

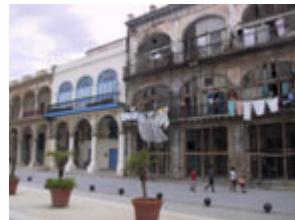
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New Directions in Cuban Social Work Education: What Can We Learn?

By David Strug, PhD, and Walter Teague, MSW

Social work students and teachers with Professor Lourdes Pérez Montalvo



A musical and dance troupe entertains both tourists and local children on weekends in the historic district, Habana Vieja. They are performing in the Plaza de Armas in front of the Museo de la Ciudad in the fine Baroque Palacio de los Capitanes Generales.

The neighborhood improvement project in the Plaza Vieja section of Havana, where most of the historic buildings have already been restored.

Protesters say they oppose U.S. charges that the Cuban pharmaceutical industry is a threat and support their country's social programs.*

Facing intractable social problems in the 1990s, Cuban leaders responded by creating new social work educational opportunities for both longer-term, comprehensive training at the graduate level as well as short-term, rapid schooling for youths known as emergentes—trained to respond to serious emergent social problems.

Why has Cuban President Fidel Castro become so interested in Cuban social work (Radio Havana Cuba, 2001)? Why did he address 500 young students at Cuba's new school of social work outside Havana? Why did Jimmy Carter also visit this same school during his well-publicized trip to Cuba in May 2002? Most Cubans know about their country's advances in social work. Why is it now receiving so much attention, both from government officials and from thousands of academics, students, and program directors? We spoke with Cuban social work educators and professionals in Havana to find answers to these questions.

A history of hardship

There are a number of reasons for the advancement of social work education in Cuba and for the overall attention the social work profession is now receiving. Major socioeconomic problems developed in Cuba in the 1990s that require new and comprehensive solutions. Today, Cuba is involved in a number of key programs to overcome these problems, just as in 1961 when

Cuba created a comprehensive and innovative campaign to eradicate illiteracy. New approaches to social work education and training are among these programs.

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The collapse of the former Soviet Union and its subsequent withdrawal of economic assistance to Cuba following the dissolution of the eastern bloc (1989 to 1991), the tightening of the U.S. embargo, and Cuba's increased participation in the global economy contributed to growing social and economic crises throughout the 1990s (Cole, 2001). Income disparity worsened in some sectors due to the influx of foreign capital, tourism, and remittances from families abroad. Poverty and unemployment grew, social and economic class differences deepened, and social alienation increased among unemployed and disaffected youth. Housing and roads deteriorated, and Cuban cities became increasingly overcrowded. “[Socioeconomic] disparities were further exacerbated by historical factors and social inequalities that linger in society despite long-term efforts to achieve equality and general social well-being,” according to Professor Lourdes Pérez Montalvo, a professor at the University of Havana (2002). Those Cubans most effected by the worsening economic conditions, such as those with disabilities, prisoners and ex-prisoners, pregnant teenagers and single mothers, senior citizens, children, and the increasing numbers of out-of-school and unemployed youths, became the priority for outreach and development of new social welfare projects (2002).

Cuba's postrevolutionary government did not initially recognize the need for a cadre of highly trained professional social workers to address social ills. Instead, social workers were trained by separate technical training institutions at facilities where they worked, such as at the Cuban Ministry of Public Health. There was no integrated social work profession. Social problems in the community were addressed primarily by other professionals, including doctors and nurses, psychologists, and educators, along with local political leaders and representatives of Cuba's “mass organizations” (eg, the Federation of Cuban Women and Committees for the Defense of the Revolution). Thus, social work did not emerge as a professional discipline with an identity of its own.

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It was the emerging and intractable social problems in the 1990s that convinced leaders Cuba needed a more integrated social work profession. Highly trained and qualified social workers were needed who could join other professionals and government representatives in creating new programs to address the worsening problems of increased poverty, growing class difference, and lack of material resources. However, it was not until the late 1990s—when Cuba recovered from the worst of its economic crises—that it was in a position to dedicate material and human resources to support the social work education and training programs described below.

Cuba's Two-Pronged Social Work Initiative

Cuba developed a two-pronged social work initiative in response to the social ills related to economic hardship. This initiative comprised the creation of (1) a university-level program (UP) or educating more advanced social workers and (2) the formation of schools of social work (SSW) that offer rapid social work training programs for Cuban youth who return to their communities as social workers after finishing this training.

The first Cuban school of social work was established at the University of Havana in 1943. It was not a university degree program and ended when the university closed its doors in 1956 due to social turmoil leading up to the Cuban Revolution in 1959. In 1971, the Cuban government began to train social workers at technical training institutes (*técnicos medios*, or TMs), the first of which was located at the Cuban Ministry of Public Health. These TMs taught fundamental, focused social work and case management skills to a generation of workers who provided specialized social work services in Cuba's clinics and hospitals, in housing and social security offices, and in other social and healthcare service settings. A dozen such TMs exist today. Most of Cuba's technical social workers, including more than 2000 in healthcare, were trained at such TMs.

The University Social Work Program in Cuba

In the late 1990s, government leaders, educators, and social workers agreed that Cuba needed to advance the educational training of Cuban social workers beyond that offered by TMs. In 1997, the Cuban Ministry of Education asked the Sociology Department at the University of Havana to implement a degree program in sociology with a concentration in social work to provide more advanced training for Cuban social workers. The university's six-year degree program began at the University of Havana in 1998. Two years later, the University of the Oriente in Santiago, Cuba, started a similar UP. Both offer the licenciatura degree (roughly equivalent to a master's degree in the United States) in sociology with a concentration in social work.

Licenciatura students must be high school graduates, and the majority are part-time students with full-time jobs as healthcare social workers. Every 21 days, they receive time off from their jobs to attend classes at the university and to study for exams. They receive their regular income while they are students. Currently, there are approximately 100 students enrolled in the University of Havana's UP alone, which is now in its fifth year of existence.

The UP's goal is to advance Cuban social work education and training by teaching students how to integrate social work practice skills with theory. The hope is that this will not only increase their practice skills, but also enhance their understanding of their role as change agents and elevate their professional status in the wider society.

The Sociology Department spent considerable time and effort developing a curriculum based on those of other Latin American countries and Spain, according to one of the UP's organizers. The UP curriculum integrates sociological theory and social work practice. Two introductory courses 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. 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. Students attend a research workshop every semester starting in their first year in which they examine their on-the-job practice. This workshop is an important source of supervision for these students because, at present, there are no social workers with advanced training to supervise them where they work.

Social Work Schools for Youth

In September 2000, the Cuban government opened its first school of social work in Cojimar on the outskirts of Havana for young people aged 16 to 22. Three other SSW now exist in Villa Clara, Holguín, and Santiago. Two thousand students attend each of these schools, with eight

thousand social work students graduating last year. This social work educational initiative, like the UP in Havana and Santiago, represents an emergency response by the government to addressing social problems in Cuba. Students at the SSW are known as emergentes because they are trained to respond to serious emergent social problems.

The purpose of these social work training schools is to provide a short-term (initially six and increasing to 12 months next year), concentrated social work learning experience for these youths, combining classroom experience with field practice. “Cuba does not have the luxury of waiting to solve its economic problems. It is experiencing a difficult economic time, but the idea is to not leave young people behind and uneducated,” according to one of the school’s founding faculty members, Lourdes de Urrutia, a professor at the University of Havana: “The idea [of emergentes] is to educate young people who can then go out and help other young people,” she says.

Many SSW faculty members are advanced social work students studying for their licenciatura in the sociology and social work degree program described earlier. They are not reimbursed for their teaching because they are on paid leave from their regular jobs. The academic program for emergentes integrates courses from various fields into a unified curriculum. In addition to studying sociology, social work, psychology, law, and other disciplines, emergentes also take courses in the historical development of social work in Cuba, the United States and elsewhere in the world, adolescence, the family, community social work, and social intervention techniques. To graduate, emergentes must pass exams in each disciplinary subspecialty. The required field work, directed by a multidisciplinary faculty team, involves interviewing youths from poor neighborhoods to determine the prevalence of problems among them and to assess their level of need for services. Emergentes also participate in government social projects, such as Cuba’s campaign to eradicate the mosquito-carrying dengue fever, which was an important public health campaign in Cuba last year.

After their training is completed, emergentes are guaranteed social work jobs where they must live in the communities and work with youth and other groups at risk such as children and senior citizens. They receive a salary of 300 pesos a month, which is considered to be a good salary for young Cuban workers.

Emergentes also have the opportunity to study for their licenciatura on a part-time basis in any of eight university degree programs, including the UP program in sociology, social work, social communication, psychology, and law. While currently, most SSW graduates do not choose social work, they are expected to remain with their community-based social work jobs if they decide to subsequently study on a part-time basis at one of these eight university degree programs.

Lessons from Cuban Social Work Education

The extent to which Cuba’s social work initiative will be successful in the long run is unknown. The Cuban government’s ability to sustain this program is an important factor in determining its future success. However, Cuba’s effort to elevate social work education is noteworthy for many reasons, regardless of its long-term outcome, and deserves the attention and the support of the international social work community. Its innovative core curricula integrating social work practice skills with political sociology and political economy is a strong model for social work training in other developing countries to address social problems related to national economic difficulties.

The SSW model may be used for the quick training of large numbers of young social workers to participate in local and nationwide public health and educational campaigns, such as Honduras’ ongoing effort to fight an outbreak of hemorrhagic dengue fever (The New York Times, 2002). The Cuban government’s expectation that emergentes make a commitment to remain on their jobs for a 10-year period after graduation may seem unusual to members of the U.S. social work community. However, this expectation reflects a degree of professional sacrifice that the

Cuban government has come to expect from its professionals in an effort to sustain the social ideals of the Cuban Revolution.

The international social work community can learn from what Cuba has already accomplished with limited resources and is encouraged to exchange information and human resources with Cuba to advance social work education and practice.

Because of the high travel costs and U.S.-imposed travel restrictions, it is difficult for members of the Cuban social work community to travel to the United States to attend conferences and exchange ideas with their counterparts. We recommend, therefore, that the National Association of Social Workers advocate for an easier exchange of Cuban and North American social work professionals. Cuban social work is of special relevance to the U.S. social work community because of Cuba's close proximity to the U.S. mainland and high numbers of Hispanic immigrants, including Cubans, who reside in the U.S. urban and suburban areas (Spuro, 2002). Additionally important are the lessons the U.S. social work community can learn from Cuba's social work education and training initiatives. Which of the Cuban strategies to increase its number of social workers could work to address the growing shortage of social workers in the United States, especially in under served impoverished urban settings? (Strug & Mason, in press).



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- * There are a few small changes in the final published article.
- * Photos by Walter Teague.
- * Over one million demonstrated in Havana on 6/12/02 in support of Cuba's social gains and against Bush's charges that Cuba's pharmaceutical industry was connected with terrorism and his call for an end to socialism.
- * A Spanish version is available from the authors.