School Social Work in Vietnam:

Development and Capacity Building through International Collaboration

International exchanges in social work have been an important part of the profession since the early 1900's (Healy & Link, 2012). Goals for these exchanges have included the development of practice in one's own country and intellectual exchanges focused on practice, theory, and research. The internationalization of social work is now well established with several international social work organizations such as the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD) for example. Every two to three years, an international conference for school social work provides opportunities for global and regional exchanges. In the United States (U.S.), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has emphasized the importance of human rights and global interconnectedness (CSWE, 2015), and the IFSW and IASSW (2014) have jointly developed ethical standards that can apply in a universal context. Thus, this cross-border exchange is one such effort to support the development of school social work in Vietnam.

The Faculty of Social Work at Hanoi National University of Education was tasked with the development of the school social work specialization in collaboration with the local UNICEF office, as this specialization was a good fit with a university already focused on teacher training. Thus, the faculty were engaged in training, developing materials, and research focused on schools and youth. Dr. Villarreal Sosa met Ms. Ha and Dr. Thuong at an international social work conference hosted in Beijing, China in 2018, where the seeds for this collaboration were planted. At this conference, Dr. Villarreal Sosa, Ms. Ha, and Dr. Thuong made preliminary plans for a potential exchange using the Fulbright Specialist Grant, and in the future, the J-1 scholar[1] funds available at Dominican University. The goal of this work was to support the continued development of school social work in Vietnam,

---

[1] A J-1 Scholar is a visiting researcher, professor, or specialist from a country outside of the United States who has been approved to enter the United States for a specific purpose and for a limited amount of time. The program is administered by the U.S. Department of State (DOS) for the express purpose of promoting international educational exchange of expertise and stimulating collaborative teaching and research efforts. Exchange is truly at the core of the program and based on this philosophy and directive. Dominican University reserves funds to host approximately six scholars per year.

including training those already working in counseling centers, teachers tasked with supporting and mentoring students, social work students in training, and faculty in schools of social work.

Brief History of Social Work in Vietnam

Vietnamese social work practice started during the French colonial period in the late 1800's when Christian missionaries established care institutions such as orphanages and homes for the aged and disabled[2] (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). The School for the Blind in Saigon and the School for the Deaf and Dumb in Lai Thieu are two examples of these social care institutions (Ha & Trang, 2015). After the August Revolution in 1945, the Vietnamese government developed a wide range of policies and strategies to build commune-based orphan social care services and other support for the disabled, elderly and poor (Tran, 2015). A wide range of social organizations covering youth, women, trade unions, the Red Cross, churches, pagoda[3] and charity organizations also delivered various activities in support of vulnerable people and groups. During the period from 1954 to 1976, when Vietnam was divided into the North and South, two different approaches to social welfare evolved (Nguyen, 2002). The socialist system emphasized mutual care within families and communities in the North, and in the South, social work was professionalizing, following the influence of the French and American models (Hugman, et al., 2009). After national reunification in 1975, social work training programs were taken over by the new government in the South, and the Northern approach to social work prevailed (Hugman et al., 2009). In 2010, the government's Decision 32/2010/QD-TTG and the accompanying National Plan 32[4] officially recognized social work and supported the continued development of the profession (Government of Vietnam, 2010).

School Social Work in Vietnam

The development of school social work in Vietnam is occurring in a context where the Vietnam government has made education a national priority and significant progress

---

[2] The French colonial period began in 1887 and lasted until 1954, with a break between 1941 and 1945 when the Japanese took ever during WWII.

[3] A pagoda is a tiered tower with multiple eaves common to Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, and refers specially to a Hindu or Buddhist temple. In Vietnam pagodas are the base for Buddhist activity and the place where monks or nuns gather and teach Buddhism.

[4] Decision 32 legally recognized social work as a profession and approved the project for developing social work including raising awareness about the profession, developing a contingent of social workers, elaborating the codes, titles, and standards of the profession, and developing pilot centers for providing social work services. The National Plan 32 was a plan to develop professional social work (MOLISA & UNICEF, 2014).

within that sector (Trines, 2017). The school environment plays an important role in the life of Vietnamese children due to both the emphasis on education and the many hours they spend in school per week. Vietnamese children spend up to 10 hours a day in school at the primary level and high school students spend five hours a day in official classes and about four hours a day in extra classes. While most children become productive citizens and achieve academically, many others have had negative experiences affecting their future. Vietnam, like other school systems in the world, must contend with bullying, physical violence, truancy, self-harm, antisocial behaviors, and other mental health issues (ODI & UNICEF, 2018). Furthermore, other challenges for schools include serving areas with high rates of poverty, difficulties in family relationships and parenting, child abuse and neglect, the need to bridge home-school relationships, and supporting children with disabilities (ODI & UNICEF, 2018). Thus, school social work is a necessary field and specialized area of practice that can effectively address these issues.

However, school social work is not yet fully developed in Vietnam and is not largely present in the schools. As mentioned earlier, UNICEF is an important partner and invested in the development of school social work. Furthermore, UNICEF understands the impact that school social work can have for addressing many of the challenges experienced by the children in Vietnam (MOLISA & UNICEF, 2014). Currently, schools employ teachers who are in the role of homeroom teacher and act as liaisons between the school and family and are often in the role of supporting students. These teachers have a challenging position due to the conflict in managing dual roles (teacher and counselor), do not have the training to feel confident to address many of the student issues that emerge, and are still expected to maintain their full load of teaching. Thus, it is important that part of this work includes both advocacy for some release of their time to fulfill the "school social work" role, and to provide professional development for skill enhancement, support, and confidence to address the complexity of student needs. School social work services are also provided through internships and pilot programs within private schools. In the private school settings, there are principals open to exploring what a school social work role would look like in their schools and are willing to be leaders in piloting this work. These principals and schools are important allies in the development of the profession. Finally, some schools have implemented "school counseling centers" that offer support with issues that impact student learning and life goals. The counseling centers serve as a place for students to receive mental health support and have provided one avenue for introducing school social work services.

The Fulbright Specialist Project

The Fulbright Specialist Program is under the U.S. Department of State programs for international exchanges. The Specialist Program is short term, funding a two to six weeks project-based exchange among academics or seasoned professionals. This project focused on the development of school social work and was hosted by the Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE). HNUE was established in 1951 and offers a full range of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. HNUE aspires to be the leader in educational research in Vietnam and in the region. HNUE has 23 schools or departments (referred to as "faculties" in Vietnam), including the Faculty of Social Work (FSW). The mission of the FSW is to train and educate social workers, conduct applied research, and engage in international social work collaborations, including receiving international students for field placements.

As a partner institution, Dominican University is a private Catholic university in the Chicago suburbs founded in 1901. The School of Social Work (SSW) was added to the university in 2001 and has had a tradition of being a globally focused, family centered program with collaborations in numerous countries such as Mexico, Ireland, India, Ecuador, Azerbaijan, Kenya, Ireland, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Germany, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and others. Dominican's SSW has not only fostered relationships with the aforementioned countries for field placements, but also developed relationships with two of these countries and offered short term study abroad programs. The SSW seeks to develop collaborations in a sustainable way with multiple pillars that enhance those collaborations such as faculty to faculty research collaborations, connections with local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), student exchanges, and opportunities for curriculum development and exchange. All students, even those in local and domestic placements are exposed to a globally focused curriculum. This focus is consistent with definitions of international social work that involve internationally related domestic practice, working with service users who have crossed borders such as refugees and migrants, and working with local and international organizations (Healy, 2008). Thus, the SSW is intentional about the type of cross border exchanges engaged for faculty and student exchanges, as well as short term study abroad courses. Placements are experiences are selected and developed that center human rights and marginalized populations within the host society. The program hopes to develop social workers that practice from a human rights and cultural humility perspective, and model this approach through the programming and faculty exchanges. Cultural humility is a perspective that goes beyond cultural competency in that it requires critical self-reflection

and institutional accountability in addressing power imbalances (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998) and is a part of our curriculum and training.

Similar to other countries where social work is relatively new, many faculty members or lecturers in departments of social work in Vietnam do not have graduate level training in social work, rather they have education in fields such as sociology, history, psychology, physics, etc. Therefore, projects such as these provide opportunities for specialized training in social work, and the development of a professional identity as social workers. The specific goals of this project were to teach social work courses, support curriculum development, collaborate with relevant government and NGO institutions, and provide coaching and capacity building to those already in the field. The project objectives included the following:

1. To promote the social work profession in Vietnam particularly in the area of social work in education (i.e. school social work).
2. To improve the quality of social work education, training, and social work services in Vietnam.
3. To build the capacity of social work faculty and social workers in Vietnam.
4. To develop a sustainable and long-term institutional relationship that is mutually beneficial.

Project Impact

Throughout the six weeks project period, numerous training and professional development opportunities were offered for faculty across universities, social work practitioners in the field, students, and others in related fields. In addition, as part of the project work, the first week was spent observing and participating in cross border exchanges with a short-term study abroad program from Australia, hosted by HNUE. Furthermore, a foundation was established for developing opportunities for Dominican students to participate in international field placements hosted by HNUE, and plans were made for HNUE faculty to visit Dominican university as a J-1 scholar, which were delayed at this time due to limitations of travel during the pandemic. However, regular conversations and planning have continued between faculty at both institutions.

Throughout the project time period in Vietnam, Dr. Villarreal Sosa was able to advise and support this exchange program, through providing training on cross cultural social work, participating in evaluation of students, site visits, and meetings with Australian and HNUE faculty. In addition, these students were in school social work placements. Dr. Villarreal Sosa and HNUE faculty collaborated on advising students in

their practice and coaching school administration and teachers involved in supervision. Dr. Villarreal Sosa also visited some classrooms, holding discussion with middle school students about their concerns and what they had learned from the social emotional lessons provided by the school social work interns. This work for the interns was challenging as many were the first social workers placed in their settings. Thus, the technical support offered was valuable in supporting these students in introducing school social work and school-based interventions.

The school social work training provided opportunities for a greater understanding among faculty and practitioners of the role of the school social worker, including psychosocial assessment, needs assessment, addressing issues such as bullying and mental health challenges such as suicidality, multi-tiered systems of support, and the evidence-based process. Some of the most pressing issues that emerged during the Fulbright project included 1) School Climate, 2) Equity and Inclusion, and 3) Mental Health Needs.

The importance of school climate and environmental factors was an issue for both students and teachers. Tier 1 or universal interventions are needed in order to address these issues in preventative ways, including teacher training around issues such as inclusion and mental health. Second, there is a need to continue to explore issues of equity and differences in ethnic groups and expanding ideas about what inclusive education means. There were few inclusive schools or classrooms for children with disabilities, and some of those that did "include" children with disabilities needed additional support with developing appropriate accommodations beyond simply having them present in the classroom without full participation in classroom activities. Furthermore, in Vietnam, there are 54 different ethnic groups, with the Kinh accounting for the majority (86%), while the remaining ethnic groups accounted for the other 14% of the population. Significant disparities exist between the Kinh and non-Kinh populations such as the percentage of no schooling of 3% compared to 23% respectively and a dropout rate for the non-Kinh (30%) that is nearly double that for the Kinh (16%) (World Bank, 2009).

Finally, there are serious and unrecognized mental health concerns among the children in Vietnam. The prevalence of significant mental health problems among Vietnamese children aged 6–16 years is around 13% (Weiss et al., 2014). In addition, a survey in 2004-2005 found that 9.2% had thought seriously about suicide in the previous 12 months (Phuong et al., 2013). These mental health concerns exist, but there are few school and community resources to address them. School social work can provide vital services in counseling centers in schools, as well as provide important linkages to community resources when available. The concept of school mental health

with a focus on prevention and universal intervention was also introduced during this project. In addition, school social workers can provide professional development to teachers to support them in including students with mental health challenges in the classroom and reducing stigma.

After Dr. Villarreal Sosa provided her observations, we identified a project goal to provide a holistic lens and understanding of the model of school social work practice. It was important that practitioners and faculty at schools of social work understood the valuable and diverse role and skill set that school social workers can bring to a school. For example, something as simple as individual student assessment and addressing climate issues in order to prevent bullying were key discussions throughout the training. Many only thought of the role of the school social worker as providing counseling, but not the other universal interventions. Valuable discussions were also had about the SSWAA model for school social work practice (Frey et al, 2013), and how it could be utilized and adapted for a Vietnamese context. Future research in the country could apply the model in order to evaluate how well suited it is for the Vietnamese context and make recommendations for changes. A common refrain during the project and training was "School social work is *more* than counseling centers" as the main take-a-away. The school social work role in staffing counseling centers is important and those professionals benefitted from the training, however, it was important for individuals involved in school social work practice or training to understand the holistic and multi-systemic nature of school social work.

Linking with Child Welfare

During the project period, Dr. Villarreal Sosa also had the opportunity to participate in collaboration with the development of a child protection infrastructure sponsored by UNICEF. There are four systems that are named in the model that would address child protection: 1) government ministries, 2) schools, 3) communities, and 4) health services. In these conversations, it was important to conceptualize the role of school social work in the child protection framework for both prevention and intervention. These four systems must work in partnership with each other for a child protection system to be effective. In developing the child protection system, it was important to discuss the role of schools in intervention and prevention as well as levels of training to provide certain interventions or responses should a case of child protection emerge. For example, a person at Level 1 training, such as all teachers, would know what to do to report a case if they suspected child abuse. Then at a level 2a training, this person would have the skills to be more involved in a case that was

low to medium risk. Finally, a level 2b trained person would then be responsible for the case and have the skills to work with a medium to high risk case. This level 2b person would be a university-trained social worker.

At a meeting with the Ministry of Education and Training, the question was asked, "Should there be a 2b role in a school such as a social worker?" This is an important question and one way for those promoting social work services in the schools to connect school social work training to other specializations and needs. While the tentative or negative response had much to do with limited resources and funding creating barriers to such a position, merging the goals of child protection and school social work, would benefit both specializations and expand the ways in which children's needs are met. This should be a continued conversation involving stakeholders in school social work as well as child protection. Other countries could learn from this exchange and consider how the goals of increasing access to social workers in the schools could be combined with the goal to enhance child protection, particularly in countries where both of these systems are in development.

Future Directions

Recognizing the importance of school social work and training, the Ministry of Education and Training introduced a plan for developing social work in education from 2016 to 2020. This plan aimed to build and develop social work services in the schools, raising awareness among leaders, administrators, teachers and staff in schools about school social work school services, and improving the quality of training programs in Vietnam. Certainly, the work of this collaboration and exchange supported these goals. However, it was clear that this work needs to continue to be supported, as school social work is still not widely implemented nor understood. Circular No. 33/2018/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2018) presents school social work services in Vietnam as:

1. Assessing risks inside and outside the educational institution that negatively affect students especially disadvantaged students, students with special circumstances, physical and sexual abuse in school, bullying, school violence, drop out of school, and delinquency.
2. Organizing activities to prevent and limit the risk of students falling into special circumstances, being abused, being bullied, drop out of school and delinquency.
3. Implementing the process of intervention and assistance to students with special circumstances, physical and sexual abuse in school, bullying, school violence, drop

out of school, and delinquency.

4. Collaborating with families, local authorities and social service providers in the community to carry out interventions and assistance for learners who need intervention, emergency assistance or education, and support.

5. Organizing activities to support development and community integration for students after the intervention or learners, teachers and parents wishing to support community development and integration.

However, on the ground, the understanding of school social work continues to be rather narrow or limited.

The work that HNUE is doing in promoting school social work, conducting research on its effectiveness, and developing important partnerships in the field with key school leaders is essential to ensuring that school social work services are understood as they are listed above. Furthermore, opportunities for international collaboration enhance this work by providing continued professional development focused on addressing common challenges children face across the globe as well as providing support for the development of indigenous or local interventions best suited for the local context. Collaboration also supports the publication of textbooks and other resources in the field of school social work.

In this particular Fulbright project, there was attention to the various principles proposed by Butterfield & Cohen (2017) which include attention to local culture, focusing on university collaborations, understanding local government entities, intentionality about the partnership process, building sustainability, and mutual benefit to both partners. Although Vietnam is still facing challenges in establishing school social work, significant steps have been taken. As a still evolving specialization, school social work would benefit from continued international collaborations and building opportunities for intellectual and professional exchanges. It is the hope that resources such as the International Journal for School Social Work can continue to provide support for these exchanges in ways that are accessible and inclusive. This project can serve as a model for future collaborations and exchanges in the process of developing sustainable global partnerships and advancing school social work.

References

Butterfield, A. K., & Cohen, C. S. (2017). Practicing as a social work educator in international collaboration. In A.K Butterfield & C.S. Cohen (Eds.). *Practicing as a Social*

Work Educator in International Collaboration. (pps. 1-10). Council on Social Work Education.

Council on Social Work Education (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards for baccalaureate and master's social work programs.* Commision on Accreditation and Commision on Educational Policy. Retrieved from: [Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards](#)

Healy, L. M., & Link, R. J. (2012). Introduction. In L. M. Healy & R. J. Link (Eds.). *Handbook of International Social Work: Human Rights, Development, and the Global Profession*. (pps. 3-6). Oxford University Press.

Frey, A.J., Alvarez, M.E., Dupper, D.R., Sabatino, C.A., Lindsey, B.C., Raines, J.C., Streeck, F., McInerney, A., Norris, M.A. (2013). *School Social Work Practice Model. School Social Work Association of America.* [https://aab82939-3e7b-497d-8f30-a85373757e29.filesusr.com/ugd/486e55_47e9e7e084a8 4e5cbd7287e681f91961.pdf](https://aab82939-3e7b-497d-8f30-a85373757e29.filesusr.com/ugd/486e55_47e9e7e084a84e5cbd7287e681f91961.pdf)

Government of Vietnam (2010), Decision No 32/2010/QĐ-TTg: *Decision on the approval of the social work profession development project 2010–2020*, Government of Vietnam, Hanoi.

Ha, N. T. T., & Trang, N. T. N. (2015). The development of professional social work practice in Central Highland in Vietnam: The gap between policy aims and actual implementation. *International Journal of Developing Societies*, *4*(3), 95–107. https://doi.org/10.11634/216817831504693

Healy, L.M. (2008). *International social work: Professional action in an interdependent world*. Oxford University Press.

Hugman, R., Durst, D., Loan, L. H., Lan, N. T. T. & Hong, N.T. (2009) 'Developing social work in Vietnam: issues in professional education', *Social Work Education*, *28*(2), 177–189.

International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work (2014). *Global definition of social work*. Retrieved from:

https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/

Tran, K. (2015). Social work education in Vietnam: Trajectory, challenges and directions. In *International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice* (Vol. 3). https://doi.org/10.13189/ijrh.2015.030403

Trines, S. (2017). Education in Vietnam. World Education News and Reviews. https://wenr.wes.org/2017/11/education-in-vietnam

Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs [MOLISA], & UNICEF, (2014). *Review of the implementation of decision 32/2010/QD-TTg concerning national plan 32 to develop professional social work: Report of the progress review conducted by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs with UNICEF Vietnam.* https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/sites/unicef.org.vietnam/files/2018-09/TA%20Ra%20soat%20tien%20do%20lao%20dong.pdf

Ministry of Education and Training [MOET] (2018), Circular No 33/2018/TT-BGDDT *Guiding social work activities in schools,* dated December 26, 2018.

Nguyen, O. T. (2002). Historical development and characteristics of social work in today's Vietnam. *International Journal of Social Welfare,* 11, 84–91. doi:10.1111/1468-2397.00199

Nguyen, H. & Nguyen, T. T. (2017). Optimistic but confused: Perceptions about the mission and core values of social work in Vietnam by Vietnam policy-makers, social work faculty and practitioners. Asian Social Work & Policy Review, 11(1), 53-65. https://doi-org.dom.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/aswp.12113

Overseas Development Institute [ODI] & UNICEF. (2018). *Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing among children and young people in selected provinces and cities in Viet Nam.* https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/sites/unicef.org.vietnam/files/2018-07/Study%20on%20Mental%20Health-Full%20Report_ENG.pdf

Phuong, T. B., Huong, N. T., Tien, T. Q., Chi, H. K., & Dunne, M. P. (2013). Factors associated with health risk

behavior among school children in urban Vietnam. *Global Health Action*, *6*(June), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v6i0.18876

Tervalon, M., & Murray-Garcı´a, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, 9*, 117–125.

Weiss, B., Dang, M., Lam, T., Nguyen, M. C., Nguyen, T. H. T., & Pollack, A. (2014). A nationally representative epidemiological and risk factor assessment of child mental health in Vietnam. *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation*, *3*(3), 139–153. https://doi.org/10.1037/ipp0000016

World Bank. (2009). *Country Social Analysis Ethnicity and Development in Vietnam Summary report.* The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/3317414681 24474580/pdf/499760ESW0Whit1C10VietnamSummar y1LR.pdf