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Collaboration and Learning: Reflections on Participation in “Empowering Global Futures” International School Social Work Conferences in Essex, UK

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Abstract

School social work continues to grow and make an impact across global contexts. The authors share their experiences and reflections after participation in the international school social work conference, “Empowering Global Futures: Strategies for School Social Work” held at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford Campus, Essex, UK. The authors highlight speakers, global perspectives, practical applications, and emerging trends. Lastly, the authors make a “call to action” to advocate for increased and intentional efforts to reach across national boundaries to learn from each other and advance the knowledge base needed to address the needs of youth in schools in a global context.

Keywords

global school social work, international social work, anti-racist school social work, international collaboration, professional development

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In September of 2024, a collaborative group of school social work academics and professionals hosted an international school social work conference titled “Empowering Global Futures: Strategies for School Social Work” [Empowering Global Futures] at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford Campus, Essex UK. Empowering Global Futures was an important step in the effort to increase the visibility of school social work, support the continued development of international networks, and provide an avenue for sharing research and best practices across global contexts. While there has been a greater emphasis on international or global social work and research in the last decade, the specialized area of school social work has yet to develop similar inter-country collaborative research and comparisons (Beck & Hämäläinen, 2022). These opportunities for cross country conversations, collaborations, and research are needed in order to generate new knowledge and culturally responsive ways of understanding best practices that have only been studied in single national contexts.

While there have been previous efforts and international conferences, as well as international groups of school social work practitioners and researchers, these were halted due to both COVID-19 as well as other barriers including shifting leadership and limited opportunities for meeting and planning. In fact, The Empowering Global Futures planning committee met at the 2023 International School Social Work Conference that was held in Broomfield, CO, sponsored by the School Social Work Association of America [SSWAA]. This conference was held in conjunction with SSWAA’s national conference, which perhaps limited the visibility and attendance for the global audience. Understanding the need for an expanded opportunity for global collaboration and participation in a global Vergottini and others who attended the 2023

conference set out to plan the international social work conference “Empowering Global Futures,” and host a subsequent conference in South Africa in 2025.

The purpose of this editorial is to share some reflections about the conference, key insights, and perspectives about the potential impact of such a conference on global school social work. Vergottini contributes to these reflections as a conference planner and participant, Villarreal Sosa and Gherardi contribute as participants and presenters. Villarreal Sosa and Vergottini both have long histories of international/global collaborations and work. The authors hope to increase the visibility and participation of school social work practitioners and researchers in opportunities for global engagement and learning.

Speaker and Conference Highlights

Keynote speakers and panels provided opportunities to explore critical issues in school social work practice through the lenses of policy, practice, and research. Isabelle Trowler, the United Kingdom’s Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, affirmed the need for and potential impact of school social work in the UK and opportunities to continue developing policy that is supportive of the profession. Dr. Prospera Tedam from University College in Dublin responded to the ways in which school social work has often been placed low on the hierarchy of practice fields by highlighting the ways in which the field directly responds to key sustainable development goals in the global context. Workshops highlighted critical emerging issues such as attendance, trauma, family engagement, and interprofessional collaboration, exploring the development and definition of roles for school social workers within these realms.

Most notable was the number of sessions that directly addressed issues of race and racism in school social work. A panel explored the experiences of social work students completing

placements in UK schools through the innovative Social Work in Schools (SWIS) program at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) and ARU researchers highlighted the complex and challenging racialized experiences of social work students of color completing internships in schools. Similar issues were explored in a presentation by White high school students from Ireland who had led a study exploring the experiences of racism in their school. The youth engaged in critical dialogue around the results of their study, highlighting the important role that school social workers can play in addressing these complex issues, not only with youth of color, but with White youth. The level of depth and understanding of anti-racism and related concepts by these youth was truly impressive and one that can serve as a model for other communities and countries. In addition, Shantel Thomas, Founder/CEO of Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) and lead of the British Association of Social Workers on developing anti-racist practices, provided a compelling and motivating presentation about how anti-oppressive and anti-racism practices can be implemented across all social work sectors, most especially school social work. The degree to which conversations about anti-racism or racism were represented within a relatively small number of sessions was impressive, especially for those of us coming from the U.S., a country where there is active and organized push-back among school social work leaders regarding anti-racism and equity practices. Our colleagues at Empowering Global Futures modeled the courage to lead and hold these discussions, and provided testimonies of the powerful transformation possible when these conversations take place.

It was clear throughout that many differences are represented by country, yet so many similarities exist as well. Moreover, what was clear was the need for a globally focused school social work, the importance of school social work across countries, and the implementation of anti-oppressive/anti-racist practices as a hallmark of school social work practice.

Practical Applications in School Social Work

Several excellent presentations addressed common global challenges for school social work practice including absenteeism, inequality, mental health, and role clarification. Additional sessions introduced mindfulness and movement as expressive therapeutic tools to be used by practitioners. One session explored the use of gardening as a practical tool for school social work. Again, exploration of the ways in which issues of race and racism are central to school social work practices were reinforced by the group of the Irish students who presented their own anti-racist research and work; their work additionally reinforced the importance of youth development in practice and the need to develop anti-racist competencies in the students we serve. The conference was an effective balance between research, training, and practice.

Emerging Trends and Future Directions

School social workers across the globe are tasked with providing evidence-based, culturally responsive, and anti-oppressive approaches to meet the unique needs of their own communities. While these responses may look different in each country or community, we have much to learn from one another regarding how we approach this work. Furthermore, as the world continues to grapple with the human suffering caused by political instability, war, migration and the long-term impact of the pandemic, we experience a shared reality which forms the basis of our work. The collaborative dialogues that evolved from this conference served to clarify areas which are in need of further research or exploration, especially issues such as online education or effective responses to post-pandemic trauma. These dialogues also served to identify new opportunities for collaboration such as the exchange of national practice models, opportunities to share effective approaches to intervention, the need for locally developed evidence based

practice that center the needs of those communities, and systems changes around shared challenges such as school attendance, trauma, and racism in education.

A significant trend was evident: the continued growth and development of school social work programs across the globe. An informative presentation from a Swedish colleague on inclusion of school social work in their Master's degree shed some light on their perspectives and the success of the program. This was especially significant as they have 2,500 school social workers employed countrywide. Additionally, the inclusion of a new, fully online structured Masters degree in social work in the North-West university, South Africa, was introduced. School social work was also established as a field of specialty in South Africa. While school social work has a longer history in the U.S., some states such as Texas and New Mexico remain somewhat underdeveloped in terms of school social work training and role definition. Meeting the needs of youth across the globe will require continued advocacy, thoughtful work to continue the development of school social work training and practice models, as well as collaboration and learning from one another in the global context.

Personal Reflections and Insights

(Villarreal Sosa) As someone who had dedicated her academic work and practice in school social work to advancing issues of equity and anti-racism, I felt validated and supported by the number of presenters who focused on racism or anti-racism. In the U.S., White school social work practitioners and academics continue to respond with white fragility¹ and all of us,

¹ White fragility refers to White people's defensive emotions or behaviors when people of color discuss racism, often leading to successfully stopping conversations about racism, contributing to the maintenance of white supremacy and racism. This term was coined by Robin DiAngelo who specializes in critical discourse and whiteness studies.

regardless of our racial backgrounds, continue to practice in ways that support white supremacy². There is still much work to do in the area of anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices in all countries, but it was hopeful to see so many of these conversations taking place at Empowering Global Futures. I also appreciated the panel that highlighted the teacher, student, and field educators as they pioneered school social work placements in their schools. Most impactful were the testimonials of teachers and how their classrooms were positively impacted by the students. There were many lessons to learn about how to introduce school social work in schools and the importance of interprofessional teams. In the future, I also hope that more school social work colleagues in the U.S. will be motivated to learn more about others from across the globe and attend global meetings and conferences.

(Vergottini) From an organiser's perspective as well as a presenter, this was such a great opportunity for networking and future collaboration. The positive energy between attendees was contagious. A smaller group than initially anticipated attended, but this gave way to more intimate sessions where questions could be asked and participation, together with engagement, were established.

(Gherardi) For those of us from the U.S., a country in which school social work is historically well-established but continues to be engaged in a process of definition and redefinition, the opportunity to consider the breadth and scope of school social work practice from a comparative international perspective was invaluable. Given the conference location in the United Kingdom, a context in which school social work is in earlier stages of development as

² White supremacy refers to the ways in which those in power in the U.S. historically used pseudo-scientific concepts of race and whiteness to create a racial hierarchy and associated value to people depending on where they are in that hierarchy. For a more extensive discussion of white supremacy and how this manifests in the culture, see this website by Tema Okun and colleagues: <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/>

a practice field, I encountered many instances in which my colleagues sought to learn from the U.S. experience. However, these dialogues often centered on many of the same issues that arise in school social work in the U.S., especially in regards to issues of role definition and interprofessional collaboration. I was especially energized by conversations highlighting the ways in which other countries and contexts are responding to these issues with approaches to school social work practice that may be unconstrained by some of the same historical or regulatory norms impacting school social work in the U.S. In these conversations, the conference served as an opportunity for a collective visioning of what school social work *could be* and how it could respond to the critical issues facing all of us.

A Call to Action

The energy, enthusiasm, and potential opportunities for the future were evident during Empowering Global Futures. This conference is an additional step towards sustainable collaborations across countries with the goal of serving children and youth in schools and the continued development of the school social work profession. In order to address the evolving needs of youth, schools, families, and communities, continued dialogue and collaboration is necessary. Participation in future conferences to share best practices or showcase research contributions will further empower the field of school social work. Therefore, readers are encouraged to prepare for the next international conference hosted in South Africa and contribute to the further establishment of this field of speciality. Collectively, we can grow international school social work into an essential annual event for the field, connecting, informing, and empowering school social workers from across the globe. ***The follow-up international school social work conference will be hosted in South Africa on 10, 11 and 12 September 2025. North-West University, Vanderbijlpark campus, Gauteng.***

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