

Chapter 20

Beyond Borders: International Social Work Field Education

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ABSTRACT

International social work field education placements pose considerable challenges for students, educators, universities and host communities. Students may face conceptual challenges as international placements often occur in developing countries that rely upon collective rather than individual models of practice. Contextual differences require staff and students to consider their new context and appropriate ways to interact and learn. This chapter draws upon the experiences of the authors in adopting different models with students over the years and concludes that the preferred approach is the partnership model where there is close collaboration between the 'home' and 'host' universities. We consider educational, organisational, personal and professional factors that students face while on international placements. This is followed by identification of different exchange models, and teaching and learning issues arising from culture, language, pedagogy, critical reflection and assessment. We argue that a Relational/Equitable Model is best suited to international social work field education placements.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Moving Across Borders

As geographic, cultural and ethnic borders give way to shifting configurations of power, community, space and time, identity can no longer be grounded in Euro-centrism or Western individualism. There is a need for *new* spaces, relationships and identities that allow people to move across borders and engage difference and otherness, working collaboratively for productive social change (Giroux 1992; Giroux &

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Shannon 1997b). Universities are challenged to develop new ways of imagining and creating communities that pursue diversity, value and respect differences among individuals, and articulate the values all of the members of the community share (Nicholson, 1995). The literature refers to the relationship and implications of international placements to the overall social work curriculum (Tesoriero & Rajaratnam 2001; Abram, Slosar & Walls 2005; Pawar 2000; Johnson 2004). Pattanayak (2007) highlighted the disjunct between theory that is inherited from the West and the social work practice context in India. Mamphiswa and Noyoo (2000) referred to the need to change the Western curriculum they inherited to one more relevant to local social work students. Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger (2012, p. 230) acknowledged the centrality of freeing students from 'abiding exclusively by dominant Western paradigms' as the most significant task in preparing students for placements in another country.

In her critical examination of student exchanges, Razack (2002) argued that a 'deeper enquiry into our complicity in maintaining our privileged locations in the North is not usually emphasized' (p. 253). Midgley (1997) noted how exchanges were welcomed between industrialised and 'developing' nations initially, but with increasing independence in former colonised countries, these unilateral exchanges are being questioned. Commenting on the social work curriculum in Africa, Mamphiswa and Noyoo (2000) concluded that social work education needs to adopt a developmental paradigm to contextualise the curriculum. We argue this needs to extend to the 'global' context of social work education generally and specifically for social work field placements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A key consideration for international social work field education is: *What determines 'satisfactory' performance in contexts where learning as a process overrides service delivery or outcomes?* Given the fluid nature of community development contexts, most often specific learning goals may only be identified once the student is situated there and engaged in dialogue regarding appropriate experiences presenting at that time. The likelihood of less structure and resources in a number of organisations in developing countries has highlighted the importance of student experiential and developmental learning, the ability for self-directed learning, and theoretical understanding. Alongside this is the need to reframe ways of engaging, communicating and relating (more) holistically, looking at issues rather than individuals. This extends to students grappling with the absence of the personal pronoun 'I' and an acceptance that they are there primarily to learn, not to do, and if delegated tasks by the agency, to appreciate their involvement and not to judge from a Western perspective.

This discussion becomes more relevant when placed within the larger organisational context of Non-Government Organisations (NGO) in different parts of the world. For example, in India, organisations are frequently formed with altruistic motives i.e., a 'welfare/charity' perspective. Often the staff have no formal social work/rural development training but rather operate from an experiential standpoint, which may prove beneficial to stakeholders, but may not be informed by locally emergent theory. This has several implications for teaching and learning, especially relating to theoretical perspectives that underpin practice and in terms of conceptualising interventions (marriage and motherhood as being the only option for adolescent girls) and innovations (devaluing the traditional).

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