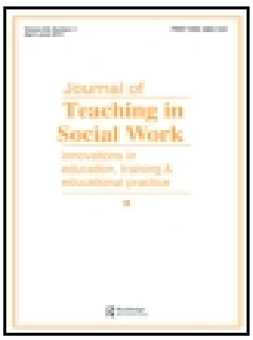

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# Creating a Continuing Education Pathway for Newly Arrived Immigrants and Refugee Communities

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**ABSTRACT**

With the increase in the number of displaced peoples, the demand for skilled social workers from diverse backgrounds to serve them is critical. This article explores a continuing education program that prepares precollege individuals from newly arriving communities who will work as entry-level workers serving these immigrant and refugee communities. The article focuses on the development of a Case Management Certificate Program as a response to community-identified issues, then presents a discussion exploring the educational pathways and unique contributions of these individuals. The article calls for the profession to explore how continuing education pathways can bridge service gaps, contribute to the knowledge base of social work, and meet current labor market demands.

**KEYWORDS**

Case management; continuing education; immigrants and refugees; paraprofessional social work



## Introduction

At the end of 2014, the number of forcibly displaced individuals worldwide was 59.5 million (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2015), and there were 19.5 million individuals with refugee status worldwide at the beginning of 2013 (UNHCR, 2014). The exodus of people from their homelands and the rapidly increasing trend of regional and global forced migrations have raised the resettlement ceiling for the United States to 85,000 for 2016 and 100,000 in 2017 (Population, Refugees and Migration, 2016). The main contributors to forced migration vary, ranging from globalization to climate change, with armed conflicts and war ranking as the major contributing forces. By the end of 2014, top ranking source of refugees were Syria (currently 4.25 million Internally Displaced Peoples), Afghanistan (one of four refugees in the world), Somalia, Iraq, and South Sudan (UNHCR, 2014). Resettled communities thus come from different continents wherein the sociopolitical, economic, and military conditions forced them to migrate in search of a decent life and security. The condition of forcibly displaced peoples and migrants calls for urgent responses to a global crisis, not only as a humanitarian issue but also as a human rights issue.

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Growing global inequality, social exclusion, and violence in the 21st century are challenging social work ideals of social justice (Finn, 2013; Finn and Jacobson, 2003). Forced migration results from historically oppressive local and global conditions that have long-term impacts. Those forced to migrate from their homelands are diverse and thus their demands more complex. In the resettlement processes, cultural diversity, socioeconomic differences, and migrants' political consciousness inform their demands and expectations from host societies (Waters, 1999). Although rarely recognized, migrants' backgrounds are often replete with diverse professions, skills and experiences that can contribute to host societies. Their professions range from physicians, engineers, nurses, and researchers to social workers, teachers, and public service providers. Too often their expertise remains invisible to host societies due to a lack of recognition of their professions by Western educational institutions and to requirements to upgrade their academic credits and accomplishments. In addition, there are stereotypes attached to refugees and immigrants from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Perry and Mallozzi, 2011). As for the cultural aspect, people from the global south are already imagined as "lacking," backward, and traditional, which calls for resettled people to "catch up" with the modern world (Escobar, 1995; Said, 1979). Yet most refugees are well educated and highly credentialed before they come to the United States (Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Gagne, & Jang, 2009; Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tustin, 2007; Fingeret & Drennon, as cited in Smyth & Kum, 2010).

The opportunity to pursue basic literacy and higher education frequently motivates immigrants and refugees to resettle in a third country (Perry, 2010). However, similar to other adult learners, educational and employment barriers often block them from pursuing their goals (Kerwin, 2009). Hence, post-resettlement processes tend to force them to accept manufacturing or low-wage service sector jobs regardless of their previous experience and profession (Kenny, 2011). The U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement's policy of promoting refugee self-sufficiency within a short time via employment has been questioned in terms of whether it is realistic and appropriate (Brick et al., 2010; International Rescue Committee, 2009; Perry, 2010; Presse & Thompson, 2007; Wright, 1981). Beyond existing job trainings and English Language Learning classes for employment purposes, educational opportunities that would have refined the expertise of the immigrants and refugees to meet local demands do not appear to be included in the policy vision. The "one-size-fits-all" approach has not worked well in meeting the variety of refugees and immigrants' demands (Kerwin, 2011; Perry, 2008). Policy recommendations suggest that, in addition to employment opportunities, education is the main focus and indicator of resettlement expected outcomes (Brick et al., 2010).

The unsettling 21st-century global reality requires that social work education develop innovative programs that will adequately prepare resettled refugees and immigrants to practice with diverse communities and in

complex sociopolitical settings. Due to geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic divides, more often than not migrants are insufficiently exposed to other parts of the globe and therefore lack the skills of navigating resettlement systems and institutions. The social work profession thus has the responsibility to prepare resettled paraprofessionals. There is a need for future generations of American social workers to be able to acknowledge migrants' cultures and knowledge as equally legitimate as their own and to design programs that will prepare members of resettled communities to engage in foundational social service providing professions.

The Case Management Certificate Program (CMCP) at the University of Utah is one such attempt in social work. CMCP provides the knowledge and skills required to provide services to the next wave of immigrants and refugees in Salt Lake City, the knowledge gained from this program is making a new contribution to social work education at the local university. Developed as a response to the initiatives and demands of resettled communities, the CMCP is located in one of the city's most diverse and lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. Capacity-building and empowerment frameworks, whereby resettled communities take charge of their own affairs, are central to the program. This article explores the development and teaching-learning process of a 9-month continuing education certificate offering a conceptualized paraprofessional, precollege case management program designed for newly arriving migrants. The aim is not only to build bridges between resettled communities and service providing institutions but also for host societies to reframe their perceptions about locally globally resettled communities from "social welfare dependents" to paraprofessional colleagues who will contribute to and serve their communities and hence the host society.

The first section of this article focuses on theoretical frameworks, followed by the context and the nature of the CMCP. The program is administered by the University of Utah, College of Social Work, Professional and Community Education Program. The final sections conclude the article with a discussion on educational pathways.



## The Theoretical Frameworks of the CMCP

The CMCP is a continuing education certificate program and pathway grounded in the theories and foundations of continuing education, adult learning theory, and action learning.

### *Continuing Education*

Continuing education is defined by Halton, Powell, and Scanlon (2014) as lifelong learning or "an ongoing process of education and development that continues throughout the professional's career" (p. 1). The rapid changes of

social phenomena, professional knowledge, and technological innovation require social workers to adapt in order to be prepared for practice. The realities have led to the need for social workers' commitments to continuing professional education in order to critically reflect on and continuously update themselves with respect to emerging knowledge and innovations (Congress, 2012; Halton et al., 2014; Lary & Duffey, 2000; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2003).

In the United States, continuing education is a requirement for social workers' licensure renewal in all 50 states (NASW, 2011; Quinn & Straussner, 2010). To guide social workers and stakeholders, the NASW developed the standards for continuing education (NASW, 2003) and the guidelines for continuing education program approval (NASW, 2011). Continuing professional education can be formal (i.e., courses, workshops, practice-oriented seminars) or informal (i.e., supervision, readings, publications, reflection and peer support) (Congress, 2012; Halton et al., 2014; NASW, 2003).

The effectiveness of continuing education programs has been demonstrated through empirical studies. Quinn and Straussner (2010) found that a continuing education program on substance abuse enhanced social workers' competencies in working with this population and assisted in providing a more ethical provision of services. A workshop on evidence-based practice also resulted in changes in participants' views, knowledge, and self-reported behavior regarding the evidence-based practice process (Parrish & Rubin, 2011). Similarly, according to Halton et al. (2014), the vast majority of survey participants who were International Association of Schools of Social Work members indicated that attending continuing professional courses such as in-service training and professional courses had been either "helpful" or "very helpful" in their work, with "other professional courses" earning the highest rating (98%), followed by higher education (91%) and in-service training (86%). In brief, continuing education is perceived as an essential way for social workers to develop and improve their professional and employment performance.

Continuing education also acknowledges the employees' commitments and responsibilities for advancing and renewing knowledge, skills, belief, and values in social work. This continuing education philosophy reinforces the CMCP's mission of providing those who engage in case management and community practice with knowledge, skills, and values relevant to their work and needed to provide quality service.

## *Andragogy—An Adult Learning Theory*

The term *andragogy* is well known as Malcolm Knowles's theory of adult learning. Andragogy (often contrasted to pedagogy, which is considered the "art and science of teaching children") is described as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, p. 61). Knowles's

theory offered six assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners different from youth learners: (a) adults consider the value and the necessity of learning something before learning new things, (b) adults acknowledge their responsibilities for their own decisions, (c) adults bring more and different experience than youth to the classroom, (d) adults have motivation to learn things important to them and to apply what they learn in a real-life situation, (e) adults are life centered or problem centered in their learning orientations, and (f) adults are motivated more by internal pressures than external factors.

Knowles also suggested four principles to apply in adult learning (Smith, 2010): (a) engaging adults in the planning and evaluation of the courses, (b) the significance of experiential learning, (c) the immediate relevance of learning subjects to learners' lives, and (d) applying problem-centered approaches instead of content-oriented approaches. In other words, adult learning included an emphasis on independence, self-direction, experience, flexibility, and feedback. Understanding these characteristics (and applying them to designing continuing education programs) will likely promote a program's appropriateness and effectiveness.

Jack Mezirow is another well-known name in the adult learning arena. Mezirow (1985) emphasized the importance of including dialogue, self-directed learning, and learners' needs and interests. His work raises the significance of interaction, reflection, and continued need assessments in order to discover the learners' real interests, which is central to designing a learning process that will strengthen the learner's ability to "become increasingly autonomous and responsible" (p. 142). Mezirow argued that adult learning is not just a process of updating personal knowledge. Rather, it facilitates social action, which encourages learners to "become aware of the cultural contradictions which oppress them, research their own problems, build confidence, examine action alternatives, identify resources, anticipate consequences, foster participation and leadership and assess relevant experience" (p. 149).

Like Knowles and Mezirow, Marienau and Reed (2008) paid attention to learners' assumptions, beliefs, and commitment, as well as the value of experiential learning, reflection on experience, a problem-orientation, and social relationships. Geron, Andrews, and Hun (2005), reflecting a similar view to Knowles with regard to adult learners' characteristics, suggested that equipping them with knowledge and research findings is not adequate. Strengthening them with practical skills, providing them with opportunities to reflect and explore their beliefs and values, and empowering them in the process are crucial goals of adult learning.

By gaining insights about adult learning theories, we acknowledged the CMCP participants as adult learners, with their own knowledge, experience, and backgrounds.

### Action Learning

Action learning is grounded in the ideology of learning by doing; learning from experience; or learning by solving problems through teamwork, project focus, and reflection (Cho & Egan, 2009; Marsick & O'Neil, 1999; O'Neil & Marsick, 2014; Pedler, 2011; Revans, 1982, 2011). In particular, Revans (1982) defined action learning as a means of "development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change to improve their observable behavior henceforth in the problem field" (pp. 626–627). As pointed out by Pedler, "there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning" (as cited in Marsick & O'Neil, 1999, pp. xxii–xxiii). Although learning provides individuals with programmed knowledge, action (case studies, live projects, simulation exercises, or adventure activities) produces opportunities to question and reflect such programmed knowledge through real situations and experiences. In addition, by participating in a small group for action, participants learn from and reflect with their peers (Cho & Egan, 2009; Revans, 2011).

As opposed to traditional lecture-oriented programs, action learning employs adult education theories (Cho & Egan, 2009). Proponents of this approach believe that people learn most effectively through working on real problems existing in their own employment setting (Cho & Egan, 2009; O'Neil & Marsick, 2014; Revans, 2011) and reflecting critically with peers, colleagues, or instructors. Based on these pedagogical notions, training programs for adults, such as the Utah School of Social Work's CMCP, encourage the active participation of enrollees while instructors play a role as facilitators, supporting an action-learning environment.

## Emerging Leaders Project

### The Community Context

The *Emerging Leaders Project*, the development phase of the CMCP, began in 2012 as a response to requests by the Utah State Office of Refugee Services, resettlement agencies, and social service agencies to support the integration of newly arriving communities of immigrants and refugees. Salt Lake City has a rich history of serving as a gateway community for new arriving populations from all over the world, hosting approximately 50,000 refugees, with more than 1,000 new arrivals each year. In 2014, for example, the City received 1,286 refugees (Utah Department of Health, 2014). The community focus for the Emerging Leaders Project included the City's most diverse and rapidly growing neighborhoods. An area report conducted by

University Neighborhood Partners (2012) identified that almost 36% of the City's total population lives in the River District (west side)—66,701 people out of the City's total population of 186,440. The report also noted that the population in this area grew by 10.7%, compared to an overall 2.6% growth for Salt Lake City. Additional growth was seen in the share of River District residents who are identified as "minority," moving from 52% in 2000 to more than 62% in 2010. The River District is home to a large Latino/a population, with 46% of the population identifying as Hispanic, to 83% of the City's Pacific Islanders, and 60.8% of the City's Black population (UNP Report, 2012).

### *Ethnic Community-Based Organizations*

In response to the large number (and rich diversity) of newly arriving individuals, a consortium of social service agencies, resettlement organizations, and grassroots leaders collaborated to develop an initiative to support the development of Ethnic Community-Based Organizations – such as the Bhutanese Community Association, Latino Behavioral Health, Sudanese Association of Utah. The goals of these community-based organizations are to provide support to arriving individuals and to act as an information, referral, and crisis response network, connecting new arriving populations to existing resources and systems (Hunter & Mileski, 2013). Many social service organizations also were interested in members of these ECBOs serving as "bridge workers," having the cultural knowledge and linguistic skills needed to support new arrivals in navigating local systems in order to access services, employment, and education. We learned that individuals organizing in their own ethnic communities also are employed in entry-level positions (as case managers, youth and family liaisons, employment counselors) in schools, at resettlement agencies, and with social service providers. Because they are already recognized members in their own communities, such individuals have the potential of understanding the unique needs and strengths of their own communities and the cultural issues present (Hunter, Mai, Hollister, & Jankey, 2011). In this way, they occupy a shared status across both the host and ethnic communities.

Nevertheless, although community-based leaders come with existing skills, they also often understandably have a novice understanding of Western systems and often lack professional credentials that are recognized in the United States. The Emerging Leaders Project included a yearlong process utilizing a participatory action research framework to better understand the educational strengths and needs of these individuals that would assist them with acquiring entry-level positions in social service agencies, thereby creating a new pathway to enter the social work profession. One of the outcomes of the Emerging Leaders Project was the development of the CMCP (Hunter & Mileski, 2013).

### The Curriculum

Located in a community-based setting, the CMCP includes the following four courses: Introduction to Social Work for Case Managers, Introduction to Interpersonal Communication & Documentation, Introduction to Casework, and Introduction to Community Practice and Advocacy. Each course, herein Phase 1, is taught by social work faculty in a weekly 3-hour block and meets for 8 weeks, creating a 9-month program. Interested participants complete an application process including the University's Continuing Education application form, a personal statement, and a letter of recommendation. (This project was deemed exempt from needing human subjects approval by the University of Utah's Institutional Review Board.)

The four social work courses that compose the CMCP were developed as part of the Emerging Leaders Project. Phase 2 of the project includes a participatory action research process—engaging with stakeholders from social service agencies, resettlement organizations, and members of the ECBOs—to identify agency and community needs and priorities. The four social work courses were developed within capacity building and empowerment frameworks, striving to be inclusive of all voices. The curriculum follows the tenants of adult learning theory and emphasizes applied learning for social change. Furthermore, social change agents are viewed from a wide scope of cultural perspectives, building on multiple ways of knowing and the rich history and knowledge of the students. Social work values are introduced in the first course and continue as a foundational learning objective in all courses. Learning from a generalist perspective, upon completion of CMCP students are able to understand and apply basic social work theory and skills; communicate effectively with individuals, families, and communities; understand and apply common case management principles, processes, and responsibilities in a multicultural context; and act as systemic change agents in ways that empower individuals, families, and groups.

The CMCP makes use of an applied curriculum in which participants are actively engaged in their communities. In this way, the CMCP may serve as a catalyst for social change in the communities where the students live. A case example would be CMCP's Introduction to Community Practice and Advocacy course project conducted with the Bhutanese community and a diverse group of CMCP students. Traditionally, there are expectations from school systems in the United States such as (a) teachers and parents work together, and (b) parents are expected to participate in their child's education, set expectations, and attend parent–teacher conferences. This project, therefore, explored families' frustrations with local schools that haven't been able to bridge the school–home, teacher–student, and parent–school gaps. According to the Bhutanese participants in the project, these parents expressed the felt need for support systems to better understand the school

system. They further identified issues related to communication barriers, lack of strict rules and regulations for students who miss classes, use of mobile phones in the classroom, and dressing codes. Similarly, there was frustration with the age-based assignment to grade schools for children who have spent most of their childhood with little (if any) formal education, and the need to teach subject content and English language together in order to assist them with understanding concepts in a particular subject. Parents also shared the importance of the recognition of their cultures as being critical to the learning process of their children, and with strengthening parent–child communication. Finally, these parents identified very demanding jobs as barriers to engaging in their children's lives. Project participants summarized some of the learning, presented next.

> Day by day children are out of control of their parents and the culture, which has impacted their further education. They are motivated to making money and getting married at early ages. Once the family has started growing, the financial burden comes to a head, so they cannot think of further education. (CMCP Team 6, 2014)

Early marriage also was identified as contributing to girls' lack of retention in school. The Plan of Action the team designed included the following:

> Education is a very crucial part of communal growth and development. We would like to submit these issues to our community leaders to research more on these issues and act accordingly; schedule a date convenient to all high school children and discuss this issue one more time for education is a broad system and the voice of a couple of students does not bring any changes. The time frame assigned to do this is three months.

These are a few examples of the critical issues that CMCP students raise and advocate for as agents of social change in their communities. These students are working as "bridge builders," case managers, interpreters, and organizers within their respective communities, addressing the need to bring people together, build broad based power, trust and diversified leadership in their communities, and assist in navigating systems (Pyles, 2014; Shaw, 2014).

## *The Student Body as Social Change Agents*

Now in its 3rd year (2014–2016), the student body of the CMCP is very diverse and continues to be involved in a wide variety of systems work. Enrollment has been increasing (from 28 students in the first cohort to 36 students in the third cohort), despite the fact that a few students from the second and third cohorts dropped out due to family or work obligations and the lack of time to come to class straight from work. The student body comprises refugees and immigrants from developing countries (global south) and Eastern Europe. The demographics of the three cohorts is 34 female students and 48 male students (82 total) from 21 countries located in the

following continents (and regions): Africa (36), the Middle East (eight), Asia (22, includes SW Asia and South Central: two from Iran and one from Afghanistan, respectively), Latin America (13), Eastern Europe (one), and the United States (two). On average, students' age ranged from 12 students who were younger than 30 (14.6%), 36 students 30–39 years old (43.9%), 21 students 40 to 49 years old (25.7%), and 13 students who were 50 years of age or older (15.8%).

Early data from program evaluations and a more detailed impact study (currently in progress) indicate that the CMCP serves as both an employment and social work education pathway for individuals of immigrant and refugee background. In a program evaluation meeting with representatives of the Utah Office of Refugee Services, participants reported that graduates are increasingly securing entry-level positions. In addition, a focus group with graduates from the first and second cohorts shared examples of graduates pursuing higher education at the associate's and BSW levels. There is also early evidence of an increase in the organizational capacity of ECBOs. For example, several graduates of the first and second cohorts continue to partner and share resources to host community events and workshops. In one case, Bhutanese graduates of the first cohort are partnering with Latino graduates on training community members in the National Alliance on Mental Illness Family-to-Family support model (J. Gomez-Aries, personal communication, November 24, 2015).



## Discussion

### *Emerging Continuing Education Pathways*

Newly arriving communities come from diverse backgrounds, yet their heterogeneity frequently has been considered a barrier to moving forward rather than a cultural wealth to harness. The most difficult hurdle they face is deprofessionalization, loss of their profession, or lack of opportunity to access educational institutions due to discriminatory practices and rigid systemic barriers (Smyth & Kum, 2010). Deprofessionalization and disqualification of members of newly arriving communities may in turn call for investments in education but may not reflect their cultural capital. Hence, there is a need for the social work profession to support members of newly arriving communities reenter their profession.

As noted, there is a need for the social work profession to design paraprofessional continuing education, community-based, and action-oriented programs to engage these communities. The aim is to strengthen and systematize practice with newly arriving communities and introduce critical thinking to their practical approaches. Such a framework to continuing education demands that the social work profession expand its vision and mission statement to employ a community-based, participatory, and empowering framework, building on a broad base of community knowledge, skill, and

wisdom. Such a paraprofessional social work continuing education program for newly arrived immigrants and refugees creates an educational pathway to higher education in social work that will strengthen the profession. The program will also contribute to promoting social work practice with diverse communities, as well as promoting an expansion of social change agents in the profession and public institutions.

A wide range of public institutions and nongovernmental agencies are involved in supporting newly arriving communities in the areas of health, education, housing, transportation, and employment. Having social work paraprofessionals working with these agencies addresses current language, cultural, and systemic issues that are costly to both service providers and clients served.

### *Limitations*

The CMCP developed as a response to one city's desire to provide improved services to new arriving communities of immigrants and refugees. At the same time, the Participatory Action Research framework applied in this project centered the *voices* of those most affected by their new circumstances. The resulting continuing education certificate program was specifically designed for this Salt Lake City setting, and consequently there is no certainty about how this program might be applied with other urban or rural communities or with other newly arrived populations.

An additional limitation of the study is the lack of existing research on the precollege pathway in the arena of social work continuing education. Although there are an abundance of certificate programs in social work, there is a lack of literature on the intentional use of precollege programs to support a new pathway and thus the extension of the role social work continuing education. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge that the discussion of paraprofessional levels of social work education is complex and political. Indeed, we question whether the term "paraprofessional" is even appropriate.

Similarly, because of the newness of this project, the findings are preliminary. There must be longitudinal investigation of the impact to provide evidence of effectiveness. Equally important would be to measure (a) how the program contributes to systems change and (b) the integration of new knowledge into social service delivery programs serving newly resettled communities. We look to the graduates of the first two cohorts, and the stakeholder groups engaged in this project, to support us in learning more about how to best define this work and its place in social work education.

## Conclusion

As current trends of global migration illustrate, the number of refugees and immigrants seeking to come to America will rise. Some likely will be highly

educated professionals, whereas others will have only basic skills and literacy. Consequently, there is a need for higher education institutions both to recognize their expertise and to equip them with skills that will transform their quality of life. The CMCP calls for the expansion of social work continuing education to better serve resettled communities, which in turn will contribute to the hosting society. Exploring their knowledge and expertise, based on community-driven approaches, is key to bridging the gaps between service providers and resettled communities as well as meeting emerging labor market demands. As CMCP indicates, the conceptualization of the program, diversity of the student body, and their communities' contributions to the design of the program have enriched this particular certificate program beyond expectations. Graduates now are working with service providing agencies as "bridge builders," thus facilitating resettlement processes.

Rather than "starting from scratch," a program design should seek to create a vehicle for the validation of resettled communities' expertise and life experience while assisting members to move forward with their credentials. Equally important is the current need within the social work profession to recruit a diverse workforce, explore how emerging cross-cultural expertise can inform social work pedagogy, and address how new content rich in appreciation for diversity can be integrated into the curriculum.



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