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Social work education, training and standards in the Asia-Pacific region

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Social work education, training and standards in the Asia-Pacific region.

Abstract This article discusses the joint project between the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) to establish guidelines for the training and standard setting that elucidates what social work represents on a global level. While it is impossible to address all the issues that might be significant in such a large scope attention is given to the challenges establishing global standards might encounter in a region as diverse as the Asia-Pacific.

Key words: social work education, international standards, and training.

The internationalisation of the social work project

The establishment of social work programs internationally over the last century and more specifically in the Asia-Pacific region during the last half of the 20th century has introduced new dimensions to the training and education of practitioners not envisioned in its early origins. Initially social work was developed as primarily a domestic activity directed towards alleviating the effects of poverty, unemployment and social problems that arose locally as a result of the rapid move to industrialise in Europe and North America (Midgley 1997. p. 162). At the beginning of the new millennium there are now social work programmes in most countries and all regions across the globe (Healy 2002)

There seemed to be little concern about the proliferation of social work models of education and training being adopted from the USA and Europe in countries as diverse as Africa, Asia, South America, the sub continent and Asia-Pacific as there was a general belief that social work practice and education was always more than just learning technical expertise or on-the-job training (Midgley 1997). Situated in the socio-political debate about resource distribution for dealing with disadvantage and social exclusion for the vulnerable and disenfranchised, social work as a professional project sought to identify generic principles of practice that would provide the profession with a distinctive identity and global unity. Which, in its general context, would then be able to be translated into particular settings despite different cultural, social, legal and political contexts provided that the substance of training programmes and hence the qualifications awarded were broadly compatible with each other (Midgley 1997). This was a successful enterprise, given the proliferation of programmes across the globe. Despite these shared professional practices and educational models there was, until recently, little interchange or dialogue among these various programmes. This practice has been challenged by the rapid growth in global economic, social, cultural and political forces connecting countries previously isolated from international activities forcing disparate social work educational projects into a more immediate local-global conversation previously limited by distance, language barriers and possibly interest (Rowe, Hanley, Moreno, Mould 2000).

As a result of the rapid globalisation many now regard the world as more like a global village connecting spatial dimensions of time and geography by the speeding up of travel and communication times and access. This metaphorical shrinking of the spatial dimensions has impacted directly on social work programmes locally, nationally and internationally with many points of interaction (Midgley 1997, Healy 2001, Razack 2002, Dominelli & Bernard 2003). For social work educators' international policies, treaties and programmes are increasingly recognised as having a direct effect upon national, regional and local policies that inform social work practice in all countries. Further many

social workers from developed countries are becoming involved in international service organisations and social welfare activities (Razack 2002) as well as engaging in international research and teacher/student exchanges as social work extends beyond its national and regional concerns (Barlow, Whittaker & Sammon 2002, Dominelli & Bernard 2003, Noble 2003). In the main there is cautious support for this opening up of local-global interaction. This support has identified a number of advantages.

First, the strengthening of international links with social work development around the world is seen as providing a link into activist work at the local, national and international level (Ife 2001) by providing educators and practitioners across the globe with an international mandate to help moderate the impact of international economic expansion within specific countries and its effect on the population's health, economic and social wellbeing. Second, the opening up of local-global discourse has contributed to the fracturing of the predominantly Anglo-western hegemony by including different cultural perspectives, beliefs, practices and historical intergroup connections thus making a significant contribution to multicultural awareness in social work curricula at national and international levels (Mama 2001, Noble 2003a). Third, the internationalisation of social problems is informing contemporary social problem analysis at national levels (Rowe et al 2000). Fourth, a connection with social work educators at the international level has the potential to provide a vanguard role in improving the level of education and training for all social work programs that currently lack adequate resources and local and regional institutional support as well as help facilitate the movement of qualified social workers from country to country (IASSW/IFSW GQ doc. 2002). Fifth, the trend towards globalisation is forcing social work to theorise its position as an internationalising discipline outside of the localised borders, and lastly, expanding national horizons provides an opportunity to "subject our own cherished understandings of the world to critical scrutiny" (Dominelli and Bernard 2003, p.7).

Global guidelines, it is argued, will supplement, complement and legitimise these developments and provide a context for furthering these initiatives. To this end the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) formed a joint consultative committee to develop international guidelines that would consolidate these initiatives and formally link all social work programmes under an international mandate. A draft document was distributed in August 2002 and distributed widely for comment. Although not a policy statement for professional accreditation requirements the draft global standards document does see part of its brief to benchmark national standards against international ones (IASSW/IFSW GQ doc. 2002, p.3). The current document defines guidelines about core curricula content, including fieldwork. Minimum standards are also outlined for the structure of each program and suggested profiles for the staff and student body as well as suggested minimum levels of supportive infrastructure required for effective administration, government and resources in order to deliver an internationally recognised social work programme.

But is social work in the late 20th and early 21st century (or ever?) really that homogeneous and can we assume that all countries have the same cultural, political and educational settings as each other? And can we now assume that generic principles of educational practice are culturally neutral as indicated in the early beginnings? These concerns are addressed in the following sections with particular reference to the Asia-Pacific region.

Social work in the Asia-pacific region

Today, most Asian-Pacific countries have some form of social work training and practice that reflect the dominant global model of social work education (Midgley 2000, Healy 2001, Lyons 1999). Borrowing social work curriculum from the industrialised nations, such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand social work programs are evident in India, the Philippines, Singapore, Japan and more recently Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and other Pacific Islands. While many share a commitment to the generalist philosophical and practice educational model there are some differences in approach. For example social work education in India is highly standardised around the masters degree while Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Japan and more recently Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia teach social work at undergraduate university-level and Papua New Guinea, Samoa and other Pacific Island states have adopted a more vocationally, non university approach focussing on preparing students to work in government community development programs (Midgley 2000) and NGOs. While there is a growing trend internationally to formalise social work education at the tertiary level many Asia-Pacific countries still face geographic isolation, lack of access to mass communication technologies and language and cultural barriers which means that setting global guidelines for social work education, as currently proposed, could represent a particular challenge to the continued development of social work in the region.

The Asia-Pacific region is a complex mixture of countries, each encompassing different cultures and cultural heritages, identities, religions, language groups, histories, and economic, political, and social developments. We know from Midgley's work that although the Asian countries have the highest GNP in the developing world many countries also have the highest number of people living in poverty and that political and military conflict has eroded many existing welfare systems considerably (Midgley 1997, 2000). We also know that many of these countries have no direct experience of a welfare state which is unanimously regraded as essential to the social work project. Additionally there are great differences between educational levels and economic development and the way social problems such as housing, unemployment, pollution and related health problems and the movement of refugees and asylum seekers impact on the social conditions. However, we do not yet fully understand is how these different historical, cultural and political differences will be addressed in international guidelines and whether it is in the interest of different countries developing social work programmes to be guided in this way.

In preparation for this discussion I asked, by email, heads of program in various social work schools across the Asia-Pacific region several questions about their support for global standard setting and its usefulness and relevance to their social work program. This was to provide specific information for this article, not to overtake or undermine the extensive consultation already undertaken by the IASSW/IFSW GQS committee. In particular I asked if they were familiar with the document, whether they had any further comments as to the content, whether they regarded the content and intent useful for their purpose; whether they have any difficulties with the content, intent and purpose; and would they use this document and, if so for what purposes? I also asked whether the document allows for the consideration of cultural differences across the region and, finally, how useful overall is it for their current and future development. I received comments from the Philippines, Hong Kong and China, Sri Lanka, India and Korea. I complement these responses from my own understandings of social work programmes

in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The discussion that follows identifies issues raised from this research.

First, all respondents from the Philippines, Hong Kong and China, Sri Lanka, India and Korea indicated that they were currently teaching a variety of practice philosophies congruent to the global core curricula criteria outlined in the draft document such as ecological, strengths-based approach and/or feminist and human rights and social justice focus and all commented that they taught a mixture of the traditional, Anglo-western practice methods of casework, group and family work, community development and organisational work with varying degrees of emphasis. No one respondent identified a different cultural approach to social work theory and practice. All had a significant fieldwork component included as core curricula. This is consistent with my knowledge of most programmes in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Overall there was general support for the document's aspirational tenet and content and most indicated that they already incorporated many, but not all of the aspirations outlined in the draft document. Two respondents suggested that it "could be improved" by being more specific with regard to core curricula to help with future curriculum development. All agreed that global guidelines would, as this one respondent articulates, "*help us negotiate with the higher authorities to convince them on the nature, scope and structures of social work educational institutions*" and thus provide a substantial argument for negotiation for the consolidation and future development of their social work programmes. Several indicated that they felt that there was flexibility in adapting the guidelines to their own cultural context while two respondents said that "*it is up to us to work out how cultural differences can be applied to social work (in our county)*" while one respondent wanted independent development in how culture could be incorporated in their programme as yet "*we have not been able to do it*". Two respondents said they were "unsure" about the how useful the global standards would be overall in teaching social work in the region, given differences in stages of development and specific cultural and political contexts. All the other respondents agreed with this particular comment that as a general guideline "*it was the best it could be*".

Some reservations, however, were expressed especially with regard to fulfilling all the categories set out in the document as several respondents indicated "*it's difficult to meet these all these standards when social work has such a short history in our country*" and "*I was wondering if it is possible to have different standards for countries at different developmental stages?*" Further, there was some concern about the actual feasibility of providing as much infrastructure support with regard to structure, administration, staff, governance and resources as there were stringent financial constraints in the developing world.

It is my belief that any resistance for introducing global standards/guidelines is more likely to come from the westernised countries of Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand where there is an emerging body of literature informed by a postmodernist and post colonialist perspective that is having an important impact on the theoretical and practice-based constructs in social work education, and by implication to any ongoing support for a commitment to global and indeed national standards (Munford & Nash 1994, Noble & Briskman 1996, Healy 2000, Fook, Ryan and Hawkins 2000). Epistemological and ontological challenges are being directed against the certainty of perceived social work knowledge where an exploration of a more reflective and inclusive discourse is disrupting what is seen as essentially an ethnocentric knowledge and philosophical

base. This post modern 'turn' is gradually impacting on social work curricula, particularly in Australia where current social work scholars are asking for a disruption between previous ways of knowing so that new knowledges and new subject positions can emerge (Healy 2000, Fook et al 2000). A more discursive dialogue is being encouraged emphasising reflectivity in knowledge exploration and encouraging the speaking from various subject locations previously excluded from the dominant western knowledge base for example clients, service providers and ethnic and indigenous voices (Healy 2000, Nash 1994) representing a move away from universalising a particular social work dogma (Ife 1997, Healy 2000). This development is leading to new ways of talking about social work education in many Schools across the country where core social work curricula is being developed that stresses interaction, reciprocity, respect for difference, support for the emergence of multiple voices and the non-interference in the development of a decolonised social work paradigm (Noble 2003a, Healy 2000, Fook et al 2000). This is true for Aotearoa/New Zealand as well (see Munford & Nash 1994).

Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand's move towards a decolonised approach to knowledge exploration is important in this discussion as it raises pertinent questions about the dominance of the 'white voice' in contemporary curriculum content. Responding to an influx of migration from European and Mediterranean and more latterly Asian and Middle Eastern countries many social work programs in these two countries are demonstrating a growing commitment to a discursive scholarship in anti-racist/cross-cultural social work education (Noble 2003a). This is being influenced by the reawakening of indigenous politics of resistances from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and the Maori peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand where indigenous voices are mostly absent from contemporary theory development (Briskman 2003, Munford & Nash 1994). This ontological challenge to what is regraded as largely an ethnocentric social work theory and practice paradigm is and will continue to have a significant impact on the content of courses as well as the ontological and epistemological foundations of social work training and education. In fact Aotearoa/New Zealand is well in advance of Australia in developing a bi-cultural model of social work education. (Nash 1994, Noble & Briskman 1996). This emerging discourse is occurring, at the same moment that IASSW/IFSW is developing their global guidelines.

The introduction and development of international social work guidelines as being developed by the IASSW and IFSW is seen by many in the selected Asian-Pacific countries surveyed as playing a significant role in fostering international dialogue around the maintenance of professional standards of practice and the development of policies and initiatives in support of individual, community and societal well-being. However, as scholars in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand are currently arguing there may be many more who are excluded from any discussion about global guidelines by isolation and cultural and language barriers or who are excluding themselves (as a commitment to a more diffuse and undifferentiated concept of social work) from this dialogue but nevertheless will be directly affected by these developments. This concern will be developed further in the next section.

Global position in education, training and standards: suggestions for future development

There is little argument that the world is now linked in ways that local-global conversations are both inevitable and essential. For social work there is now awareness that what happens in one country can and does have an impact on their own countries

practices and policies. There are obvious advantages to working across borders as the literature on social movements identifies. Moreover, there are issues that transcend national boundaries and limit the capacity of individuals to devise and implement solutions or even develop ideas to address problems, for example, the international social problems resulting from crippling foreign debt and loss of local culture which is obviously more than can be effectively deal with locally. Issues such as HIV/AIDS, international crime, migration and environmental issues become every ones concern because of the very nature of moving across borders. Individual social worker's practice is now agreed to be limited by the effects of globalisation in the broader sense and in the local sense, as countries can no longer 'solve' their social problems in isolation to international developments. Improving international communication and exchange between and across social work programs as each country grapples with the forces of globalisation will be the key to developing models of practice that are able to address emerging social issues where the impact and effects on globalisation on individual lives is held in common. Likewise the importance of recognising the constantly changing nature of the realities of social work practice as more communication opens up between and among international educators needs to be ever present. These issues can be seen to support any initiative to set international guidelines for social work education and training.

This brief discussion of social work programs in the Asia-Pacific region highlights the fact that not all social work practice follows the same patterns in all parts of the region. Guidelines cannot be comprehensively global because social work in the Asia-Pacific region is a complex and varied activity invariably influenced by the socio-economic and political contexts of each country and is always mediated through differing cultural imperatives and theoretical perspectives. This is especially pertinent in the Asia-Pacific region where colonialism still is a recent legacy in many of the counties and where the negative impacts of globalisation of the world economy is having such a dire impact on many of the country's social and economic problems.

So if we take together the general issues identified from this overview of social work courses in this region what can we pull together that will have resonance with the future development and ongoing discussions and consultation for setting global guidelines?

Many of these difficulties are acknowledge in the comments within the document and are flagged for more discussions and recommendations. But the core mission of equipping social work practitioners to practice in globalised social situations by reinforcing a commitment to identify generic principles of practice that are deemed culturally neutral is still clearly evident. As the draft document (IASSW/IFSW GQ doc. 2002, Aug 2002) states.

However, the suggestion that all counties in the complex region comprising the Asia-Pacific to adopt the one epistemic model of Anglo-western social work needs challenging especially in those countries across the region where national policies and practices and theoretical developments differ significantly. That is not to say that these countries are incapable of reason and critique for themselves or that a desire to explore international guidelines is totally redundant or contraindicated. It is possible as the draft document (Aug 2002) states that a continuing dialogue with the IASSW/IFSW consultative committee will, in time, bring developing and developed social work schools in touch with each others development in a way that can contextualised their concerns within and outside these guidelines. It is and can be used as a point for social

dialogue and reciprocal learning. My point here is that a respect and appreciation for differences, not only needs to be acknowledged and accepted by the dominant discourse but incorporated as a core principal in any attempts to exchange standards and guidelines for educational practices.

The preamble in the draft document (Aug 2002, p.1) indicates there is a desire to do this and extensive consultation is still a focus of the committee. However, as the document currently stands, the specifications regarding core curricula and minimum standards about resources, standards of educational achievement and governance do not really reflect the possible difficulties in achieving these goals or indeed reflect any uncertainty as to the appropriateness of this position in the diverse and diffuse Asia-Pacific region. If promoting global guidelines in social work education across nations is core business for the IASSW/IFSW then this activity must be measured against an ever present awareness of the possibility of cultural imperialism especially as the Western voice is constantly in the forefront of many such developments. Awareness about the tension between core universalistic characteristics and the resurrection of indigenous voices and the postmodern challenge must also be present.

However, even if these concerns are addressed there is still no consensus as to how to avoid the trap of preventing the Western voice from dominating the present and future development or consultation process for the setting of international professional standards in social work education, even if a postmodern critique and decolonised curricula are encouraged to form a basis of core curricula. Even the commitment to 'letting others speak' and engaging in 'inclusive dialogue' can be viewed as another form of colonialism, as the underlying control in the dissemination and construction of knowledge or in 'letting go' of privilege and power can still be seen as a process dominated by Western ideology. It is difficult to hear and respect other knowledges when they are still marginalised and coming from a subordinated subject position.

Conclusion

It has been an implicit assumption in this article that social work programs in the Asia-Pacific region exist in an increasingly diverse and heterogeneous world. Challenges emerge, then, as to how to open up the dialogue within the Asia-Pacific region and how the establishment of universal norms, institutional practices and views of peoples behaviour and the nature of knowledge and scientific development in the search for the 'truth' as universal principles of social work which can be easily translated across cultural imperatives.

Acknowledging that the Asia-Pacific region is a mass of cultural groups each with their own system of meaning, understanding, needs and purposes where no one particular group (cf male, heterogeneous, white, middle class, 'Western', Asia-Pacific etc) should have a privileged voice over the other can fracture the present social work discourse and open the way to explore multiple-realities. This will ensure that new subject positions are created.

Further, continually challenging the academic authority over knowledge and the academic 'game' in which social work discourse is currently located will draw attention to social work's arcane and specialized language as exclusionary and controlling and will raise the awareness as to social work's complicitness in social control and cultural imperialism (Healy 2000). This is important for developed countries as well as those beginning to formulate their social work programmes. Post colonial social work demands

the resurrection of lost voices in the midst of western dominance, while postmodern social work's agenda is to encourage a multiplicity of visions not just one concerned with individual and social change and social justice, but one that reflects a more general concern for accepting differences, cultural diversity and inclusive dialogues. If further collaboration in revising global guidelines is mindful of these ideas then it will represent a positive move forward and unsettle previously established power relationships that have in the past dominated the development of social work programs in the Asia-Pacific region.

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