

Cuba's Social Work Education Initiative

David Strug and Walter Teague

Cuba is a poor country of eleven million inhabitants. Yet it has trained 15,000 social workers in the last three years for work with at risk-children and adolescents, drug addicted youth, and other vulnerable groups, as the result of a recently introduced two-pronged social work education initiative (Pérez Montalvo, 2002).

Cuba's social work initiative began in 1998. Two social work training programs were established as a result of this initiative. One is an advanced, university-level social work education program for experienced social work practitioners (Barthelemy, 2004). The second is a one-year training program for young social work paraprofessionals at newly created schools of social work. Graduates of this program return to their communities of origin for work with at-risk individuals after they finish this training program.

Cuba's top political leadership supports these social work programs and considers that social work has an important role to play in addressing Cuba's social ills (Alvarez, 2003). This social work initiative was a response to emergent social problems in the country and must be understood in the context of a larger program of the Cuban government known as "The Battle of Ideas" (Barthelemy, 2004). The Battle of Ideas refers to the government's effort to strengthen Cuba economically, socially and ideologically through the introduction of a variety of educational and social programs, including schools for the intensive training of social workers. All of these programs have as their goal to improve the lives of individuals from the most marginalized sectors of Cuban society, who have experienced the consequences of growing social inequality and alienation resulting from economic problems in Cuba (Monreal, 2001; Rock Around the Blockade Newsletter, 2003).

Social work educators, policy makers and practitioners from other countries, including developing ones like Cuba, can learn much from one another

(Midgley, 1996). An exchange of information between the Cuban and U.S. social work communities is especially relevant at this time, given the possibility of improved relations and increased contact between Cuba and the US in the near future.

The University Social Work Program

The Ministry of Education established an undergraduate degree program (UP) for already practicing social workers within the Department of Sociology at the University of Havana in 1998. The UP was the first undergraduate university degree program in Cuba's history that offered specialized training in social work. A similar UP, modeled on the one at the University, was established two years later at the University of the Oriente in Santiago, Cuba.

Graduating UP students receive a licenciatura degree in sociology, with a specialization in social work. The licenciatura, which takes six years to complete, is roughly equivalent to a master's degree in the US, but is considered an undergraduate degree in Cuba. Most UP students are experienced social work technicians who practiced prior to entering this program. Every 21 days, UP students receive time off from their social work practitioner jobs to attend classes at the university and to study for exams.

The UP curriculum focuses on community organization and theory driven social work practice. Two introductory courses taken in the first year are Introduction to Sociology and Theory and Practice in Social Work. First-year students also take classes in philosophy, political economy, and the history of the Americas. Students discuss Marxist economics and its relevance to contemporary Cuban society. They study demography, sociological methods, and statistics in their second year. In years three-to-five, students take Social Work I (community intervention), Social Work II (intervention with groups, organizations, and institutions), and Social Work III (interventions with individuals and families), which is similar to casework in U.S. schools of social work. Students also study the history of social work, political sociology, anthropology, sociology and health, and sociology and the family. Much of the sixth year is devoted to writing a professional thesis.

Paraprofessional Social Work Schools for Youth

The first paraprofessional social work school for youth (SSW) was established in Cojimar, outside of Havana, by professors from academic departments of the University of Havana. The stated goal is to train 35,000 students to become community based social workers, which would represent one practitioner for approximately every 300 inhabitants in Cuba.

The first students to attend SSWs were young persons between the ages of 16-22. Students were selected for admission to the SSW by officials from the Union of Communist Youth (UJC) and by SSW administrators and faculty. They were chosen from among youth in the community who were not working, not attending school and at risk for not finishing their education.

These paraprofessional schools of social work offer students a concentrated, social work learning experience that combines classroom activities, independent study and, after the classroom study has ended, a month-long supervised fieldwork experience in the community. An important focus of the SSW training program is to teach students how to work with community leaders, family doctors, school officials and other key actors in their community.

The SSW curriculum is multidisciplinary and includes modules on Community Social Work and Community Psychology, Introduction to Law, Present Day Socialist Cuban Society, Sociology and Applied Social Work, and Social Communication. Law is included in the SSW curriculum because SSW faculty believes that it is important for students to understand how power is distributed in society and to know how the legal system operates at the local, national, and provincial levels (L. Pérez, personal communication, October 10, 2001).

SSW graduates are given the opportunity to study for their licenciatura on a part-time basis in any of eight university degree programs including, the UP, Social Communication, Psychology, and Law after they finish the SSW program. Unlike other university applicants, SSW graduates are not required to pass exams to gain entry to the university.

SSW graduates who return to work in their communities once they finish their SSW training are known as *emergentes*, because they address emergent social problems in the community such as, child malnutrition, school absenteeism, and the needs that the elderly have for economic and social assistance. Emergentes visit the homes of everyone in the communities in which they work and assess the need for support services of all household members. However, they pay special attention to the needs of children not in school, single mothers, and the elderly. They also participate along with thousands of Student Youth Brigade members in major health prevention projects throughout Cuba (Uriarte, 2002).

These *emergentes* give special attention to at-risk youth. They try to develop a nurturing and supportive relationship with adolescents, to win their confidence, and lend support to the young people who have dropped out of school and are not working. The goals are to help prevent delinquency, drug abuse and other problematic behaviors and hopefully assist the youth in

returning to school and being more connected to society (Anonymous SSW student, personal communication, April 22, 2002).

Besides the social work focus there are reportedly as many as 100 other emergentes programs throughout Cuba which are addressing not only the needs of youth, but like the famous Cuban literacy programs of 1959, aim at fundamental change and overall improvement of the quality of life for Cubans.

Relevance of Cuba's Program for Social Work in the US and Other Countries

Cuba's social work program may be of interest to social workers in the US and in other countries, including its curriculum, which integrates sociological and political theory into the social work practice curriculum. Also, social workers in other countries may wish to learn more about the SSW model of identifying young people who are not in school and not working, and of educating them to become active agents of social transformation in their communities of origin and agents of change in their own lives.

Cuba's program for training large numbers of paraprofessionals may be of interest to social workers in the US. Some members of the U.S. social work community question whether it will be possible to continue to provide social services at their current levels to at-risk individuals from underserved populations, given fiscal cutbacks at the national, state and local levels. The possibility of providing increased training and of selectively using paraprofessionals to provide social services has been suggested as one possible response to the effect that fiscal cutbacks are having on the delivery of services in the US (Gibelman, 2003; O'Neil, 2003). This is the case despite the emphasis on professionalism within U.S. social work.

Exchanging Information about Social Work with Cuba

It is necessary to learn more about Cuba's two-pronged social work initiative. Little is known internationally about social work education and practice in Cuba. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) should advocate for an exchange of Cuban and North American social work educators, practitioners and policy makers. The Cuban social work community has expressed interest in learning about U.S. social work theory and is in need of bibliographies, syllabi and other pedagogical materials that are commonly available in the US, but which are difficult to find in Cuba. Cuban social workers have stated that they have a great deal to learn from an exchange with social workers in the US, despite the ideological and political differences that separate the two countries (L. Urrutia Barroso, personal communication, September

26, 2003). An exchange between Cuban and U.S. workers is especially important at this time.

Bibliography

- Álvarez, M.E. (2003, Enero-Febrero). Trabajadores sociales, consagrados a la prevención. *Cuba Internacional*, 14-16.
- Barthelemy, S. (2004). El trabajo social: Misión transformadora. *Granma*. Retrieved January 24, 2004, from <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2004/01/24/nacional/articulo02.html>
- Gibelman, M. (2003, May). Running on empty. *Currents*, 47(7), pp. 1,8.
- Midgley, J. (1996). Towards a developmental model of social policy: Relevance of the Third World Experience. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 23(1), 59-74.
- Monreal, P. (2001). Cuba: the challenges of being global and socialist...at the same time. *Socialism and Democracy*, 15(1), 5-23.
- O'Neill, J.V. (2003, June). Services in Spanish unavailable to many. *NASW News*, 48(6), p. 4.
- Pérez Montalvo, L. (2002). Social work experience in Cuba. In *Social work development and practice in Cuba and the US*. Washington, DC: Cuban American Alliance Education Fund.
- Rock Around the Blockade (London). (2003, June). The battle of ideas and improving socialism. Retrieved February 18, 2003, from http://www.rat.org/uk/vc/vc_27_battle.html
- Uriarte, M. (2002). *Cuba: Social policy at the crossroads: Maintaining priorities, transforming practice*. Boston, MA: Oxfam America.

