in this study have international field placements wherein students spend over six weeks overseas or stay here in the United States and do their practicums at agencies that do international social work.

With the exception of one program that has international social work as its singular concentration, all of the other participants expressed the difficulty in establishing a concentration in the area of international social work. Thus, students will find it difficult to take the requisite number of classes for a concentration in the area of study and hence, follow the general trend by specializing in populations within the local practice arena. The study clearly shows some of the programs inadequately teach international social work, and it might be logical for these programs to focus on their communities and contexts, instead leaving the task of teaching international social work to larger, better funded schools that have international connections.

Final Note

This research received no grant from any agency, whether public, academic, commercial, or not-for-profit.

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