

Opinion:

Issues facing Social Work Education in the Canadian Arctic

**Nuelle Novik, M.S.W. Ph.D. R.S.W.
University of Regina, Canada**

Social work education around the globe continues to change and evolve. Social workers now enjoy opportunities for increased international engagement, and we practice in environments that are heavily influenced by globalization – regardless of our geographic locations. Technological innovations have opened up the world and have created unprecedented opportunities for both distance education and international collaboration. Those interested in social work education can now pursue opportunities to complete a degree in social work, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, without ever having to disrupt the routine of their lives. Advancements in distance education enable students to enrol in social work programs thousands of miles away from their home communities, and these same students never have to set foot in a university. By and large, as practicing social workers, we welcome such accessibility and embrace the globalization of our value base. However, it is important to examine the current environment of social work education in northern Canada within this particular context.

Those nations and regions that are considered to be *developed* according to international definitions embrace social work values that tend to focus upon individualism, self-realization, objectivity, issues related to oppression, and democracy. Core social work values in settings considered to be *developing*, or more traditional in nature, emphasize the importance of community, spirituality, traditional beliefs, and social justice. The communities in Canada's three northern territories are considered to be more traditional, with the majority of the population in that area of the country identifying as First Nations, Aboriginal, Metis or Inuit. Social work educational programming that does not recognize these differences in value base may not provide the best fit for northerners. However, some form of social work education has been offered in all three of the northern territories – Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut – since the early 1980s. Each of these programs have evolved to varying degrees, building upon some version of a two year diploma program offered on-site by southern-trained social work educators. As has been the case for a number of years, a BSW degree program, brokered through the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, continues to be offered at Yukon College in Whitehorse, Yukon. This unique program has been very successful in providing local northerners with the opportunity to pursue a social work degree and is discussed in greater detail in the following essay.

While there remains recognition that social work education is critically important to the economic and social development of Canada's north, the challenges associated with providing access to social work education in this setting are numerous. For the purpose of this discussion, two particular challenges will be highlighted.

Historically, in northern Canada, there has been an emphasis on providing short-term workshop-focused training opportunities in the area of human services. As a result, there are those who have sought out these short-term training opportunities instead of committing to the completion of diploma or degree programs. In many ways, this has served to dilute the social work profession in some regions of the north and has slowed the development of a skilled and trained local workforce of northern-born, and northern-residing, social work practitioners.

A second challenge to the provision of social work education in northern Canada is related to the compatibility of southern urban-based social work programs with more traditional northern communities. A number of Canadian social work colleagues have written about a localization movement in the practice of social work – especially in northern and remote regions of the country. This emphasis on localization recognizes the importance of local values, and encourages the creation of a specific social work knowledge base that is more congruent with needs of specific communities – see Bodor and Melnyk-Poliakowski's article. It goes without saying that this knowledge base must be inclusive of culture. Social work educational programs that are based outside of the north, but are offered in the north via distance technology, do not emphasize localization, and do not incorporate a social work value base that is consistent with local values.

Research on the use of technology in social work education remains underdeveloped. However, most social work programs are rushing to include a variety of distance education opportunities to students. In many ways, and in many settings, technology and other options for distance learning are very appropriate and necessary to ensure the accessibility of quality social work educational programs. However, in northern Canada, it is essential that the incorporation of such technologies in social work education proceed respectfully and cautiously. Distance courses can pose special challenges because this is a medium that can still be very difficult for northern students to understand. Teleconferencing, videoconferencing and internet courses also pose challenges in terms of the learning styles and the learning history of northern students. In many ways, new technologies and mediums are too personally removed for these students who come from a value base that encourages connections to family and community. In addition, there are still many northern communities where the necessary technologies for distance learning are not available, or are only available on a limited basis.

Social work education in northern Canada, like social work education in the rest of the world, continues to evolve. It is critical to acknowledge, and build upon, the successes in social work educational programming in Canada's north. A value base that has traditionally emphasized the importance of connections to community and family requires the distinct maintenance of such connections within social work education. At this time, technologies in distance education have not developed to the point of replicating the kinds of connections that can be created through the use of face-to-face teaching models and approaches. Therefore, as social workers, we must ensure that our excitement in the creation of a global value base does not diminish the critical importance of recognizing and embracing a local social work value base in northern Canada.