



Innovative Exchange Creates Global Continuing Education

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Introduction

This is a time when social work professionals in all parts of the world face professional challenges due to common societal, economic, political, and environmental changes and upheaval. Social problems such as poverty, uncontrolled population growth, drug traffic and abuse, human rights violations, and environmental disasters flow back and forth across national borders. It has become impossible to separate economic forces within nations from global forces. Similarly, there is increasing international cross-fertilization of social policy ideas and approaches. We cannot escape our increasing interdependence (Nagy and Falk, 2000). This challenge provides opportunities for social work involvement, but as Hokenstad and Midgely (1997) have pointed out, "Social work remains a profession with a largely local orientation. Most social workers function within the context of a locally based service delivery structure. Their work, whether directly with individuals and families or at a community level, is locally focused."

Most of the literature describes international social work in terms of practice with international social welfare organizations. Huffman (1981) states, "The social work profession and international social welfare organizations share common missions, goals, and values." The generalist knowledge base and skills possessed by most social workers have been sought by international social welfare organizations for their developing personnel (Rosenthal, 1985; Healy, 1987). The opportunity for international social work exchanges has traditionally been reserved for social work students and faculty.

There is no lack of persuasive arguments and support for international content in social work education. As early as 1965 the importance of international and cross-cultural content in social work education was recognized. Stein (1965) said, "we neglect our responsibility in social work education when we do not provide a world view to our students and we neglect our responsibility to our profession and government when we do not contribute to international service."

International comparisons can serve to highlight the rich and mixed history of the social worker's role in social welfare history. The historic exchange between Toynbee Hall in London and Hull House in Chicago illustrates the benefits of cross-national contacts. Clearly, settlements in the United States were patterned after Toynbee Hall, established in 1884 in East London. After visiting Toynbee Hall, Jane Addams founded the Chicago Hull-House on August 4, 1889 (Trattner, 1999).

Little has been written about cross-cultural exchanges for practicing professionals that utilize experiential learning. Even less has been written about the multidimensional learning of such a "cultural discourse" in a professional group experience. In the words of Malcolm Payne (1996:172) "We need a changed conception of social work which represents effectively the whole range of its knowledge and skills throughout the world...[This will facilitate shared discourse derived] from a shared conception that organized social action and intervention are worthwhile for related social purposes".

Despite the growth of social work as an international profession, most social workers are poorly informed about the activities of their colleagues in other countries. In 2002, NASW President Terry

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Mizrahi challenged social workers to become a more visible and respected force internationally. NASW "recognizes that social workers are ahead of the organizations that represent them in understanding the importance of paying attention to international issues and finding ways to play viable roles internationally" (NASW News, March 2002). Caragata and Sanchez (2002).

"We suggest that an international social work perspective can contribute to the shared understands necessary to respond effectively to social problems, including alleviating poverty and combating racism, cultural imperialism and violence. Shared learning may help to find solutions and responses to what have thus far proved to be intractable human problems. As we experience the continuing impacts of globalization, we may find that our increasingly common set of social issues have their roots in a common ideology and in the global economic structuring of our societies." Multinational cooperation can produce stronger credibility for social work as a profession... (Daley, 2003)

This article describes a creative response to meet the challenges of the current world climate. The innovative model developed by the NASW Illinois Chapter supports social workers employed in agency and governmental settings from different parts of the world to come together in a group "cultural discourse" and learn from one another. This international social service exchange model responds to the needs of community-based social workers through short-term cultural immersion and dialogue.

The exchange program creatively mirrors the profession's formally sanctioned mission. "The mission statement stresses social work's venerated concern about vulnerable populations and the profession's traditional simultaneous focus on individual well-being and the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living" (Reamer, 1998). It promotes human poten-

tial, functioning, and "win-win" outcomes for individuals and the cultural mosaic of peoples in our global community. This project demonstrates the impact of international group experiences, "cultural discourses," on social workers and their work.

Program History

Since the initial November 1996 exchange, the Illinois Chapter has participated in a total of thirteen social service exchange programs directly involving over six hundred social worker professionals and indirectly educating thousands of other social workers through presentations and publications. Cremer, DeBruin, and DuPuis (2001) states the following:

A wide range of benefits, both tangible and intangible, accrue to cities involved in sister-city relationships. Among these are the benefits of international trade, cultural exchanges, migration, investment and tourism. Within the sister-city movement it is widely thought that intangible benefits are derived from exposing the citizens of a city, particularly the city's youth, to different cultures. It is expected that the understandings developed and the connections gained through sustained face-to-face contact will enable people to better function in a world characterized by increasing globalization.

Hamburg Exchange

In 1996 the Youth Authority of Hamburg, Germany requested a Chicago Sister Cities social service exchange. The Illinois Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers responded and in collaboration with the Sister Cities International Program sent a delegation to Hamburg, November, 1996. The two-week exchange immersed 12 Illinois social workers in dialogue with their German peers around the cultural and theoretical basis of social development and welfare practice in each country. The NASW delegation was deeply moved professionally and personally by the immersion and discourse in

Hamburg. Additionally, the group experience became a powerful multidimensional continuing education unlike any other. Consequently, the delegation initiated the NASW Illinois Chapter's International Task Force to reciprocate and coordinate a two-week exchange program with Hamburg in Chicago, 1997.

The Chicago context was different than that of Hamburg. While the Hamburg Youth Authority had covered NASW participants' lodging, meals, and city transportation, no Sister City or NASW funds were available to support Hamburg social service professionals in a Chicago exchange. However, the new Task Force members felt empowered by the exchange experience. They brought together their social work skills, contacts, and resources and acted creatively. First, Loyola University of Chicago gave an in-kind-donation of two-weeks' lodging in unoccupied dorms including breakfast.

Loyola's investment in this innovative initiative was pivotal and enabled the Task Force to develop other partnerships. The Chicago Sister Cities Program provided city transportation. The Task Force Chair's employer, Chicago's Circuit Court of Cook County, donated her time to coordinate and lead the twelve Hamburg social service professionals within the two-week Chicago program in September 1997. Task Force members enlisted agencies to provide site visits and lunches. The program's success was evidenced by evaluations and by Hamburg's request to continue the exchange in Hamburg in 1998.

Tri-City Social Service Exchange

In 1997, Sister City Program staff encouraged expansion to include another sister city. Birmingham, England was identified as a complementary partner. As a result, NASW invited Birmingham's Social Services Department to join this innovative partnership. The Illinois Chapter's visibility on the international stage increased as they initiated a new three-year program, the Tri-City Social Service Exchange.

In 1999, Chicago hosted Hamburg and Birmingham delegations with program themes of cultural diversity and of violence. In 2000, Birmingham hosted with themes of child protection and youth offending. In 2001, Hamburg hosted with the theme of the United Nation's, Children's Bill of Rights. NASW Illinois Chapter participants were awarded 50 CEUs for this annual continuing education program. Next, to increase program outcomes, the Tri-City Exchange began to include two-day agency immersions, individual action plans, and workshops where participants described their intercultural dialogues to local social service professionals.

Expanding Sister Cities' Mission

In 1999, in conjunction with a Sister Cities Board member, the Task Force proposed the Chicago's Sister City International Program now expand their mission from promoting trade, economic development, cultural awareness and educational opportunities to include social service exchanges. In January 2000, Chicago's Sister City International Program's mission was expanded "...to increase international trade, economic development, promote exchanges of culture, education, medicine, environment, technology and foster social service opportunities with its sister cities."

Durban Social Service Exchange

In July 2000, the Task Force collaborated with Sister Cities again to expand. Together they responded to a request to address issues of street children from Durban, South Africa. South Africa has a history of deep division and a rich tapestry of different cultures and religions. South African social workers are transforming the strength of the old into a vibrant future. (Mazibuko & Gray, 2004) The International Activities Task Force proposed an expansion to that request, a two-week exchange in Chicago with themes of at-risk youth and families, June 2-16, 2001. Durban's delegation of 14 social service professionals came to Chicago. Program

evaluations evidenced that this exchange with a developing country had a significant impact on Chicago participants and on the visitors from Durban. Upon the delegation's return home, the Durban Director of Social Welfare and Population Development Department, Ms. Thobie Mhlongo, stated, "Personally I have no doubt that both cities have contributed to a program that will change the face of practice in children, youth, and families FOREVER."

In 2001, for the first time the Task Force, now a network, expanded Chicago's social service exchange program to successfully complete two programs in one year, Chicago/Hamburg/Birmingham and Chicago/Durban. In 2002 another first occurred, NASW Illinois Chapter's Delegation of 18 social workers participated in the exchange in a developing country, South Africa. They returned home inspired by the South African social workers and labeled this exchange the most impactful to date. The network expanded this exchange further when they invited both Hamburg and Birmingham to send a representative to join their 2002 delegation in South Africa. Social workers from three continents—America, Europe, Africa—participated in the "cultural discourse." And in 2003, Durban expanded their social service delegation to include a Durban Family Court Judge, another first.

Program Model

International social work and cross-cultural social work overlap. The cross-cultural perspective looks at dominant themes of cultural diversity, inter-cultural communication and cross-cultural understanding. The international perspective focuses on themes of international social development, social work practice, models and methods in different countries, global social problems and comparative social welfare and policy (Nagy and Falk, 2000).

The purpose and focus of this article is "cultural discourse," a dialogue between cultures to accomplish both of the above goals in a multidimensional

group experience. It is not a twinning model where Americans visit another culture to impart their "words of wisdom." This cultural discourse model is defined with a broad context: Social services that empower and improve the quality of life especially of at-risk youth, families, and their communities—those negatively impacted by economic, political or cultural conditions, by violence, abuse, addictions, by life transitions, etc. Also, such a definition would include a wide variety of professional social work practice and activities that transcend national borders, such as in programs carried out by inter-governmental agencies (e.g. the United Nations), as well as by governmental and non-governmental agencies with international programs (Nagy and Falk, 2000).

This model is grounded in social work's commitment to contextual knowing. "Social work's commitment to contextual knowing helps social workers recognize diverse vantage points of understanding, the social relatedness of human life, and the influence of one's location in historical, cultural, physical space" (Witkin, 1999). Twelve social workers are culturally immersed for two weeks in dialogue and study with sister city social service professionals and their city peers. Common social issues and ills are refracted through different cultural lenses creating a reexamination of assumptions, belief systems, and professional strategies. This intense group experience, twelve professionals living and interacting together for two-weeks within another culture's professional milieu, offers multidimensional continuing education opportunities to:

- Enhance learning by being a part of and using the group process.
- Stimulate increased awareness through other participants' experience.
- Establish a shared mission from the experience.
- Develop new collaborations both internationally and within the participants' city.
- Support on-going projects to increase social work effectiveness and knowledge.

Innovative Exchange Creates Global Continuing Education

The exchange program offers information, experience, and dialogue about different social service models and their transferability. It creates opportunities for social workers to present their work to professionals in another culture. Cultural understandings are enriched by "walking in another culture's shoes." It uncovers the potential of cultural nuances to enrich and/or block communication between people of diverse cultures whether in another sister city or in a culturally diverse city such as Chicago. It heightens the awareness of cultural misunderstandings that can result in missed opportunities, conflict, differences, isolation, or war.

Specific to Americans, these exchanges challenge the stereotype of the one-way international flow of ideas and practices. Chicago participants identify that they expand their applied knowledge and "world view" which impacts their future social service work and ultimately enhances the health of our culturally diverse communities. Additionally, Europeans experience the two-week program as a "fast forward" view of issues in their future, and South Africans experience an empowerment returning home with new self-knowledge, strategies and resources.

Program Content

Since this program model immerses social workers in intense cultural discourses about servicing vulnerable youth and families worldwide, the program content is a "work in progress." Each year's program is developed as a result of the host city's coordinating members' experience and expertise, current issues, previous evaluations, and available resources. Within this intense group experience, there are three core elements: learn about the host city's historical/cultural underpinnings and those of their social services; visit group sites that demonstrate those social services; and delineate site visits for individual delegates to explore specific areas of interest/practice.

A two-week exchange program generally includes the following:

- Develop relationships with sister city professionals.
- Orient participants to program goals.
- Record pre and post expectations and experiences.

- Discuss international social work through a social services case study.
- Visit museums and sites depicting host city's history and culture.
- Facilitate workshops on USA's social welfare and social work evolution.
- Facilitate workshops on cross cultural social work.
- Visit social services agencies as a group to address common social ills and best practices.
- Immersion for two days in social services agencies as individuals to address participants' specific areas of expertise.
- Facilitate group meetings to integrate the cultural and professional immersion.
- Process the exchange experience daily by visiting delegation to allow group dynamics and diversity to enrich the learning experience and to strengthen their intra-city networking.
- Interact with other host-city professionals through dinners.
- Develop individualized action plans.
- Evaluate the program and discuss future planning on the last program day.

Lessons Learned

Additionally, there are some practical hints for others attempting to duplicate this innovative program content:

Balancing the content is an integral issue in maximizing the program's impact and sustainability. For example, group activities such as core workshops and group site visits need to be balanced with individual site visits that allow a participant to address individual goals. Additionally, pacing activities, both professional and social, with reflection/free time is a constant challenge in a program that never seems to have enough time.

Do not let cultural differences or group dynamics divide. Set up a structure to openly discuss group dynamics and cultural differences prior to and during the program. Develop a strategy to address and respect cultural differences whether between sister city participants or within your own city's group. The intensity of this exchange experience can exaggerate differences, control issues, sensitivities, and how one travels within a group.

Always utilize social work skills to persevere.

The first attempts of the International Task Force to reciprocate Hamburg's 1996 exchange and host the 1997 program were very stressful with no international expertise or available funding. However, perseverance paid off. It is important to involve local leaders who are "people of vision" since this type of program is innovative. In the Illinois Chapter experience both the Executive Director and the Task Force Chair were pivotal to success. Also important to assuring success was using social work skills to establish working relationships with contacts such as the Sister City International Program and Consulates to facilitate international connections and credibility.

Even without available cash funding, in-kind donations can still lead to program success. In Illinois "win-win" working partnerships with Loyola University of Chicago's School of Social Work provided lodging and breakfast, with the Circuit Court of Cook County provided two week's time for the Chair's coordination of the program, with Sister City staff provided intercity transportation and tourist opportunities, and with local universities, consulates, social service professionals, and social service agencies provided site visits, lunches, and receptions/dinners.

A recruiting plan is important when choosing a delegation to attend an exchange in another sister city. We advertised the opportunity in our chapter newsletter, website, and at chapter meetings. We reached out to colleagues to spread the word and obtain the most qualified professionals who have the needed expertise, social skills, and good health for such an intense intellectual, physical, and emotional group experience.

As you interview prospective program participants, screen for professionals who demonstrate the ability to use this "cultural discourse" to further the social work profession and our body of global knowledge. Request participants to commit to ongoing time and resources for future programs to increase program outcomes. Screen, as best as possible, for those who can utilize and not be overwhelmed by this intense group experience. If all in the delegation are new to the exchange experience,

then more time will need to be spent on establishing relationships with the host city professionals; however, if one to three participants already have established relationships and exchange experiences, then the delegation can build on that base to a higher level of interaction and outcomes.

The delegation should be chosen at least two to three months prior to departure to the host city. Utilize that time prior to departure to orient your delegation to the sister city's culture and history, to group dynamics, and to cultural diversity issues that could polarize and divide. Include information opportunities and/or a reception with the host sister city's consulate to immerse the delegation participants in the culture. This experience can also solidify working relationships with consulates for future programs.

Methodology

Initially exchange participants were surveyed generically with questions: "what did you like best about the program; how could the program be improved; how has the program been of benefit to you professionally, personally, socially?" In 1998 the Task Force evaluated how the exchange met their seven primary goals:

- to promote an international exchange of professionals;
- to share practice experiences;
- to increase an international exchange of theoretical and conceptual knowledge;
- to educate and promote interest in the significance of global collaboration at university and professional levels;
- to increase social work awareness, visibility, and multi-faceted expertise worldwide;
- to develop creative partnerships which increase international activities;
- to identify the major social issues and responses relevant to individuals, families and societies worldwide.

In 1999 the Task Force enlisted Loyola University's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) for program evaluation. Sanders and Pederson

(1984) and Healy (1995), have suggested that the term "comparative" be used to refer to a research methodology or a way to compare information about societies. Comparative social work then is providing, analyzing, and comparing facts about social work in two or more countries. The same applies to comparative social welfare and social policy (Nagy and Falk, 2000). A CURL graduate student worked to create a series of survey instruments and assisted in their implementation. The CURL staff member who worked to analyze the resulting data stated, "I was overwhelmed with the number of questions that asked about the respondent's views of the U.S. system and culture especially in comparison to their own systems and cultures...these data allow you to show that the participants haven't simply 'seen' things, but that they have begun to compare and contrast with their own experiences in their home country. That is, there has been critical reflection—something much needed in social service provision the world over." And in the CURL report's conclusion, "While the host group did a professional job and had the support of many people, for none of them is this their full-time profession. Hosting this group was one of many things they did each day. And so, the fact that the exchange was such a clear and overwhelming success is all the more impressive."

The evaluative instruments designed by CURL, a questionnaire, daily logs, and final evaluations in groups and individually, consisted of mostly open-ended questions with responses given in narrative form. While the hope at the beginning of the evaluative process was to obtain statistically significant results regarding benefits of the exchange, the narrative responses lead toward a more qualitative review. Qualitative research is often seen as less stringent than quantitative research. In reality, qualitative analysis may better suit certain types of data, primarily research conducted in the social sciences.

Outcomes

Since the initial exchange program in 1996, evaluations continue to highlight the potential of

this exchange process to establish the world as a university for social workers' continuing education—to learn and reflect on policy, practice, and on social work as a reflection of a culture's history and politics. This program does not have Americans teaching the "right way." In fact, this program's cultural discourses provide significant "world view" changes, especially for Americans who experience, learn, and reflect on another culture's social service system. In all evaluations, program participants routinely report the experience as a "life-changing event." Such statements demonstrate overwhelmingly that social workers experience this two-week program as a continuing education experience well beyond conferences, lectures, or books. Indeed this is an innovative, international exchange that responds to the challenges of our times in our global community.

Program Outcomes

By December 2004, more than 600 social workers directly participated in 13 two-week programs. Thousands of other professionals are enriched by this cross cultural social work exchange program, when the participants discussed their experiences through written reports, presentations, and publications. These describe their two-week professional experiences including practice and policy comparisons, contrasts, transferability, and enriched cultural awareness. A few other representative outcomes of the two-week exchanges include:

- 2004, Hamburg, in the absence of any German professional social service organization, used the National Association of Social Workers, Illinois Chapter's organization as a model;
- 2003, a Chicago youth service agency established a three-month internship for a 2002 German delegate.
- 2002, Durban's Department of Social Welfare and Population Development incorporated a Chicago foster-parent training model into a Family Preservation Program.
- 2000, a Birmingham delegate redesigned his

Juvenile Offender Program model to incorporate his 1999 Chicago experience of our successes and failures in our Juvenile Court and with our Probation Office.

- 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004 Chicago delegates presented their "cultural discourse" experience, "what did they learn and what did we learn" at Chicago's Cultural Center, the NASW-Illinois Chapter Annual Conference, and at numerous individual social service agencies.
- 1997, two Chicago delegates co-authored a professional article comparing social welfare systems in Chicago and Hamburg, "Deutsche Sozial Politik-Beobachtungem aus US-Amerikanisher Perspektive" published in 43 German journals, including a chapter in a book published out of the University of Munich.

Some representative qualitative participants' reflections include:

- 2004, Chicago delegate: "If you do not see and experience the culture, you do not see and experience the whole person and may make untrue assumptions."
- 2003, Durban delegate: "This experience has enriched me and my work in South Africa and I return home with many new ideas to help our social work."
- 2002, Birmingham delegate: "I left South Africa with an increased appreciation of the role of social workers in social community development."
- 2001, Chicago delegate: "I am moved by Hamburg's harm reduction concept and have already adapted it to my work with the poor."
- 2001, Birmingham delegate: "Viewing other interventions enabled me to consider aspects of my practice and, while not wholly importing techniques, it provided the opportunity to review, evaluate and modify my own practice."
- 1999, a Hamburg delegate: "I am a little bit of another person after this trip and I think it is very important to do this."

- 1996, a Chicago delegate: "It really is one big world. Intellectually, I am amazed how similar the services are, I had expected huge differences that did not occur. However, the techniques are clearly different due to cultural differences and sensitivities about family rights."

Conclusion

These "cultural discourses" are like the mosaic of glass in a kaleidoscope. The kaleidoscope must be used in order to view and make sense of global social work practice issues. Professionals must be imbued with a broader and more enlightened vision, one that incorporates both a global consciousness and new types of knowledge and skills (Nagy and Falk, 2000). This program model demonstrates the potential of bringing social workers from sister cities with diverse cultural/ethnic backgrounds together to focus on common issues and the servicing of at-risk youth and families throughout our global community. Participants' evaluations and subsequent actions reflect "win-win" outcomes that mirror our diversity and interconnectedness while promoting peace, cultural understandings, and the well being of all people. Participants of this intense group experience evidence that, with just a slight turn of the kaleidoscope, a tiny two-week shift of focus, a whole new range of possibilities and connections can develop.

As contacts among social workers worldwide increase through more travel, formal and informal exchanges, and enhanced communications through technology, the profession will deepen its understanding of global problems. The result will be increasing cross-fertilization of social work knowledge, approaches and methods (Nagy and Falk, 2000). Professionals, immersed in another sister city's social service issues and work, emerge with thinking "out of the box." They take home new paradigms, alternative views of another culture's vision of, approach to, and service delivery models for common social service challenges. Although research and practice in international and comparative social welfare have made enormous strides in

Innovative Exchange Creates Global Continuing Education

recent years, there are still things to learn. This model opens up possibilities for new avenues of policy and practice. For Americans in particular, this enables social workers to more effectively understand, assess, respect, and service our cultural mosaic of peoples.

The NASW Illinois Chapter's sister city social service exchange program affirms the profession's historic and defining feature – to focus on individual well being in a social context for the well-being of all society. It demonstrates how social workers can enrich and be enriched by “cultural discourses” that focus on common bonds and do not allow differences to polarize or diffuse energies. NASW Illinois Chapter's innovative exchange program could easily be duplicated throughout the United States to impact and enhance the professional development of social workers and increase their global body of knowledge and connections at this time of great professional challenges throughout the world. Other organizations, including universi-

ties and NASW chapters, can sponsor “cultural discourse” exchanges that will promote the growth and development of social workers and help bring about further development of services in our global community.

In the upcoming-years, NASW Illinois Chapter's International Activities Network will create additional innovative exchanges for global continuing social work education. Its 2005 exchange program will expand beyond prior programs' vision and impact. The Network's 2005 Global Exchange, September 10-24, will bring delegations of eight from each of the three sister cities to Chicago simultaneously. The highlight of this program will take place at the Illinois Chapter's Annual Statewide Conference. For the first time ever, international delegates will present and participate in a conference with over 500 Illinois social workers. The Network believes this will empower all participants, social workers immersed in multi-cultural cities' social challenges worldwide.

Kathleen Landreth Borland, ACSW, LCSW, has chaired NASW Illinois Chapter's International Activities Network since its inception in January 1997. The NASW Foundation named Kathleen as the winner of the 2004 International Rhoda G. Sarnat Award for significantly advancing the public image of professional social work through her leadership of the Network. Chicago Mayor Richard Daley appointed Kathleen to the Chicago Sister Cities International Program's Board of Directors in 2004. Since 1990, Kathleen has been a family mediator in Chicago's Circuit Court of Cook County and in 1995, Kathleen co-authored the court's “Focus on Children”.

Janice M. Hockensmith, MSW, MS, was chosen to participate in the first Chicago/Hamburg exchange in 1996 and has been a member of the NASW Illinois Chapter's International Activities Network since its inception in January 1997. She is an Associate Professor and Field Education Coordinator for the Social Work Program at Olivet Nazarene University in Bourbonnais, Illinois. Professor Hockensmith helped developed the Romanian Studies Program which is part of the universities Study Abroad Program. She has also developed an international BSW field placement program that works with Veritas, a private Romanian foundation in Sighisoara, Romania. In 2000 she was named Social Worker of the Year by the East Central Illinois District of NASW Illinois.

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