

## Transcultural School Social Work Practice

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### Practical Background

The overall aim of this study is to establish ways and means of realising the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and a broader human rights culture within school social work service delivery.

In 1998, a community-based school social work service agency began operating in secondary schools throughout the western Austrian province - Vorarlberg. This agency offers (1) casework, comprised of: confidential assessment, diagnoses, counselling, crisis care, recreational opportunities, advocacy, referral and, (2) social pedagogy to include group activities in classrooms which are conceptualised and carried out in the form of social, cultural and experiential education. The casework and social pedagogy approaches focus on the enhancement of competencies and skills. This encourages children to further develop empathy, reciprocity, self-respect and self-esteem. The aim of the social workers at the agency is to assist children and teachers gain better understanding of social justice, human dignity and equality.

Through the social workers guidance and reflection, teachers overcome barriers that interfere with the pupil's success in learning, adjustment and growth. The primary objective is to maximise well-being through the provision of a targeted, non-stigmatising program.

As an advocator for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the agency seeks to fulfil the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) obligation to confront those who violate this convention. This process involves

documenting violations and assessing the corresponding unmet basic human needs<sup>1</sup> of the service users. An example of this is when a child reports experiencing discrimination on grounds of a cultural, linguistic or religious distinction. In this case article 2 of the UNCRC, the right not to be discriminated against, has been violated. Further incidences recorded include bullying, name-calling and being told to go back to the "country of origin". Children of immigrants report not being permitted to speak their native language during lessons or, in some cases, on school grounds (Schneider, 2007).

Accounts such as these have lead to the agency's decision to explore and develop culturally sensitive methods and tools for school social work practice.

### Research background

Six case studies of children of immigrants, suspended from school for a fixed period, are analysed using a multi-level theory, the systems paradigm of social work discipline and profession (Staub-Bernasconi, 2007). The key aspects of the study are (1) social economic disparity (2) cultural-religious based characteristics (3) language barriers and, (4) relationships. The challenges experienced by these children are analysed using Werner Obrecht's theory of basic human needs (Borrmann, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup>Needs = biological, biopsychological and biopsychosocial(cultural) basic human needs (Borrmann, 2005).

### **Aims**

- Clarify the possibilities and challenges in realising the UNCRC in social work practice
- Develop culturally sensitive methods and tools
- Develop a science based action plan for transcultural social work with focus on overcoming social exclusion and building social cohesion.

### **Main contribution**

- Personal and social problems, on the micro, meso and macro levels, are made visible and the causes explored. This results in a differentiated view on the challenges confronting children of immigrants and increases the understanding and knowledgebase of parents and teachers.
- The necessity to development specific guidelines, principles and benchmarks for school social work practice is underlined.
- The best interests of pupils experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are served by (1) challenging practice in the field of secondary education that neglects the rights of the child, and (2) identifying and disseminating best practice.

### **Implications**

- The results of the study facilitate further development and implementation of a culturally sensitive rights-based social work practice that engenders respect and cohesion as well as providing protection from discrimination (Ife, 2001). This approach corresponds with that of transcultural social work in advancing equality in secondary schools (Schneider, 2009).
- Children of immigrants are encouraged to recognize their abilities and actively participate in processes concerning their well-being (John, 2003).

- The agency reviews the knowledge base and skills of staff members.

### **Introduction**

Silvia Staub-Bernasconi defines culture as the frame of reference, codes, that we use to perceive, describe and understand how people think and act (Staub-Bernasconi, 2007: 135). From an ethnological perspective, transculturality is based on the premise that all human beings have the same basic human needs. How these needs are met depends on the social or cultural context (Wronka, 1998: 24). Transcultural social work uses universally accepted values, criteria and documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human rights, to assess traditional practices and develop new values, standards and guidelines for theory, research and practice (Staub-Bernasconi 2007: 354).

In this article, based on the exemplary case study of *Aisha*<sup>2</sup>, the following violations of the UNCRC and the corresponding unmet human needs are identified and discussed:

- Article 2, the right not to be discriminated against
- Article 30, the right to learn about and practice their own culture, language and religion
- Article 27, adequate standard of living
- Article 15, the right to meet together and to join groups and organizations.

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym to conceal the identity of the person involved.



### **The case study of Aisha**

Aisha is 15 years of age, a Turkish national born in Austria. She is attending her 8th year of compulsory school. Aisha describes herself as a fun-loving, secretive person. She wears make-up and is very aware of fashion trends. She is proud of her Turkish heritage and culture, enjoying stories of life in the old country.

Aisha lives with her parents and two sisters in a rented three-roomed apartment. Her mother lost her job at the factory. Her father has a full-time job in the production line. Her parents have experienced several periods of unemployment. They have limited German language expertise, being reliant on the translation skills of their children. Aisha has good command of the German language and a basic understanding of Turkish.

Aisha's parents are keen for their daughter to be well educated. Aisha enjoyed attending primary school. As she progressed through secondary school, her grades became worse. She increasingly lost interest in schoolwork and attending school. Aisha speaks of being treated unfairly, ignored and isolated by teachers. She wishes that they would listen to her point of view and show interest in her.

When Aisha was suspended from school after being caught forging her mother's signature on a school absentee note, the family was ashamed and deeply troubled. Aisha's parents feel their views carry less

weight because they are Turkish immigrants having not attended school in Austria themselves. Her father voiced concern about his daughter's mental health, emphasizing her mood swings. There was concern that Aisha would not be able to obtain the Austrian citizenship. Aisha was suspended from school for a fixed period of three weeks.

### **The role of social work**

Social workers are expected to offer quick-fix solutions for problems like those that Aisha, her family and teachers are experiencing.

There is a strong tendency for the adult's involved to blame the children and not to reflect on their own involvement. In order to put this into perspective we use a multi-level approach that entails viewing the problems experienced on the micro, meso and macro intervention levels. Within this framework children of immigrants are viewed as adaptive individuals with needs and aspirations dependent on, and involved in the construction of micro, meso and macro socio-cultural systems (IFSW, 2002).

The base of a conflict between young people and adults is an asymmetrical distribution of resources and power. To enable dialogue to take place it is necessary to clearly state these issues of inequality. The social work agenda includes offering arguments to the weaker party and apprehending and confronting manipulation and unfair power practices. The IFSW stipulates that social workers are obligated to assist the oppressed, disadvantaged and other vulnerable populations to rights awareness and claiming their rights.

### **The theory of basic human needs**

The sociologist, Werner Obrecht, basis the theory of basic human needs on the concept of the philosopher and physicist

Mario Bunge. This concept supports the notion that human needs are of an “organic nature” (Staub-Bernasconi, 2007: 171).



Human needs are defined as an internal condition that regulates an organism's state of well-being (Klassen, 2004: 219). The internal state of an organism is referred to as the intrinsic value that encompasses a specific range of properties and conditions and when they stay in a specific range enable an organism to survive within its environment (ibid.). Human intrinsic values are dependent on and perceived in relation to the environment in which the organism resides. A human being “*feels completely happy if and only if*” he or she “*believes to have the ability and opportunity of meeting all needs and wants*” (ibid.).

Human beings are self-assured organisms with a highly developed nervous structure and neurological system, which are influenced by internal (physiological) or external (environmental) factors (Klassen, 2004: 219). These factors cause variations in the intrinsic values registered by the central nervous system and in turn motivates the organism to respond towards compensation. Bunge defines the variation

in the intrinsic values as human needs and thus needs are linked very closely to intrinsic values of human beings (ibid.).

In order for children of immigrants to develop and reach their full potential their basic needs have to be met. In doing so biological, psychological and social well-being is achieved. The underlying statement is that if these basic human needs are not met over a longer or shorter period depending on the elasticity of a particular need, personal and social problems will inevitably result. Unfilled basic human needs result in social problems and violations of the UNCRC.

Social problems such as poverty, unemployment, isolation, discrimination and exploitation cause grief and suffering. Issues such as these affect our survival and are shared by all cultures – in other words they are “transcultural”.

### **Correlation between needs and rights**

The universality of human needs and thus the related actions of the social work profession can be universally justified with accordance to the needs perspective, which results from the theory of human needs (Wronka, 1998: xiii). The connection between human rights and social work is based on that of human needs resulting in a central link between the two owing to the fact that human needs are universally recognized. The foundation of the theory of human needs is a scientific set of standards based on the theory of biological, psychological, social (and cultural) needs which have to be met for each and everyone of us in order for our well-being and, in end effect, our very survival (Obrecht, 2005 / Klassen, 2004).

Connecting social work with a human needs approach can constitute a means to declare the inseparability and universality of human rights, and therefore, mobilize social work from needs-orientation towards rights affirmation (Ife, 2001: 11).

The International Federation of Social Workers regards the fulfillment of basic human needs as “*an imperative of basic justice*” (IFSW, 1994: 5). Within the social work profession internationally, the fundamental nature of basic human needs and the necessity and entitlement that they be met have led to a “*transition from needs orientation to rights affirmation*” (IFSW, 1994:5).

### Key aspects of the study - Aisha

As discussed earlier under *research aspects*, this study focuses on four key aspects.

The first of these is the issue of social economic disparity. In Aisha’s case this constitutes the low job status that her parents have as factory workers. This is enhanced by them experiencing recurring unemployment. This leads to Aisha not being unable to take part in school activities and excursions that her parents have to pay for. This means that her biopsychosocial need for variation and change is not fulfilled. This is a violation of the UNCRC, article 27, adequate standard of living: “*Children have the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs*”.

The second key aspect is comprised of the cultural-religious based characteristics. Aisha discussed being bullied at school. She was told to go back to turkey and that she does not belong in Austria. In this case Aisha’s biopsychosocial and cultural need for social recognition is not realized. Article 2 of the UNCRC, the right not to be discriminated is violated:

*“The Convention applies to all children, whatever their race, religion or abilities; whatever they think or say, whatever type of family they come from. It doesn’t matter where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do, whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is,*

*whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor.”*

The third key aspect is that relating to the language barriers. (1) Aisha reported not being allowed to speak her native language during class. (2) When Aisha visits relatives in Turkey she has problems understanding them because she does not have sufficient command of the Turkish language. In this case Aisha’s biopsychosocial and cultural need to define her own identity is not realized. The UNCRC, article 30, is violated: “*Minority or indigenous children have the right to learn about and practice their own culture, language and religion. The right to practice one’s own culture, language and religion applies to everyone; the Convention here highlights this right in instances where the practices are not shared by the majority of people in the country*”.



The fourth key aspect focuses on relationships. On the one hand the German-speaking girls in Aisha’s class do not accept her because they see her as a Turkish girl. On the other hand she experiences rejection from the Turkish girls in her class due to differences in their religious belief systems, the use of make-up and dress style. This results in Aisha’s biopsychosocial and cultural need to participate and belong to a sociocultural group not being realized. In this case the UNCRC, article 15, is violated: “*Children have the right to meet together and to join groups and organisations, as long as it*



*does not stop other people from enjoying their rights. In exercising their rights, children have the responsibility to respect the rights, freedoms and reputations of others”.*

### **Concluding remarks**

- There was a lack of sufficient data recorded on the case study to undertake the analysis. In order to rectify this, for future case studies, semi-structured interpreter mediated interviews with the children and their parents are to be conducted.
- An interview guide that includes the informal groups of questions and topics that feature in the interviews is being designed.
- During the process of analyzing the case study we realized that agency staff members were unfamiliar with certain issues relating to migration and how this can result in exclusion. To remedy this, staff members will take part in training programmes on issues relating to migration, racism and social exclusion.
- Rights-based social work entails confronting violators of the UNCRC. This involves (1) documenting violations and the corresponding unmet basic human needs that they encounter in the context of everyday practice and (2) discussing these findings at team meetings to (3) establish constructive ways to deal with these issues.

### **Literature**

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### **Biographies**

Sharon Schneider is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Siegen, Germany, and the Indosow International Social Work Study Programme at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. With a masters degree in social work as a human rights profession from the Zentrum für postgraduale Studien Sozialer Arbeit in Berlin, her current research interests concern human rights based social work research, theory and practice. She also lectures on intercultural competency and transcultural social work. She is a strong advocate for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in policy and practice.

Nigar Isik is engaged in school social work practice. The major focus of her approach is on promoting the social inclusion of children of immigrants in secondary school. She is involved in the design and application of intercultural training programs, in school classrooms, to resolve conflicts and enhance well-being through deliberative democracy. She offers family counselling and assists children affected by migration related personal and social problems. Her current professional interests include networking with organisations to challenge and combat discrimination and racism in the educational sector.