

# My Tapestry of Mentoring Relationships: Weaving the Threads of Cultural Competency and International Social Work

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**Abstract:** In the following narrative, the author presents a tapestry of her mentorship relationships across her life span. The experiences of joining a Catholic religious congregation, attending American colleges and graduate schools, and being immersed in Western culture could have jeopardized her Korean ethnic identity. However, the author's encounters with positive mentors/teachers during these years have assisted her in developing a bicultural ethnic identity in the U.S. This narrative will present the author's weave, the author's threads of mentorship experiences with various mentees among graduate social work students in the university, and her way of sharing and paying forward what she has received from her own mentors and teachers.

**Keywords:** mentoring; mentor; Republic of Korea; South Korea; cross-cultural; social work; international social work; Roman Catholic; diversity; cultural competency

The Webster dictionary defines a mentor as “a trusted counselor or guide who gives help or advice to someone who is less experienced and often a younger person,” and the Oxford dictionary defines a mentor as “someone who teaches or gives help and advice to one less experienced.” Looking at both definitions, from my perspective and understanding, a teacher has both the roles of teaching and mentoring his/her students interchangeably and simultaneously. Reflecting on my educational and professional social work experiences, I am aware that I have had various types of mentors and teachers. In turn, I have become a mentor and teacher to a diverse group of people I have encountered along the way. Woven from different strands and textures, the mentoring and teaching I have received and given has fashioned the intricate and beautiful tapestry that is my life.

As a Korean-American, Roman Catholic Sister in an American religious order and a professor in an American university, I have been living in a multicultural society while sustaining a bicultural ethnic identity as a bilingual person. Looking back, my religious vocation grew out of my passion for social justice. (*Social* comes from the Latin *Socius* meaning friend, ally, partner in sharing and acting together and *Justice* comes from the Latin *Justus*, meaning just, equitable and fair. *Social Justice* means working together with others as equals, as partners for a socially just world.) Through the

years my personal and professional mentors have encouraged me to explore and develop this desire for social justice. Later on this personal belief was my driving force to study and teach social work education and practice with graduate students in the university. I am confirmed in this since one of the core values of the National Association of Social Work Code Ethics is social justice (NASW, 1999).

Back in the early '80s when I came to the States, the concept of acculturation or the emphasis on bicultural ethnic identity development for immigrant children and their families or globalization were not common themes. Instead, it was more a question of assimilation, asking immigrants to adapt to the mainstream culture and live just like the rest of Americans. I am very grateful to some of my religious congregation's Sisters and a few close Caucasian teachers and friends who consistently encouraged, supported, and helped me to develop a bicultural and bi-ethnic identity while integrating/acculturating American culture into my own ethnic culture.

During my graduate education, my professors taught about diversity, multiculturalism, global education, and ethnic identity development. My Ph.D. dissertation advisor, quite apart from her professional guidance, mentored me to not lose my Korean ethnic heritage, cultural identity, language, values, norms, traditions, etc. I heard over and over: “Do not lose your own ethnic identity; that is your

root.” I am fully aware that my strong bicultural ethnic identity, my multiculturalism, and my ability to sustain my global vision are possible because of their fine teaching and mentorship. My commitment to teaching and mentoring graduate social work students in the university is my way to share and pay forward what I have received from them in my life.

For the remainder of the narrative, I will simultaneously interject my role as a teacher and a mentor to my students, because I perceive myself performing these functions in an intertwined fashion.

### **Tapestry of Teaching and Mentoring Graduate Social Work Students**

I believe that personal growth and human capacity development are possible when personal strengths are recognized and positively supported and reinforced. My mentoring interaction with my university students focuses on utilizing their strengths, gifts, and talents and empowering them to grow in self-sufficiency. They in turn become comfortable with themselves in expected and unexpected life circumstances. I consider teaching as a lifetime opportunity, not only to transmit textbook knowledge, but also to empower, advocate, and instill the tools and attitudes for a meaningful life. In doing this to provide opportunities to experience and engage in various activities that seem to be crucial for personal growth.

The mission of social work education emphasizes the promotion of social justice and culturally competent practice in the profession's Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999). In addition, the importance of cultural diversity in the social work curriculum is stated in the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) educational policies and accreditation standards. Educational policy 2.1.4: “Engage diversity and difference in practice” (CSWE, 2008), calls for social workers to “understand how diversity characterizes and shapes the human experience and is critical to the formation of identity.” In the spring semester of 2012, I had an opportunity to teach an on-line course: “Global Perspectives on Social and Administrative Practice” to the MSW and Public Administration students in my university. This course is designed to teach the content of international social work, and students

are required to take the international study program in conjunction with the course. Six students completed the coursework and went for a two-week international study trip to the Republic of Korea with me in May, 2012.

My international social work education foci were: (1) gaining knowledge about a different culture and diversity issues, (2) cultivating positive attitudes toward different cultures and diversity, and (3) stepping out of personal comfort zones and exploring, experiencing, and embracing different cultural environments.

In gaining in-depth knowledge of international social work, the students studied the benefits and barriers of global perspectives in social work education and practice, the roles of international social institutions/organizations, how the Declaration of Human Rights Articles and the mission of social work present the same core values, and how international social workers participate in the global community. My students and I had very rich and in-depth discussions about: (1) how human rights and social justice issues match with the mission of social work, (2) how our personal beliefs, values, and knowledge of global education impact our world vision, and (3) how infusing global perspectives in social work knowledge and practice impact the social work profession. In this phase, my role was to enhance student knowledge about and personal cultural awareness of international social work education.

When the international social work course finished, our next step was to take a trip to learn and experience the similarities and differences in international social work education and practice. It was my belief that an overseas experience would certainly take them out of their comfort zone and force them to embrace an unknown/unfamiliar culture with its norms and values. I realized that this could be either a transformative life experience or a total fear factor for students.

### **Tapestry of Mentorship: the Pre-Trip to Korea**

I was very excited about taking my MSW students to my birth country, but at the same time I was a bit anxious when all my students told me that they had never visited an Asian country and they were unfamiliar with Korean food, culture, norms, values,

and the Korean way of life. Their honest expression of both excitement and nervousness led me to believe that this trip could potentially be a turning point for them personally and emotionally.

Here are some of the ways students felt as we were about to begin the trip to Korea. One student said, "As we were about to begin the trip to Korea I felt very intimidated and I was excited to learn about the culture of South Korea and experience a different lifestyle than my own." Another student said, "As I was about to begin the trip to Korea, I felt excitement, curiosity, and a bit of apprehension. I was excited about traveling to a place that was completely different from where I have always lived, and to experience what it feels like to be an absolute minority. There was curiosity for great discoveries about the Korean culture. I felt apprehension entering this situation precisely because of how much of what was to come was still unknown."

In order to help my students to overcome intimidation and apprehension to visit the unfamiliar country, South Korea, I prepared very traditional and common Korean food and invited the students for dinner. Over dinner I shared with them my experience with Korean culture, norms, life styles and typical Korean greetings and expressions. I prepared enough food for ten people, and we were only seven, but we did not have any leftovers. The students remarked, "I think I can eat Korean food and, in fact, I like it," and "I think I will be okay in Korea." They helped me realize that deep inside they had been pretty anxious and apprehensive about whether or not they would be able to survive on Korean food, a most basic need! Over dinner we discussed the similarities and differences between Korean and American cultures. My messages to the students were: "Every culture has its own uniqueness...Cultural competency begins with open-mindedness...Instead of asking why they are different, be curious about recognizing and accepting the differences." The students seemed to understand my point that cultural understanding begins with open-minded curiosity about something new without judging it against what we are most familiar with.

### **Tapestry of Mentoring: Republic of Korea**

Through coursework, students were asked to

identify areas of interest and/or social service agencies that they would like to visit while in the Republic of Korea. Students were interested in the areas of hospital social work, disability programs, immigrant/migrant populations, international adoption, alcohol and substance abuse treatment programs, and the Department of Health and Human Services in Korea. Students visited all the aforementioned agencies and programs and engaged in conversations with these agencies' social workers, clients, and government policy makers. In addition, they also visited our two sister universities, the Catholic University of Korea and Handong Global University in Korea, and had conversations with a university president and social work faculty and students. Furthermore, they also visited the First Vice-Minister for Education of Korea and learned about Korea's K-12 and college/university education system and policy.

I believe our international study program in Korea was a successful and meaningful experience for our students, because they were not acting or being treated like tourists from the U.S., but as social work graduate students who wanted to learn about and experience Korean culture, norms, and values, while at the same time studying about social work education and practice in Korea. During the course, the students and I had several conversations about how we are not going to Korea as tourists, but to explore and understand how Korean culture and values shape their social work practices, in other words, how Western and Eastern social work education and practice can explore their similarities and differences.

As a teacher and a mentor, I tried to empower my students to take charge of what *they* wanted to learn from Korean social work educators, students, policy makers, and clients and to appreciate the differences and similarities of the Korean and American systems. Initially, the students appeared to be apprehensive about what and how to prepare for their visits to different agencies. As a strategy to empower and mentor my students' critical thinking process, every evening before an agency or government office or university visit the students were encouraged to brainstorm about what and why they would like to learn from the host agency/program and to prepare appropriate questions. As preparation, I taught the students that

every individual Korean person they encounter is coming from their own personal unique culture.

The concept of understanding the intersectionality of cultures challenges us to recognize that each individual is coming from multiple social group identities (Spencer, Lewis, & Gutierrez, 2000), such as gender, age, class, education, occupation, etc. In other words, every individual represents a complexity of interlocking identities from simultaneous memberships in a variety of social groups (Ridley, 2005). Hence they could expect that new learning/experience would occur while interacting with Korean people and practicing cultural competency by appreciating the different cultures we (Koreans and Americans) have. As a mentor to my students, I modeled how we (students and I) can have honest conversations about how we view other cultures and what the learned beliefs were that we think are implied in other cultures. As much as I tried to bring my students out of their comfort zones to engage in honest and critical conversation, it was not an easy task for me to take them out of their own boxes. We discussed: "How did you feel when you encountered some aspect of Korean personalities, culture, life style, or language?"

Furthermore: "How would you rate your cultural inadequacy and cultural appreciation level as your exposure has increased daily?" I shared with the students that I left Korea over twenty-five years ago and, even though I have visited Korea every year, I am not all that familiar with the details of what is happening in Korea because I don't live in Korea. In addition, I shared that my lifetime goal is to become a bilingual and bicultural person while living in the United States. All my students encouraged me to keep both cultures and languages, and a couple of them expressed how they wish they could keep up their own ethnic cultures and languages. (Some of the students come from German, Lebanese, and Irish ancestry). I believe that, being out of the classroom and the U.S., Korea seemed to become a natural place for us to engage in reflective conversation regarding each individual's cultural perception, attitudes, and integration process.

Every day a different student took a leadership role to prepare for the day and addressed the purpose of

their visit, asked appropriate questions, and interacted with various hosts.

I asked students what was the most valuable educational experience for them while visiting these places. One student shared, "I loved experiencing a new culture, learning about South Korean history, learning about social service agencies, and getting to enjoy so many different types of food."

Another student shared said, "The most valuable experience for me was observing the people in the agencies, the staff and even the clients—the way in which they demonstrated their cultural values in their practice and in their interaction with us. Every agency we visited showed us the highest dignity and hospitality. I noticed that their practice and agency environment was informed by their cultural values."

Still another student shared, "His Beans Café (one of the programs we visited) resonated with me. I thought it was a moving and auspicious venture, considering that a social work student began the business from the ground up, giving intellectually disabled people a chance to work at a coffee shop. As a social work student, witnessing an organization fostering hope for individuals by giving them this opportunity was inspirational."

In this second phase, as a teacher, I led them in discovering important knowledge about global social work education and, as a mentor, I enabled each of them to develop as a person and as a social worker. In the end, they were able to check their own cultural sensitivity (feelings and attitudes toward Korean culture) and be ready to engage/practice what they had learned about global social work and culture in the Republic of Korea.

### **Tapestry of Mentorship: the Post-Trip**

Upon our return to the States, I wanted to know how my mentorship had impacted my students' global education and social work profession. I asked students how the international study program contributed to their global education, and how this international study program would impact their social work profession. Here is some of the students' feedback. Student A said:

I was able to see the way social service agencies in other countries worked and what was different

and similar to the U.S. I was also immersed in a culture, forced to be taken out of my comfort zone, which led to a deeper appreciation of cultures different from my own.

Student B said:

This trip to Korea gave me a global education. I have never been immersed in a culture that was so completely different from mine. It opened my eyes in many ways, although our cultures are so different, our problems are the same. It gave me a lesson in humanity...This international study program impacted my future profession. This allowed me to gain an insight both into the United States' and South Korean agencies and social work field since we were able to discuss and compare the two.

Student C said:

The international study program proved to be as invaluable to my global education, awareness, and competence as my internship and field education is to my developing social work practice...My international study will certainly impact my professional practice. It will impact my significant growth in cultural competency, a broadening of practice models and ideas may be beneficial in future practice. It has made me a more whole human being.

Student D said:

Through visiting several social service agencies and organizations, I gained a deep appreciation for the positive aspects of the Korean culture and how these could be incorporated into my professional development. By meeting and interacting with social work professionals, I fully understood that one person can have an impact on the lives of others.

Listening to the students' transformative experiences touched my heart deeply. Obviously, each of the students was in a very different place from where they were during the pre-departure period and where they had now arrived emotionally, culturally and professionally after they returned from Korea. I was fully aware that the international study tour to Korea for the American students who had never been in

Korea wouldn't be an easy task, but I wanted to take this project forward.

As a Korean/American and a bilingual person, I perceived myself as a bridge to connect both American and Korean students and let them engage and exchange in dialogue, to share experiences in different cultures, education, and world vision, and assess how they would like to sustain their international social work education and practice in Korea and the U.S. in the future. Furthermore, I wanted to mentor my American students to have a transformative experience in their hearts through their constructive and open conversations with the Korean educators, social work professionals, and clients, so they in turn can transform their communities, country, and the world. As a mentor, I believe, I made a difference in my students' perception of another culture. This mentorship remains ongoing, and I am so honored to be a part of their good memories and continued cultural openness.

#### **Tapestry of Mentorship: Now**

My mentorship with the graduate social work students who took the course and went to Korea has been an ongoing process. When I was invited to present the international social work course and the trip to Korea to the University Board of Trustees, I selected one of my students and gave her a chance to present her own experience of studying the global social work course and how she believed her experiences in Korea would impact her personal growth and professional endeavors. The student was both excited and anxious about speaking in front of the University Board of Trustees, but she eloquently described her educational and practical experiences of international social work.

Another mentoring opportunity occurred when I was invited to present the global social work course and share the experience of taking graduate social work students to Korea during the global education conference in Pennsylvania. Again, I took another student who went to Korea with me and provided an opportunity for her to share her own perspective on the importance of global education and her life changing experience while visiting Korea. As I had expected, the student was a bit nervous about speaking in front of social work educators, practitioners, and fellow students, but I ensured her

that all she needed to do was speak from her heart.

This was what the student shared with me after she finished her presentation. The student said:

When I signed up for this trip, I was informed that my life was going to change, and at that time I was not certain how. Today I can see it has been altered to a certain extent. As I continue to study social work, I will now appreciate the importance of traveling the world in order to grasp a deeper understanding of our own backyard. Since my return from South Korea, I am left to ponder what international experience is in store for me on the horizon.

In teaching and mentoring my graduate social work students, my teaching was helping them to build knowledge of global social work education, and my mentoring was empowering and strengthening them to become culturally competent social work practitioners in the interdependent world in which we live. Teaching the content of global social work was an exciting enough opportunity for me, but taking social work students to the Republic of Korea was the highlight. It connected the meaning and value of international social work and helped them to gain cultural competency while interacting with Korean educators, social workers and residents. As my students stated in their reflections, they have experienced the differences between the ideology and culture of the Eastern and Western hemispheres.

I was seeking opportunities for my students to share their experience of an international social work course and cultural experiences during their visit to Korea. I was fully aware that speaking in front of the university board members, social work educators, social work professionals and fellow students wouldn't be an easy task, but I wanted them to exercise their leadership by sharing and educating others through their own active voices. My way of mentoring these students was simple and direct: "Have ownership of your own experiences and learning, and share it from your heart."

I believe my students' acceptance of different cultures without judging and their appreciation of our commonalities in the American and Korean cultures were key indicators of cultural competency. My heart certainly warmed with pride and joy when

my students shared that they felt comfortable meeting other Koreans and that they have a desire to share what they learned and experienced with their fellow classmates and co-workers.

For future research regarding mentor & mentee experiences, it would be valuable to pursue the levels of interest of: 1) social work educators' and practitioners' involvement in mentorship, 2) social work students' perspective on their experience of mentorship, and 3) the effectiveness of mentorship through the pre- and post-cultural competency level outcomes after an international study program.

### **Conclusion**

As a Korean-American, Roman Catholic Sister in an American religious order and a professor in an American university, my religious vocation and social work profession grew out of my own passion for social justice (working together with others as equals, as partners for a socially just world). Looking back, my religious congregation's Sisters, a few close Caucasian friends, my professors, and especially my dissertation advisor were my mentors who consistently encouraged, supported, and helped me to develop a bicultural and bi-ethnic identity while integrating/aculturating American culture into my own ethnic culture. I have experienced the power of mentorship to preserve my Korean ethnic heritage, cultural identity, language, values, norms, and traditions, and this has led me to become who I am today.

I am fully aware that without my strong bicultural ethnic identity, and my understanding of the meaning of multiculturalism and the importance of sustaining my global vision, I would be less confident in teaching the global social work course to the MSW students and helping them to practice international social work in the Republic of Korea. Reflecting on the international study trip to Korea, I have witnessed how my students have been transformed both personally and professionally. Mentoring my students to explore, experience, and understand different cultures, norms, values, and ways of life has helped them to gain the cultural competency to become the Korean cultural ambassadors to the university board members, university educators, social work practitioners, and fellow social work students. As a student stated: "I now appreciate the importance of traveling the

world, in order to grasp a deeper understanding of my own backyard. Since my return from South Korea, I am left to ponder what international experience is in store for me on the horizon.”

I once saw the slogan: “Leave this place better than you found it.” This message resonates with me because I believe that we are all in this life together as teachers, mentors, and learners. We are responsible for each other as we allow the tapestry of our lives to extend and connect from strand to strand across the teacher's desk and around the world. I understand these strands and textures to symbolize each person's unique life passage, and I am glad to be intertwined with theirs. My tapestry of mentorship is in progress and I will continue to weave vibrant colors and textures as I live from day to day.

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