Analyzing International Social Work in Undergraduate Social Work Curriculum

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Abstract

In the social work field, international work plays an essential role in many services such as working with global agencies, aiding immigrants, and advocating for human rights. Representation of this area in the classroom is critical for ethical international practice and it also can be beneficial in developing skills for all students. This study aimed to look at how international social work is represented in undergraduate social work programs at universities across the country, and how they are preparing students to practice with any client, but particularly clients from other countries. Data were collected from course syllabi and analyzed for international content using content analysis. International social work content was found inconsistent across the syllabi collected. Suggestions were then given for international social work education models that can be used for effective class design.
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We have no known conflict of interests to disclose.

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Abstract

In the social work field, international work plays an essential role in many services such as working with global agencies, aiding immigrants, and advocating for human rights. Representation of this area in the classroom is critical for ethical international practice and it also can be beneficial in developing skills for all students. This study aimed to look at how international social work is represented in undergraduate social work programs at universities across the country, and how they are preparing students to practice with any client, but particularly clients from other countries. Data were collected from course syllabi and analyzed for international content using content analysis. International social work content was found inconsistent across the syllabi collected. Suggestions were then given for international social work education models that can be used for effective class design.

Keywords: International Social Work, CSWE, Undergraduate Education, Syllabi

Introduction

Social work is a field that has an immeasurable impact on society. The issues that the profession is confronting are equally enormous. Some of these issues include the tasks of ensuring healthy child development, ending homelessness, and eliminating racism, as detailed in the Grand Challenges of Social Work (Barth et al., 2022). All of these challenges are ones that are not unique to the United States of America. Social injustice is on the rise all across the world, and social workers’ ability to confront it domestically and internationally is essential for upholding the mission of the profession to, “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people” (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021) as outlined in the Code of Ethics. While many students will not travel outside of the country, many will interact with international clients in the form of immigrants or refugees (Estes, 2010). If students working to get their undergraduate degree in social work are not
knowledgeable about international social work, they will be unable to ethically practice in this field, at the expense of foreign clients.

In addition to international social work, it is critical for schools to educate students on the importance of cultural diversity. The NASW Code of Ethics expresses the importance of diversity in Competency 1.05, stating that it is important for social workers to understand, “…culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures…” and have “…knowledge that guides practice with clients of various cultures…” (NASW, 2021, 1.05 Cultural Competence section). Cultural diversity works in conjunction with international social work as it plays a part in developing an understanding of one’s own identity and biases that can impact international social work practice (Anish et al., 2021). It is not only necessary for international social work education, but social work education as a whole, as it is laid out as an essential element of social work education in the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) education policy and accreditation standards (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] Commission on Educational Policy & CSWE Commission on Accreditation, 2015).

I have been planning to practice international social work after graduation. When reflecting on my undergraduate studies, I realized that my education had not sufficiently discussed international social work. Much of the curriculum centered around social work practice in America and working with American client populations. We had learned about the National Association of Social Workers in every single course, but I do not remember the International Federation of Social Workers being mentioned even once. It was through this reflection that I decided to perform an investigation into how international social work is represented in other schools’ undergraduate social work programs in order to see if it is present and to what degree.
Methods

Participants

It was determined that the target population would be colleges and universities that provide an undergraduate social work program that is accredited by the CSWE. This population was chosen as the CSWE is recognized as the only agency for the accreditation of social work programs, by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (Council on Social Work Education, n.d.). Competence is one of the core values of the social work field, as defined in the NASW Code of Ethics, and applying this to social work education is necessary to ensure programs are preparing students for ethical practice (NASW, 2021). The specific type of degree (Ex. BSW, BASW, BSSW) was not included as a limiting factor, as they all possess the same social work class requirements. From the CSWE-accredited programs, a self-selected sample was formed that included 31 different colleges and universities across the United States. These participants came from 17 different states, with a regional breakdown of 48% coming from the Midwest, 35% from the South, 10% from the West, and 6% from the Northeast.

Procedure

Requests were made for syllabi focusing on international social work as well as ones having content related to cultural competency or cultural diversity, given the overlap of content covered in the two subjects. The request email was sent to all of the emails listed in the accredited undergraduate entries of the CSWE accreditation directory. The email contained the purpose of the study as well as a link to upload syllabi through a Google Form. Syllabi were collected over a period of one month between September 19th and October 19th, 2022.
Syllabi were then analyzed using content analysis to look for the presence of specific keywords. The first set included international keywords: “Global”, “International”, “Global/International Social Work”, “International Federation of Social Workers/IFSW”, and any mention of countries other than the United States of America. The second set involved diversity keywords: “Cultural Competency”, “Cultural Sensitivity”, and “Cultural Humility”. Finally, “National Association of Social Workers/NASW”, was used as a keyword to compare the frequency of times NASW was mentioned in comparison to the International Federation of Social Workers. Once a keyword was found, it would be recorded as well as its context. Context was based on if the keyword is present in an objective, reading, assignment, or project. It is worth noting that for the sake of this study, an assignment was defined as a smaller task such as a forum post or a small homework activity, while a project was defined as a larger task such as a paper or a presentation.

Based on the keywords found, each syllabus would be checked for relevancy. If a syllabus did not have a diversity or international focus, it was excluded. The only exception was if it did have any international keywords present, and then it was added to a miscellaneous category. Syllabi were also excluded if they were for a study-abroad trip. While study-abroad experiences are incredibly beneficial for preparing students for international social work practice, they are significantly more expensive than regular in-person/virtual classes, and as a result, are not accessible to all students. Therefore, the study only focused on classroom experiences that are accessible to the average student. When reviewing syllabi, special effort was made to look for projects that best represented international social work. A few of these examples are mentioned and analyzed in the Results below.
Results

In total, out of the 31 schools that responded, 88 syllabi were submitted for review. The average school submitted approximately three syllabi, with 16 schools submitting more than one syllabus. From the syllabi, 40 syllabi were excluded. Thirty-seven were excluded for not meeting relevancy requirements and three were excluded for being for study-abroad trips. With the remaining 48 syllabi, 26 could be classified as having a diversity focus, 7 having an international focus, and 15 falling into neither category, but containing an international keyword. The number of syllabi with a certain keyword present can be seen in Table 1, while occurrences of international and diversity keywords, with context, can be seen below in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively. The NASW had occurrences occurring in the following contexts: 19 in objectives, 12 in readings, 1 in assignments, and 8 in projects. For comparison, the International Federation of Social Workers only appeared in four readings and a project.

Table 1

Number of Syllabi with an Occurrence of a Keyword

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Number of Syllabi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global or International Social Work</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Federation of Social Workers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Countries</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Competency</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Sensitivity</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Humility</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Association of Social Workers</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Number of Occurrences of International Keywords by Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Global</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>Global or International Social Work</th>
<th>International Federation of Social Workers</th>
<th>Other Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>7/4/6</td>
<td>7/1/4</td>
<td>6/0/1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1/0/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>4/2/2</td>
<td>5/1/2</td>
<td>7/0/1</td>
<td>3/0/1</td>
<td>1/1/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>3/0/0</td>
<td>3/1/0</td>
<td>2/0/0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1/0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project</td>
<td>4/2/3</td>
<td>5/0/3</td>
<td>2/0/1</td>
<td>0/0/1</td>
<td>3/1/3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Occurrences are broken up by syllabi category (International/Diversity/Misc).

Table 3

Number of Occurrences of Diversity Keywords by Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Cultural Competency</th>
<th>Cultural Sensitivity</th>
<th>Cultural Humility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>2/14/0</td>
<td>0/2/0</td>
<td>1/3/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>2/10/3</td>
<td>0/1/0</td>
<td>0/2/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>1/2/0</td>
<td>0/1/0</td>
<td>0/1/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project</td>
<td>1/4/0</td>
<td>0/1/0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Occurrences are broken up by syllabi category (International/Diversity/Misc).

Out of all of the included syllabi, 32 out of 48 of them had at least one international keyword present. From the syllabi, 16 had an international keyword in a reading, 4 had one in an assignment, and 15 had one in a project. Twenty-two of these syllabi had at least one of these keywords in the objectives. From the syllabi that had an international social work keyword in their objectives, follow-up on the objectives was analyzed. Follow-ups in this
scenario are either readings, assignments, or projects that occur in a class on top of the initial objective and show the objective is being addressed. If a syllabus has a concept present in an objective but does not follow up on it in a reading, assignment, or project, then students are not able to actually learn about it. It was found that 10 of these classes had reading follow-ups, 3 of the classes had assignment follow-ups, and 11 of the classes had project follow-ups. This equates to only 64% having follow-up greater than a reading. This lack of follow-up is also concerning given that out of all of the classes, only three classes had an international social work keyword present at the reading, assignment, and project levels.

When looking at Table 3, we can see that cultural competency is the most frequently used cultural diversity framework across all three syllabi categories. When cultural competency is interpreted directly as working to be literally competent in a culture, it quickly can become harmful and hinder international social work practice as one cannot become completely competent in a culture outside of one’s own (Nadan, 2017). As the debate around the use of cultural competency has unfolded, it has come to integrate a definition that moves away from its direct interpretation and has incorporated concepts such as cultural humility (Greene-Moton & Minkler, 2020). This advancement can be seen in the NASW Code of Ethics in Competency 1.05-Cultural Competence, Point C, “Social workers should demonstrate awareness and cultural humility by engaging in critical self-reflection…” (NASW, 2021, 1.05 Cultural Competence section). This change was made in the 2021 amendments to the code of ethics, which changed Competency 1.05 from “Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity” to “Cultural Competency” (Murray, Andrea, n.d.). A potential point of concern for international social work education is the uncertainty around what interpretation of cultural competency is being taught in classes.
When looking at the syllabi, projects were reviewed for examples of effective international social work learning experiences. Projects were deemed effective based on how they aligned with principles of existing international social work education models. These models will be further explored in the Discussion. One project that was effective, required students to select a country outside of the United States and research a social issue of that population. It also included (a) a comprehensive analysis of the country and the population, (b) a discussion of the issue and how culture interacts with it, and (c) a holistic review of national and international responses to the issue as well as social/health services available. Students then must synthesize this information to develop a possible intervention. This project takes a culturally sensitive look at an issue in another country from both a global and localized perspective, reflecting the tenets of international social work education models shown in the Discussion.

Another project that provides good preparation for international practice required students to prepare a presentation on social work in the United States and then exchanged this with social work students in another country who would share social work practice in their country. After the presentation, they have the opportunity for small group discussions with the students from the other country. Engaging in intercultural dialogue on social work is an excellent way for students to be exposed to practice conditions in other countries. Having open-ended discussions in small groups is also an incredibly effective method for learning and self-discovery (Pollock et al., 2011).

Discussion

International social work is growing in importance as globalization increases and with human rights issues abroad (Estes, 2010). If the goal of social work education is to prepare students for competent social work practice in all domains of the field, then international
social work should have a strong presence here. While there is some presence of international social work in the syllabi submitted, what is present is not consistent in providing exercises across multiple contexts. While this may be more challenging for the instructor given time constraints, it is beneficial for ensuring the proper development of competence in international social work. Exploring subjects across multiple contexts allows professors to better monitor class comprehension and give students more varied opportunities for connecting with course material (Lipnevich et al., 2021). If an instructor claims in a syllabus objective that students will develop skills necessary to practice international skills competently, but does not thoroughly follow up on it, is the skill being fully developed?

**Limitations**

One limitation that is present in this study is that class content analysis is limited to what can be found in a syllabus. Specific details pertaining to class discussions and presentations are not always represented here, and class schedules are prone to adjustments due to uncontrollable factors such as inclement weather, illness, or technical difficulties.

The other main limitation of this study is that given the qualitative nature of the study as well as the sample size of the syllabi, an inference cannot be formed about the data collected. As a result, all of the points discussed in this research paper cannot be used as a representation of the entire state of social work education. This paper outlines methods that can be used to check a social work program for an effective international social work presence.

**Recommendations**

While there is not much peer-reviewed literature on international social work education models for the classroom setting, the few that do exist have multiple overlapping points. When looking at two models proposed by Davis et al. (2019) and Wehbi (2008), both
recognize the importance of taking culture into consideration. They also promote looking at issues in a country with the strengths available in the country and viewing it as a problem for all countries to work on together. Wehbi’s model for international social work education is composed of four elements: “the importance of context; power across nations; power within nations; and locating sites of resistance and alliances”. These principles help to check power relationships between people, cultures, and countries. This model mainly focuses on teaching the principles behind effective and ethical international social work practice. The author highly recommends this model for the use of designing class content around international social work practice.

The model by Davis et al. (2019), proposed the use of a global classroom for the teaching of international social work. The global classroom in their model used an online learning system to host online class material and assignments for students from multiple different countries. Students had to engage in discussion forums with international students on various social issues as well as international social work education itself. This model enhances the education experience as it increases cultural diversity in the classroom and allows for sharing of personal and cultural perspectives among students. It has been found that when students interact with students from different cultures, they develop significantly higher levels of intercultural competency (Soria & Troisi, 2014, as cited in Davis et al., 2019). While this model is more challenging to integrate than Wehbi’s model, it provides a unique learning experience that allows students to learn about culture and international practice from their peers as opposed to a textbook.

In the future, more research should be conducted on international social work education’s presence in the classroom in order to ensure that it is consistently represented and aligns with concepts native to international social work practice. Through the utilization of
the models discussed above, programs can provide more competent education. This can be especially important in preventing social workers from accidentally contributing to social inequities through improper international social work practice (Wehbi, 2008). The Code of Ethics further supports this in Competency 6.04-Social and Political Action, Point C:

Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people. (NASW, 2021, 6.04 Social and Political Action section)

As the world becomes more global, we must ensure that social work students are prepared to competently engage it.
References


