Social Work In Vietnam: Re-Birth and Developing Profession

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After many decades of war and struggle, professional Social Work in Vietnam was strongly influenced by foreign models and political forces. Prior to 1945, Vietnam was dominated by France, so social work in Vietnam had taken the form of a charity model that was most common in western countries at the time. It was basically the domain of religious institutions (Kelly, 2003). During this time, social work was not for Vietnamese people generally, but served the French clientele. The period from 1945 to 1954 was the time of the nine year resistance war against France. At that time, “professional social work was introduced with, on one hand, the creation of a government directorate for social welfare.

From 1954 until 1975, Vietnam was divided into two parts, the North and South. North Vietnam was governed under the socialist regime and did not develop social welfare programs. While in South Vietnam, social work was used to serve the war. Nguyen writes, “although social welfare and social work developed rapidly during this period of the war, they were regarded as tools of the invading forces. They were not seen as serving the poor at the grassroots level” (2002, p. 87).

After the 1975 reunification of the north and south, the entire country was governed by central socialist government. Services provided by the former southern government and non-profit organizations ceased or were taken over by the new government located in Hanoi. These programs and services include institutional care programs for persons with disabilities and mental health.

By the mid-1980s, the country was trapped in a period of economic stagnation and severe poverty because of inappropriate socio-economic management. In response, at the Sixth National Congress in 1986, the Communist Party of Vietnam launched the Renovation program, known as “Doi Moi”. This reform was aimed at re-orienting the Vietnamese economy to a “socialist-oriented market economy under the State management” (Resolution of the Six Congress of Vietnam Communist Party in 1986). By changing the country's economic mechanism, pursuing an open-door policy and engaging the country in proactive international economic integration, the Doi Moi process has opened up a new space of very promising development for the entire Vietnamese people (National Development Report, 2001). However, the new economic reform has been attributed with a dramatic shift not only in the economy, but more notably in the culture of Vietnam. It has been noted by the government to affect negatively all aspects of Vietnamese life, including family relations and traditional values, potentially leading to an increase in “social evils” (Wagstaff and Nguyen N. 2002). Nguyen describes, “Vietnam is confronted with the whole range of problems connected with modernization, and they are developing faster than expected (Nguyen, 2002, p. 88). These problems include rural and urban poverty, rural-urban migration leading to problems of street children, women’s exploitation of women in prostitution and trafficking nationally and internationally, drug abuse, HIV/AIDS and a general family breakdown, child neglect and abuse (Nguyen, 2002).

In this situation, social workers are clearly needed. Vietnam needs social workers who are trained in scientific social theories and have sufficient practice. At the time, there
were only 15 teachers with professional social work education and most of them were in the south of Vietnam. In the fall 2002, the Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina, was asked to consider the application of mature students who were active professionals in human service education and child protection/welfare. Nine students have graduated with a Master of Social Work from the University of Regina and 2 from the University of the Philippines. Most of them are working for the development of social work profession.

What is not understood is how does a western concept of social work fit into a Vietnamese social/political system based on very different values and worldviews. How do these Vietnamese graduates transform their professional education into a profession that fits their homeland? Field education may be the pathway to answering these questions.

**Competing and Conflicting Cultures in Social Work**

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<th>Vietnam</th>
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<td>• Socialist (Communist) Central Government</td>
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<td>• Rural and young population</td>
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<td>• Family and communitarian values</td>
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<td>• Education by memory and rote learning</td>
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<td>• Obedience to authority</td>
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<td>• Social problems caused by non-conformity</td>
<td>• Social problems caused by social isolation and structures</td>
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<td>• Early social work influenced by French psycho-analytic models</td>
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In every profession the practitioner faces the task of combining theory and skill. In common with other professions, especially those works directly with people such as teaching, medicine, nursing, and other health professions, social workers learn to integrate theory and skill in practice by undertaking practice in a controlled and supervised setting. This process may be referred to by different terminology and the terms may be used interchangeably: (field) practicum, stage, internship, field education, field practice, field placement, field course. “Social work education around the world
places a great emphasis on the placement of students in the field of practice as part of their professional studies. This element of professional training in social work is considered by many people to be central to the process by which students become qualified practitioners” (IASSW/IFSW, 2004).

Field Education is defined as “A part of the social work student’s formal educational requirement, consisting of ongoing work in a community social agency. The student receives close supervision by agency personnel and has the opportunity to integrate, use, and apply classroom content to practical experiences (Barker, 2003). Hence, Field Education is an experiential form of teaching and learning that takes place in a social service setting and gives the student an educational experience in direct social work practice. The objectives of field education are the development of practice competence and the preparation of a professionally reflective, self-evaluating, knowledgeable and developing social worker. Field practice education provides students the experiential opportunity to integrate theory, knowledge, values and skills.

In reality, practice is a set of actions and behaviours by the social worker. Clients are not directly affected by theory; rather, they are influenced by what the worker actually does – by the specific actions taken by the social worker (Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi, 2000). So we can see that field education is not only work experience, but it also provides the student with the experience of doing social work. Additionally, the student is expected to use this experience consciously to learn in a systematic way. Participation in this process includes student, teacher, faculty of the university where the student is studying, and field instructor (supervisor from agency).

In countries where social work is in an early stage of development role of field instructor will need to be undertaken by practitioners who are not formally qualified in social work, but who are informed about it and have a positive attitude to the growth of the profession.

In Canada, the field education in the form of practica plays a central role in the student’s education. It is normal to see up to a third of the credit hours devoted to field education. At this time MOLISA only requires 9 units of social work (6 units) and community development (3 units) of practice. The students do not spend a lot of time in practice and they move from agency to agency. For example, a student might receive some experience in individual practice in one agency for only 2 weeks, then move to another agency to gain experience in group work. So the students rotated through the agencies and receive specific practice in each. Most Canadian practica, the student receives a generalist practice in one single agency.

However, programs such as the University of Labour and Social Affairs (Hanoi) have some serious limitations. The social work department does not have many social work instructors and each instructor manages large classes of 45-50 students. It is difficult for the instructor to monitor the students and follow their progress. In Canada, faculty depend heavily on field instructors and because of the lack of qualified social workers in the field that linkage is not present in Vietnam.
The shortage of suitable practica is a problem in Canada but is even more acute in Vietnam. There are few quality placements and sometimes students feel the placement is preparing them for child care or custodial care and not social work. One student asked, “Are we trained to work with children after school?” With so few cases, some students have to share a client and this can cause additional stress for both the client and the students.

The development of social work profession in Vietnam in general and the development of social work education in Vietnam in particular, are facing many challenges. The social work curriculum in Vietnam is following the international standards of best practice as defined by the “Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training” (IASSW/IFSW, 2004). However, the standards are based on a western concept of social work, the challenge is to find culturally sensitive approaches from theory to practice, and practice to theory suitable to Vietnam context and culture. The indigenization of social work in Vietnam is a process and will not happen overnight. The challenge is there and Vietnamese social work leaders and educators are taking it on. This doctoral research will examine these cultural and political differences and identify barriers and issues facing the Vietnamese social work academic community. Through course work and the preparation of the comprehensive examinations, the student will build the theoretical and research framework to complete the dissertation. The methods will be developed but it is expected that the student will need to complete some historical research on social work education and interview social work educators throughout Vietnam to develop a culturally sensitive approach to field education.

References

Wagstaff and Nguyen N. 2002